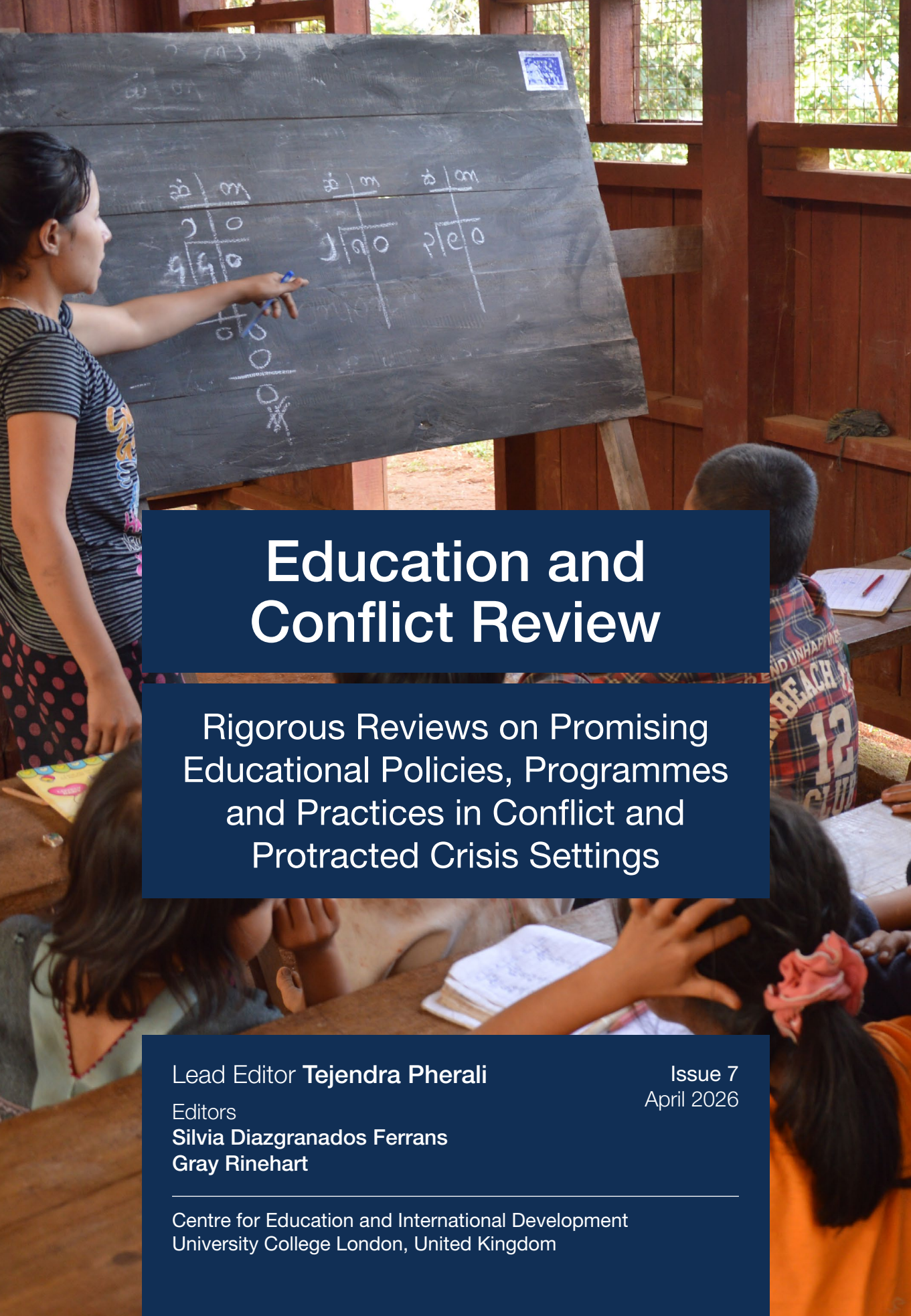




Education and Conflict Review

Rigorous Reviews on Promising
Educational Policies, Programmes
and Practices in Conflict and
Protracted Crisis Settings

Lead Editor **Tejendra Pherali**

Editors

Silvia Diazgranados Ferrans

Gray Rinehart

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About Education and Conflict Review

Education and Conflict Review is an open-source journal published by the Centre for Education and International Development, University College London. It focuses on debates about broad issues relating to education, conflict and international development and aims to provide succinct analyses of social, political, economic and security dimensions in conflict-affected and humanitarian situations. It provides a forum for knowledge exchange to build synergies between academics, practitioners and graduate students who are researching and working in these environments.



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Editorial reflection: Rigorous reviews on promising educational policies, programmes and practices in conflict and protracted crisis settings



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Education in contexts of conflict and crisis is both a casualty of fragility and a critical instrument for recovery and rebuilding. Maintaining educational activities during armed conflicts is challenging because, increasingly, educational institutions are not simply caught in the middle of the conflict but are intentionally attacked as military targets. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack identified around 6,000 reported attacks on schools and universities in 2022 and 2023, and over 10,000 students, teachers and education staff were reported to have been killed or harmed (GCPEA, 2024). In addition to the risks of violence, education systems struggle with inadequate resources, including damaged infrastructure, a poorly qualified and trained teaching workforce and limited funding to cover teacher salaries and educational materials. Consequently, an estimated 234 million school-aged children and adolescents across 60 conflict- and crisis-affected countries urgently need support to access quality education and improve their holistic learning outcomes (ECW, 2025). Even for those who manage to access some form of education, communities face enormous challenges to maintain equitable access and quality learning as families are usually displaced, traumatised by experiences of violence, and living in poverty as their lives have been uprooted and their livelihoods stolen (UNICEF, 2017).

In conflict-affected and crisis settings, education plays a crucial protective role, helping restore

stability, routine and support for children amid crisis (INEE, 2010). However, the education sector in humanitarian situations receives a small share of humanitarian funding, often overshadowed by urgent needs such as food, shelter and protection (UNESCO, 2015). To ensure that limited resources are used effectively, policymakers and donors need strong evidence about which education interventions deliver meaningful benefits for children.

Educational research in conflict-affected contexts faces significant methodological challenges due to disrupted schooling, rapidly shifting political conditions and limited access to reliable data. There are also practical challenges posed by insecurity, making it difficult to reach participants and build long-term relationships for robust qualitative inquiry. In particular, researchers must navigate risks of harm and issues of informed consent under conditions of fear or coercion. As a result, there has been a chronic lack of research in conflict-affected settings. Nevertheless, in the past decade the body of research that analyses educational barriers, interventions and outcomes across different conflict and crisis settings has grown significantly (Burde *et al.*, 2023), but the evidence continues to be fragmented across different disciplines, making it difficult to assess overall progress (Kim *et al.*, 2026). Also, most studies focus on need assessments and problem analyses while a limited number explore how to design, implement and assess the impact

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and cost effectiveness of research in conflict settings (Diazgranados, Guimond and Annan, in this issue). Consequently, policymakers, national education authorities and development partners struggle to make informed decisions about which programmes to prioritise; how to coordinate development and humanitarian response in the education sector; and how to allocate limited funding and resources to maximise the benefits for learners and educational communities in these challenging environments. To fill this important gap, this Special Issue (SI) presents a synthesis of existing evidence on the implementation and impact of different types of education interventions that aim to improve education outcomes for children in conflict and crisis settings. The papers primarily include studies grounded in randomised controlled trials or quasi-experimental designs to generate high-quality causal evidence on the impacts of interventions. When the evidence is available, authors have aimed to identify what works, how, for whom, at what cost and under what conditions.

Through the synthesis of studies reporting promising impact of educational interventions, this SI serves as an organised repository of evidence concerning ‘what works’ in education in conflict-affected and protracted crisis environments. However, we do recognise that some scholars have critiqued the ‘what works’ agenda in education (Biesta, 2026; 2010; Pampaka, Williams and Horner, 2016; Burton and Chapman, 2004). Firstly, they question that the evidence-based model rests on assumptions about how education works, what kind of knowledge professionals require and how research should inform decision-making (Biesta, 2007). Yet, education is inherently relational – contingent and shaped by moral and political judgements, and therefore technocratic solutions grounded only in programme effects are insufficient in grappling with its complexity. Secondly, critical scholars in the field of education in emergencies emphasise interrogation of the broader social and political structures (e.g. colonial legacies, conflict dynamics and the political economy) that sustain inequality and exclusion within education systems and contribute to persistent disruption and marginalisation (Lopes Cardozo and Shah, 2016). Overall, the critique is concerned that the ‘what works’ agenda, through its dominance and over-emphasis on programme effectiveness in donor and policy circles, risks depoliticising and obscuring

the structural drivers of educational crises.

Taking these critiques seriously, we position impact evaluation as one component of a broader evidence ecology that can inform education policies, funding decisions and programme designs. Hence, our primary aim in this SI is to synthesise evidence from effectiveness research on the impact of education interventions in conflict and crisis settings. Nevertheless, we recognise that these interventions are embedded within broader political economies and shaped by legacies of conflict and specific historical contexts that determine their design, implementation and prospects for success. Although examining these broader dynamics lies beyond the scope of this SI, we consider them critical areas for future research, particularly studies underpinning a political economy lens, conflict analysis and attention to structural inequalities. As such, it is equally important to prioritise interpretative, participatory and critical research approaches that emphasise context, meaning and power relations (Greer, Warwick and Chase, in this issue). We therefore argue for constructive dialogue and complementarity across different research designs and theoretical traditions to study educational processes as well as the social, cultural, political and economic conditions within which parents, teachers and learners live, teach and learn (Bell and Aggleton, 2016).

In the above spirit, Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crises (ERICC) is designed not only to address evidence gaps in conflict and crisis settings, but also to strengthen how research agendas are structured and sequenced to support policy and practice. The programme works in collaboration with local and national education actors to generate research that responds to the needs and priorities of education systems in conflict and crisis settings (Rinehart *et al.*, 2025; Nasser *et al.*, 2024; Brun *et al.*, 2024; Wagner Tsoni *et al.*, 2024; Akogun, Adesina and Njobdi, 2023; Rauschenberger, Palmer and Sabella, 2023; Haque *et al.*, 2022). It aims to organise and synthesise the existing body of evidence coherently, identify research gaps and generate new knowledge to address them. As part of this effort, ERICC has developed both a conceptual framework and a phased research methods approach. The conceptual framework highlights how interventions that strengthen the key drivers of learning and development – access, quality, continuity and education system coherence

– can improve education outcomes for children in conflict and crisis (Kim *et al.*, 2026). Central to the framework is the political economy analysis of education at multiple levels so that (in)coherences in education system operations are accounted for in shaping educational policies, programmes and practices. The phased research methods approach, in turn, clarifies how different types of studies can contribute to generating evidence on interventions that address priority issues for populations affected by conflict and crisis in ways that are relevant and desirable for them, but also cost effective, scalable and sustainable (Diazgranados, Guimond and Annan, in this issue). Together, these frameworks provide a structured way of organising, interpreting and generating evidence across different stages of research and programme development.

This ECR SI advances ERICC's aim of systematically organising research evidence by consolidating the existing body of knowledge on 'working solutions' in education (Pampaka, Williams and Horner, 2016). It presents 13 rigorous reviews covering a broad range of educational topics in diverse conflict-affected and crisis settings. The papers focus on, among other areas, implementation and effectiveness research, to highlight the kinds of educational interventions that reveal promising outcomes, offering insights to donors, policymakers and educational practitioners. In this process, we believe the SI fills an important gap in knowledge about how children in conflict-affected contexts and protracted crisis situations learn and develop, and the kinds of policies, programmes and practices that are effective in improving holistic learning outcomes (e.g. academic outcomes, socio-emotional learning and mental and physical wellbeing). Contributors argue that meaningful evidence must address not only what works, but also why, for whom, under what conditions, and through which mechanisms. This reflects the broader tension we highlight in this editorial: policy decisions frequently require concise, decision-oriented evidence, whereas practitioners and researchers rely on more diverse forms of contextual and experiential knowledge during implementation. These approaches are not in opposition; they reflect different evidence needs at different stages of the policy-practice cycle.

Hence, several papers in this SI synthesise findings to reveal which interventions show promise in addressing educational problems of different kinds

and where the evidence gaps exist in conflict and crisis settings. Meanwhile, others advance thinking around how to generate deeper and more contextually grounded insights that account for multiple barriers.

A sequenced-method approach for evidence-building

The SI opens with a methodological contribution by Diazgranados, Guimond and Annan, described above. To address the need for systematic evidence-building on designing solutions, implementation or impact evaluations and cost effectiveness, the authors propose a sequenced framework that organises research into five phases: (1) understanding the problems and associated factors in ways that account for historical and structural roots, (2) designing solutions with local actors to ensure they are relevant, desirable and culturally appropriate, (3) piloting and implementing the solutions to ensure quality, fidelity and uptake in practice, (4) evaluating impact and cost effectiveness to determine whether solutions produce meaningful changes in ways that represent value for money, and (5) supporting the scale-up and sustainability of interventions in education systems. Across all these phases, the framework emphasises the critical importance of political economy analysis and costing research as cross-cutting dimensions that help ensure that interventions are feasible, scalable and sustainable, and of measurement research to ensure research data is of high quality. By aligning research methods with the stages of programme development and system change, the approach offers practical guidance to donors, policymakers and researchers seeking to build cost-effective and scalable education solutions in crisis-affected contexts, and calls for broadening the types of research studies that are valued and supported within the field.

Education continuity amid polycrisis

The paper by Datzberger and Pacifico provides an example of a relatively nascent field and unveils evidence gaps around working solutions in education in conflict-affected environments that are compounded by the effects of environmental shocks. The review deals with disruptions in learners' educational routine because of

polycrises that cause widespread damage to educational infrastructure, disrupting teaching and learning, leading to increased risks of school dropout. The authors highlight that there is a paucity of studies in education in emergencies that account for both conflicts and natural disasters. The review identifies critical gaps in research and policy, emphasising the need for integrated climate-conflict data, multidisciplinary and decolonial approaches, context-sensitive and longitudinal studies and stronger evidence on preparedness strategies and interventions suited to polycrisis environments.

Gender, marginalisation and inclusion

In this section, contributions focus on different groups of learners who experience particular disadvantage or marginalisation due to their intersectional identities in conflict and crisis settings.

North and Ozawa show that educational approaches that link efforts to improve learning with programmes challenging harmful gender norms by engaging with communities and strengthening institutional cultures are more likely to accomplish improved gender equality in education. However, there is a lack of evidence around whether or how such programmes impact on gender equality in social environments outside the formal learning spaces. The authors point out the need to document the ‘voices and perspectives of girls themselves’ by including a wider range of studies evaluating educational initiatives that support girls’ education and gender equality.

The second rigorous review by Pherali and Rinehart focuses on studies that evaluate interventions designed to improve drivers of learning for three marginalised groups of learners in conflict and protracted crisis settings: children with disabilities, language minority learners and internally displaced children. They reveal that educational interventions involving accelerated and remedial learning and language and psychosocial support are reported to show positive impacts on academic outcomes and wellbeing for language minority and displaced children, but evidence for children with disabilities is extremely limited. The authors conclude that

there are major gaps around what policies and systems-level interventions work to reduce equity gaps, highlighting the need for robust effectiveness research and complementary methodologies to build a more comprehensive evidence base.

Learners’ development and wellbeing in and through education

The papers in this section are broadly concerned with learners’ development and wellbeing in educational environments affected by conflict and crisis. The evidence reviewed spans synthesis of programme evaluations from those that contribute to early childhood development to those addressing mental health, as well as safety within learning spaces.

The first paper by Diazgranados, Murphy and Thuo synthesises experimental and quasi-experimental research on interventions that impact early childhood development. Drawing on 12 impact evaluations focused on four types of interventions – caregiver-directed stimulation, psychosocial support (PSS) for children, PSS for caregivers and mass media programmes – the authors report that mass media models show promising gains in social-emotional learning at scale at low cost, while caregiver-directed programmes generate larger impacts but not necessarily in a cost-effective manner. Evidence on caregiver PSS interventions is promising but limited. The authors highlight that there is a lack of robust evidence on whether early childhood development interventions improve children’s mental health. Overall, the review identifies major gaps in evidence on cost effectiveness, equity and long-term impacts of these interventions in conflict and crisis settings.

Next, Greer, Warwick and Chase synthesise studies adopting a range of methodological approaches to examine children’s mental health and emotional wellbeing in conflict and protracted crises. They report that programmes that are theoretically informed, values driven, multi-layered and embedded into schools or other educational environments show promise in improving children’s mental health and emotional wellbeing. Involvement of children, caregivers and teachers not simply as recipients but as co-designers

of the programmes was reported to be a key feature behind the success. The authors also warn against over-reliance on externally imposed measurement tools and insufficient attention to contextually situated, everyday educational interactions.

Finally, Kagan and Fabbri's review is concerned with how to mitigate violence and enhance safety in school environments. The paper brings together evidence on school safety interventions in conflict and crisis settings. It reveals that many school-based interventions improve wellbeing but have limited demonstrated impact on reducing violence or improving safety, largely due to inadequate measurement of safety outcomes and weak attention to underlying drivers of violence. The review shows that interventions rarely used validated tools or clearly articulated theories of change, making it difficult to assess how they worked to reduce violence in schools or why effects varied. Most importantly, limitations in relation to the effectiveness, sustainability and cost effectiveness were highlighted.

Examining specific interventions: Programmes and pedagogical approaches

Firstly, Selby and Marchant's scoping review focuses on the value of recreational play in supporting children's wellbeing and socio-emotional development in emergencies. The paper identifies six key interdependent aspects of recreational play in crisis settings (safe play environments, adequate time for play, opportunities to meet peers, access to nature, trained adult facilitators, and opportunities for agency and choice) and highlights that a multitude of barriers across structural, cultural and logistical domains hinder children's play opportunities. The authors recommend strengthening humanitarian policies to ensure the right to safe and meaningful recreational play for children in contexts of mass displacement as psychosocial support as well as a tool to ensure stability and cognitive development.

Secondly, Kwok, Sable and Smiley focus on the Learning through Play (LtP) interventions for improving drivers of learning (access, quality, continuity and coherence) in conflict and crisis settings. The authors synthesise findings from

studies focusing on three types of LtP modalities: LtP as supplementary guided play and games; LtP as formal classroom pedagogy; and LtP as nonformal content and pedagogy. The analysis reveals some promising impacts of these interventions on children's learning, particularly in the area of nonformal content and pedagogy. Overall, studies report positive impacts of LtP interventions on classroom climate and wellbeing of learners but less so in literacy and numeracy enhancement.

The third paper, by Turner, Sáenz Muñoz and Gutierrez, review research into the impacts of Save the Children's Catch-up Clubs model in addressing foundational literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills among children, including those affected by conflict. The review synthesises evaluations in five countries to report on the model's applicability, achievements and limitations. The evidence shows that it is impactful when it is contextualised and adapted flexibly to respond to local realities. Reflecting on a case study in the Colombian context, the authors highlight that the practical decisions programme teams make when translating solutions into implementation often lie beyond the scope of conventional impact evaluations. They conclude that continuous reflection and examination of various options are needed to ensure that interventions remain contextually appropriate and evidence informed.

The final paper in this section is authored by the EdTech Hub team (Pacitto, Hayat, Hinks, Emerusenge, Rabi and Ullah) and presents a rapid review of the literature on remote teaching and learning in emergencies, mainly drawn from the context of Covid-19. The authors highlight that educators delivering lessons remotely during emergencies require strong digital skills, and the pedagogical approaches need to be creative and adaptive to diverse contexts. The review finds that caregivers' involvement in children's education is vital, as an interactive method to ensure that learners are engaged in lessons and their progress is monitored and supported as needed.

Teachers in conflict and crisis settings

This section presents two contributions that focus on the critical role of teacher development

in improving learning quality within conflict and crisis settings. Here, the papers synthesise the evidence on teacher professionalisation and wellbeing as well as on the critical need to train teachers for conflict-sensitive professional practice.

The review by Falk, Mendenhall and Dow provides a comprehensive synthesis of studies that report on approaches to professionalisation of teachers in conflict and crisis settings. They highlight that teachers in these challenging environments are poorly compensated for their work and are often expected to fulfil demands beyond their personal and professional capacities. Teacher professional development (TPD) programmes that strengthen professionalisation include those that are designed and implemented with the involvement of teachers, are responsive to teachers' contexts and classroom realities and are linked with teachers' career progression pathways. TPD programmes are also more effective when they lead to recognised qualifications and increased teacher salaries. Finally, the paper identifies the significant evidence gap in TPD provision for internally displaced teachers.

The second paper in this section, by Brandt, Matabishi and Marchais, helps us understand how and to what extent the content related to education in emergencies is integrated into pre-service teacher education. The authors pay particular attention to topics such as mental health and psychosocial support, socio-emotional learning, inclusive pedagogy, peace education, trauma-sensitive pedagogy and how to deal with controversial issues. Though they point out the paucity of research evidence around conflict-sensitive educational content in pre-service education, some – albeit limited – studies on teacher education initiatives in refugee camps and community-led programmes report on valuable practices. Protracted crises often face severe shortages of qualified teachers, requiring large numbers of untrained or underqualified individuals to enter the profession. These teachers are rarely prepared to support conflict-affected learners who may be experiencing trauma, displacement and acute household stresses. To address this gap, teacher preparation programmes must integrate conflict-sensitive pedagogy, psychosocial support approaches and knowledge

of crisis-related dynamics as core components. This paper highlights a critical gap in research and education in emergencies practice, calling for appropriate attention to pre-service teacher education and equipping the emerging teaching workforce with the vital knowledge and skills required to teach safely, ethically and effectively.

Overall, the evidence reviews reveal that education in conflict and crisis settings hinges on the ability to sustain learning amid disruptions; address deep-seated inequities affecting girls, children with disabilities, linguistic minorities, refugees and internally displaced children; support learners' early development and holistic wellbeing through integrated educational programming; and invest meaningfully in teachers, whose expanded roles are inadequately supported. Promising interventions for learning, development, safety and wellbeing tend to be locally adapted, multi-dimensional and sustained rather than technical or short term. Yet, most contributions highlight that the evidence base remains thin and uneven, suggesting the need for more investment in effectiveness research and, more broadly, in context-responsive political economy analysis that bridges humanitarian practice, system strengthening and conflict mitigation through education.

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Sequencing fit-for-purpose research for greater impact, value for money and sustainability:

A phased methods approach for conflict and crisis settings



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Abstract

Education research in conflict and crisis settings is expanding, but there is limited guidance on how different types of studies contribute to addressing pervasive educational problems. This paper introduces the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crises (ERICC) phased research methods approach, a sequenced model that organises evidence generation into five phases: (1) Understanding the problem, (2) Designing solutions, (3) Piloting, (4) Evaluating impact and (5) Scaling-up and sustaining. These phases are supported by cross-cutting dimensions: (a) political economy analysis, (b) costing studies and (c) measurement research. Unlike typologies focused primarily on effectiveness, this ERICC approach emphasises purposeful sequencing while allowing for iteration, ensuring solutions respond to local priorities and are co-designed and governed with local actors. It stresses the importance of implementation quality, causal impact evaluation, value-for-money assessment, and adaptation for sustained systems-level reach. The framework offers practical guidance for donors, policymakers and researchers to build impactful, durable education solutions.

Key Words

education in conflict and crisis, research sequencing, intervention design and evaluation, localisation and co-production

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Introduction

Children living in conflict and protracted crisis settings face a convergence of challenges that undermine their right to education. Armed violence, displacement, poverty and instability disrupt schooling and erode the quality, continuity and coherence of education (UNESCO, 2022; Burde *et al.*, 2015). Schools may be damaged or occupied, teachers unpaid or untrained, curricula fragmented and learning materials scarce (UNICEF, 2019). Many children are forced to work, care for siblings or migrate repeatedly, making regular attendance difficult (UNESCO, 2022). Trauma, chronic stress and social exclusion further affect their ability to learn and thrive (Mundy and Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Existing barriers not only limit children's access to education but also weaken its quality, continuity and coherence (Kim *et al.*, 2026), leaving them without the foundational skills, social-emotional competencies and protective environments they need to learn and thrive.

There is an urgent need to generate innovative, cost-effective solutions that expand access to quality education for children in conflict-affected settings. As education systems in these settings face increasing demands with limited resources, research must guide decisions about where to invest and which interventions are most likely to improve children's learning and wellbeing. However, the evidence base remains fragmented, and much existing research fails to answer the questions that decision-makers need most urgently (Kim *et al.*, 2026). At the same time, education research in these settings is often externally driven, with limited involvement of local stakeholders and system actors in shaping research agendas and interpreting findings, constraining relevance, ownership and use. A clear roadmap is needed to link different types of research to the phases of the policy and programme cycle – from identifying needs and designing interventions to evaluating implementation, impact and cost-effectiveness, and planning for scale-up – while clarifying how and when local actors are critically needed.

This paper introduces the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crises (ERICC) phased methods approach to help researchers, donors and policymakers strategically sequence education research in conflict and protracted crisis settings.

Drawing from the work of the International Rescue Committee's Airbel Impact Lab, the ERICC research portfolio and wider intervention and implementation science literature, this methods approach illustrates how different phases of evidence generation need to be aligned with fit-for-purpose research methods to support the development of contextually appropriate, feasible, desirable, impactful, cost-effective and sustainable interventions at scale, and provides actionable recommendations to strengthen the generation and use of evidence in crisis-affected settings.

Evidence generation in conflict and crisis settings

Education research in conflict and crisis settings faces unique challenges that distinguish it from research in stable educational contexts. These settings – marked by armed conflict, forced displacement, economic shocks, health emergencies, governance breakdowns and climate-induced disasters – are fluid, overlapping and often recurrent, creating what Falk *et al.* (2024) describe as 'polycrisis' conditions that disrupt education systems in unpredictable ways. Such complexity, coupled with the practical, methodological and ethical challenges of conducting rigorous research in these settings (Puri *et al.*, 2017), has resulted in a chronic lack of high-quality evidence on what improves learning and wellbeing outcomes (Kim *et al.*, 2026).

Over the past two decades, the evidence base has expanded, with a growing number of rigorous impact evaluations and new meta-analysis synthesizing impact and cost-effectiveness (Diazgranados and Thuo, 2026a; Diazgranados *et al.*, forthcoming; Burde *et al.*, 2023). This growth has been shaped by global debates emphasising impact and cost-effectiveness, value for money and accountability (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2023). In parallel, insights from intervention and implementation science, originating largely in the public health and behavioural sciences, have underscored the importance of aligning research methods with different stages of intervention development, testing and sustainment (Damschroder *et al.*, 2022; Moullin *et al.*, 2019).

Related work in international development and education has produced tools to strengthen

evidence use and prioritisation, including 3ie's evidence gap maps (White and Phillips, 2012), DFID's 'What Works' guidance (DFID, 2014), USAID's Journey to Self-Reliance (USAID, 2021), RTI's Learning Agenda Matrix (Evans, Piper and Adelman, 2020) and Building Evidence in Education (BE2) guidance on implementation research (Allison, 2023). Together, these approaches have advanced methodological rigour and clarity around causal inference, while drawing attention to the political, organisational and fiscal challenges of scaling interventions (Milat *et al.*, 2020; Zamboni *et al.*, 2019; Barker, Reid and Schall, 2016).

Despite these advances, many frameworks were not developed specifically for education systems in conflict and crisis settings, and consequently provide limited direction on adapting evidence-generation strategies to the fragmented, politically complex and resource-constrained environments that characterise these systems. The ERICC phased methods approach, presented in this paper, responds to this gap by integrating insights from intervention and implementation science with evidence-generation approaches from education and international development, adapting them to crisis contexts. Rather than advancing a new theory of intervention, the approach offers a sequenced, context-sensitive roadmap to help researchers, practitioners and policymakers prioritise fit-for-purpose research across stages of problem diagnosis, design, implementation, effectiveness testing and scale, reflecting both the state of the evidence and the realities of education systems shaped by conflict and crisis.

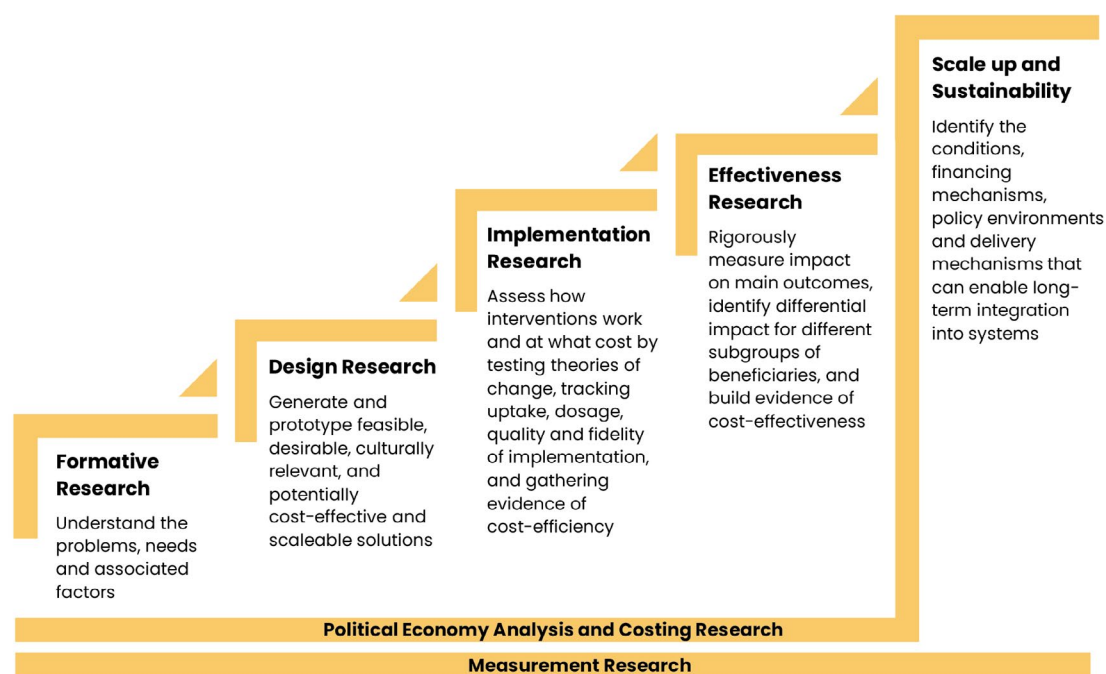
The ERICC phased research methods approach

The ERICC methods approach offers a typical sequence of research phases that identifies research needs according to the state of the evidence. It expands the agenda beyond identification of needs and impact evaluation to prioritise political economy analysis, design research, implementation research, costing and measurement studies. The approach emphasises sequencing research in alignment with the state of the evidence to facilitate strategic investment in identification of needs, innovation and programme development, and rigorous testing of programmes, where appropriate. At the same time,

it is not intended to be applied rigidly or universally. In conflict and crisis settings, research phases may be combined, reordered or selectively applied in response to urgent needs, resource constraints or shifting system conditions, reflecting evidence on how pathways from innovation to scale are often iterative (Indig *et al.*, 2017). The approach grounds research methods in the practical realities of education in conflict and crisis, supporting learning agendas that generate relevant evidence to address children's needs.

In contexts of conflict and crisis, generating rigorous evidence to inform education policy and practice is critical, not only to identify what works to improve learning and wellbeing for children, but also to understand how, for whom, under what conditions and at what cost. To map existing research and evidence gaps, the approach guides stakeholders in identifying the information needed for decision-making, according to the state of the evidence in different settings (see Figure 1). By articulating a sequence of evidence types, the approach supports researchers, policymakers and practitioners to develop cost-effective, scalable solutions to address existing education needs. The following sections describe the purpose, key methods and potential risks of not engaging in these phases of research.

Figure 1. ERICC phased research methods approach: Five sequential phases supported by three cross-cutting dimensions; scaling and sustaining begins early and extends through all phases, culminating in system-level uptake.



1. Understanding the issue: What is the problem and why does it exist and persist?

In conflict and crisis settings, education systems often operate with limited, fragmented and outdated information on the status of access, quality, continuity and coherence of education systems and children's learning outcomes. Where data and evidence are sparse or deeper contextual understanding is needed, formative research provides a starting point for understanding how children in different conflict and crisis settings learn and develop, the educational needs they may have, and the macro-, meso- and micro-level factors shaping their educational outcomes.

This **formative research phase** aims to surface the underlying causes and consequences of barriers to educational access and low learning outcomes, while identifying promising practices and community-driven solutions that may already exist but remain undocumented. Importantly, externally driven diagnostic research risks missing or misinterpreting local priorities or reinforcing extractive research dynamics if not co-designed with local researchers,

educators and practitioners. Evidence from ERICC research on localisation shows that participatory, locally led formative research surfaces community practices that outsiders often overlook (Pacífico *et al.*, 2025). Related research further demonstrates that research–practice partnerships embedding local practitioners in decision-making and agenda-setting can produce research that is more relevant and actionable for local systems (Farrell and Coburn, 2017; Coburn and Penuel, 2016; Penuel *et al.*, 2011).

Fit-for-purpose research methods associated with this phase include:

- Needs assessments** – foundational studies that aim to identify gaps in access, quality, continuity and coherence of education by describing the current status of the system and the scale of challenges. These often use quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods to assess the availability, accessibility, quality and continuity of education, as well as barriers faced by different populations affected by conflict and crisis (GEC, 2023; INEE, 2022). Needs assessments typically

provide a snapshot of conditions at specific points in time to help prioritise resource allocation and advocacy, serving as an entry point to understand the education landscape.

- b. **Formative research** studies use qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods – including observational, correlational and participatory-action approaches, and historical analysis – to obtain granular and nuanced insights into factors associated with educational problems. They shed light on the values, practices and experiences of learners, families, educators and system-level actors, and examine how these interact with broader contextual and historical dynamics shaping access, quality, continuity and coherence of education (Mendenhall, Russell and Buckner, 2017; Snilstveit *et al.*, 2016). Such insights are especially critical in conflict and protracted crisis settings, where political histories, community perspectives and lived experiences diverge significantly from existing assumptions and realities in stable settings (Burde *et al.*, 2017; Justino, 2016). For an example of formative research in conflict settings, see Asfaw *et al.* (2025).

Designing solutions without a strong understanding of local needs and priorities may result in misaligned solutions that lack community ownership and fail to address key barriers to access and learning, reducing relevance and uptake. Accordingly, before advancing to the design phase, researchers should have a clear, evidence-based understanding of the problem, including its causes, affected populations and contextual enablers and constraints, such as the incentives and power relations that shape why problems exist and persist.

2. Designing solutions: What solutions are feasible and desirable, and how might we design them?

Once educational needs are clearly understood, the next priority is to generate evidence-based solutions for children, youth and education communities in conflict-affected settings. The **design research phase** supports this process by articulating a theory of change (Weiss, 1995) that outlines how a proposed solution addresses an education problem, while also engaging in iterative prototyping and pressure-testing underlying assumptions to refine

the design. Central to this phase is the recognition that solutions must be feasible, desirable and relevant for local stakeholders who will ultimately adopt, implement and sustain them. Fit-for-purpose research methods for this phase include:

- **Human-centred design** – an approach that identifies what matters to learners, teachers and education systems – starting with their needs, experiences and priorities – and involving them in the generation of solutions through ideation, followed by rapid prototyping using A/B testing and iterative feedback loops (UNHCR and IDEO, 2020; World Bank, 2019; IDEO, 2015). Behavioural science insights can be integrated throughout the process to inform design choices, including how people's cognitive biases and mental models shape their engagement with proposed interventions (Dolan *et al.*, 2012; Kahneman, 2011). Together, human-centred design and behavioural science help identify stakeholders' needs, values, experiences and behaviours in relation to new or adapted solutions. Design research generates hypotheses about how interventions will help to overcome barriers to access, quality and continuity of education in culturally responsive, locally feasible and socially desirable ways, while navigating tensions between needs and constraints in conflict and crisis settings. For high-quality examples of design research studies in humanitarian settings, see Bailey *et al.* (2021) and DeReynal *et al.* (2021).

Design research approaches are most effective when embedded in sustained research–practice partnerships with local actors, which enable iterative learning, adaptation and alignment with institutional and political realities (Datnow and Park, 2019; Farrell and Coburn, 2017). Evidence from ERICC's localisation synthesis shows that participatory and locally led design processes enhance relevance, legitimacy, uptake, sustained engagement and policy influence by shifting decision-making authority toward those closest to implementation and affected communities (Akogun *et al.*, 2025; Pacifico *et al.*, 2025). Similar findings from education systems research further demonstrate that interventions co-designed with local actors are more likely to be adopted, adapted and sustained at scale (Coburn and Penuel, 2016; Penuel *et al.*, 2011).

To advance to the pilot phase, the design phase must yield a clear theory of change specifying how a problem will be addressed through inputs and activities that are expected to generate outputs, outcomes and long-term impacts. It should also demonstrate that these inputs and activities are feasible, desirable and culturally relevant for the communities they are intended to serve.

3. Piloting: How does the intervention work in practice, and under what conditions is it delivered with quality, fidelity and uptake?

When promising solutions exist but lack evidence on how they work in specific conflict-affected settings, the ERICC approach recommends an **implementation research phase** to examine why and how interventions function in practice. This phase generates evidence on how context, stakeholders and implementation processes enable or constrain quality, fidelity and uptake (Allison, 2023). In conflict and crisis settings, implementation is often undermined by challenges such as limited capacity, teacher turnover, low student attendance and insecurity, leading to variations in how interventions are delivered and experienced across sites, even for standardised designs (Falb *et al.*, 2024; Falk *et al.*, 2019; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2017; Burde *et al.*, 2017). Evidence on delivery is therefore essential to ensure that interventions are mature before they are tested for impact. This is because even well-designed programmes may fail to achieve the intended results if implementation is weak (Durlak and DuPre, 2008), and particularly important given growing evidence that implementation research in international education is often discussed rhetorically but insufficiently used to guide adaptation and scaling decisions (Dowd, 2024). Fit-for-purpose methods during this phase include:

- **Implementation research** that uses qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods data from monitoring systems to assess the degree to which interventions are implemented with adequate levels of quality, fidelity and uptake, and to examine implementation processes to uncover what has happened during delivery and why. This tests whether the core assumptions of a theory of change (Weiss, 1995) are realised during delivery, identifying deviations and their causes to

support course correction in real time. Without implementation research, delivery challenges – such as inequitable access, weak fidelity and poor quality of implementation – can be masked, making it difficult to distinguish intervention failure from implementation failure. For examples of implementation research of education interventions in conflict settings see Angrist and Meager (2023), Bailey *et al.* (2022) and Mendenhall (2019).

- **Cost-efficiency analysis:** Conducting cost-efficiency analysis studies are essential during the implementation research phase to understand the resources required to deliver an intervention with adequate quality, fidelity and uptake. By estimating costs per unit of output (e.g. cost per child reached or per teacher trained) and examining how costs vary by delivery model, context or scale, researchers can identify operational inefficiencies and inform implementation adaptations before proceeding to effectiveness evaluation. For a study on comparative cost-efficiency of education interventions in conflict and crisis settings, see Diazgranados *et al.* (forthcoming).

Without implementation research, decision-makers cannot determine whether observed outcomes reflect weaknesses in intervention design or failures in delivery, making it difficult to identify what needs to be adapted before effectiveness testing. To advance to an effectiveness phase, the implementation research phase must demonstrate that the intervention has been delivered as intended, with strong quality, fidelity and user uptake. Additionally, cost-efficiency estimates should indicate reasonable likelihood of cost-effectiveness at scale.

4. Evaluating impact: What changes are causally attributable to the intervention, and are the impacts worth the cost relative to alternatives?

When there is evidence that interventions are well designed and implemented as intended, the ERICC methods approach recommends an **effectiveness research phase** to evaluate the changes in key educational outcomes that can be causally attributed to the intervention. During this phase, impact evaluations can also be designed to identify

heterogeneous effects across different groups of children, as education interventions in conflict settings can contribute to increased or reduced existing equity gaps. Fit-for-purpose methods to evaluate impact include:

- **Experimental and quasi-experimental studies:** Effectiveness research focuses on assessing the impact of interventions on education outcomes (Burde *et al.*, 2015; 2023; Ganimian and Murnane, 2016; Snilstveit *et al.*, 2016). It uses experimental and quasi-experimental methods to determine the extent to which interventions improve educational outcomes, by the comparison of treatment and control groups or by testing the added value of specific components. The use of causal inference methods such as randomisation, difference-in-differences models, propensity score matching, instrumental variables estimation or regression discontinuity models is critical to detect programme effects (Willett and Murnane, 2011). Examples of high-quality impact evaluations of education interventions in conflict and protracted conflict include Schwartz *et al.* (2024), Angrist *et al.* (2023) and Diazgranados *et al.* (2022).
- **Systematic evidence reviews and meta-analysis of impact evaluations** synthesise findings across multiple impact evaluations using causal inference research, offering broader insights into what works across different treatments, populations, settings and implementation conditions (Bangert-Drowns and Rudner, 1991). Examples of evidence synthesis focused on causal inference research in conflict and crisis settings include Diazgranados, Murphy and Thuo (2026; in this issue) and Burde *et al.* (2023; 2015). For a meta-analysis of education interventions on foundational skills in conflict-affected settings, see Diazgranados and Thuo (2026a). For a meta-analysis of education interventions on social-emotional learning outcomes, see Diazgranados and Thuo (2026b).
- **Cost-effectiveness analysis:** Conducting costing studies in parallel to effectiveness studies is critical because these estimates require causal evidence on impact. Only once impact estimates are available can researchers calculate the cost per unit of

change in key outcome measures and assess whether observed gains justify the costs. For comparative data on cost-effectiveness of education interventions in conflict settings, see Diazgranados *et al.* (forthcoming).

At the conclusion of this phase, researchers can determine whether an intervention is impactful and offers good value for money to justify scale-up or further adaptation to new settings or populations.

Cross-cutting phases

While phases 1–4 are presented sequentially to reflect the typical progression of research from problem identification to effectiveness testing, several critical research dimensions cut across multiple phases of the methods approach. The sections that follow focus on these cross-cutting elements.

5. Scaling-up and sustaining: How and under what conditions can interventions be scaled and sustained within the education systems?

Even when interventions demonstrate impact and cost-effectiveness, expanding reach while maintaining quality and impact over time remains challenging. In conflict and crisis settings, scale-up and sustainability are rarely linear, as political transitions, shifting donor priorities, insecurity and system-level capacity constraints can all undermine expansion and sustainability (Plank and Sabet, 2021; de Hoop *et al.*, 2019; Pritchett, 2015). For this reason, research should identify how to expand reach without diminishing quality and impact (World Bank, 2019). The work required for **scale-up and sustainability** does not begin after the effectiveness phase but should start early on and be embedded in all phases of solutions development to ensure interventions are designed, implemented and tested in ways that support system-level uptake (Basuel *et al.*, 2024; Plank and Sabet, 2021).

Advancing scale and sustainability requires research that examines the policy, financing, institutional and delivery conditions under which cost-effective interventions can be integrated into education systems. This includes assessing trade-offs between fidelity and adaptation, identifying strategies to maintain quality at scale and analysing the political, institutional and financial commitments needed

to sustain programmes after donor funding ends (Cooley and Ved, 2012). Crucially, scale and sustainability research must go beyond local stakeholder engagement at different stages of the research sequence – from identifying needs, and developing, piloting and testing solutions – to examine how decision-making authority, financing and accountability are transferred to local systems over time. Evidence from ERICC’s localisation research shows that interventions are unlikely to be sustained if authority, financing and accountability remain external, regardless of demonstrated effectiveness at pilot or project scale (Pacífico *et al.*, 2025). Two types of research methods are critical for this work:

- **Political economy analysis (PEA):** This analytical lens helps explain why systems function as they do and where opportunities for change may exist, by identifying competing goals, power dynamics, institutional capacities and normative assumptions of key actors in humanitarian, development and public sectors. This is critical in conflict and crisis settings, where education delivery is often fragmented, contested or politicised (Nicolai *et al.*, 2020). PEA provides insight into how factors such as conflicting stakeholder priorities, parallel governance structures, weak financing or fragmented data systems affect coordination, implementation and sustainability, including the political commitments, institutional capacities, financing arrangements and governance structures needed to embed interventions into educational systems and maintain their impact over time (World Bank and RISE, 2020; Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2017; Nicolai *et al.*, 2019; Pritchett, 2015). Recent synthesis of political economy evidence across seven conflict affected settings (Homonchuk *et al.*, 2026) further shows that many persistent education system failures – such as fragmented learning pathways, distorted teacher management and parallel provision – are not simply coordination or capacity problems, but reflect incentive-compatible arrangements among governments, donors, implementing agencies and non-state providers that actively sustain system incoherence over time. Recognising that fragmentation is often

politically functional rather than accidental underscores the importance of embedding PEA across research phases to distinguish technically desirable solutions from those that are politically feasible, and to identify realistic, context-specific entry points for reform.

- During the **formative phase**, PEAs inform problem definition by revealing why problems exist and persist, including the incentive structures, power relations and the actors and interests served by policies and programmes that reproduce existing power arrangements. This helps avoid misdiagnosing political constraints as technical gaps, and guides the identification of realistic entry points for interventions.
- During the **design phase**, PEAs help assess whether proposed solutions align or challenge existing power structures, and anticipate likely sources of resistance or support. These insights can inform key design choices, including which actors should be involved in the delivery, helping to avoid interventions that may be desirable for users but are not politically feasible.
- During the **implementation research phase**, PEAs can explain why quality, fidelity or uptake of interventions break down, and help interpret whether deviations from the intended design reflect implementation failure or political resistance.
- During the **effectiveness phase**, PEAs clarify the conditions under which interventions succeed or fail, and why intervention effects vary across different settings, populations or periods. They also shed light on the political and institutional conditions under which impacts are likely to be sustained or eroded, informing judgements about where and to what extent results can be generalised.
- During the **scale and sustainability phase**, PEAs help assess the political and institutional feasibility of scaling and sustaining interventions. They examine alignment with governance structures, financing arrangements and stakeholder incentives, while identifying the conditions under which interventions can be sustained within education systems.

- **Value-for-money analysis:** As education in conflict and crisis settings faces growing resource constraints, evidence on cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness is essential to guide investment decisions by donors, policymakers and practitioners. To ensure the reliability, comparability and transparency of costing data, researchers should follow established standards for economic evaluation (AIR, 2021; Levin and Belfield, 2015; Levin, 1995). Costing is integral across all research phases:
 - During the **formative phase**, costing can estimate the economic and social costs of existing problems and help identify priority areas for action.
 - During the **design phase**, cost projections can inform feasibility by comparing alternative delivery models and assessing the financial implications of different options to inform whether a particular design has the potential to be affordable and scalable within existing resource constraints.
 - During the **implementation research phase**, cost-efficiency analysis examines the cost per output (e.g. cost per child reached or per teacher trained) and how cost varies by context, delivery model or scale, helping to identify inefficiencies and inform implementation adjustments before effectiveness research. For comparative cost-efficiency data in conflict and crisis, see Diazgranados *et al.* (forthcoming).
 - During the **effectiveness phase**, cost-effectiveness analysis estimates cost per unit of change in outcome (e.g. cost per increase in literacy skills), enabling comparisons across interventions and informing whether observed impacts justify the costs. This information is critical because even highly impactful solutions may not be worth it if their cost is too high, or if lower-cost alternatives can achieve similar impacts.
 - During the **scale and sustainability phase**, value-for-money analysis assesses long-term affordability, fiscal space and budgetary trade-offs to determine whether effective interventions can be financed and maintained at scale.

Without intentional research on scale and sustainability, even cost-effective interventions may remain as small pilots, with limited and short-term impact (Plank and Sabet, 2021; de Hoop *et al.*, 2019), a pattern reflected in critiques of international education research, where implementation evidence is often underutilised in informing adaptation towards scale (Dowd, 2024). By generating evidence on how to adapt, embed and resource interventions for the long-term, this phase ensures that investments in design, implementation, effectiveness and value-for-money research ultimately translate into durable, system-wide improvements in education for crisis-affected populations.

6. Measurement research: Are we measuring the right things in the right way?

Reliable, valid and fit-for-purpose measures are fundamental to generating high-quality, actionable evidence across all research phases. In crisis-affected settings, however, researchers often rely on tools developed for stable contexts that do not reflect local languages, cultural norms or lived experiences, which could be ill-suited for populations facing displacement and trauma. Without adequate localisation or context-appropriate tool development, research can result in misdiagnoses, biased comparisons or data that lacks relevance for decision-making (McCoy *et al.*, 2021; OPRE, 2018).

Measurement research includes the development and/or adaptation of tools to assess key education constructs – such as academic outcomes, social-emotional skills, mental health and wellbeing or instructional quality – in contextually appropriate ways, alongside psychometric analysis to find evidence of validity and reliability.

- During the **formative phase**, measurement research can define and operationalise constructs critical to understanding educational experiences. Poor measurement at this stage can lead to misdiagnosis of problems or needs, which in turn misguides the design of interventions.
- During the **design phase**, measurement research supports the development or adaptation of instruments to ensure measures are contextually valid, feasible and culturally relevant for use with new populations.
- During the **implementation research phase**, measurement research should assess the

validity and reliability of measures that evaluate critical outcomes, and the quality, fidelity and uptake of interventions. By this stage, measurement research should establish structural, convergent, discriminant and predictive validity.

- During the **effectiveness phase**, outcome measures must demonstrate evidence of validity and reliability to ensure meaningful causal claims. At this stage, measurement research can help establish comparability across treatment groups and subgroups in crisis settings (e.g. refugees and host community members).
- During the **scale and sustainability phase**, measurement research supports the use of streamlined, system-embedded indicators to monitor whether interventions maintain quality, equity and impact as they expand. It helps assess whether measures remain valid and reliable at scale, detects dilution or drift in implementation and outcomes, and ensures data systems are feasible for long-term use by government and relevant system actors.

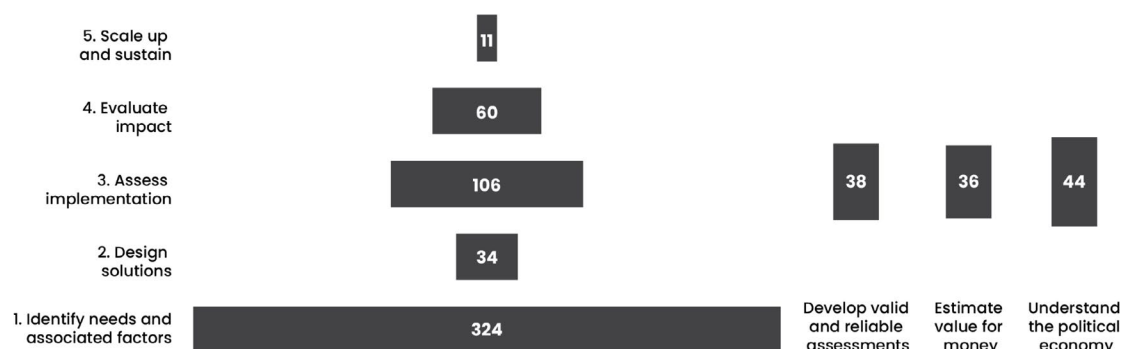
Without investment in strong measurement, even highly rigorous studies risk producing evidence that is inaccurate, misleading or unusable. For measurement guidance on education measures in conflict and protracted crisis, see Diazgranados and Lee (2019) and Education Cannot Wait (2025), and consult the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)'s Measurement Library (2021).

Application of the ERICC phased research methods approach: Generating evidence maps and gaps in conflict and crisis settings

We used the ERICC phased research methods approach to identify types of research prevalent in the field and help prioritise future studies and funding decisions in education in conflict and crisis. We coded 550 high-quality studies on education in conflict and crisis conducted between 2000 and 2024. These were identified through citation tracking from systematic reviews on education in displacement contexts (Burde *et al.*, 2015; 2023) and country-level evidence reviews in Jordan (Rauschenberger and Sabella, 2023),

Nigeria (Mishra *et al.*, 2023), Bangladesh (Saha *et al.*, 2023), Lebanon (Brun *et al.*, 2024), Syria (Akar, Meskhi and Baldelli, 2024), South Sudan (Wagner Tsoni *et al.*, 2024) and Myanmar (Rinehart *et al.*, 2024). We complemented these sources with structured searches of academic databases and organisational platforms (e.g., INEE and the International Rescue Committee's Airbel Impact Lab). Included studies focused on education issues in conflict and protracted crisis settings (Falk *et al.*, 2024), and constituted primary research. We excluded studies without clear research questions or aims, or that lacked sufficient methodological detail (e.g. participants, instruments, procedure and analytic approach). Eligible studies were coded using predefined categories reflecting the ERICC phased research methods approach, and could be coded in different categories where appropriate (e.g. effectiveness research and costing). Coding was independently reviewed by two authors to enhance accuracy and ensure consistency.

Figure 2 shows the number of studies per design type. Our analysis shows that the existing evidence base is heavily concentrated in formative research, with far fewer studies dedicated to designing, implementing, testing or scaling solutions. Notably, the distribution departs from the pyramid-shaped progression that would be expected if research followed a sequenced pathway from diagnosis to scale, with a particularly sharp drop between formative and design research. While there is substantial work describing educational needs, barriers and associated factors in conflict and crisis settings, evidence that guides the development and adaptation of interventions, examines implementation quality or rigorously tests impact and cost-effectiveness remains limited. Research on measurement, PEA and costing – all essential for scale and sustainability – is also comparatively scarce.

Figure 2. Number of high-quality studies conducted in conflict-affected settings by research purpose

Conclusion

The ERICC phased research methods approach responds to persistent tensions in education research in conflict and crisis settings by promoting a structured yet flexible approach to evidence generation, from problem identification to scale-up. It is intended to guide how research is conceptualised, sequenced and commissioned in conflict and protracted crisis settings by shifting the focus from a narrow emphasis on needs assessments or premature impact evaluations toward a more balanced approach that recognises the critical role of PEA, design research, implementation research and costing. By foregrounding purposeful sequencing, while also allowing for iteration, the methods approach seeks to support learning that is both methodologically rigorous and practically relevant, creating clearer pathways for scaling and sustaining feasible, desirable and cost-effective interventions.

Our analysis highlights imbalances in the types of studies conducted in conflict settings, with a heavy concentration on needs assessments and formative research. While critical for diagnosing challenges and capturing community perspectives, these studies often fall short of generating actionable solutions. Far fewer studies focus on measurement, PEA, design, implementation, effectiveness, costing and scale-up. As a result, much of the research identifies problems and associated factors, but relatively little supports the development of interventions to meet the needs of conflict-affected communities.

Our map of studies in conflict and crisis settings further reveals a gap in design research. This suggests that interventions may be developed

without adequate localisation or attention to human use and behaviour, reducing their likelihood of success, or that localisation efforts are not being adequately documented and shared. This pattern aligns with broader findings in intervention science showing that insufficient emphasis on intervention development and feasibility constrains the production of robust, implementable solutions (Hoddinott, 2015).

Across phases, the ERICC phased methods approach underscores that the relevance, feasibility and sustainability of evidence depend not only on methodological rigour, but on how research is governed and with whom it is conducted – a consideration that is decisive for scale-up and long-term system integration. Evidence from ERICC (Pacífico *et al.*, 2025; Akogun *et al.*, 2025) and the broader education literature shows that when local researchers, educators and system actors are meaningfully involved in agenda setting, design, interpretation and decision-making, research is more likely to generate contextually grounded solutions, support system adoption and sustain impact beyond project cycles (Penuel *et al.*, 2020; Datnow and Park, 2019; Farrell and Coburn, 2017; Coburn and Penuel, 2016; Penuel *et al.*, 2011). Conversely, externally driven research – particularly at formative and design stages, when problem definitions and solution pathways are set – risks reproducing extractive dynamics and producing solutions that lack ownership, uptake or durability (Coburn, Honig and Stein, 2009; Bang and Vossoughi, 2016).

The analysis also highlights the limited attention given to political economy analysis, costing and

measurement research across the evidence base. The relative scarcity of these forms of inquiry constrains understanding of how power relations, institutional incentives, resource constraints and measurement choices shape the feasibility, efficiency and sustainability of interventions. Without systematic attention to these dimensions, even well-designed and impactful programmes may struggle to be compared, scaled or sustained within resource-constrained and politically complex education systems.

The ERICC methods approach cautions against skipping phases in the development of interventions, while recognising that research pathways in conflict and crisis settings are often iterative rather than linear (Plank and Sabet, 2021; Moullin *et al.*, 2019). For example, testing effectiveness without implementation research risks producing null or misleading results driven by poor delivery rather than weak programme design. Jumping from diagnosing problems to evaluating impact – without investing in designing context-responsive solutions, assessing implementation and costing – risks generating weak, inconclusive or nonactionable evidence. Similarly, even well-designed interventions may underperform if evaluated before implementation systems are mature enough to ensure quality and fidelity. While phases may overlap, merge or be revisited in response to evolving contexts (Milat *et al.*, 2020), bypassing critical learning stages increases the likelihood that interventions will be misaligned with local values or practical constraints, resulting in low uptake or limited impact.

Taken together, the review reveals a misalignment between the types of evidence most frequently produced in conflict and crisis settings and the kinds of knowledge required to inform durable system-level change. While formative and diagnostic studies have expanded understanding of educational challenges and lived experiences, their dominance within the evidence base suggests that some lines of research stall at problem identification. The comparatively limited attention to design, implementation, effectiveness and value-for-money research constrains cumulative learning about how interventions evolve from promising ideas into scalable and sustainable solutions. This pattern invites closer examination of how prevailing norms, incentives and funding structures shape what counts as legitimate or feasible research at different stages

of the evidence cycle.

More broadly, the findings suggest that research sequencing, governance and methodological choices are not neutral, but actively shape how education systems in conflict and crisis settings are understood and engaged. Decisions about when costs are examined, how political constraints are analysed, whose knowledge informs design, and which outcomes are measured influence not only the evidence produced, but also which interventions become legible, comparable and viable within policy and practice. From this perspective, the ERICC phased methods approach contributes to debates on evidence use by highlighting how research design and sequencing mediate the translation of knowledge into action and condition the possibilities for long-term system-level change in conflict-affected contexts.

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Continuity of education amid environmental shocks in conflict and crisis settings



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Abstract

The frequency and intensity of natural and human-induced hazards, particularly armed conflict and those induced by climate change, have increased, creating overlapping crises that severely disrupt education. This review examines how these forces interact to undermine the continuity of education, using the concept of 'polycrisis' to frame their interconnected impacts. Most studies focus on either conflict or climate change, with few addressing their combined effects on education. As a result, there is limited knowledge on how to respond to overlapping crises. We highlight several recurring challenges in these contexts: widespread damage to educational infrastructure, increased disruption in teaching and learning, risk of school dropout, strained resources with limited coping mechanisms, and intersecting vulnerabilities related to gender, mobility and health. These findings point to critical gaps in knowledge and practice, including the need for integrated climate-conflict data, multidisciplinary and decolonial research approaches, context-specific and longitudinal studies, and research on preparedness policies, practices and interventions in polycrisis settings.

Key Words

polycrisis, education disruption, climate change and conflict, intersecting vulnerabilities

Introduction

Global environmental changes resulting from rapid world population growth and intensified human development over the past centuries have marked the start of a new geological epoch, termed the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2002). Extreme weather events (EWEs) are increasing in frequency, severity and duration due to unsustainable human activity escalating climate change (Mark *et al.*, 2024). At the same time, the world is witnessing the highest number of conflicts since 1946. According to recent conflict trend analyses, the past three years to 2026 have been the most violent in the last three decades (Global Peace Index, 2026). Conflict and crisis settings are also the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (ND-GAIN Index – University of Notre Dame, n.d.).

These trends have significantly disrupted the continuity of formal education for children. Analysis from Education Cannot Wait suggests that a growing number of school-aged children are being affected by crises – including conflict, climate change, forced displacement and other protracted emergencies – with an estimated 234 million now requiring urgent support to access quality education across 60 countries. Of these children, approximately 85 million are out of school (Stoff and Valenza, 2025). Against this backdrop, this review examines existing evidence related to the ways that climate change and conflict interact to disrupt the continuity of formal education (i.e., schooling).

Notably, research on the continuity of education in the context of both conflict and environmental shocks remains limited or nearly non-existent (c.f., OECD, 2024). Studies predominantly focus on the effects of either conflict or climate change on education, rarely combining the two. Through this preliminary desk review of the literature, we aim to shed light on what is known and to identify key areas where evidence is lacking. In doing so, we draw on examples from academic and grey literature to examine the effects of polycrisis, that is, simultaneously occurring multiple crises with complex and interactive effects (Morin and Kern, 1999), on the continuity of education and to highlight gaps in the existing evidence and knowledge.

Continuity of education in polycrisis settings

While climate change has not been found to directly cause armed conflict, scholarship shows that it can indirectly exacerbate existing social, economic and environmental conditions that can fuel conflict drivers (e.g., Koubi, 2019; Scheffran *et al.*, 2012; Nordås and Gleditsch, 2007). This often occurs through indirect pathways, making vulnerable populations even more susceptible to displacement, resource scarcity or heightened insecurity (UNFCCC, 2022). In other words, the intersection between conflict and climate change is not one-dimensional but complex and mutually reinforcing.

The interconnected and compounded nature of both climate change and armed conflict reflects an evolving risk landscape where multiple crises are increasingly likely to occur simultaneously or in quick succession, intensifying their overall impact (de Ruiter *et al.*, 2020; Pescaroli and Alexander, 2018). A growing number of scholars and policymakers characterise the situation of multiple and interconnected crises as polycrisis (Falk *et al.*, 2024; UNICEF, 2023b). The concept of polycrisis is particularly relevant to this review, as the impact of environmental shocks cannot be disentangled from the broader conflict and crisis context in which they occur.

In short, environmental shocks exacerbate resource scarcity, such as water and arable land, which can heighten tensions and lead to conflicts, particularly in vulnerable regions (e.g., Unfried, Kis-Katos and Poser, 2022). At the same time, conflict undermines a society's capacity to adapt to climate change by disrupting governance, infrastructure, social services (such as education systems) and social cohesion, making recovery and mitigation efforts more difficult. Conflict also has profound negative impacts on the environment and can contribute to climate change through the destruction of ecosystems, pollution, deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions, inhibited environmental protection or rendering landscapes unusable (e.g., Najim *et al.*, 2023).

Against this backdrop, we recognise two types of learning in polycrisis settings: formal education, which includes literacy, numeracy and academic skills taught in schools or non-formal/alternative education programmes, and informal learning.

The latter occurs at home and in the community, facilitated by caregivers and peers. Informal learning may take the form of learning local languages, life skills such as gardening or cooking, and cultural or religious knowledge. Children often supplement school-based learning with learning at home supported by family and friends, such as doing calculations while shopping, telling riddles with family and friends or through storytelling and other activities at home. This review focuses on the continuity of formal education and the missed learning opportunities due to school non-attendance. It is, however, important to acknowledge that, despite disruptions in crisis settings, children's learning continues in various forms, though often unrecognised. A separate review would be needed to explore this broader scope.

For the purposes of this review, we thus conceptualise the continuity of education in conflict and crisis environments as the sustained provision of learning opportunities (i.e., schooling) to children throughout their school-aged years. This includes enabling progression through learning levels and transitions between grades or various types of schools (including alternative forms of education), despite disruptions caused by natural shocks combined with conflict (Kim *et al.*, 2026).

Methods

We conducted a scoping review (Munn *et al.*, 2018) relying on findings and data from studies that did not explicitly focus on the intersections of climate change, education and conflict due to the shortage of literature on the topic. Overall, this study aims to highlight the relationships between climate change, conflict and their effects on education continuity. Additionally, it seeks to identify thematic gaps in the literature and discuss implications for future research. Hence, we provide a broad overview of existing research, identify key themes and pinpoint areas where further investigation is needed.

As shown in the Annex, we searched the literature using two academic databases (Google Scholar and EBSCOhost) to identify academic and peer-reviewed publications along with Google and the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) database to find grey literature such as programme evaluations, reports and humanitarian data.

A challenge we faced was the scarcity of studies explicitly addressing the intersection of conflict, climate change and education. Most studies focus on the effects of either conflict or climate change on education, rarely combining the two. Consequently, we relied heavily on sources that indirectly touched on the issue or mentioned this intersection as part of our broader analysis. These types of documents include case studies, situation reports, humanitarian data and literature focused on either conflict or climate change and education. We also reviewed literature on topics linked to education, for example, the intersection of climate change, conflict and migration where education-related issues were discussed. We also reviewed case studies focused on education from countries affected by climate change in conflict settings that did not explicitly focus on the polycrisis dimension. Although very few studies directly addressed the intersection of conflict, climate change and education, the broader search yielded a diverse body of related literature. Given that our search traversed multiple bodies of literature (e.g., on education and climate change, education and conflict, education and forced migration), quantifying the total number of potentially relevant studies is not analytically meaningful. From our search, we strategically selected 57 studies for inclusion in the scoping review, based on their relevance to the conflict–climate nexus. This included studies on education in conflict settings that also experienced climate-related issues, even if the nexus was not explicitly examined.

All included studies were published in or after 2010. Of the 57 studies included in this review, 6 focused primarily on conflict but included issues related to climate shocks and education, while 27 centred on climate shocks while also addressing issues of conflict and education. Nine resources were case studies or reports on specific polycrisis contexts. Eleven studies focused on the intersection of conflict and climate change alongside related themes. Five studies addressed polycrisis specifically, although only two of these studies focused specifically on the intersection between conflict, climate change and education.

Findings

Overall, the evidence on educational continuity in polycrisis settings, characterised by intersecting

effects of violent conflicts and climate change, points to the following main issues: increased damage to education infrastructure; education disruption and risk of school dropout; resource strain and limited coping mechanisms; and intersectional vulnerabilities (gender, im/mobility, health).

To illustrate these issues, we draw on research evidence from specific cases and examples from diverse regions. These examples are not meant to be exhaustive but offer insights into the compounded effects and help contextualise the overall trends we observed.

Increased damage to education infrastructure

While data and studies directly examining the intersection of environmental shocks, conflict and their impact on educational infrastructure are limited, grey literature – such as reports from NGOs and international organisations – has begun to shed light on these effects. These sources highlight how past and present conflicts, combined with climate-related events like floods, storms and wildfires, further damage or destroy schools and learning facilities. For example, in South Sudan, flooding has forced many schools to close and in many cases, school infrastructure has been destroyed. In 2022, around 895 schools were partially or completely destroyed by floods, directly affecting 215,000 children (Save the Children, 2024). At the same time, conflict and insecurity contributed to the destruction of schools and the occupation of educational facilities by armed groups, further contributing to significant disruption in education services (OCHA, 2022). Moreover, in Syria, schools that have not been destroyed by conflict or environmental shocks are often repurposed to provide shelters for internally displaced persons due to environmental shocks (UNHCR, 2025). This further disrupts the education process, extending the impact to host communities.

Education disruption and risk of school dropout

In 2024, at least 242 million students – from pre-primary to upper secondary – faced school disruptions due to climate events (UNICEF, 2025). Meanwhile, 473 million children experienced armed conflict in 2023, nearly double the figure at any time since the mid-1990s (Sapiezynska, 2024). These

crises often overlap: 16 countries experiencing conflict rank among the most climate vulnerable and account for 60% of global humanitarian need (IRC, 2023). Overall, 234 million school-aged children across 60 countries are living in contexts of polycrises, with 85 million out of school (Stoff and Valenza, 2025).

While these statistics provide a valuable overview of the scale of the global education crisis, they leave several critical gaps in understanding how conflict and climate change affect education continuity apart from school dropout. Concretely, there is limited country or school-level data that details the differential mechanisms through which climate change and conflict interact to disrupt the continuity of education. The same applies to data distinguishing between short-term school disruptions and long-term education setbacks. As we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, even short-term school closures are linked to long-term negative effects on learning, earning and wellbeing, and expose children to risks that limit their ability to return to school (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2022).

In addition, armed conflict significantly exacerbates security challenges in and around educational institutions. In the Sahel region, for instance, school food supplies and canteens have been recurrently targeted and looted by armed groups in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (Tsolakis, 2024). School feeding programmes – demonstrated to enhance student enrolment and attendance (GEEAP, 2023) – are particularly critical in regions affected by climate change and food insecurity. However, their implementation is jeopardised by the persistence of conflict.

Resource strain and limited coping mechanisms

Evidence on the capacity and resources of education systems to respond to the combined effects of conflict and environmental shocks remains limited. Understanding these dynamics is essential for contextualising how intersecting crises disrupt educational continuity. To provide insight into this gap, we review illustrative examples at the global, national and local levels, which form the basis for the following findings section.

At the global level, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine illustrates how new conflicts can impact continuity

of education in low- and lower-middle-income countries (LLMICs) already facing a polycrisis (Falk, 2023). The war triggered global spikes in fuel, food and fertiliser prices, worsening food insecurity driven by EWEs like droughts in East Africa and heatwaves in India and the US (McGuirk and Burke, 2022).

Donors also redirected aid from protracted crises in Africa to Ukraine (McAllister, 2022), while the loss of Ukrainian grain – once 40% of WFP's supply – led to reduced food rations (Green, 2022). In Uganda's Palabek refugee settlement, this contributed to school absenteeism as children sought food or were left in child-headed households due to parental migration (Falk, 2023). This example highlights how global interconnected crises – conflict, climate change and food insecurity – can disrupt education, yet research on these cross-scale, cross-geography impacts remains limited.

At the national level, recurring climate-related disasters are straining already limited government budgets, making it harder to invest in resilient education systems (Kagawa and Selby, 2023). For example, Pakistan's 2022 floods damaged nearly 26,000 schools, causing an estimated \$779 million in losses. LLMICs are especially vulnerable to budget shocks from extreme weather, facing both reduced revenues (e.g., lower tax collection) and increased spending (e.g., infrastructure repairs) (Lis and Nickel, 2010). Education budgets often lack dedicated funds for rebuilding schools, *let alone* for long-term investments like climate-resilient infrastructure, updated curricula or teacher training (Kagawa and Selby, 2023). While the economic costs of conflict are well documented (e.g., Blomberg and Hess, 2002; Serneels and Verpoorten, 2015), there is little evidence on how conflict further limits countries' fiscal capacity to respond to education needs after environmental shocks.

At the local level, climate change and conflict both deepen poverty and inequality, especially at the household level, making it harder for families to support children's education (Dang, Nguyen and Trinh, 2023; Justino, 2011). Climate impacts disproportionately affect people with low incomes and could push up to 135 million more people into poverty by 2030 (Jafino *et al.*, 2020). Conflict further strains household economies through asset loss, reduced services and instability. In response, families may resort to harmful coping strategies – such as child labour, early marriage, or recruitment into

armed groups – leading to school dropout (Kagawa and Selby, 2023). However, research clearly linking poverty from climate and conflict to disrupted education remains limited and difficult to find.

Intersecting vulnerabilities

There is significant evidence on how climate change and violent conflict, as distinct crises, disproportionately affect populations from low-income countries (Buvinic *et al.*, 2013; Pearse, 2017). Less is known about how education for vulnerable groups (e.g., migration status, gender, health or disability status, ethnic, racial or linguistic minorities) is affected by environmental shocks in conflict and crisis settings. Previous research (Datzberger *et al.*, 2024) has shown that for education systems to effectively prepare for and mitigate these shocks, it is crucial not only to understand how multiple crises are influenced by the surrounding political, social and economic environments, but also to recognise how they differently impact children's educational trajectories (and consequently their learning) and wellbeing based on their gender, im/mobility and health.

Gender

Research often conflates the term 'gender' with 'women' or 'girls,' without sufficient attention to the gendered effects of climate change on both female and male children (Datzberger *et al.*, 2024). While evidence on the general effects of climate change on girls is emerging, less is known about its specific impacts on boys. A case study from Bor County, South Sudan – a region experiencing extreme temperatures, erratic rainfall and violent conflict – illustrates the compounded gendered implications for learners. Mohammed and Laki (2024) found that sexual violence, school dropout rates and early marriages were the most significant issues affecting women and girls due to the combination of climate change and conflict in Bor County. Specifically, they found that drought and the scarcity of safe drinking water reduced girls' time in the classroom due to the long journeys required to fetch and carry water (Ibid). Moreover, climate change and conflict disrupt access to natural resources, compelling women and girls to undertake dangerous journeys to obtain essentials such as firewood, water and food. Meanwhile, due to insecurity from violent conflict, men and boys often avoid such tasks out of fear of

recruitment by armed groups, leaving women and girls to shoulder the burden and face exploitation, with implications for education access (Ibid).

Disruptions to education due to EWEs can also increase early marriage, child labour and pregnancy (Pope *et al.*, 2023; Datzberger *et al.*, 2023). These effects are not one-dimensional and depend highly on the context, as EWEs can lead to both increased and reduced child marriage (Datzberger *et al.*, 2024). Our knowledge of how polycrisis settings affect boys' education is still very limited. Concrete and comprehensive data on boys' specific vulnerabilities in these contexts, such as increased exposure to child labour or recruitment into armed forces and how this disrupts their education, is hard to find. Nevertheless, one review indicated that boys' education may also be negatively affected by climate change, often through many of the same pathways as girls, particularly at the school and household levels (Pankhurst, 2022). There is some emerging evidence that boys drop out of school in cases where their efforts are required in rebuilding following environmental shocks. A study from Bangladesh found that parents took boys out of school to help with reconstruction (Mottaleb, Mohanty and Mishra, 2015).

Im/mobility

EWEs and environmental degradation exacerbate displacement due to resource scarcity. The situation particularly worsens for populations in conflict settings (Abel *et al.*, 2019; Burrows and Kinney, 2016). In South Sudan, the ongoing civil conflict and severe flooding due to climate change have displaced millions of people, many of them children. Schools have been turned into shelters and flooding has damaged school infrastructure. The combination of environmental shocks and conflict has forced many children to abandon their education (Wagner Tsoni *et al.*, 2024; World Vision, 2024). Moreover, the increasing number of displaced children in complex crisis settings makes it even more challenging for education authorities and providers, who are already stretched beyond their limits, to address the diverse educational needs of students (GPE, 2023a). Simultaneously, migration and displacement increase teacher–student ratios, exacerbating the challenges in already overcrowded classrooms (GPE, 2023a). At the same time, environmental shocks can also prevent people from escaping (i.e.,

trapped populations), especially affecting people in LLMICs (Rikani *et al.*, 2023). The effects on children's education in the context of displacement are acknowledged in policy and practice, by stressing the need for education systems to be shock-responsive, portable and inclusive so displaced children can continue learning during and after crises (UNICEF, 2023a). However, our review of the literature revealed that there is far less attention in policy and practice to the educational needs of children in voluntarily or involuntarily 'trapped' populations within polycrisis settings such as Syria, South Sudan, Haiti and Yemen.

Health

There is widespread consensus among scholars that children are affected by environmental shocks at all stages of their physical and mental development, starting from in utero exposure (Sheffield and Landrigan, 2011). Some research points to an increase in post-traumatic stress disorder following natural hazards, mainly affecting disadvantaged children and youth in LLMICs, particularly those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic minorities (Self-Brown *et al.*, 2013; Lai *et al.*, 2017). School dropout and child labour after natural hazards and in industries that harm the environment have been significantly associated with poor mental health outcomes in LLMICs. Little is documented about how the combined stress of conflict and climate change exacerbates severe physical and psychosocial effects on learners and teachers, ultimately impairing their ability to learn, teach and engage in school activities. However, rising temperatures and poor air quality can affect students' health, making regular school attendance or focus and cognition difficult. In areas with high conflict and climate stress, these health risks are even more pronounced (Bowles, Butler and Morisetti, 2015). For example, cholera outbreaks in Dadaab refugee camp (Kenya) have been linked to rainy seasons and flooding, disrupting education by causing school closures and posing health risks to students (UNICEF, 2019). The outbreaks were followed by cholera prevention efforts, which included chlorination of water sources in schools, highlighting the impact of such outbreaks on educational settings. Similar issues can be observed in South Sudan (OCHA 2024), which also experienced a cholera outbreak in 2024 and 2025. These instances underscore the challenges that

waterborne diseases, exacerbated by environmental shocks, pose to maintaining consistent education in conflict settings.

The mechanisms by which climate change and conflict influence mental health are complex, multidimensional and cumulative. Mental health and wellbeing determinants are influenced by prior exposure to EWEs, the time since the event occurred, and legacies of colonialism and conflict (Lawrence *et al.*, 2024). Importantly, the consequences of cumulative stress may have a greater effect on already vulnerable individuals. A study of young adults in Poland who experienced the recent polycrisis (COVID-19, Ukraine war, climate change, economic crisis) found that learners from disadvantaged groups (based on gender, sexual orientation and socio-economic status) experienced more stress and adverse mental health outcomes than other students (Katwak *et al.*, 2024). However, mental health support for students, teachers and caregivers in these settings is often lacking (UNICEF, 2025).

Conclusion

Research on the continuity of education in the context of both conflict and environmental shocks is still emerging and scarce. Due to the dearth of studies explicitly addressing the intersection of conflict, climate change and education, we relied heavily on sources that indirectly touched on the issue or mentioned this intersection as part of a case study or broader analysis. Overall, the literature points to several issues and limitations in the existing evidence base, including:

Increased damage to education infrastructure:

Evidence from grey literature indicates that polycrisis settings often exacerbate disruptions due to damaged facilities. However, there remains limited understanding of how these disruptions affect the broader continuity of education.

Education disruption and risk of school dropout:

While existing data indicate an elevated risk of school dropout in polycrisis contexts, significant gaps remain in understanding how conflict and climate change jointly affect education continuity beyond dropout rates. There is limited country- or school-level data detailing the distinct mechanisms through which these crises interact to disrupt

learning, or distinguishing between short-term interruptions and long-term educational setbacks.

Resource strain and limited coping mechanisms:

As exemplified in the widespread impacts of the war in Ukraine, research on the global, cross-scale and cross-regional effects of conflict on education remains limited. Evidence is also scarce on how conflict constrains the fiscal capacity of countries to address educational needs following environmental shocks. At the local level, data linking climate- and conflict-induced poverty to disrupted education is both limited and difficult to access.

Intersecting vulnerabilities (gender, im/mobility, health): To enable education systems to effectively prepare for and respond to polycrisis contexts, it is essential to understand how overlapping crises are shaped by broader political, social and economic conditions – and how they differentially affect children’s educational trajectories, learning outcomes and wellbeing based on their specific backgrounds and vulnerabilities. Addressing these complexities requires more research grounded in decolonial and intersectional perspectives and research methods.

Most education systems in LLMICs remain ill-prepared to anticipate and respond to the above issues. Planning is often reactive, with limited resources and delayed emergency responses – sometimes taking up to three months to reach affected communities (IRC, 2023; Kagawa and Selby, 2023).

At the time of writing, the humanitarian sector was grappling with one of its worst-ever funding crises, driven by the major withdrawal of USAID and deep cuts by FCDO and other donors (e.g., ETF, 2025). Beyond the immediate funding gap, what is particularly alarming is the way in which opposition to urgent climate action, coupled with shrinking research and programme budgets, is stalling progress at precisely the moment when preparedness and anticipatory action are most needed. National security debates have further sidelined education and broader responses to polycrisis mitigation, pushing them down the agenda despite mounting evidence of their critical role in resilience building. This dynamic is visible in contexts where protracted conflict, displacement and climate stresses intersect, yet education and child protection programming often receive less attention and funding than securitised responses. In

this environment, it becomes even more urgent to highlight how grassroots-led initiatives are sustaining education in crisis-affected settings, offering insights into scalable, cost-effective strategies that risk being overlooked amid shifting political and funding priorities.

To conclude, the gaps identified in this review carry significant implications for the design of education policies and programmes in polycrisis contexts. Education systems and humanitarian actors need to move beyond reactive, short-term interventions and adopt proactive, anticipatory approaches that integrate both conflict and climate-related risks. Policies that foreground the resilience of educational infrastructure, the continuity of learning and equitable access for the most vulnerable children, while attending to the differing lived experiences of girls and boys, children with disabilities and those who are displaced or otherwise immobile, are critical. There is a pressing need for integrated research that combines climate and conflict data, adopts multidisciplinary perspectives, and is grounded in specific regional and community contexts. Longitudinal studies are especially scarce, limiting insights into the evolving nature of these crises, and little is known about the effectiveness of current preparedness policies or the mitigation and adaptation strategies available to education systems.

Moreover, despite the growing risks from climate shocks and recurrent EWEs in conflict and crisis settings, there is a striking lack of evidence on how education systems proactively safeguard access to safe, quality and continuous learning before, during and after crises (Kagawa and Selby, 2023). Further research is needed on education system preparedness in polycrisis contexts, as well as on feasible, cost-effective models for anticipatory action and emergency management in contexts affected by conflict and climate-related disruptions that can maintain uninterrupted learning. Future research may explore how programme design benefits from being contextually grounded, drawing on both technical expertise and the knowledge and lived experience of local communities, recognising that individuals and groups most attuned to their own social and environmental contexts often develop effective adaptive strategies.

Rather than imposing external solutions, interventions can build on these locally led practices, supporting scalable, cost-effective strategies that sustain learning continuity during crises. This also underscores the importance of strengthened coordination among national governments, donors and grassroots actors, enhancing the likelihood that resources reach high-risk communities and that interventions remain evidence-informed, sustainable and responsive to evolving needs. Addressing these gaps calls for more decolonial research approaches that centre local knowledge and lived experiences, ensuring that both policy and programme design are informed by those most directly affected by polycrisis.

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Annex: Search terms used in EBSCO, Google Scholar and Google for initial scoping review of the literature.

Overview literature search	
Sections / themes	Search terms
Climate change and conflict	'conflict' OR 'violent conflict' OR 'war' AND 'climate change' OR 'natural disasters' OR 'natural hazards' OR 'floods' OR 'cyclone' OR 'drought' OR 'climate shocks' OR 'polycrisis'
Climate change, conflict and forced migration	'conflict' OR 'violent conflict' OR 'war' AND 'climate change' OR 'natural disasters' OR 'natural hazards' OR 'floods' OR 'polycrisis' AND 'forced migration' 'migration' 'refugee' 'internal displacement' 'internally displaced persons'
Climate change, conflict and education	'conflict' OR 'violent conflict' OR 'war' AND 'climate change' OR 'natural disasters' OR 'natural hazards' OR 'floods' OR 'polycrisis' AND 'education' 'primary education' 'secondary education' 'early childhood education'
Climate change, conflict and children	'conflict' OR 'violent conflict' OR 'war' AND 'climate change' OR 'natural disasters' OR 'natural hazards' OR 'floods' OR 'polycrisis' AND 'children' 'youth'

Approaches to girls' education and gender equality in contexts of conflict and crisis:

Insights from a rigorous evidence review



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Abstract

This review identifies promising approaches to support girls' education and promote gender equality in conflict and crisis contexts. It suggests that combined, holistic interventions – linking efforts to improve learning with work to challenge harmful norms, engage communities and strengthen institutional cultures – are most effective in supporting girls' education. However, evidence on how such interventions relate to broader gender equality and women's rights beyond education is limited. The review also raises critical questions about knowledge production, what counts as evidence and whose voices are heard in global reviews. It calls for better documentation of the wide range of initiatives working to support girls' education and enhance gender equality in crisis settings, and more attentive engagement with the voices and perspectives of girls themselves.

Key Words

conflict, crisis, gender equality, girls' education

Introduction

Research suggests that peacebuilding is more successful where women are empowered (Gizelis, 2018). However, evidence regarding how best to support women's empowerment and gender equality, including through education, in conflict and crisis settings is limited (Lwamba *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, while in some contexts conflict may contribute to disrupting repressive gender norms (Parkes and Unterhalter, 2015), it often deepens existing inequalities (Unterhalter *et al.*, 2022). Thus, although the impacts of conflict and crisis on education affect boys and girls in different ways, girls from marginalised communities tend to be disproportionately affected (Pankhurst, 2022; Sims, 2021). This evidence review, which was developed as part of the wider Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) research programme, focuses on the impacts of interventions aimed at improving educational access, quality and continuity for girls. It seeks to respond to the following questions:

- What promising approaches support access, quality and continuity of education for girls, particularly those from the most marginalised groups, in contexts of conflict and protracted crisis?
- To what extent, and under what conditions, are these approaches associated with increased gender equality and girls' and women's rights in and beyond education?

In the following sections, we discuss the framing for the review and describe its methods. We then consider key findings in relation to the distribution of

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research and what existing evidence reveals about the impacts of different forms of intervention on girls' education and wider gender equality outcomes in contexts of conflict and crisis.

Background and framing

This review builds on earlier evidence reviews that have examined how conflict and crisis shape inequalities in and beyond education (Unterhalter *et al.*, 2022; Pankhurst, 2022; Sims, 2021; Stark, Seff and Reis, 2021; Noble *et al.*, 2019). These show that school closures during disasters, pandemics and conflict disproportionately affect girls from the poorest groups (Unterhalter *et al.*, 2022) and highlight similar risks for girls in relation to climate change and displacement (Pankhurst, 2022; Sims, 2021; North, 2019). They also document heightened exposure of adolescent girls to sexual violence, exploitation and early marriage during conflict and crisis, particularly when schooling is disrupted (Stark, Seff and Reis, 2021; Noble *et al.*, 2019). Such reviews are important for understanding the intersecting nature of forms of marginalisation and violence experienced by girls in conflict and crisis. However, they do not focus on the impacts of interventions to support girls' education in these contexts. Previous evidence reviews on the impacts of different education-related interventions for girls (Psaki *et al.*, 2022; Sperling and Winthrop, 2015; Unterhalter *et al.*, 2014) have provided important insights into the sorts of actions that have been successful in supporting girls' schooling. Yet, these have not tended to focus explicitly on contexts of conflict and crisis.

Meanwhile, some previous reviews of education interventions in conflict and crisis settings have highlighted gendered dimensions of impact, such as differences in attendance and learning outcomes for girls and boys. Such reviews have emphasised the value of multi-pronged approaches that combine community engagement with teacher support to create inclusive, gender-equitable learning environments (Burde *et al.*, 2023, 2015; Burde, Lahmann and Thompson, 2019; Perez-Nieto *et al.*, 2017). However, little attention has been given to how efforts to improve girls' schooling relate to broader gender equality outcomes within or beyond education in these settings.

This review thus aims to synthesise evidence on how the disruptions caused by conflict and crisis may interact with and shape work to support girls' education and gender equality within and beyond education. It focuses on studies evaluating interventions aimed at supporting education for girls in contexts of conflict and crisis. To guide the analysis, we adapted a Theory of Change (ToC) from an earlier review (Unterhalter *et al.*, 2014), bringing it into conversation with the ERICC conceptual framework (Kim *et al.*, 2026). The ToC for this review assumes a dynamic relationship between girls' education and broader social factors, such as resource distribution, power dynamics, exclusionary structures and gender norms. It posits that successful interventions depend on supportive conditions at global, national and local levels, and that improvements in girls' education can contribute to wider gender equality beyond education. However, this relationship is contingent on broader social, political and institutional conditions: schools may reproduce rather than transform gendered inequalities while conflict and crisis may undermine enabling factors, limiting progress toward equality.

Our analysis is grounded in Unterhalter's work, which distinguishes between three different ways of understanding gender in education (Unterhalter, 2007). These are gender as a noun, which is linked to concerns with access and ensuring equal numbers of girls and boys in school; gender as an adjective, which highlights the need to understand gendered structures of power and relationships and how these may be associated with forms of hierarchy, exclusion and exploitation within and beyond school settings; and gender as a verb, concerned with how gendered norms and stereotypes are enacted and how they may be resisted, challenged or reinforced in schools, families and communities (Unterhalter and North, 2017; Unterhalter, 2007). We suggest that realising education's transformative potential requires attending to all three conceptualisations of gender equality. This involves not only increasing girls' participation in education – for example, through resources or new learning opportunities – but also creating gender-equitable institutions and challenging harmful norms and stereotypes. Based on this, the ToC groups interventions into four inter-related categories:

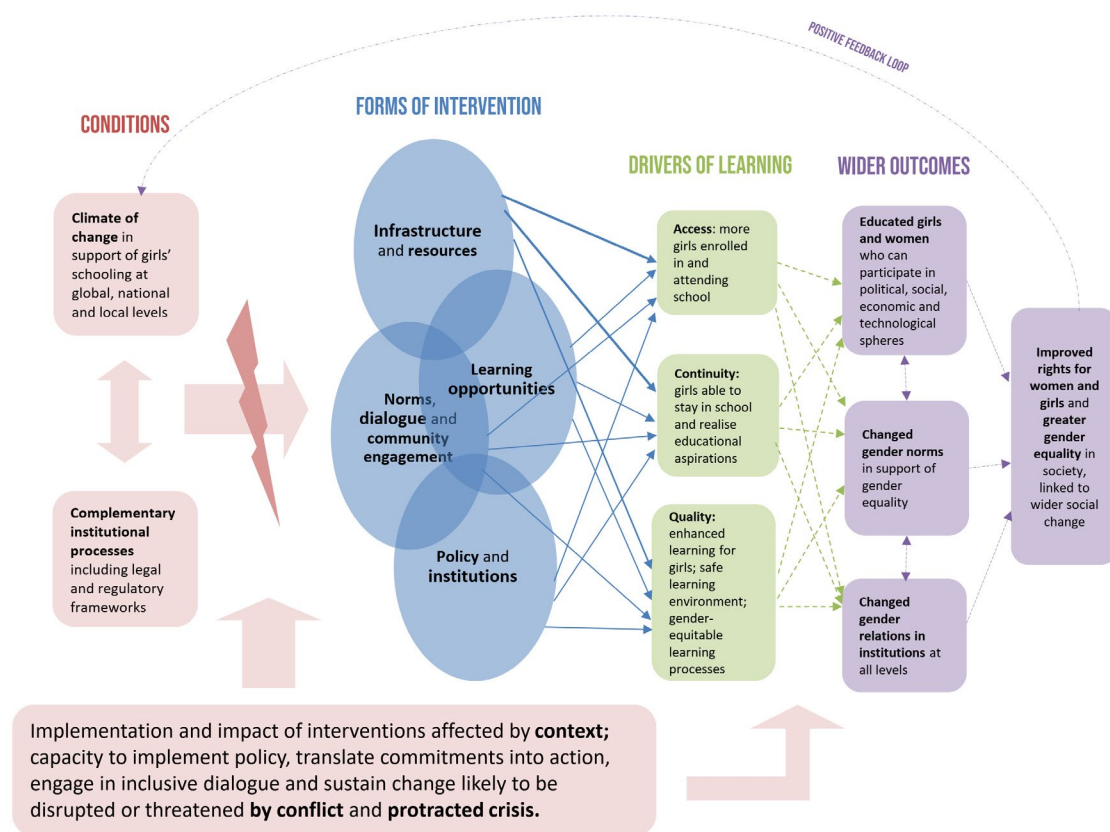
1. Infrastructure development and the distribution of resources;
2. The provision of learning opportunities;
3. Work to change gender norms and engage different groups in dialogue regarding the importance of girls' education and girls' and women's rights; and
4. Policy development and the strengthening of institutions in support of gender equality.

It assumes that the impact of work to support

girls' education will be greatest when combinations of different kinds of intervention, associated with different understandings of gender, are used together, as represented by the overlapping ovals in Figure 1.

In the analysis below, we draw on these four categories of intervention to organise our discussion and interrogate the assumptions on which the ToC is based.

Figure 1. Theory of Change (ToC)



Adapted from Unterhalter *et al.* (2014)

Methods

Search strategy

The review took a rigorous approach to identify, assess and synthesise existing studies on promising approaches for the promotion of girls' education and gender equality in conflict and crisis settings. It was guided by ODI's principles for rigorous evidence reviews (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2013). This

meant it adopted the core principles of a systematic review, as set out in the Cochrane guidelines (Chandler *et al.*, 2019), but also acknowledged the inherent subjectivity in assessing quality and the need to ensure a reflexive and critical approach, which is attentive to the problems of making definitive claims about 'what works' in relation to research conducted across diverse settings on complex and contextually nuanced issues.

Following the research protocol developed for the review, the literature search was undertaken in six phases:

1. Studies were sourced from five major databases: ERIC, ProQuest, Scopus, Google Scholar and Web of Science. Search terms were derived from the research questions and ToC, with searches based on the three core dimensions of the review – gender, education and conflict and crisis. These were expanded through the use of related and synonymous terms.
2. Hand searches were undertaken of the following websites to identify relevant grey literature and evaluation reports: UNESCO, UNICEF, United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), UNHCR, the World Bank, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Refugee Women's Commission, the Malala Fund, Save the Children, Plan International, War Child, UN Women, the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), the International Rescue Committee (IRC).
3. Hand searches were conducted in the Journal on Education in Emergencies and the Journal of Peace Education.
4. Additional research literature was manually incorporated based on recommendations from the researchers' networks, including ERICC programme teams located in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, South Sudan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nigeria.
5. Extensive reference tracking from existing relevant evidence reviews was conducted.
6. Searches in French and Spanish were conducted on Redalyc, FLACSO, Cairn Info and Persée.

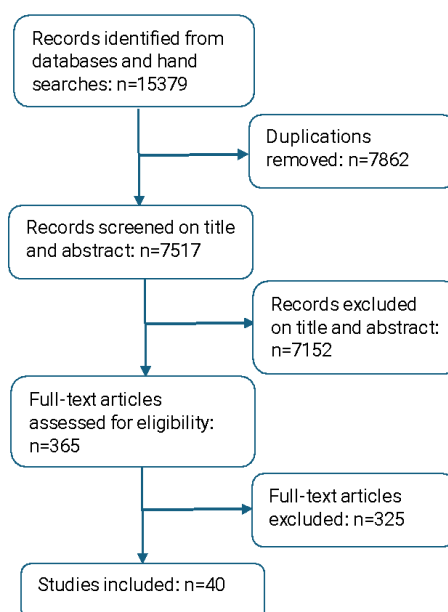
Screening and coding

The searches led to the extraction of 15,379 articles, which were imported into EPPI-Reviewer, a web-based software designed to support systematic reviews. Repetitions were removed and a two-stage screening process was applied. This excluded studies published before 2012,¹ studies not focused on education for primary or secondary-age children, studies in languages other than English, Spanish or French, and those that did not directly address the research questions because they lacked a clear gender focus or sex-disaggregated data, did not focus on a promising approach or intervention, or did not relate to a relevant context. In delineating contexts for inclusion, we drew on the ERICC concept note (Falk *et al.*, 2024), which identifies eight types of crises: compounded crisis or polycrisis, armed conflicts, violence, climate-induced and environmental disasters, forced displacement, economic crisis and shocks, health epidemics and pandemics, and governance or political crisis. We included studies which were conducted in country contexts significantly affected by conflict or a wide-scale crisis at the time of the research, or which engaged explicitly with one or more of these eight forms of conflict or protracted crisis.

The quality and strength of evidence were assessed against seven categories: conceptual framing, transparency, methodology, cultural appropriateness, validity, reliability and cogency, based on the framework developed by BE2 (2020).

Finally, 40 studies were retained and analysed using a pre-determined coding framework. This was based on the ToC and considered the background and context of the research; the research methodology, setting and participants; the type and nature of the intervention, whether or not different interventions were used in combination; and the evidence in relation to different forms of impact on access to and quality and continuity of education for girls and wider gender equality outcomes.

¹ To ensure the evidence reviewed was relevant amid rapidly evolving global political and economic landscapes, only studies published since 2012 were included.

Figure 2. PRISMA diagram showing screening process

Limitations

While the requirement for global evidence reviews to consider research rigour is important for assessing the strength of evidence, it risks privileging knowledge produced through externally funded interventions, where impact evaluations are more common, over grassroots and locally developed initiatives. In this review, although during screening we identified many potentially promising approaches in the grey literature, reporting on activities by international organisations as well as local NGOs and grassroots organisations, these reports often lacked methodological transparency and therefore could not be included. Moreover, the review draws primarily on academic literature published in English. Thus, although we sought to include searches in Spanish and French and made efforts through ERICC country teams to access literature in other languages, we recognise that local knowledge, particularly from protracted crisis settings in low- and middle-income contexts, remains underrepresented.

We also note that the specific focus of this review on girls' education and gender equality meant that, while we acknowledge the gendered impacts of conflict and crisis on boys, the search strategy was not designed to capture literature focused on boys. This could be an important focus for future reviews.

Findings

Distribution of research: Uneven and fragmented evidence

Overall, the review found that evidence regarding the impact of work associated with the four different types of interventions identified in the ToC to support girls' schooling and gender equality in conflict and crisis was uneven and fragmented. Most (90%) of the included studies were either quantitative or mixed methods, with nearly two-thirds of studies (27/40) funded by bilateral donors or multilateral agencies. There was a marked lack of high-quality qualitative research, or research focused on small-scale, bottom-up projects developed by grassroots or community organisations. This, at least in part, reflects the limitations noted above of excluding research that did not clearly demonstrate methodological rigour. It also raises wider questions about how experiences, processes and different forms of impact, in relation to complex and contextualised processes of change at local levels, are documented and captured.

In terms of geographical spread, more than half of the included studies (23/40) were conducted in countries in Africa with smaller numbers from Asia, the Middle East and just one from Latin America.

This possibly reflects wider geographic bias in dominant conceptions of what conflict is, which often exclude countries in Latin America. The included studies took place in settings affected by a range of conflicts and forms of crisis, with more than half identifying poly or compounded crises as a feature of the research context (see Table 1).

Table 1. Classification of studies by type of conflict and crisis

Armed conflicts	17
Violence	14
Climate-induced and environmental disasters	3
Forced displacement	9
Economic crisis	10
Health crisis	11
Governance or political crisis	3
Polycrisis/compounded crisis	26

Several of the included studies did not explicitly define the features of marginalisation experienced by girls within the research. Those that did most often attributed it to their refugee status or conditions of extreme poverty (Table 2). However, although a relatively large number of studies focused on refugees, research on internally displaced girls was far less common. Disability was one of the least examined factors, highlighting its peripheral position within the literature and indicating a significant research gap.

Table 2. Classification of studies by type of marginalisation

Disability	2
Minority	4
Location	5
Poverty	7
Travelling community	1
Refugee/migrant community	9
Internally displaced	4
Orphan/left-behind children	4
Not specified	16

In relation to the different categories of intervention identified in the ToC, interventions involving infrastructure and the distribution of resources (such as cash transfers), or with the provision of learning

opportunities (accelerated or remedial programmes) were the most well researched with 20 and 15 studies respectively (Table 3). In contrast, far fewer studies focused on work that aimed to address restrictive gender norms that hinder girls from attending school or realising their aspirations and create spaces for dialogue on girls' education and rights (12 studies), or work to develop policy and strengthen institutional cultures in support of gender equality at different levels (ten studies). Just over half (60%) of the reviewed studies combined two or more types of intervention.

Table 3. Classification of studies by type of intervention

Infrastructure/resources	20
Learning opportunities	15
Policy/institutional cultures	10
Norms/engagement	12

Impacts on girls' education and gender equality

Infrastructure and resource distribution

Of the 20 studies in this category, 17 examined financial support interventions – such as cash transfers, scholarships and subsidies for school-related costs including tuition, uniforms, textbooks and hygiene kits (Save the Children, 2024; Cas, 2016; Trinies, Ghulamali and Freeman, 2015). Only three focused on infrastructure, including school construction and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities. While some interventions targeted girls, many addressed children more broadly, with positive impacts for girls. For example, two infrastructure projects in Pakistan and the Philippines aimed to restore school facilities after disasters to ensure continued learning for all students (Save the Children, 2024; Cas, 2016). Adequate WASH facilities were noted as particularly beneficial for girls (Trinies *et al.*, 2015).

The most common form of financial support was cash transfers to families, with eight of the seventeen studies focused on financial support examining this approach, often in refugee contexts. These aimed to meet basic needs and offset indirect education costs. Evidence from various settings shows positive impacts on girls' schooling, particularly in access (GESS, 2023; UNICEF, 2021; Ozler *et al.*, 2020;

De Hoop Morey and Seidenfeld, 2019; Clugston, 2018; Jones, Samuel and Plank, 2017; NRC, 2016). However, the reviewed research suggests that such interventions are most effective when part of holistic strategies that address gender norms and safety concerns and engage communities, including parents and caregivers. For example, an evaluation of the Makani ('My Space') programme in Jordan – which targeted vulnerable Jordanian, Palestinian, Syrian and Dom communities, providing cash transfers to adolescents aged 13–18, conditional on school attendance and participation in empowerment activities – found that the empowerment components had a positive impact on gender norms, while cash transfers enhanced girls' well-being and helped families afford essentials such as medical care and clothing (Presler-Marshall *et al.*, 2022).

Overall, the studies focused on research and infrastructure interventions indicate positive outcomes in terms of improving girls' access to education and learning outcomes. However, there is no evidence linking these to wider gender equality outcomes beyond education.

Provision of learning opportunities

The 15 studies on interventions focused directly on the provision of learning opportunities included accelerated learning (five studies), remedial learning (four studies), community-led education (three studies) and distance learning programmes (four studies). Many of these interventions targeted children broadly rather than girls specifically, though positive impacts for girls were noted. Most (14) focused on foundational skills, particularly literacy and numeracy, in refugee contexts or regions where state education systems could not deliver basic learning, sometimes combined with vocational or life skills. Four interventions also incorporated social and emotional learning (SEL) (Brown *et al.*, 2023; Presler-Marshall *et al.*, 2022; Diazgranados *et al.*, 2022b; Bandiera, 2019). For example, in Nigeria, an NGO-led programme established non-formal education centres offering three hours of daily instruction in literacy, numeracy and SEL. Although not designed specifically for girls, the programme improved girls' literacy and numeracy over seven months but showed no significant effects on SEL outcomes (Diazgranados *et al.*, 2022b; IRC, 2019). Similarly, another study conducted in Niger found

limited impacts on girls' social-emotional well-being (Brown *et al.*, 2023), suggesting that in complex settings where girls face intersecting disadvantages, improving well-being requires multidimensional strategies beyond basic learning provision.

Overall, the evidence relating to interventions focused on the provision of learning opportunities highlights their positive impact on improving girls' access to or quality of education across a range of contexts (Arlini *et al.*, 2023; Diazgranados *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b; Naveed, Habib and Akhtar, 2022; Jantzi *et al.*, 2019; IRC, 2019; Burde and Linden, 2013). However, again, this was not generally linked to evidence of wider gains in gender equality within or beyond education.

Policy development and institutional strengthening

Of the ten studies focused on interventions involving aspects of policy development and institutional strengthening, seven were primarily associated with teaching practices, including the provision of teaching and learning materials, training for teachers and materials developers, and support for teacher training colleges. Only three addressed institutional structures, which encompassed technical assistance to the Ministry of Education, training for school management committees, and support for parent-teacher associations (PTAs) (Randall and Garcia, 2020; USAID, 2017; USAID and EDC, 2012). As with the previous two groups of interventions, not all explicitly addressed gender; many simply aimed to enhance teaching quality, with the expectation that this would improve outcomes for girls.

Of the studies concerned with curriculum development, three looked at programmes aiming to enhance girls' awareness of health and reproductive rights, one included work to support employability and three involved peace education (Corboz *et al.*, 2019; Herrington, 2015; Osler and Yahya, 2013). These were typically small-scale and supplementary initiatives, rather than being focused on driving structural change to enhance gender equality within or beyond schools. Teacher training featured in five interventions (e.g., Randall and Garcia, 2020; USAID and EDC, 2012), but this was mostly focused on the implementation of learning programmes rather than addressing gender norms or systemic inequalities. Some studies highlighted a lack of teacher training, alongside community

engagement, as major constraints to the success of wider initiatives to support girls' education or gender equality. For example, a child-led peace programme in Somalia had a positive impact on girls' education by increasing enrolment and amplifying girls' voices in challenging violence, but insufficient teacher training limited broader social change (Herrington, 2015). Similarly, in Kurdistan-Iraq, education reforms promoting human rights and gender equity were hindered by teachers' lack of capacity to integrate these themes effectively in classroom teaching (Osler and Yahya, 2013).

Six of the policy and institutional strengthening interventions included in this group were implemented alongside others linked to resource distribution or alternative learning provision. For example, a programme in the Democratic Republic of the Congo aimed at enhancing educational opportunities for girls while addressing broader community needs combined teacher training, support for PTAs, scholarships, snacks, a savings and loans scheme for community members and caregivers, and remedial classes for low-performing girls (Randall and Garcia, 2020). These activities improved girls' attendance and academic performance but also led to unintended consequences: boys and their caregivers expressed resentment toward girls who received benefits, and dropout rates among boys in intervention schools increased.

Overall, the relatively small body of evidence associated with interventions in this group suggests that they may play an important role in improving both access to and quality of education for girls, with a small number of studies (four) also pointing to positive impacts in terms of wider gender equality outcomes.

Work to challenge gender norms and open spaces for dialogue

The final group of interventions focused on changing gender norms that restrict girls' opportunities and creating spaces for community dialogue. The 12 studies in this group included research on programmes addressing gender-based violence (eight studies), initiatives to raise awareness, including those engaging parents, caregivers and community leaders (five studies), and activities supporting girls' empowerment through clubs and

mentoring (two studies). Often, these efforts were combined with other interventions. Studies across diverse contexts show promising impacts when resource or learning-focused interventions are combined with efforts to address gender-based violence, engage caregivers and communities, or create dialogue through girls' and mixed-sex clubs (e.g., Foulds *et al.*, 2023; C.A.C. International, 2022; Seff *et al.*, 2021; Corboz *et al.*, 2019; Stark *et al.*, 2018).

Studies in this group provided the strongest evidence of shifts in social norms toward gender equality, highlighting the value of linking school-based initiatives with broader community engagement, especially when these take a carefully contextualised approach to working with existing community structures and engaging different groups in dialogue. For example, a peace education and community norms programme in Afghanistan combined efforts to challenge gender norms with institutional support through curriculum changes, teacher training and engagement with women's civil society organisations and government staff (Corboz *et al.*, 2019). It adopted a whole-community approach, involving children, parents, religious leaders and men and boys. Activities included conflict resolution, peacebuilding and advocacy training, framed within Islamic principles supporting women's rights. Baseline-endline research showed improved girls' school attendance, and more gender-equitable attitudes and reduced violence-supporting attitudes among girls and boys.

However, the reviewed research suggests that changing attitudes toward girls' schooling and gender equality alone is insufficient to ensure girls can attend and thrive in education. Interventions must also address parents' and caregivers' concerns about girls' safety in and on the way to school, which are often particularly acute in conflict-affected contexts (Foulds *et al.*, 2023; Consilient, 2022). Meanwhile, evidence on programmes aimed at reducing sexual and gender-based violence is mixed: some initiatives involving girls and caregivers reduced incidences of rape or violence (Wheeler *et al.*, 2024; Seff *et al.*, 2021), but where school-based efforts were not linked to broader community engagement, their impact was limited (Ogunfowokan and Fajemilehan, 2012). Moreover, the gains documented were often small-scale and difficult to sustain. Some research reported

backlash from boys (Randall and Garcia, 2020; Munene and Wambiya, 2019), while other studies highlighted setbacks during the Covid-19 pandemic, when economic hardship led to traditional gender norms being reinforced (C.A.C. International, 2022). These findings underscore the need for long-term, context-sensitive investment and for strategies that actively involve boys and men in promoting gender equality. The lack of attention to the experiences or perspectives of men and boys, and their role in supporting work on girls' education and gender equality, therefore represents a significant research gap.

Conclusion

The review found that interventions involving infrastructure and resource distribution, as well as the provision of learning opportunities, have been fairly well studied, with relatively good evidence linking these to improved participation in education for girls across a range of settings. This reflects a dominant focus in the research literature on gender as a noun – concerned with getting girls into education or enabling them to continue learning. However, there has been far less attention to interventions linked to understandings of gender as an adjective or as a verb. Thus, despite a relatively substantial body of evidence on approaches that support girls' schooling in different crisis contexts, little is known about more systemic interventions aimed at strengthening institutional cultures, challenging gender norms, or engaging communities and other stakeholders, including boys and men, in dialogue.

The review's ToC assumed a dynamic relationship between efforts to support girls' education and broader social change. However, we found little evidence linking interventions focused on girls' schooling with wider gender equality outcomes, as shown by the broken lines in Figure 1. This highlights the challenges of achieving and sustaining change in support of girls' rights and gender equality in complex settings where families face multiple insecurities. The research evidence that does exist suggests that work to strengthen institutional cultures, including through support to teachers, engaging communities and changing gender norms, is likely to be essential for sustaining improvements in girls' education and increasing gender equality

and girls' and women's rights in the longer term. It further underscores the need for interventions that are carefully contextualised and sustained over time, and which connect work in schools with wider community engagement.

The limited evidence on wider gender equality outcomes may also partly reflect the review's inclusion criteria, which prioritised studies evaluating educational outcomes, as well as the challenges of measuring changes in gender norms using conventional 'rigorous' research methods. Impact evaluations, typically based on quantitative approaches, often fail to capture the perspectives and experiences of girls and other participants. Meanwhile, the relative lack of carefully contextualised qualitative and longitudinal studies means we have an incomplete understanding of the relationship between girls' education and gender equality as well as how this is perceived by different stakeholders, and how change happens over time in these contexts.

This review is therefore valuable not only because it synthesises what is known about interventions supporting girls' education in conflict and crisis contexts but also because it exposes critical gaps in current research practices. In doing so, it raises questions about processes of knowledge production, what counts as evidence, whose voices are heard, and how diverse and often localised experiences linked to supporting girls and processes of social transformation in complex contexts are captured – or not – in global reviews. In particular, it highlights an urgent need for more careful documentation of the wide range of existing initiatives, including grassroots, women and community-led work to support girls' education and enhance gender equality in conflict and crisis contexts, and more attentive engagement with the voices and perspectives of girls themselves.

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Addressing educational gaps in conflict and crisis settings:

A rigorous review of interventions for children with disabilities, language minorities and the internally displaced



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Abstract

This rigorous review synthesises evidence on education interventions – policies, programmes and practices – aiming to improve access to, quality of and continuity in education for three groups of marginalised learners in contexts of conflict and protracted crisis: children with disabilities, language minority children and internally displaced children. Fifty-nine studies were included, with many evaluating intervention effectiveness on holistic child outcomes. Evidence involving children with disabilities is especially scarce, limiting conclusions for this group. Studies on interventions for language minority and displaced children are more common, including accelerated and remedial learning, language support and psychosocial programmes. These show positive impacts on academic learning and wellbeing, but few report reduced equity gaps with more advantaged peers. Notably, there is a major gap in evidence around policy-level interventions and systems change. Overall, more effectiveness research is needed, and complementary research efforts can help to build a more holistic body of evidence around interventions.

Key Words

education in emergency, children with disabilities, language minorities, internally displaced

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Introduction

Conflicts and protracted crises – such as armed conflict and violence, forced displacement, environmental shocks, political instability, economic disruptions and pandemics (Falk *et al.*, 2024) – disproportionately affect children from marginalised backgrounds, intensifying vulnerabilities and constraining educational pathways. Dabrowski *et al.* (2024) highlight multiple intersecting barriers to access, quality and continuity in education, including economic hardship, gender-based exclusion, disability-related stigma, ethnolinguistic marginalisation, geographic isolation and the effects of violence, disasters or pandemics. The disproportionate impacts experienced by marginalised identity or social groups are often shaped by prevailing structural and social inequalities (Carter, 2021), with emergency-induced vulnerabilities often compounding pre-existing disadvantages across social, health, political, infrastructural, economic and communication domains (Mendis *et al.*, 2023).

Traditional humanitarian approaches often homogenise vulnerability and overlook intersectional disadvantage (Whetstone and Demiroz, 2023). This results in policy and programmatic interventions that inadequately address compounded marginalisation, which limits access to, quality of and continuity in education for certain groups during crisis. Our paper synthesises an evidence base around encouraging interventions that support education for marginalised populations: 1) children with disabilities, 2) language minority children and 3) internally displaced children. This undertaking is critical because these groups are particularly susceptible to educational exclusion due to economic hardships from loss of livelihoods, political repression linked to minority identities and social isolation resulting from displacement.

Marginalisation often reflects intersecting vulnerabilities, such that the three groups included in this review are not always mutually exclusive. For instance, displaced children with disabilities from language minority backgrounds experience compounded disadvantage. However, our review treats these groups as discrete categories, as reported in the studies reviewed. Further research is needed to assess equity gains for those facing intersecting forms of exclusion in education.

Firstly, we employ the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crises (ERICC) conceptual framework (Kim *et al.*, 2026) to explore how conflict and crisis shape the educational experiences of these groups. This framework identifies four key drivers of learning: access to, quality of and continuity of education, and the coherence of education systems operations. These provide levers for strengthening the functioning of education systems and achieving equitable holistic child outcomes in academic learning, social and emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing.

Next, we consolidate our rigorous review by presenting selected promising interventions for each group. While most are supported by effectiveness studies that assess impact on achievement and equity outcomes, we also draw on implementation research and process evaluations where relevant. Although these may not be able to unpack ‘what works,’ they offer insights into the contextual and experiential dimensions of intervention delivery and are useful in documenting some promising effects when evidence from impact studies is scarce, especially for children with disabilities. We conclude with a discussion of thematic implications for intervention design and highlight notable gaps in the current evidence base.

Literature review

Children with disabilities

At least 22 million children with disabilities live in crisis settings, with over 17 million out of school (Stoff and Valenza, 2025). They are more likely to face vulnerabilities and exclusion during and in the aftermath of violent conflicts (UN, 2022). Yet the evidence base for inclusive education in humanitarian contexts remains alarmingly limited (Thota *et al.*, 2022; Whittaker *et al.*, 2021; Burde, Lahmann and Thompson, 2019).

Box 1. Disadvantages experienced by children with disabilities during conflict and crisis

- Intensification of pre-existing barriers: inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate teacher preparation and insufficient data systems (UNICEF, 2024; Humanity & Inclusion, 2023; Presler-Marshall, Jones and Odeh, 2020)
- Increased health risks during and after emergencies, with greater vulnerability to mental health challenges, malnutrition and preventable illness and injury (UNICEF, 2022)
- Exclusion from education services and decision-making processes due to weakened identification systems and poor data collection (EENET, 2017)
- Limited educational access due to continued stigmatisation among teachers and parents, such as the belief that children with disabilities cannot learn (Bakhshi, Babulal and Trani, 2018; EENET, 2017)
- Higher out-of-school rates and lower learning achievement and wellbeing compared to non-disabled peers (Stoff and Valenza, 2025; Bakhshi, Babulal and Trani, 2018)
- Gaps in education and other special service provisions due to disability being approached as a medical issue – rather than a matter of rights-based and inclusive education – during humanitarian response (Thomas, 2018; EENET, 2017; Berghs, 2015)
- Collapse of inclusive education efforts when humanitarian funding ends and coordination with long-term development planning is poor (Humanity & Inclusion, 2023)

Language minority children

The role of language in human development is increasingly recognised as vital for achieving global development goals, yet children from language minority backgrounds consistently show lower early childhood development scores than their peers from dominant language groups (Miller *et al.*, 2024; Romaine, 2013). Around 37% of children in low- and middle-income countries are taught in a language they neither speak nor understand (World Bank, 2021), even though we know that mother-tongue instruction has positive impacts on literacy, motivation, engagement in learning and equity for language minority children (Nakamura *et al.*, 2023).

Globally, two-thirds of displaced people, including 31 million school-aged displaced children and youths, live in countries where the official language is different from their own (UNICEF, 2017). For refugee and displaced children, research highlights the importance of both maintaining home languages (to support identity, sense of belonging and foundational learning) and learning host-community languages (to improve access to education, employment and social inclusion) (Kaysılı, Soylu and Sever, 2019; Capstick and Delaney, 2016). However, there exists limited evidence on effective language-of-instruction practices for multilingual populations in situations of mass displacement (Menashy and Zhakaria, 2018).

Box 2. Disadvantages experienced by language minority children during conflict and crisis

- Heightened language barriers during and after emergencies restrict access to essential services, including education (Uekusa, 2019)
- Reinforcement of linguistic exclusion and limited participation of language minority groups when humanitarian responses prioritise dominant or official languages (Capstick, 2018)
- Overemphasis on dominant-language acquisition overlooks the importance of mother tongue-based education and depoliticises the role of language policy in promoting social cohesion, diversity and peacebuilding (Menashy and Zhakaria, 2018)
- Increased risk of loss of home languages, which can erode cultural identity, deepen marginalisation and fuel intra-group tensions (Capstick, 2018)
- Lack of language policies tailored to the needs of displaced populations even though displacement often lasts 10 to 15 years or more (Devictor and Do, 2016)
- Education-in-emergency programmes struggle to meet the needs of language minority learners, including a lack of teacher professional development to facilitate teaching and learning in students' home languages (Sekaggya-Bagarukayo and Oddy, 2022; Mason and Orcutt, 2019)

Internally displaced children

By the end of 2023, the number of internally displaced people (IDP) had reached nearly 70 million – exceeding the global refugee population – with figures projected to continue rising (UNHCR, 2023). Among them, over 11 million IDP children are estimated to be out of school (Stoff and Valenza, 2025). IDPs face widespread disruption to educational, economic and social life, and their vulnerabilities are heightened when their lives are uprooted and their livelihood mechanisms are shattered. Despite the protracted nature of many displacement situations, international support for IDP education remains largely short term (IDMC, 2024).

IDPs integrated into host communities are more likely to achieve better education and health outcomes than those in camp settings due to better access to existing infrastructure and functioning public school systems (Pape and Sharma, 2019; Bengtsson and Naylor, 2016). However, integration may trigger tensions where host communities perceive IDPs as competing for already limited resources. Consequently, well-funded services are needed that benefit both displaced and host populations, especially in poorer and remote settings (Schuettler and Do, 2023; Bennouna, Stark and Wessells, 2020; Hoogeveen and Pape, 2020). Yet research into effective educational interventions for IDP children is limited (Burde *et al.*, 2023).

Box 3. Disadvantages experienced by IDP children during conflict and crisis

- Compounded and overlapping vulnerabilities: trauma, poverty, poor health, discrimination, exclusion and violence (Schuettler and Do, 2023; Burde *et al.*, 2023)
- Limited international attention due to the absence of a binding international legal framework, and the perception that IDP protection is a domestic issue (Burde *et al.*, 2023; Abu-Ghaida and Silva, 2021)
- Reliance on national authorities – who may be unable or unwilling to respond – for protection and assistance (Ferris and Winthrop, 2010; Hulme, 2005)
- Lack of strong national IDP policies and implementation gaps due to conflict, political resistance and weak capacity (Ferris and Winthrop, 2010)
- Ineffective educational planning due to data gaps, particularly for non-camp IDPs who are often mobile and may conceal their status due to fear or stigma (Valenti and Yasukawa, 2024; Eurostat, 2018; Baal and Ronkainen, 2017; Bengtsson and Naylor, 2016)
- Increased risk of recruitment by armed groups when IDP children are separated from family and community networks (Bennouna, Stark and Wessells, 2020)
- Exacerbated barriers to quality education: damaged educational infrastructure, shortages of qualified teachers, unsafe conditions in and around schools and limited access to education that provides formal certification (Schuettler and Do, 2023; Burde *et al.*, 2023)
- Uneven quality of education, depending on displacement settings (camp versus host community) and governance models (state versus community- or NGO-led) (Hamer, 2011)

Methodology

In the absence of a coherent body of evidence on effective policy and programmatic interventions for these three marginalised groups, this review addressed two overarching research questions:

What promising interventions (policies, programmes, practices) have been implemented to improve access to, quality of and continuity in the education of children facing barriers related to disability, language minority status and internal displacement in conflict and protracted crisis settings?

To what extent does existing evidence suggest these interventions positively impact equity and achievement in holistic child outcomes?

Search strategy

We employed a rigorous methodology grounded in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2021) and the PICO framework supported by Boolean search strings (Tufanaru *et al.*, 2021) (Table 1).

Table 1. PICO Model

Population	Intervention	Context	Outcomes
Disabilities	Programme	Humanitarian crisis	Education
Internally displaced	Practice	Conflict	School
Ethnic minority	Policy	Displacement	Learn
Linguistic minority	Intervention	Violence	SEL
Socially excluded	Evidence	Disaster	Wellbeing
Underprivileged	Inclusion	Emergency	
Disadvantaged			

Studies published since 2010 were identified using a four-phase search strategy:

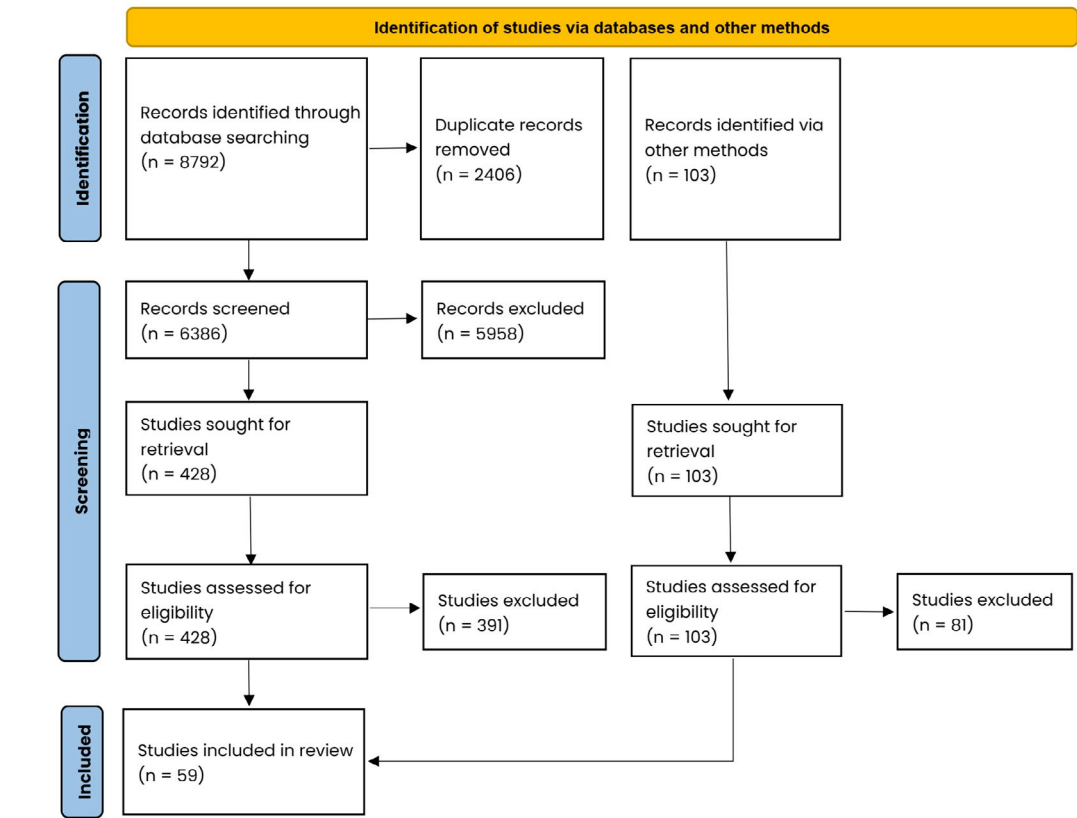
1. Academic databases: Google Scholar, Scopus and the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC).
2. Grey literature and evaluations: Hand-searched from key agencies, including UNESCO, UNICEF, Save the Children, Plan International and Humanity & Inclusion.
3. Specialised databases: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Resource Collection, USAID's Education Links,¹ ReliefWeb and ERICC's Global Table of Studies.
4. Reference tracking: Reviews of evidence syntheses on education in conflict and crisis and among the three marginalised groups in low- and lower-middle-income contexts.

Screening and selection

This process identified 6,489 studies for initial screening. After abstract/first-page screening and full-text review, 59 studies met inclusion criteria.

We included studies using rigorous impact evaluations, as well as process evaluations that presented promising evidence with the potential to improve achievement and equity outcomes; for example, studies reporting on drivers of learning. While effectiveness research is most appropriate for identifying 'what works' (see Diazgranados, Guimond and Annan, 2026; in this issue), we included select implementation research with robust quantitative or qualitative analyses, particularly for children with disabilities where effectiveness studies are lacking. Descriptive reports lacking analytic rigour were excluded. The review was limited to publications in the English language that were accessible via scholarly and grey literature databases.

Figure 1. PRISMA diagram



1 Accessed in December 2024; taken offline in February 2025.

Data extraction and coding

In-depth coding of the 59 studies was conducted using a pre-established framework aligned with the ERICC Conceptual Framework (Kim *et al.*, 2026) and the ERICC Dimensions of Conflict and Crisis (Falk *et al.*, 2024). Studies were coded across four dimensions:

- Research context
- Research approach
- Nature of the intervention
- Impact on equity and holistic child outcomes

The entire process – including both screening stages and coding – was supported using EPPI-Reviewer, which ensured systematic data consolidation and review consistency.

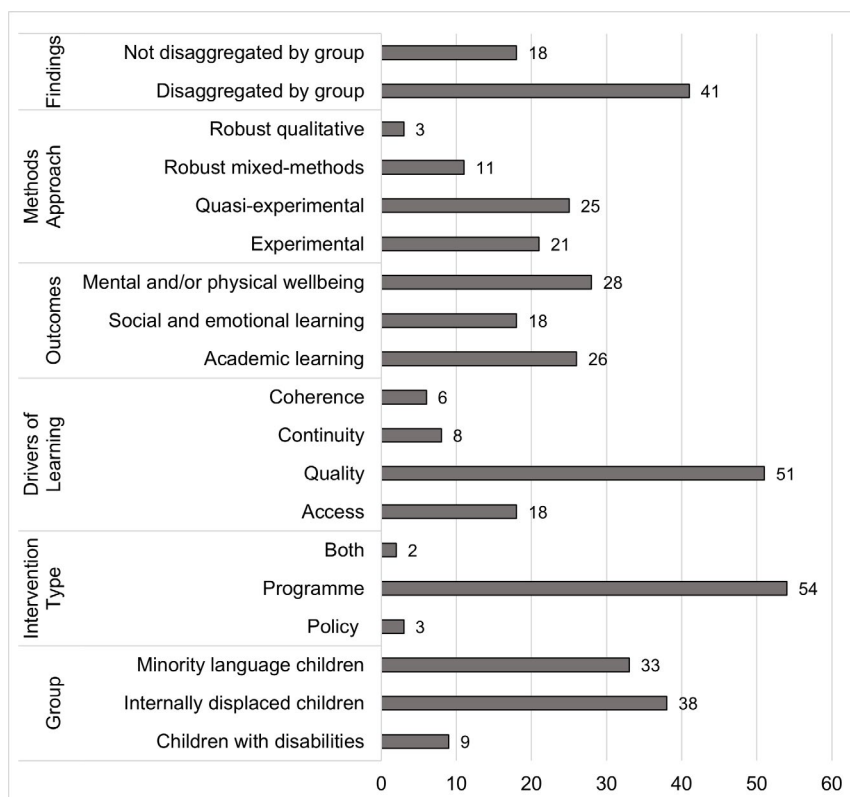
Distribution of studies

Of the 59 studies, 37 came from peer-reviewed academic publications and 22 from grey literature. Most focused on IDP and language minority children, while children with disabilities were significantly

underrepresented (Figure 2). Experimental and quasi-experimental designs were common across the included studies, enabling causal inference and reflecting the emphasis on effectiveness research to identify ‘what works’ (Diazgranados, Guimond and Annan, 2026). With regards to implementation research, fewer studies were included that employed robust mixed-methods or qualitative approaches. Although many studies reported disaggregated results by target group, this was not consistent across the evidence base.

Programmatic interventions far outnumbered policy-focused ones. This reveals gaps in long-term, systemic changes in education systems. Most interventions sought to improve the quality of education resources, chiefly through the introduction of new programmes. Others were designed to improve access to or continuity in education. Coherence was rarely addressed, which mirrors the broader lack of policy-level interventions. Academic learning and wellbeing outcomes were most frequently evaluated, with fewer studies examining SEL.

Figure 2. Description of interventions and studies (n=59)



Findings: Promising practices²

Children with disabilities

Several studies reported on education interventions that included children with disabilities but they either did not explore (Save the Children, 2023) or did not report (IRC, 2020) on reductions in equity gaps between disabled learners and their non-disabled peers. Nevertheless, some targeted interventions showed promise by leveraging structured learning environments, specialised resources and caregiver/teacher training.

In Uganda's Kyaka II Refugee Camp, implementation research from Brus (2023) tested the Child Functioning Module-Teacher Version to assess functional difficulties among children aged 5 to 17 years. Used by 21 teachers and 485 caregivers with around 2,000 learners, the tool was generally feasible, although context affected reliability. Teachers reported its potential to support inclusive practices and improve classroom dynamics. While inter-rater reliability between teachers and caregivers was limited – with teachers focusing on learning and adaptability, and caregivers prioritising sensory, communication, social and emotional challenges – this divergence is not necessarily a flaw. Rather, it suggests that views from both teachers and caregivers yield a richer perspective than relying on one alone.

In Kenya's Kakuma Refugee Camp, Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) special-needs centres implemented a twin-track approach to inclusive education for 250 children with disabilities. This combined disability-specific support (low student–teacher ratios, specialised infrastructure, stigma-reduction activities and individualised instruction) with pathways into mainstream classrooms. A longitudinal study by Crea *et al.* (2022), based on two waves of caregiver surveys spaced two years apart, compared outcomes for children who remained in JRS centres and those who had transitioned into mainstream classrooms. While mainstreamed children initially showed higher levels of prosocial behaviour, their scores declined more steeply over the two years compared to peers who stayed in JRS centres. Importantly, the type of educational settings was a

stronger predictor of behavioural outcomes than the severity of disability.

In Turkey, a 12-week programme by Global Voice for Autism for Syrian refugee children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), their caregivers and their teachers, combined training on communication, social skills and adaptive behaviours with caregiver and teacher empowerment. Implementation research from Dababnah *et al.* (2019) tested the feasibility and acceptability of the programme, with qualitative findings reporting improved adult understanding of ASD, increased teacher confidence, and greater recognition of effective behavioural strategies for children with ASD. Crucially, the programme highlighted home environments as central to potentially improving education access by addressing stigma and fostering caregiver engagement.

Language minority children

In multilingual crisis settings, most interventions aimed to improve proficiency in official or host-community languages, sometimes to facilitate integration into formal schooling. In Niger, experimental evaluations of the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) Healing Classrooms remedial programme found significant literacy gains in the official language of schooling (French), with small-to-medium effect sizes³ (Brown *et al.*, 2023; 2017; Kim *et al.*, 2019). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a version of the same programme yielded larger benefits for classrooms with higher proportions of regional minority-language learners, who also reported improved perceptions of teachers and learning environments (Aber *et al.*, 2021; 2017a; 2017b). However, studies did not disaggregate impacts across participants whose home language matched the language of instruction and their language minority counterparts.

In Myanmar, Save the Children's Catch-up Clubs supported language minority children and adolescents from four ethnic minority groups using contextualised literacy materials in the official language, delivered through structured play-based activities following the Teaching at the Right Level approach (Arlini *et al.*, 2023). A quasi-

2 Unless otherwise noted, studies employed experimental or quasi-experimental methods

3 In low-resource and humanitarian contexts, this reflects strong, above-average performance of the intervention, although Healing Classrooms did not translate into significant improvements in students' school grades (Brown, Kim and Weiss-Yagoda, 2017).

experimental evaluation found learners advanced nearly one literacy level on average, though gains mainly addressed foundational gaps; language barriers limited advancement to higher level literacy outcomes. This intervention included additional SEL sessions, and the treatment group was twice as likely to show high SEL competency after three months.

In Turkey, several interventions improved Turkish language skills for Arabic- and Kurdish-speaking refugees. At the pre-primary level, a 10-week bilingual accelerated curriculum significantly improved pre-literacy and numeracy, with medium-to-large effect sizes (Erdemir, 2022). A crucial component was instructors being fluent in the host-community language and the learners' first language. Project Hope utilised online game-based learning with adaptive spaced-recognition techniques to teach vocabulary to non-Turkish refugees (Sirin *et al.*, 2018). Results indicated significant language proficiency gains, cognitive skill improvements and reduced feelings of hopelessness. The LEARN Project, a bilingual, tablet-based blended learning model for out-of-school adolescent Syrian refugees, combined individualised instruction with one-on-one and group learning sessions (Mercy Corps, 2017). Participants showed significant pre-post improvements in Turkish language proficiency, leading some to re-enrol in formal education. Success was attributed to the alignment of offline-accessible tablet content with additional learning support provided through home visits and group sessions.

Outside dominant-language acquisition, a year-long perspective-taking programme for Turkish host-community and Syrian refugee primary students focused on developing socio-cognitive skills to strengthen social cohesion (Alan *et al.*, 2020). Mixed-methods evaluation found reductions in peer violence, victimisation and ethnic segregation alongside increases in inter-ethnic connections within treatment schools.

Internally displaced children

Large-scale programmes addressing educational access of IDP children through financial incentives or material supports demonstrated promising effects on indicators of access and continuity. Conditional cash transfers in Somalia (Lodi, 2011) and Turkey

(Ring *et al.*, 2020) and school feeding programmes in Uganda (Alderman, Gilligan and Lehrer, 2012) improved enrolment, attendance and retention among IDP children. However, the evidence did not report on significant impacts for IDP children compared to host-community children. Additional measures are likely needed beyond cash transfers and school feeding to address access barriers such as lack of formal documentation or records, or discriminatory practices.

Accelerated and remedial learning programmes offered flexible pathways to support IDP children's academic learning; yet these often targeted all eligible children regardless of displacement status and did not reliably show evidence of addressing equity gaps in achievement of learning outcomes between different groups enrolled in the same programme. A randomised controlled trial (RCT) of remedial lessons that integrated IRC's Healing Classrooms programme in Niger improved literacy and numeracy, but the impact was no different for displaced and non-displaced learners (Kim *et al.*, 2019; Brown, Kim and Weiss-Yagoda, 2017). In northeast Nigeria, an RCT of IRC's accelerated learning programme provided out-of-school adolescents with targeted instruction in foundational skills by community-recruited facilitators. The programme had positive impacts on the academic outcomes of both IDP and host-community children, but it reinforced existing numeracy gaps between these learners because host-community children had significantly larger math gains (IRC, 2020; 2019; Diazgranados Ferrás *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, the evidence from RCTs on improvements in SEL indicators for IDP children across these interventions in Niger and Nigeria and comparable programmes in Lebanon and the DRC (Aber *et al.*, 2021) was mixed across studies.

Programmes evaluated specifically for wellbeing outcomes generally demonstrated positive impacts, although evidence on long-term impacts was limited. Child-friendly spaces (CFS) combining structured recreational, educational and psychosocial activities exhibited encouraging results on wellbeing outcomes. In Kurdish Iraq, IDP children exhibited significantly higher average personal wellbeing scores after two months of CFS participation than displaced peers in the control group (Abdulah and Sedo, 2022). In IDP camps in eastern DRC, regular attendance in community-managed CFS was

associated with significantly higher wellbeing scores (Eyber *et al.*, 2014). A pre-post study of a similar Safe Spaces programme in a Haitian IDP camp found 80% of participants demonstrated improved social relationships, resilience and emotional wellbeing after six weeks (Madfis, Martyris and Triplehorn, 2010).

Smaller scale wellbeing-focused programmes also showed benefits. In Palestine, a teacher-led narrative-based programme for IDPs exposed to war trauma significantly increased both positive and negative emotions in the treatment group, likely due to heightened trauma awareness (Veronese and Barola, 2018). Also in Palestine, the Teaching Recovery Techniques programme reduced post-traumatic stress symptoms and improved mental health following group-based, trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (Eloranta *et al.*, 2016). However, findings were not disaggregated by whether treatment children lived in camps or host communities.

Additional wellbeing interventions demonstrated context-specific impacts. An 18-week school-based cultural music programme for IDP children in Colombia improved self-esteem (Zapata and Hargreaves, 2018). A Writing for Recovery programme offering school-based, paraprofessional-led psychosocial support to IDP youth in Kenya reduced trauma symptoms (Getanda and Vostanis, 2022). A classroom-based, cognitive-behavioural and creative-expressive programme for children exposed to political violence – including many who had been internally displaced – reduced post-traumatic stress symptoms in Indonesia but not in Sri Lanka (Tol *et al.*, 2012; 2010).

Discussion

Implications for intervention design

Amid a modest evidence base on ‘what works’ for these three marginalised groups, our review surfaces several important design insights for programmatic interventions. For children with disabilities, promising approaches address barriers to educational inclusion and support SEL and wellbeing. For language minority children, tailored programming for dominant-language acquisition shows encouraging results. For IDP children, academic gains may arise from their inclusion in broader treatment groups

within larger scale interventions, while the most impactful interventions specifically targeting them focus on wellbeing. Across both language minority and IDP groups, SEL was typically embedded as an additive component rather than a standalone focus, with limited reported impact.

Assessment tools for children with disabilities such as the Child Functioning Module (Brus, 2023) may be most helpful when multiple perspectives are incorporated. To generate richer, more holistic insights, they should be adapted to context, supported by training and accompanied by cross-validation. In terms of programming, mainstreaming alone is unlikely to meet needs in resource-constrained contexts (Crea *et al.*, 2022). The evidence points in some promising directions, including dedicated investment in specialised support – such as trained teachers, accessible infrastructure and stigma-reduction efforts – alongside well-structured pathways that enable smooth transitions from special-needs centres to inclusive classrooms.

The strongest evidence for improving academic outcomes among language minority children comes from Save the Children’s Catch-up Clubs (Arlini *et al.*, 2023) and two educational technology interventions (Sirin *et al.*, 2018; Mercy Corps, 2017). These specifically targeted language minority learners and their needs, such as through levelled instruction or using facilitators fluent in learners’ mother tongues and the primary language of instruction. The educational technology models relied on tablets or computer labs, which raises concerns about feasibility in resource-constrained settings.

For both language minority and IDP children, there is some encouraging evidence that IRC accelerated learning and remedial education interventions can improve academic outcomes. However, these learners are included within broader treatment groups alongside less-marginalised peers (Aber *et al.*, 2021; IRC, 2019). While evaluations generally demonstrated moderate gains when learners persist with the programme, they did not consistently narrow equity gaps, when reported. In some cases, disparities between marginalised and more advantaged subgroups intensified within the treatment group.

Only one study (Alan *et al.*, 2020) examined an intervention focused solely on SEL outcomes.

Most studies measuring SEL involved interventions with additive SEL components complementing an academic or wellbeing focus, typically for a broader treatment group including language minority or internally displaced children. These reported limited effectiveness on the general treatment population: finding no observable impact (Diazgranados Ferrás *et al.*, 2022; Aber *et al.*, 2021; Brown, Kim and Weiss-Yagoda, 2017), minimal impact (IRC, 2020; 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2019; Eloranta *et al.*, 2016) or diminishing effects over time (Tol *et al.*, 2012). One intervention specifically for language minority children included an additive SEL component and reported modest effects (Arlini *et al.*, 2023). The low returns on SEL may reflect underlying tensions and pitfalls around the transfer of Western-derived SEL frameworks into non-Western, crisis-affected contexts (Dalrymple, 2024).

The most impactful interventions for IDP children's psychosocial wellbeing included CFS, structured classroom activities and narrative or play-based therapies (Abdulah and Sedo, 2022; Veronese and Barola, 2018; Zapata and Hargreaves, 2018). These interventions drew on local cultural practices – such as art, storytelling, music, dance and traditional games – and were implemented across diverse settings, including those affected by ongoing violence and protracted displacement. Findings point to the value of designing interventions that resonate with learners' cultural and social realities. While many studies had small sample sizes and limited long-term evidence, they consistently reported meaningful short-term gains. Notably, effectiveness was often influenced by contextual factors: demographics, levels of trauma exposure, and programme duration and intensity.

Evidence gaps

While this review surfaced several promising practices, substantial gaps remain in the evidence base on how best to support the education of children with disabilities, language minority children and IDP children in conflict and crisis settings.

Effectiveness research focusing on children with disabilities is especially scarce. Despite their distinct and often complex needs, these learners remain underrepresented in both programming and evaluation, which leaves a critical gap in understanding what works for inclusive education.

For language minority and IDP children, many programmes include these groups but may not regularly report on disaggregated academic, SEL or wellbeing outcomes. Without subgroup-specific analysis, it is difficult to assess equity gains or identify persistent gaps between dominant and non-dominant language users, or between displaced and host-community children.

No studies in this review examined policy interventions aimed at strengthening system-wide coherence or institutionalising inclusive values and practices. This gap may not necessarily reflect an absence of policy progress but may instead point to challenges in implementation or a lack of documentation and analysis. Understanding how policies are designed, enacted and sustained from the vantage of equity and social justice is especially critical during times of instability, when the risk of further marginalising the most disadvantaged children is greatest. Further research is needed to explore what Carney (2009) terms the *policyscape*: the layered and shifting landscape of policies and agendas in emergency, post-war or protracted refugee settings, where the interests of states, humanitarian–development actors and educational practitioners intersect and evolve, alternately transforming exclusionary education systems or perpetuating marginalisation.

Building a holistic body of evidence around interventions

This review draws primarily on effectiveness research to identify promising practices that improve access to, quality of and continuity in education towards achievement of equity and holistic child outcomes. While this helps identify 'what works,' there remains a pressing need to complement these findings with evidence on whether – and how – educational interventions intend to redress broader inequalities for these three marginalised groups.

To advance this agenda, we encourage more research that explores the ways in which interventions are designed and implemented with attention to the historical, social and political forces that shape exclusionary practices. For example, future studies should examine whether theories of change explicitly address structural causes of marginalisation and whether interventions:

- engage with the political economy of

education, including the endogenous and exogenous factors driving conflict and sustaining exclusion (Novelli *et al.*, 2014)

- frame learners, communities and educators not merely as passive recipients who must adapt to exclusionary systems, but as agents capable of driving transformative change (Shah *et al.*, 2024)
- recognise the role of local stakeholders in co-creating inclusive educational spaces, forging partnerships with marginalised groups and foregrounding their voices in educational decision-making (Versmesse *et al.*, 2017).

Building a more holistic body of evidence around interventions will better equip the field to critically assess whether too much emphasis is being placed on building individual resilience (Shah, Paulson and Couch, 2019) while failing to address the root causes of exclusion, violence and systemic disadvantage.

Conclusion

Our review highlights a moderate evidence base on promising programmatic interventions that support the quality of education for language minority and IDP children, with most positive impacts observed in academic learning and wellbeing. However, significant evidence gaps remain. Interventions targeting children with disabilities are markedly underrepresented, and there is little evidence of positive SEL programming impact. In addition, there is scant evidence on policy-focused endeavours with the potential to address the structural inequalities compounded during conflict and crisis that sustain the marginalisation of all three groups.

Moving forward, we encourage scholars, researchers and practitioners to collaborate on studies that combine rigorous quantitative methods to measure impact with qualitative approaches that capture the lived experiences of marginalised groups and the educators and policymakers seeking to address their disempowerment. A holistic understanding of ‘what works’ requires not only a robust empirical base of effectiveness research but also deeper engagement through design and implementation research with the political economy factors that historically perpetuate exclusion and marginalisation. Multidisciplinary perspectives embedded within and across research are therefore best positioned to

critically unveil the ways in which promising policies, programmes and practices can drive systemic, sustainable and equitable change, and capture why such change occurs.

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What works to improve early childhood development in conflict and crisis settings?

Evidence review from experimental and quasi-experimental impact evaluations



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Abstract

Children in conflict and crisis settings face profound risks to their development, but the evidence on effective early childhood development (ECD) remains limited. This review synthesises rigorous evaluations of ECD programmes for children aged 0–5 years and their caregivers in humanitarian contexts. We identify 12 rigorous impact evaluations using experimental or quasi-experimental methods, focused on four types of interventions: caregiver-directed stimulation, psychosocial support (PSS) for children, PSS for caregivers and mass media. Findings reveal promising effects for remote caregiver-directed stimulation programmes to improve caregiving practices and child development outcomes. Mass media programmes demonstrated significant social and emotional learning gains at a low cost, while caregiver-directed models generated larger impacts at higher cost, suggesting trade-offs between scalability and intensity. Evidence on children's mental health is scarce, with only one PSS programme for children demonstrating reductions in stress symptoms. Caregiver PSS programmes improved caregiver wellbeing and child outcomes, but evidence is limited overall; results highlight critical gaps in comparative cost effectiveness, equity and long-term impacts.

Key Words

early childhood education, interventions, cost effectiveness, conflict and crisis contexts

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The importance of early childhood development in conflict and crisis settings

Children in conflict and crisis settings face an accumulation of risks that threaten not only their immediate survival, but also their long-term development, learning and wellbeing. Exposure to violence, displacement, poverty and disrupted services undermines opportunities for safe, nurturing care and learning during the critical years of neurobiological development (Black *et al.*, 2017; Britto *et al.*, 2017; Shonkoff and Garner, 2011; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). With an estimated 400 million children – one in every five – living in a country affected by violent conflict (UNICEF, 2021), the magnitude of risk underscores the urgent need to identify and scale cost-effective interventions to improve both immediate and long-term developmental outcomes.

Early childhood, particularly during the first five years of life, is a highly sensitive period when children's environments and relationships have profound and lasting impacts on brain architecture and epigenetic processes that lay the foundation for cognitive, social-emotional and physical development (Fox, Levitt and Nelson, 2010). A 2024 systematic review of the developmental impact of displacement on children aged 0–6 years identified 32 studies globally and found that displacement and other adverse experiences, such as parental stress and separation from parents, are associated with negative outcomes in children's cognitive and social-emotional development (Bernhardt *et al.*, 2024). Evidence from conflict and crisis settings further underscores that such exposures disrupt developmental trajectories in ways that can have lasting consequences for children's learning, health and wellbeing across the life course (Murphy, Yoshikawa and Wuerml, 2018).

A strong body of evidence from stable settings in high-, middle- and low-income contexts demonstrates that high-quality early childhood development (ECD) interventions improve children's language, executive function, social-emotional skills and early literacy and numeracy (Nores *et al.*, 2024; Banerjee *et al.*, 2023; GEEAP, 2023; Yoshikawa and Kabay, 2015; Gertler, *et al.*, 2014; Yoshikawa *et al.*, 2013; Engle *et al.*, 2011; Heckman and Masterov, 2007). These gains are foundational for later academic achievement, productive employment,

stable and healthy relationships, as well as physical and psychosocial wellbeing, and generate high returns in human capital over the long term. Evidence from longitudinal studies further indicates that early investments generate sustained returns across the life course, while the economic and social costs of failing to invest in young children are substantial (Nores *et al.*, 2024; Heckman and Masterov, 2007).

Despite the scale and severity of risks faced by young children in conflict and crisis settings, they remain among the least likely to access safe, nurturing and quality ECD opportunities (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2021; UNICEF, 2019; Theirworld, 2016). Moreover, evidence on what works in stable settings cannot be assumed to translate directly to humanitarian contexts, where displacement, trauma, service disruption and resource constraints may alter both implementation and impact (Stevens, Siraj and Kong, 2023).

The last comprehensive synthesis of rigorous ECD impact evaluations in humanitarian settings focused on implementation research to identify how programmes are designed, delivered and adapted (Murphy, Yoshikawa and Wuerml, 2018). Since that review, a new wave of studies has emerged documenting the impact of ECD interventions, including novel modalities such as remote caregiver-directed programmes (e.g. Murphy *et al.*, under development; Schwartz *et al.*, 2024), digital mass media (Moran *et al.*, under review; Franchet *et al.*, 2024) and phone-based caregiver support (Rafla *et al.*, 2024). Some of these studies also report costs and cost effectiveness.

To provide a coherent analytic structure for synthesising diverse ECD interventions and outcomes, we use the Education Research in Conflict and Crisis (ERICC) conceptual framework (Kim *et al.*, 2026). This framework offers a social-ecological understanding of how conflict shapes children's educational experiences and the systems that govern them and identifies four key drivers of learning and development: access, quality, continuity and (in)coherence of education systems. It enables interventions to be organised according to the mechanisms they target across programme-level experiences and policy-level pathways, and to interpret their effects within the broader multi-level systems that influence children's development in conflict and crisis contexts.

This review responds to recent developments in the field by providing the first comprehensive synthesis of ECD interventions in conflict- and crisis-affected settings that integrates (1) causal evidence of child- and caregiver-level impacts and (2) emerging cost and cost-effectiveness data. By linking data on programme impact, delivery models and costing – while grounding this synthesis within the ERICC conceptual framework – the review offers new comparative insights to guide researchers, policymakers, practitioners and donors seeking to design, evaluate and scale cost-effective ECD interventions in crisis-affected settings.

The present study

This review synthesises available rigorous evidence on interventions to promote ECD for children aged 0–5 years and their caregivers in conflict and crisis settings. It examines a range of intervention types, delivery modalities, target populations and geographies, and assesses their impact on key outcomes including access, early learning, social-emotional development and mental health. We review the strength of the evidence for different interventions, identify promising practices and highlight evidence gaps. We then discuss implications for policy and programmes to support early childhood education and development in conflict and crisis settings. The study addresses two questions:

1. What evidence exists on the impact of ECD interventions on child development outcomes, caregiver practices and mental health outcomes in conflict and protracted crisis settings?
2. What evidence exists on their cost and cost effectiveness?

The study consolidates findings across interventions to inform programme design and investment priorities, with the aim of improving developmental outcomes for children most affected by war and crisis.

Methods

We conducted a comprehensive review of high-quality studies on ECD interventions in conflict and protracted crisis settings. Guided by the ERICC conceptual framework for classifying interventions, mechanisms and outcomes (Kim *et al.*, 2026) and ERICC's methods framework for identifying effectiveness research (see in this issue Diazgranados,

Guimond and Annan, 2026), we aimed to build a clear and coherent picture of the state of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness research in conflict and protracted crisis settings, including those affected by violence and forced displacement, political and governance crisis, climate-induced or environmental disasters, health epidemics and pandemics, and economic crisis and shocks, during the onset, protracted or recovery phases (Falk *et al.*, 2024).

Data

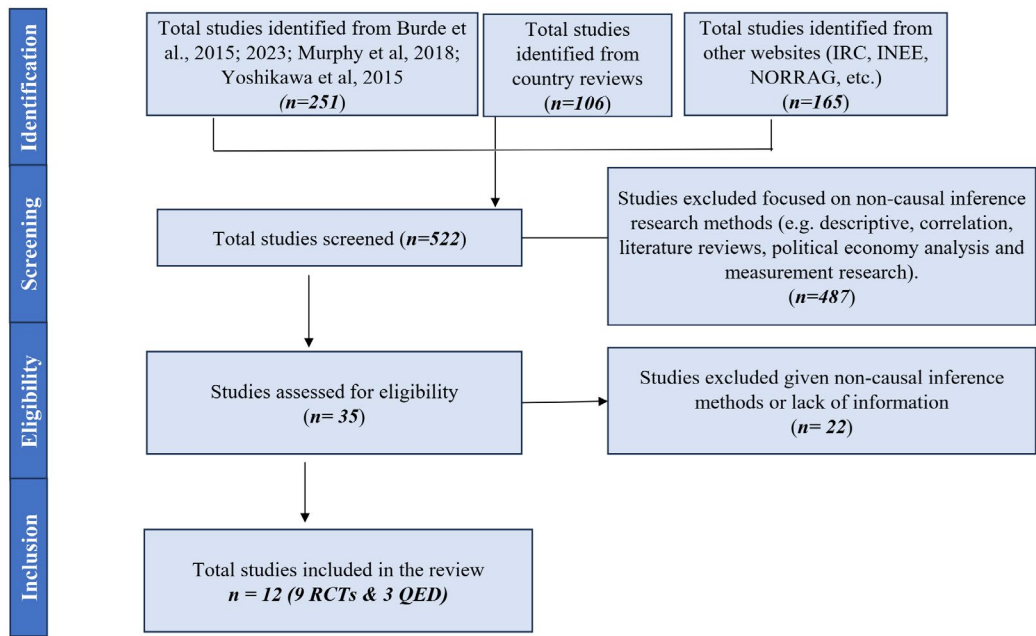
Our review focused on effectiveness studies that use causal inference methods to identify the impact of ECD interventions on child development and caregiver outcomes in conflict and protracted crisis settings. Studies were identified through multiple sources, including prior systematic reviews on education in displacement contexts (Burde *et al.*, 2023; 2015), ECD (Murphy, Yoshikawa and Wuermli, 2018; Yoshikawa and Kabay, 2015) and recent country-specific evidence reviews in conflict-affected settings from Jordan (Rauschenberger and Sabella, 2023), Nigeria (Mishra *et al.*, 2023), Bangladesh (Saha *et al.*, 2023), Lebanon (Brun *et al.*, 2024), Syria (Akar, Meskhi and Baldelli, 2024), South Sudan (Wagner Tsoni *et al.*, 2024) and Myanmar (Rinehart *et al.*, 2024). We complemented these sources with structured searches of academic databases and organisational platforms such as the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC)'s Airbel Impact Lab, and incorporated sources from subject-matter experts.

Titles and abstracts were screened to remove studies unrelated to ECD or not situated in conflict or crisis settings. Full texts were assessed against predefined criteria requiring:

1. An intervention targeting children aged 0–5 years or their caregivers
2. Implementation in conflict-affected or protracted crisis contexts
3. Use of experimental (randomised controlled trials (RCTs)) or quasi-experimental methods (difference-in-differences, propensity score matching, instrumental variables estimation, regression discontinuity designs).

We excluded studies that did not demonstrate methodological transparency (see Figure 1). Data extraction was cross-checked by two authors to minimise errors and ensure consistency.

Figure 1. Identification of studies



Analytic approach

To identify evidence of impact for ECD and education interventions in conflict-affected settings, we created evidence maps for different outcomes of interest. We classified these studies according to the method (RCT, quasi-experimental, evidence review). We extracted the sample size of the study and effect size (or unstandardised impacts if effect sizes are not provided) for child and caregiver-level outcomes. We chose effect size as the key indicator of impact, as it facilitates comparisons across different studies using different measures. Rather than relying on conventional social science benchmarks (Cohen, 1969), we interpret effect sizes using thresholds proposed by Kraft (2020) based on his analysis of over 1,000 causal studies in education. Under this framework, effect sizes below 0.05 standard deviations (SD) are small, 0.05–0.20 SD are medium and effects above 0.20 SD are large relative to most education interventions.

To answer the question on cost effectiveness, we extracted information on cost per child where available, converted all costs to the same currency (US\$) and updated these costs to inflation in the year 2024. We then calculated the cost required to generate a 0.20 SD improvement in key outcomes; this benchmark represents a large impact and

provides a meaningful and policy-relevant reference point for comparing the relative efficiency of ECD interventions in crisis settings.

Results

Evidence of impact of ECD interventions

We identified 12 rigorous studies conducted in eight conflict-affected settings: Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Colombia, Lebanon, Liberia, Jordan, Israel and Uganda. Nine studies employed RCT designs (including clustered RCTs), while three used quasi-experimental methods. Sample sizes ranged from fewer than 100 mother-child dyads to over 4,000 children in large-scale mass media evaluations. These evaluations spanned four categories:

Caregiver-directed stimulation – interventions that aim to improve caregivers’ ability to provide responsive, nurturing and developmentally appropriate interactions to support children’s learning and development. These programmes operate through strengthening caregiver knowledge, modelling responsive behaviours, and increasing the frequency and quality of cognitively stimulating interactions in the home environment.

Psychosocial support (PSS) for children –

interventions designed to reduce psychological distress and support the development of social-emotional skills such as emotional regulation, coping and resilience in children. These programmes work by providing children with structured opportunities for emotional processing, play-based regulation, and guided practice of coping strategies in safe settings.

PSS for caregivers – interventions focused on improving the mental health, wellbeing and stress management of caregivers. These programmes operate under the idea that caregiver trauma and distress undermine responsive caregiving; by improving caregivers' psychological wellbeing, they aim to indirectly enhance child development outcomes through more stable and supportive caregiving relationships.

Mass media – programmes delivering early childhood educational content at scale through television, radio or digital platforms. These interventions operate by directly exposing children – and often caregivers – to developmentally appropriate cognitive and social-emotional content, while leveraging repetition, modelling and co-viewing to reinforce learning in low-access environments.

Below we summarise findings by category.

1. Caregiver-directed early childhood stimulation programmes

provide parents with the support they need to improve responsive caregiving and the quality of their interactions with children at home, and to gain awareness of the value of early stimulation that can result in improved caregiving practices and improved cognitive, social and emotional learning (SEL), mental health and physical health outcomes for children (Jeong *et al.*, 2021). There is evidence that these interventions are cost-effective in low- and middle-income contexts (LMICs) (GEEAP, 2023). We found evidence of four types of caregiver-directed ECD stimulation interventions: group caregiving training, 1:1 phone calls for caregivers, remote learning programmes and individual home visits.

Group caregiving training: Groups led by trained facilitators offer caregivers the opportunity to build new knowledge and practices to support their children's development and wellbeing. Caregivers

can also benefit from peer support in these groups. Groups are typically offered in community centres and delivered by non-governmental organisations, and they may be complemented by one or a small number of home visits to better tailor support to caregivers' living situations and routines (Ponguta *et al.*, 2020; Puffer *et al.*, 2015; Morris *et al.*, 2012).

In northern Uganda, displaced mothers attending emergency feeding centres participated in six group sessions and up to three home visits, facilitated by trained psychosocial workers. Results from the quasi-experimental study with 208 mothers found that the intervention improved caregiver involvement and emotional responsiveness, and reduced maternal sadness and worry (Morris *et al.*, 2012). The study did not evaluate impacts on child outcomes nor report cost data.

In Liberia, the Parents Make the Difference programme delivered 10 group sessions based on behavioural theory. The RCT with 270 caregivers and their children found a 55% reduction in harsh punishment (0.26 to 0.67 SD), increased positive behaviour management and interactions (0.22 to 0.38 SD) and modest gains in children's numeracy (0.18 SD), though no effects on other cognitive or wellbeing outcomes (Puffer *et al.*, 2015). The study did not report cost data.

In Lebanon, the Mother-Child Education Programme (MOCEP) offered 25 group sessions over 6–8 months to mothers of children aged 2–7 years, complemented by home visits. An RCT with 106 mother-child dyads found reductions in harsh parenting (-0.76 SD), improvements in responsive parenting (0.61 SD), lower stress (-0.90 SD) and greater perceived support (1 SD) and empowerment (0.70 SD) among high-attendance mothers. No significant effects on children's behavioural, emotional or cognitive (language or math) outcomes were observed, and the study exhibited high attrition (38%) and limited power (Ponguta *et al.*, 2020). The study did not report cost data.

In Bangladesh, BRAC and Sesame Workshop implemented the Fathers' Engagement programme, as part of the Humanitarian Play Lab initiative (HPL). HPL provided mothers of children aged 0–3 years with weekly one-hour group training to improve caregiving practices and children's ECD outcomes. An added component focused on fathers' engagement, using weekly home visits

and monthly group sessions over six months to strengthen responsive caregiving, improve father-child and spousal relationships, and promote positive discipline and stimulation. An RCT by NYU Global TIES for Children evaluated the added impact of the fathers' engagement intervention among 2002 Rohingya families living in camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (Alam *et al.*, 2025; Iqbal *et al.*, 2024). Findings show that adding the fathers' programme increased costs from \$200 to \$550 per household, and resulted in improved father responsiveness, collaboration with child, father-child stimulation and beliefs about fathering (0.12 to 0.23 SD). A modest effect was observed in children's SEL (0.12 SD). No effects were observed for fathers' mental health outcomes.

Caregiving 1:1 phone calls: In Jordan, a phone-based caregiving support programme for Syrian refugee and host families delivered 8–10 minute calls three times a month for six months. Trained incentive workers (Syrian refugees receiving stipends) shared information about the importance of ECD, developmental milestones for children aged 0–3 years and play-based activities using an adapted Reach Up and Learn curriculum (Walker *et al.*, 2018) at an estimated cost of \$110 per household. An RCT with 2,298 caregivers and their children found no detectable impact on caregiving practices, child development or most aspects of caregiver wellbeing, likely due to the limitations of modelling and coaching new behaviours through an audio-delivery mode and the short time spent on ECD. However, the intervention did produce a small but statistically significant reduction in caregiver depressive symptoms (-0.11 SD), suggesting a promising approach for remote interventions seeking to support caregiver mental health (Rafila *et al.*, 2024). This is notable given that few parenting interventions assess caregiver mental health, and those that do rarely show reductions in caregiver depressive symptoms (Jeong *et al.*, 2021).

A distinct version of phone-based Reach Up and Learn called Gindegi Goron was designed as a six-month remote programme delivered in refugee and host communities in Cox's Bazar for caregivers of children aged 0–2 years. The intervention provided guided play and responsive caregiving support through interactive voice response (IVR) calls, with one treatment arm supplemented by monthly home visits. An RCT with 1,503 caregivers and their

children showed that both the IVR-only and IVR + home-visiting modalities produced significant gains in children's cognitive development (0.22 SD and 0.35 SD, respectively) and language development (0.21 SD and 0.25 SD, respectively). Costing analysis estimated the remote model at \$98 per child, while the addition of home visits approximately doubles the programme cost but appears to amplify developmental effects and deliver important benefits for children's physical growth, particularly among children with low growth indicators. Both modalities also generated large improvements in home stimulation (IVR: 0.95 SD; IVR + home visits: 0.82 SD), parental knowledge (IVR: 0.32 SD; IVR + home visits: 0.35 SD) and caregiving practices (IVR: 0.38 SD; IVR + home visits: 0.27 SD), although neither produced significant reductions in maternal depression (Murphy *et al.*, under development).

Remote Early Learning Programme (RELP):

Pre-primary education improves school readiness (Aboud and Akhter, 2011) and completion (Earle *et al.*, 2018), with strong cost-effectiveness evidence in stable LMICs (GEEAP, 2023). In conflict-affected settings, we found no rigorous evidence for centre-based preschool programmes, but did identify RELP, an intervention that used remote and digital communications to provide pre-primary education opportunities for Syrian refugee children aged under five years through their caregivers in Lebanon. The programme followed a condensed curriculum targeting pre-literacy, pre-numeracy, SEL and motor skills, with 2–3 weekly calls over 11 weeks. Caregivers received a home kit with worksheets and digital multimedia resources, including songs and videos. The RELP targeted families who could not access in-person preschool due to conflict, crisis or remote geography, and operated in areas of limited connectivity, including only a few hours of daily electricity and relying on borrowed smartphones from neighbours. Findings from a multi-arm RCT with 1,606 caregivers and their children showed that, at a cost of \$260 per child, the programme had positive and statistically significant impacts on literacy, numeracy, motor skills and child play (effect sizes between 0.21 and 0.49 SD), with an overall impact of 0.45 SD. The intervention also had a positive and significant impact on caregiving practices (0.52 SD) but no effects on caregivers' mental health outcomes (Schwartz *et al.*, 2024).

REL P + parenting support: The same REL P in Lebanon also assessed the impact of combining REL P with weekly caregiver group WhatsApp calls led by trained facilitators, to improve caregivers' ECD knowledge and practices, and to support both caregiver and child wellbeing and stress management. Findings from the same multi-arm RCT reported above showed that, at a cost of \$550 per child, the programme had positive impacts on literacy, numeracy and child play (effect sizes between 0.26 and 0.37 SD), with an overall impact of 0.26 SD. The intervention also had positive impacts on caregiving practices of 0.40 SD but no effects on caregivers' mental health outcomes (Schwartz *et al.*, 2024).

2. PSS interventions for children in conflict and crisis settings often target a combination of mental health outcomes, such as reduction of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, and socio-emotional outcomes, such as building resilience and social skills (Jordans *et al.*, 2009). In contrast to the caregiver-directed ECD stimulation programmes described earlier, PSS interventions for children directly target children through a trained facilitator. While PSS support interventions for middle- and adolescent-aged children in conflict and protracted crises are more common, there is a lack of evidence on PSS interventions for children aged 0–5 years (Jordans, Pigott and Tol, 2016). We found evidence of impact for just one intervention that aimed to improve PSS for children in this age range.

To reduce stress during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, the Huggy Puppy programme worked with psychologists to give children in an Israeli camp stuffed animals to care for, aiming to distract them from their fear, empower them as caregivers and provide them with opportunities for play. Psychologists demonstrated how to hug and care for the stuffed animal, and encouraged caregivers to remind children to interact with it regularly. A group-based version was also delivered in school classrooms, where children received stuffed animals and discussed how to care for them. Teachers and parents were asked to reinforce use at school and home. A quasi-experimental study with pre- and post-tests from treatment and control groups collected from 292 children affected by war showed that stress reactions such as anxiety, difficulty sleeping, nightmares and aggressive behaviour significantly reduced among the children who received the intervention. Moreover, as the children

became more attached and involved with the stuffed animals in the individual version of the intervention, the stress reactions were further reduced (Sadeh *et al.*, 2008). The study did not report cost data.

3. PSS interventions for caregivers can take place in group settings, 1:1 sessions or home visits, and aim to support caregivers of young children develop the skills they need to manage stress and improve their mental health and wellbeing in ways that are expected to also have a positive impact on children's development.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, weekly group meetings were conducted with internally displaced mothers of five-year-old children over five months. These consisted of therapeutic conversations about trauma in a psychological centre and discussions to promote parental involvement and quality mother-child interactions led by preschool teachers. An RCT with 87 mother-child dyads compared the outcomes of participants who received the PSS intervention and medical care against the outcomes of a control group that only received medical care. It showed that the PSS had positive effects on mothers' mental health, children's weight and reductions of child behaviour problems as reported by the interviewers' observations, but no other impacts on child-level mental health outcomes. The study did not report costs (Dybdahl, 2001).

In Tumaco, Colombia, the Semillas de Apego programme delivered 15 group sessions led by community facilitators to caregivers of children aged 2–5 years who had experienced conflict-related violence and displacement. An RCT with 1,373 children showed that after one month the intervention improved caregiver-child interaction style (0.21 SD), child mental health (0.14 SD) and child development (0.20 SD). By eight months, statistically significant gains extended to caregiver mental health (0.17 SD), caregiver-child relationship quality (0.31 SD) and style (0.15 SD), child mental health (0.10 SD) and child development (0.23 SD) (Moya *et al.*, 2024). Impacts were larger among caregivers with elevated baseline mental health symptoms, while effects were attenuated among families facing food insecurity. These findings suggest that caregiver trauma is a binding constraint on nurturing care, and that group-based PSS can yield durable, multi-domain benefits for both caregivers and children. No costs were reported.

4. Mass media can be a scalable way to reach children of all ages through broadcast or mobile devices used in homes, schools and informal educational settings in both stable and conflict and crisis settings (Foulds *et al.*, 2024; Jordan and Mitchell, 2020; Mares and Woodard, 2010). Mass media provides opportunities for children and families to learn together through co-viewing, and can reach children who are unable to access in-person services. In conflict and crisis settings, we found evidence of impact for one mass media intervention for kindergarten students that used a television show to teach children a variety of cognitive and social-emotional skills in an entertaining way through animated and live action segments. Other types of mass media, such as IVR (Islam *et al.*, 2022), digital tools (Foulds, Rodríguez and Casas, 2021) and social media (Jordan and Mitchell, 2020), have also been used in education interventions in conflict and crisis settings, but we did not find impact evaluations targeting ECD populations.

The Ahlan Simsim programme provided children in public kindergartens in Jordan with the opportunity to watch a television show targeting emotional learning in classrooms daily for 12 weeks. Designed to support children affected by conflict and crisis in the Middle East, the episodes of Ahlan Simsim used in this intervention focused on teaching children how to identify different feelings as well as coping strategies to help deal with difficult or overwhelming emotions. The cost of the intervention was around \$3–\$7 per child. An RCT with 4,369 Syrian and

Jordanian children in Jordan demonstrated that the show had a mix of null and positive impacts on social-emotional skills such as expressive emotion recognition, emotion situation knowledge and the use of deep breathing as a coping strategy (significant effect sizes in the range of 0.11–0.36). The show did not have a detectable impact on children’s receptive emotion recognition or use of other coping strategies (Moran *et al.*, under review; Global TIES for Children, 2023).

Sesame Workshop’s Watch, Play and Learn programme delivered educational videos via WhatsApp to young children in conflict-affected settings. In Colombia, researchers tested its effectiveness among 1,017 four-year-old Colombian and Venezuelan children (Franchet *et al.*, 2024). Families received twice-weekly 10-minute videos over 19 weeks featuring maths and SEL content. An RCT conducted with 1,017 four-year-old children showed significant impacts on emotional development. Children demonstrated better expressive emotion recognition and emotion situation knowledge compared with controls (effect sizes 0.15–0.17). No significant maths impacts emerged, likely because most children already received similar content through ECD centres. No costs were reported.

Overall, we find limited but promising evidence on the effects of early childhood interventions on different child and caregiver outcomes in conflict and crisis settings.

Table 1. Impact of ECD interventions on child ECD and caregiver outcomes

Intervention and citation	Child ECD outcomes	Caregiving outcomes	Caregiver mental health outcomes
Caregiver-directed stimulation			
Group Caregiving (Morris <i>et al.</i> , 2012)	n/a	Positive*	Positive*
Parents Make the Difference (Puffer <i>et al.</i> , 2015)	0.18	0.26–0.67	
Mother-Child Education Programme (MOCEP) (Ponguta <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	Null	0.61–0.76	0.9
Fathers’ Engagement (Alam <i>et al.</i> , 2025)	0.12	0.12–0.23	n/a
Phone call caregiver support (Rafla <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	Null	Null	0.11
Gindegi Goron (IVR only) (Murphy <i>et al.</i> , under development)	0.21–0.22	0.32–0.95	Null

Gindegi Goron (IVR + home visits)	0.25–0.35	0.27–0.82	Null
REL P (Schwartz <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	0.45	0.52	Null
REL P + Parenting Support (Schwartz <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	0.26	0.4	Null
Mass media			
Ahlan Simsim (Moran <i>et al.</i> , under review)	0.11–0.36	n/a	n/a
Watch, Play and Learn (Franchet <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	0.15–0.17	n/a	n/a
PSS for caregivers			
Psychosocial Group Support (Dybdahl, 2001)	Positive*	Positive*	Positive*
Semillas de Apego (Moya <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	0.10–0.23	0.31	0.17
PSS for children			
Huggy Puppy (Sadeh <i>et al.</i> , 2008)	0.60–0.90	n/a	n/a

Note: *Authors did not report findings in effect sizes.

Cross-Study findings by child and caregiver outcomes

We synthesised cross-study findings of the impacts of interventions on child-level outcomes (cognitive skills, SEL and wellbeing) as well as caregiver-level outcomes (caregiving practices and mental health).

1. Children's Outcomes

Emergent language and numeracy skills: Four evaluations of caregiver-directed stimulation assessed impacts on emerging literacy and numeracy skills: Parents Make the Difference (Puffer *et al.*, 2015), REL P (Schwartz *et al.*, 2024), Gindegi Goron (Murphy *et al.*, under development) and Watch, Play and Learn (Franchet *et al.*, 2024). While Parents Make the Difference did not improve children's emerging language, REL P had large impacts (0.49 SD). In relation to numeracy, we find that both Parents Make the Difference and REL P had positive and significant impacts, while Sesame's Watch, Play and Learn did not have significant effects on maths. The effects on maths of Parents Make the Difference (0.18 SD) are significantly smaller than the effects of REL P (0.45 SD). Overall, REL P appears to be the most promising evidence-based intervention in conflict settings to improve emergent language and numeracy skills in the early years.

SEL: Five studies assessed the impact of two types of ECD interventions on children's SEL outcomes: caregiver-directed childhood stimulation (Rafla *et al.*, 2024; Schwartz *et al.*, 2024; Puffer *et al.*, 2015) and

mass media (Moran *et al.*, under review; Franchet *et al.*, 2024). Three RCTs evaluating caregiver-directed stimulation programmes showed mixed impacts on SEL outcomes. While REL P had positive impacts on SEL skills equivalent to 0.36 SD, other interventions, including REL P + parenting support, group caregiving training and 1:1 caregiver phone calls exhibited mostly null impacts on SEL skills. Two RCTs of mass media interventions – Ahlan Simsim and Watch, Play and Learn – showed positive impacts on a diverse set of SEL skills within the emotional domain (e.g. emotion recognition, emotion knowledge, emotion vocabulary) in the range of 0.11 to 0.36 SD. While existing reports on Watch, Play and Learn do not provide information on cost, the Ahlan Simsim intervention appears to be highly cost effective in improving SEL outcomes in the early years given its low cost, moderate to large impacts and scalable delivery.

Mental health: Two studies evaluated impact on children's mental health outcomes linked to two different types of interventions: PSS for children and PSS for caregivers (Sadeh *et al.*, 2008; Dybdahl, 2001). The Huggy Puppy intervention, which provided a stuffed animal to children during war, had significant large reductions in children's stress symptoms and reactions in the range of 0.60 to 0.90 SD (Sadeh *et al.*, 2008). A psychosocial intervention for caregivers in Bosnia and Herzegovina reported decreases in mental health problems, but besides reductions in behaviour problems reported by the interviewer, other changes were not significant (Dybdahl, 2001).

2. Caregivers’ outcomes

Caregiving practices: Eight interventions assessed impact on caregiving practices. There is strong evidence from these studies that caregiver-directed stimulation programmes – both remote and face-to-face – are effectively able to improve caregivers’ interactions with their children, including their responsiveness, stimulation and use of positive behaviour management strategies.

Caregivers’ mental health: Seven studies explored impacts of ECD interventions on caregivers’ mental health; most of the evidence of impact comes from caregiver-directed stimulation programmes (Rafla *et al.*, 2024; Schwartz *et al.*, 2024; Ponguta *et al.*, 2020; Morris *et al.*, 2012), with mixed results. Group caregiving training decreased sadness among mothers (Morris *et al.*, 2012), lowered mothers’ levels of stress and increased perceived levels of support and empowerment (Ponguta *et al.*, 2020). Caregiver 1:1 phone calls reduced mothers’ depressive symptoms (Rafla *et al.*, 2024). However, RELP and

RELP + parenting support (Schwartz *et al.*, 2024), Gindegi Goron (Murphy *et al.*, under development) and the Fathers’ Engagement programme (Iqbal *et al.*, 2024) did not have significant effects on caregiver mental health outcomes. We also found promising but limited evidence on the impact of PSS interventions on caregivers’ mental health, with one RCT showing significant improvements in mothers’ post-traumatic reactions (Dybdahl, 2001). However, effect sizes were not reported, making it difficult to compare effectiveness against other interventions.

Evidence of cost effectiveness of ECD interventions

Fewer than half of the interventions identified report cost data. The cost-effectiveness analysis shows substantial variation across delivery models. Table 2 shows evidence on cost effectiveness from ECD interventions that have reported cost data.

Table 2. Cost effectiveness of ECD interventions on child and caregiver outcomes

Intervention and citation	Cost per child (US\$ 2024)	Cost per 0.20 SD gain in child outcomes (US\$)	Cost per 0.20 SD gain in caregiver outcomes (US\$)
Caregiver-directed stimulation			
Fathers’ Engagement (Alam <i>et al.</i> , 2025)	366*	610	319–611
Gindegi Goron (IVR) (Murphy <i>et al.</i> , under development)	98	89–93	20–61
Gindegi Goron (IVR + home visits)	200	114–160	48–148
RELP (Schwartz <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	260	116	100
RELP + Parenting support (Schwartz <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	550	423	275
Phone caregiver support (Rafla <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	73*	n/a	132
Mass media			
Ahlan Simsim (Moran <i>et al.</i> , under review)	3–7	3.89–5.46	n/a

Note: *Authors reported cost per household so we derived a cost-per-child estimate based on the assumption of 1.5 eligible children per household.

For child-level outcomes, mass media (Ahlan Simsim) is the most cost-effective model, generating child SEL improvements at \$1.6–\$8 per 0.20 SD. Remote caregiver-directed stimulation models such as Gindegi Goron with IVR in Bangladesh and RELP in Lebanon are less cost effective than mass media – potentially given their smaller scale – but they generated improvements on a wider range of child

outcomes including cognitive ones at \$89–\$93 per 0.20 SD. More intensive hybrid models, such as IVR + home visits, or RELP + parenting support, produce meaningful impacts but at considerably higher cost. The Fathers’ Engagement programme showed the highest cost per unit improvement (\$611).

For caregiver outcomes, remote models show higher cost effectiveness to improve caregiving outcomes,

ranging from IVR models in Bangladesh at \$20–\$61 to RELP in Lebanon at \$100 per unit gain. There is a dearth of data on cost effectiveness of interventions on caregiver mental health, with only one impact evaluation generating this type of evidence. Overall, lower-cost, scalable modalities appear most cost effective, while higher-intensity models entail substantially greater cost per unit impact.

Discussion

This review complements an earlier implementation research synthesis by Murphy, Yoshikawa and Wuermler (2018), which examined how ECD programmes are delivered and adapted in conflict and crisis settings, by synthesising a growing body of rigorous evidence on the causal impact of ECD interventions on child and caregiver outcomes as well as their cost effectiveness. Our review finds rigorous but limited evidence for four different types of ECD interventions in conflict-affected settings: (1) caregiver-directed stimulation, (2) PSS for children, (3) PSS for caregivers and (4) mass media. Most ECD interventions with rigorous evidence of impact have been tested at small scale and exhibit limited costing data and uneven coverage across child and caregiver outcomes. Nevertheless, several important insights emerge.

Our findings, through the ERICC conceptual framework (Kim *et al.*, 2026), highlight that nearly all rigorous ECD impact evaluations to date focus on the educational experience pathway, primarily targeting caregivers and children. Caregiver-directed stimulation programmes, PSS for children and caregivers, and mass media interventions strengthen the immediate relational, emotional and learning environments that shape young children's experiences by improving three drivers of learning and development: access, quality and continuity. However, we find a notable gap in the interventions addressing system coherence – a fourth driver that reflects the alignment of policy, financing, governance and implementation structures needed to support effective and sustainable ECD delivery in conflict settings. Nearly all evaluations focused on programme-level impacts on children and caregivers, with little attention to institutional and policy conditions that enable durable impact. Without system coherence, even strong interventions struggle to scale and sustain impact (Kim *et al.*,

2026; Diazgranados *et al.*, 2026). Causal evidence is also scarce for interventions operating at the community, school or system levels, underscoring the need for research examining the impact of multi-level interventions on children's learning and how contextual and political economy factors shape effectiveness in crisis settings.

In terms of impact on children's holistic learning and development, we find that education technology (EdTech)-assisted programmes in the caregiver-directed stimulation category – such as Gindegi Goron (IVR), RELP (WhatsApp) and mass media programmes including Ahlan Simsim and Watch, Play and Learn – emerged as the most promising interventions in conflict-affected settings given their documented impacts on ECD outcomes. These interventions are able to reach a large number of children in contexts where face-to-face access is difficult. Ahlan Simsim was able to improve ECD SEL outcomes at a very low cost, and RELP and Gindegi Goron also proved to be highly impactful across SEL and cognitive outcomes though at a higher cost. These findings suggest a trade-off between scalability and intensity, with lower-cost mass media models delivering moderate gains on SEL outcomes at scale and higher-cost caregiver-directed models generating larger developmental impacts on a wider range of child-level outcomes. While highly promising given their large impacts and availability of cost data, the evidence remains limited for each type of programme. It is worth noting that while programmes such as RELP operated effectively despite limited electricity and shared devices, EdTech-supported interventions still require a minimum level of connectivity, which may not be available in all crisis settings.

Evidence on the impact of ECD interventions on the mental health outcomes of children during the early years is extremely limited: we only found two impact evaluations assessing child mental health outcomes. The Huggy Puppy intervention during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war resulted in large reductions in trauma-related reactions. Other interventions such as PSS for caregivers did not result in improved mental health outcomes for children. The evidence on what works to improve mental health in the early years is too limited to draw firm conclusions about intervention effectiveness. This gap is notable given the high prevalence of trauma exposure in conflict and crisis settings.

The evidence of impact on caregiver outcomes is also promising but uneven. Seven studies demonstrate the positive impact that caregiver-directed stimulation programmes have on parenting practices, including reductions in harsh discipline, improvements in responsive caregiving and positive interactions with children. These findings are consistent across diverse contexts, suggesting that structured group training can help parents shift behaviours in conflict and crisis settings. The evidence on caregivers' mental health is more mixed. Group-based interventions and PSS sessions reduced sadness, stress and post-traumatic symptoms, and one phone-based intervention in Jordan reduced depressive symptoms. However, other interventions such as RELP, Gindegi Goron and a fathers' engagement programme had no detectable impacts on caregiver wellbeing. This suggests that improved parenting behaviours do not necessarily translate into improved mental health for caregivers. This divergence indicates that behaviour-focused parenting interventions may be insufficient to address trauma-related distress, which may ultimately influence child ECD outcomes without more explicit mental health components. Overall, the evidence remains thin and underscores the need for more research, particularly large-scale evaluations that examine both caregiver behaviours and mental health, as both can act as drivers of children's learning and development.

With a few exceptions, we find that most interventions rely on small sample sizes, have been implemented at small scale, and do not consistently assess both caregiver and child-level outcomes. They also tend not to disaggregate impact for different populations or include costing data – a pattern consistent with broader reviews of ECD in refugee and crisis contexts (Stevens, Siraj and Kong, 2023). Comparative cost-effectiveness evidence remains especially limited, constraining decision-making about which models to scale under resource scarcity. More evidence is needed on the impact of policy interventions to improve system-level coherence and implementation of programmes at scale. Evidence is also limited on how best to support ECD across different phases of conflict; most studies focus on protracted crises, with little research on interventions at the onset of an emergency. Finally, we lack evidence on the long-term impact of ECD interventions on children's learning and development.

Conclusion

While the evidence base remains small, it demonstrates that ECD interventions can deliver meaningful benefits in crisis and conflict settings. Remote and scalable approaches such as mass media and caregiver-directed stimulation programmes supported by EdTech, such as Gindegi Goron and RELP, provide impactful models for learning and caregiving support, with emerging evidence suggesting trade-offs between cost, intensity and scalability. Future research should prioritise cost effectiveness, equity and long-term impacts, and invest in scaling models that integrate trauma-informed caregiver support with accessible early learning. By doing so, the international community can move closer to ensuring that even in the most adverse contexts, young children have the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential.

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Supporting children's mental health and emotional wellbeing in and through education in contexts of conflict and protracted crisis:

A narrative, thematic evidence review



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Abstract

This review examines what has, and has not, been reported to have worked or shown promise to support children's mental health and wellbeing in and through education in conflict-affected and protracted crisis contexts. Informed by ecological systems-based theories and drawing from over 100 studies (2000–2024), we critically synthesise findings from quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods studies. Our analysis suggests that promising programmes are theoretically informed, values-driven, multi-layered, embedded into schools or other educational environments and involve children, caregivers and teachers as co-designers over time. Promising approaches are locally adapted to age and settings and embedded within everyday educational interactions. Persistent programme challenges include limited grounding in education theory, insufficient attention to gender and displacement, and over-reliance on measurement tools from high-income contexts which can overlook how wellbeing is valued locally. We argue for programming that adopts a more contextualised focus on children's culturally, politically and historically situated day-to-day educational interactions.

Key Words

conflict, crisis, education, narrative review, mental health, wellbeing

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Introduction

This review examines how support for children's mental health and wellbeing has been enacted in and through educational spaces in conflict-affected and crisis settings. It was guided by the question: What has (and has not) worked to support children's mental health and wellbeing in and through education in contexts of conflict and protracted crises?¹

While 'what works' phrasing is frequently used across sectors (Haroz *et al.*, 2020; Burde *et al.*, 2019; 2015) – often associated with analyses of quantitative findings from randomised controlled trials (RCTs) or impact evaluations – we make use of it here as a valuable yet pragmatic starting point, exploring its assumptions. A systematic review and meta-analysis of child and youth MHPSS interventions in humanitarian settings has reported modest and outcome-specific effects for some programmes, inconsistent and sometimes unintended impacts across others, with authors calling for programmes of work that safely and inclusively address diversity among children and young people (Bangpan *et al.*, 2024). Complementary work by Diazgranados and Thuo (forthcoming) has undertaken meta-analysis of selected quantitative studies with a focus on social-emotional learning outcomes. In contrast, our narrative thematic review focuses on mental-health outcomes and wellbeing and examines a wider range of evidence, including qualitative, mixed-methods and quantitative research. Rather than identifying singular or generalisable claims of effectiveness, we outline how authors report supporting children's mental health and wellbeing in and through education, and identify patterns across relational, contextual and programmatic processes.

The literature we reviewed reflects multiple layers of complexity, including diversity of sites (country and conflict contexts), settings (formal and non-formal educational spaces), participants involved (children, caregivers, practitioners), education-related practices (lay and professional) and ideas of how 'mental health' is understood (Adebayo *et al.*, 2024; Limenih *et al.*, 2024; Kirmayer and Pedersen, 2014).

While frameworks such as the Inter-Agency Standing

Committee (IASC, 2007) pyramid and the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Minimum Standards (INEE, 2018) recognise this layered complexity, intervention-focused syntheses often reduce educational processes to causal inputs and outputs. Drawing on Biesta's (2024a, p. 40) critique of 'quasi-causal conception of interventions and effects', this review adopted a values-based educational approach (Biesta, 2010), which foregrounds the processes through which support for children's mental health and wellbeing is negotiated and enacted within different educational contexts. Rather than rank intervention models, our review surfaces the values and principles that underpin support for mental health in and through educational spaces. We synthesise what authors themselves report – including limitations and contextual insights – rather than reanalysing outcomes.

In the following sections, we outline the background and theoretical framing guiding our work, the methods used, and key findings related to promising practices and persistent challenges. Through our discussion, we suggest that programmes are best developed through dialogue, drawing together theory and practice with critical understandings of local contexts and engaging with the lived experiences of children, caregivers and professionals.

Background

An estimated 20% of people living in conflict and crisis settings experience mental health challenges (Charlson *et al.*, 2019). Studies with children reveal a broad range in reported prevalence rates for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety, reflecting differences in contexts, populations and methodologies (Taylor and Kaplan, 2023). Displaced children, child soldiers, girls and those from marginalised communities are disproportionately affected. Moreover, adverse experiences in childhood have lasting effects (Abate *et al.*, 2025; Garner and Shonkoff, 2012), underscoring the potential value of education in providing nurturing and protective environments (Immordino-Yang, Darling-Hammond and Krone, 2019).

¹ This question arose through discussions among partners from the Education Research in Conflict and Crisis (ERICC) research programme (ERICC), a global research and learning partnership aiming to transform education policy and practice in contexts of conflict and protracted crisis to help improve holistic outcomes for children.

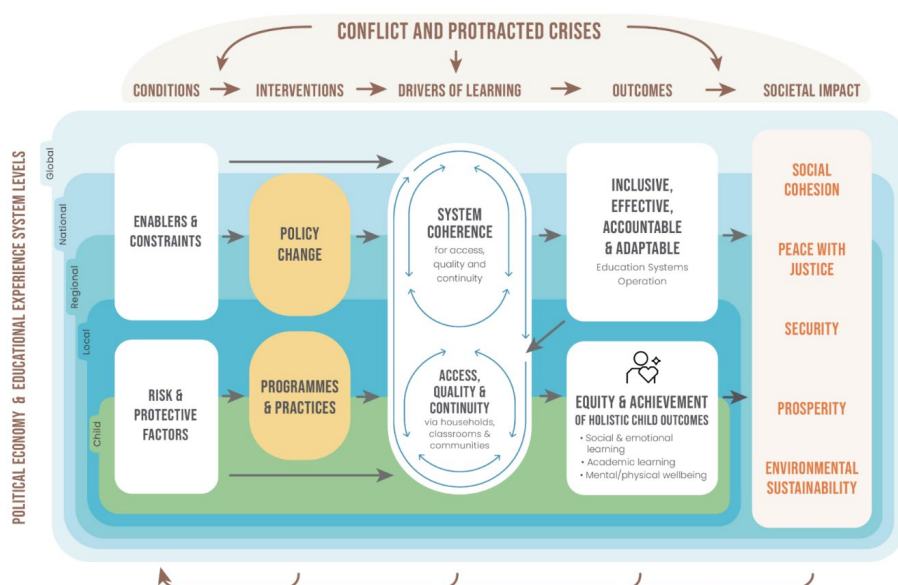
Alongside the central role of education in children's lives, we recognise the value of programmes and activities to support children's mental health (UNHCR, 2024; WHO, 2019; 2022), including approaches that integrate mental health and psychosocial support into community-based protection initiatives and safe and supportive educational environments (INEE, 2024; Nemiro *et al.*, 2022b). However, existing evidence and syntheses often sit in parallel silos – clinical mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), social-emotional learning (SEL), or education effectiveness – obscuring how support enacted through education is shaped through relationships, routines, cultural meaning making and the conditions under which educators work.

UNICEF's (2022) Mind the Gap report highlights both the centrality of education settings and how partial the evidence remains about humanitarian contexts: only 10% of studies examine MHPSS interventions for children and adolescents in humanitarian settings and contextual factors and implementation challenges are inadequately addressed. Responding to these gaps and building on evidence of a persistent research/practice divide in humanitarian MHPSS (Nemiro *et al.*, 2022a), we examine how support for children's mental health and wellbeing is enacted across contexts, relationships and processes in conflict and protracted crisis settings, including what authors report has and has not 'worked' (that is, has or has not achieved intended outcomes).

Recognising that some mental health measures can overestimate prevalence by failing to assess clinical significance, researchers have emphasised the need for more nuanced and contextualised measures (Charlson *et al.*, 2019). We make use of the inclusive definitions of mental health and wellbeing from the World Health Organization (WHO, 2025) and INEE (2018), highlighting the complex and multifaceted experiences children face in conflict and protracted crisis settings. Factors such as gender, language and sociopolitical contexts shape mental health vulnerabilities and outcomes. While education-focused programmes can have therapeutic potential (WHO, 2025; Bürgin *et al.*, 2022), they can also inadvertently cause harm. For instance, large-scale school-based interventions, if poorly designed or enacted, may exacerbate distress for some children (Foulkes and Stringaris, 2023).

To structure our review, we began with the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) conceptual framework (Figure 1), which views wellbeing through multi-layered systems – from individual characteristics to global influences. Educational experiences, especially their quality and continuity, are seen as pivotal in shaping wellbeing-related outcomes. 'Education' is understood broadly to include formal schooling and non-formal education (such as classrooms and out-of-school settings in which educational activities take place).

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for ERICC (Kim *et al.*, 2026)



As we progressed with the review, the need to focus more closely on micro-level factors became apparent. We turned to Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1994) bioecological theory (which partly informed the ERICC framework) – specifically the Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT) structure, which highlights how proximal processes (sustained, reciprocal interactions) drive children's development.

We noted how conflict and protracted crises disrupt the mental health, wellbeing (Khosravi, 2024) and developmental conditions on which children depend. Ferrara *et al.* (2025) highlight how violence, displacement, instability and disruptions to caregiving and education undermine emotional security, peer interaction and structured learning, while chronic stress affects neurobiological systems linked to attention, memory and emotional regulation. These disruptions make Bronfenbrenner's (1994, p.38) PPCT model especially relevant: 'proximal processes' are repeatedly interrupted or constrained during crises, underscoring the importance of everyday social and educational relationships and routines as potential stabilising supports.

This lens draws attention to the '... progressively complex, reciprocal interactions between a developing individual and other people and/or objects and symbols in their immediate environment' which must occur regularly and over time to be supportive of development (Navarro *et al.*, 2022, p.235). This foregrounds the continuity or discontinuity of relationships in children's lives, including how the adults and peers with whom they interact embody their own positions in relation to experiences, values and practices regarding, among other things, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, conflict, trauma, faith, education, politics, justice, relations of power and mental health. As Khosravi (2025) has noted, mental health barriers include those to accessing mental health care, such as stigma and cultural beliefs.

This understanding of what might contribute to 'holistic child outcomes' includes children's personal characteristics and their interpersonal relationships, as well as the symbolic and material elements in their environments, all while acknowledging how these processes are influenced by contextual factors over time. Moreover, educators, caregivers and peers bring their own lived experiences of trauma, culture and conflict, which shape how mental health support

is enacted and received.

These theoretical considerations sit within wider tensions shaping evaluation and decision-making in the education in emergencies and MHPSS sectors. Practitioners and policymakers must make ethical and resource-sensitive judgements about whether programmes support – or risk harming – children, yet published evidence is uneven and often poorly aligned with practice realities. Nemiro *et al.* (2022a, p.139) identify a persistent 'disconnect' whereby MHPSS interventions are broad-based and oriented towards positive wellbeing goals, while outcome measures focus narrowly 'on changes in symptoms of mental disorders' – and the dominance of (RCTs) 'skews your view of what works'. In line with Biesta's (2010; 2024b; 2026) arguments that educational practice cannot be fully understood through input–output logics alone, we highlight the relational and value judgements through which educational support for wellbeing is enacted (Biesta, 2015; 2026).

Methodology

In our review, we responded to the research question: What has (and has not) worked to support children's mental health and wellbeing in and through education in contexts of conflict and protracted crises?

In line with our pragmatic epistemological stance (Cohen *et al.*, 2018), we interpret this question as an invitation to synthesise how different authors report what has supported or hindered children's mental health and wellbeing outcomes, reviewing quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods evidence, critically engaging with what studies report as effective, including their stated limitations and contextual constraints (what has not worked), and the persistent challenges and gaps identified.

As Global North-based researchers with backgrounds in health promotion, wellbeing and education, and qualitative and mixed-methods research on the wellbeing of children, young people and families across diverse national and displacement-affected contexts, we adopt a reflexive, values-based approach. Consistent with practitioner concerns identified by Nemiro *et al.* (2022a), we recognise how methodological hierarchies within humanitarian research can privilege quantifiable impact evaluations while obscuring

relational, contextual and processual dimensions of practice. Our analytic approach therefore seeks to recognise the value of quantitative evidence, combining rigour while foregrounding context and interpretive judgement.

Literature search, screening and analysis

A total of 105 quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods studies were identified through a systematic search and screen of academic and grey literature guided by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Figure 2). Inclusion criteria focused on studies of education-related programmes (formal and non-formal) for children aged 0–18 in low- and middle-income countries affected by conflict and protracted crisis. We adopted a two-pronged approach for the review. First, of 523 studies coded as part of the

ERICC global evidence review database, 107 studies published between 2000 and 2024 coded to the theme ‘mental health’ were reviewed using abstract and key word searches. By focusing only on studies in and through education, as well as excluding programmes which did not focus on mental health outcomes, 57 relevant studies were identified.

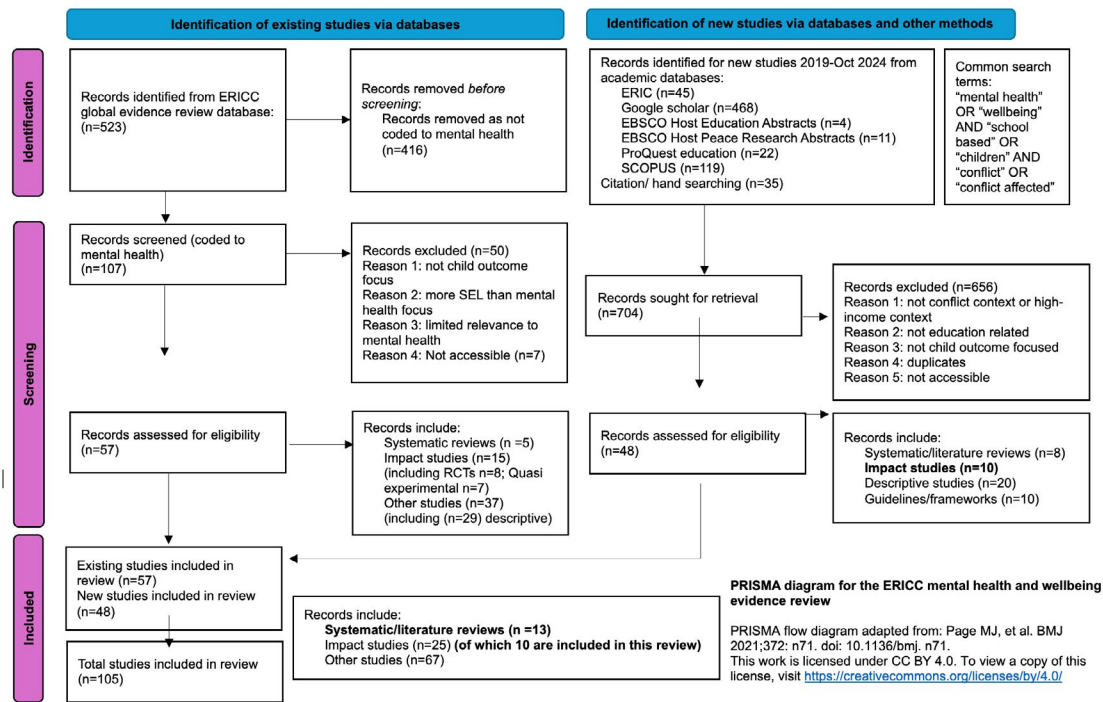
Second, separate searches in academic databases took place (October to November 2024) to identify additional studies published between 2019 and 2024. Table 1 shows the population, intervention, context, outcomes and type of research (PICOT), while the PRISMA diagram (Figure 2) outlines the process, databases and search terms for identifying and selecting a further 48 relevant studies from 704 screened from the new search. Of these, 10 impact studies were identified, along with 13 systematic and literature reviews, which form the analysis of this paper (along with two of the 20 descriptive studies).

Table 1. The PICOT framework

Population of focus	Children 0–18 years from host, refugee and/or internally displaced communities.
Interventions (policy and programmes) of interest	Those seeking to improve children’s mental health and wellbeing outcomes through changing one or more of the drivers of learning; access, quality and continuity of education and coherence.
Context of focus	Global – country or countries classified as low- or middle-income or having experienced a humanitarian emergency or disaster, conflict or protracted crisis.
Outcomes	Mental health and wellbeing
Type of research/ research type	Quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods descriptive and evaluation research; impact evaluations (experimental and quasi-experimental studies), literature/systematic reviews, process evaluations, case studies, observational studies, participatory or equity focused, project, policy and government-specific documents.

Note: The PICOT framework used here is adapted from clinical models to support structured literature searching in education and social science contexts.

Figure 2. PRISMA diagram



Analytic approach

Following screening, we conducted a thematic synthesis in three stages. First, we retained studies examining MHPSS outcomes, excluding those centred only on SEL. Second, we coded interventions by type and level of support. Consistent with other reviews (e.g. Bangpan, 2024; Kamali, Munyuzangabo and Siddiqui, 2020), most were located within the two middle layers of the IASC (2007) pyramid: focused, non-specialised supports and community- and family-strengthening supports. Only studies in and through formal or non-formal education (classrooms and communities in the ERICC framework) were retained.

Third, analysis was structured using an ecological systems lens, drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1994; 1979) and the PPCT model, alongside the ERICC conceptual framework (Kim *et al.*, 2026) (Figure 1). These frameworks informed analysis of how education-based approaches operated across processes at the micro (child-level interactions), meso (educational settings and programmes) and macro (wider sociocultural and political contexts) levels, and

where gaps remain in addressing ecological layers of influence.

Studies were classified by geography, participant group (children, caregivers, teachers, community actors) and educational settings. For impact studies, we additionally noted reported effects on children's mental health and wellbeing and authors' stated methodological and contextual limitations. The synthesis therefore focused not only on mapping interventions, but on analysing how different types of education-based approaches, situated across ecological levels, were reported to support children's mental health and wellbeing.

Findings

In total, we synthesised findings from 105 studies examining education-based approaches to supporting children's mental health and wellbeing in conflict-affected and protracted crisis contexts. Across this diverse body of evidence, we identify recurring patterns, highlighting promising practices (what has been reported to have worked) and persistent challenges. Findings draw primarily from

13 systematic and literature reviews to provide a sense of the breadth of the evidence, supplemented by ten illustrative impact studies (including randomised and quasi-experimental designs) and two in-depth descriptive studies, which together illuminate how different approaches are enacted in practice.

To present findings we use the Who, Where, What, When, How heuristic, aligning this with the PPCT model. 'Who' corresponds to Person (children and other actors involved); 'What' captures the Processes shaping wellbeing through forms of support (targeted or universal); 'Where' reflects Context (educational and sociopolitical); and 'When' reflects Time (temporal aspects of programmes); while 'How' captures the ecological conditions through which proximal processes are enacted.

Promising approaches

We identified several recurring features associated with promising mental health and wellbeing approaches, including multi-layered designs operating across individual, group, school and community levels (Lasater *et al.*, 2022; Lloyd and Penn, 2010), structured programmes with clearly defined components (Gimba *et al.*, 2020) and activities embedded within familiar learning environments.

WHO: Evidence consistently highlights the value of ecological approaches that engage not only children, but also caregivers, teachers and community actors who shape children's daily environments (Lasater *et al.*, 2022; Nemiro *et al.*, 2022b; Lloyd and Penn, 2010). Supportive student–teacher relationships are repeatedly identified as central (Shephard *et al.*, 2024; Falk, Shephard and Mendenhall, 2022; Falk, Frisoli and Varni, 2021), alongside growing recognition that teacher wellbeing and support remain critical yet under-prioritised (Hansen Overvåg, 2023; D'Sa *et al.*, 2023; Lasater *et al.*, 2022; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2021; Gimba *et al.*, 2020; Wolf *et al.*, 2015).

Caregiver engagement similarly strengthens school-based support, with programmes involving parents reporting improved engagement and outcomes (Gimba *et al.*, 2020; Gordon *et al.*, 2008; Paardekoooper, 2002; Dybdahl, 2001). Across studies, teachers, caregivers and community actors

are therefore best understood as co-constructors of education-related wellbeing support (El-Khani *et al.*, 2021; O'Callaghan *et al.*, 2015; Morris *et al.*, 2012).

In Appendix 2, 'WHO' refers narrowly to the primary child or adolescent population, while the involvement of adults is captured analytically under delivery processes (HOW).

WHERE: The evidence base clusters geographically in the Middle East (particularly Gaza, Palestine, Israel, Jordan and Lebanon) and parts of Africa, including Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), reflecting evidence gaps and underrepresentation of other conflict-affected contexts.

Regarding educational settings, interventions were conducted in a range of spaces, including 'formal' (such as schools and early childhood centres), 'non-formal' (such as child-friendly spaces (CFS)) (UNICEF, 2020; Metzler *et al.*, 2019; 2015) and 'informal' (such as homes, community centres and refugee camps). A strong emphasis was placed on the importance of contextual relevance and grounding interventions in children's immediate environments (Arega, 2023; Kamali *et al.*, 2020; Gimba *et al.*, 2020; Haroz *et al.*, 2020; Lloyd and Penn, 2010). 'Whole-school' approaches (Capurso, De Stasio and Ragni, 2022) and CFS (UNICEF, 2020) were noted as context-shaping frameworks and supportive environments for prevention and response.

Beyond schools, early childhood interventions implemented across sheltered camps and kindergarten settings (Sadeh *et al.*, 2008), as well as through community health clinics (Wilton *et al.*, 2023) demonstrated how familiar objects, routines or settings can support caregiver-led resilience (Dybdahl, 2001) and children's coping strategies through culturally grounded, problem-focused activities (Paardekooper, 2002), contributing to psychosocial gains through the 'normalisation' of children's daily living situations (Lloyd and Penn, 2010, p.283).

WHAT: Education-based MHPSS interventions can broadly be categorised as either universal (engaging the whole school or group) or targeted (focused on children identified as being in particular need).

The IASC (2007) pyramid situates most education-related interventions within the 'focused, non-

specialised support' tier (Vus *et al.*, 2023; Haroz *et al.*, 2020; Tol *et al.*, 2013), consistent with Kamali *et al.*'s (2020) observation. Of the ten impact studies reviewed (Appendix 1), most were targeted, school-based but non-education-delivered interventions, reporting modest and typically short-term improvements in specific outcomes.

Across both universal and targeted models, structured programmes combining clearly defined components and needs assessment were associated with more consistent engagement (Gimba *et al.*, 2020). Universal school-based approaches further emphasised embedding wellbeing activities into routine school life, as illustrated by the FRIENDS intervention in Lebanon (Capurso, De Stasio and Ragni, 2022; Maalouf *et al.*, 2020).

Reported impacts were mixed and context dependent, typically measured using symptom-focused tools. Appendix 1 presents reported outcomes alongside authors' stated methodological limitations and contextual cautions; these summaries are descriptive rather than evaluative and do not imply generalisability or ranking.

To illustrate the different pathways through which support was provided, studies are clustered into: (1) education-integrated approaches, (2) school-based interventions led by non-teaching staff and (3) interventions in educational settings but not through educational processes. The table (Appendix 1) distinguishes the WHO (population) and WHERE (context) from the WHAT (intervention type and core components) and the HOW (delivery processes and ecological level), and codes each study by level of support (universal or targeted).²

Across these ten impact studies, the most consistently reported short-term improvements in mental health symptoms are observed in targeted, specialist-led interventions within school settings but outside routine educational processes (Cluster 2), while education-integrated approaches (Cluster 1) and those in educational settings through non-educational modalities (Cluster 3) more frequently report mixed, modest or domain-specific effects alongside substantial contextual and implementation constraints.

Capurso, De Stasio and Ragni (2022, p.372) identified six recurring components across school-based responses: (1) 'inform and help children to understand' the crisis through accurate information-sharing and open discussion, (2) emotional support via 'empathic listening', (3) 'social and environmental connections' to restore relational and contextual stability, (4) building coping and problem-solving skills (the most frequently included component), (5) promoting self-awareness and self-care and (6) fostering 'post-traumatic growth' by helping students make meaning of adversity and develop future-oriented hope.

Across the literature, these components appear in a range of programme types, including structured psychosocial group activities, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)-informed interventions, resilience curricula and arts- or storytelling-based approaches. Burde *et al.* (2017) highlight the use of structured, meaningful activities, while also emphasising the need for interventions to account for local norms, customs and community dynamics. For example, Gimba *et al.* (2020) described a recurring modular structure and 'culturally sensitive' adaptation to delivery actors and settings.

Lasater *et al.*'s (2022) realist review synthesised 27 studies across 19 education-based MHPSS programmes, including six evaluations of the International Rescue Committee's Healing Classrooms approach, which emphasises safe, predictable and supportive educational environments. Across this and other approaches – ranging from structured psychosocial group activities and teacher-led SEL to multi-component school-community models – Lasater *et al.*'s (2022) review developed programme theories explaining how, why and in what contexts education-based MHPSS interventions influence wellbeing and learning. Interventions embedded in educational spaces were associated with improved coping, emotional regulation, relationships and academic engagement, particularly where educator training and supervision, caregiver engagement and inclusive school environments were in place.

However, reviews consistently note limited detail on what constituted 'structured' or 'creative'

2 Coding of approach (universal, selective or targeted) aligns with the IASC MHPSS pyramid, distinguishing interventions by level of need rather than by content or delivery.

educational activities (Kamali *et al.*, 2020), and rarely engage with macro-level policy conditions shaping programme design and delivery. This gap is addressed by long-term, practice-based in-depth accounts such as the Healing and Education through the Arts (HEART) programme (Hommel and Kaimal, 2025). This documents over a decade of arts-based work supporting children's emotional wellbeing within schools, CFS, youth centres and homes, including contexts where the programme has been embedded within national education and child-protection systems.

WHEN: Few studies specify optimal timing within school calendars; instead, evidence emphasises sustained participation over time as more critical than intervention model (Rojas-Andrade and Bahamondes, 2019). Timing was reported as most effective when aligned with individual and community readiness rather than externally imposed schedules (Hommel and Kaimal, 2025; O'Callaghan *et al.*, 2015).

While most studies focus on children aged 9–18, early-years provision remains limited. Notable exceptions targeting children aged 3–5 demonstrate gains in caregiver and child wellbeing, trauma reduction and social-emotional development through play- and relationship-based approaches (Hommel and Kaimal, 2025; Mariam *et al.*, 2021; Sadeh *et al.*, 2008; Dybdahl, 2001).

HOW: Across reviews, interventions were reported as most effective when combining structured content (e.g. evidence-based modules) with flexibility to adapt to local culture, age and context. Lasater *et al.* (2022) emphasise that integrating activities into the everyday life of schools supports quality, access and continuity, provided that ongoing support for teachers is in place (Shoshani, 2020).

Several studies illustrate how such flexibility operates in practice. Yi *et al.* (2024), working with formerly abducted children in Nigeria, tested three group-based approaches – CBT, art therapy and music therapy – adapted using interactive storytelling, local language audio-visual materials and community-based workshops. All three interventions reported significant reductions in depression symptoms across groups, with the CBT group showing the largest decrease compared with the control group. Similarly, El-Khodary and Samara (2020) demonstrate how storytelling and drawing activities

within a school-based counselling programme with students and parents promoted dialogue. However, their findings also illustrate the limits of aggregate 'what works' claims: while PTSD prevalence and symptom severity decreased following the intervention, depressive symptoms increased for some adolescents and anxiety remained unchanged, with insufficient disaggregation to explain these divergent outcomes.

Targeted trauma-focused interventions – including teaching recovery techniques (TRT) and trauma-focused CBT (TF-CBT) – particularly those also involving parents or caregivers (El-Khani *et al.*, 2021; O'Callaghan *et al.*, 2015) were among those reporting the most substantial reductions in PTSD, anxiety and depression symptoms in the short term. Barron, Abdallah and Smith (2013) reported that school-based TRT led to large reductions in PTSD, depression and grief in Palestine. In DRC, O'Callaghan *et al.* (2015) compared TF-CBT and CFS delivery models, finding sustained reductions in distress symptoms across both.

While Appendix 1 summarises experimental and quasi-experimental impact evaluations, we also identified other studies that intentionally adopt non-experimental designs to foreground relational processes, ethical considerations and cultural grounding. These studies offer critical insight into how education-related practices support children's mental health and wellbeing in contexts of conflict and displacement. Appendix 2 presents two such examples – HEART and Pashe Acchi – which illustrate ecosystem-level, process-oriented approaches that complement the impact evidence by deepening understanding of pathways, participation and context.

Mariam and Ahmad (2023), while describing the Pashe Acchi programme, highlight the importance of aligning psychosocial support with local cultural narratives, engaging Rohingya mothers using culturally resonant metaphors like oshanti ('lack of mental peace') to describe emotional pain rather than Western clinical terms. They recommend practices based on flexible, participant-centred approaches that respect local knowledge, and explicitly describe abandoning a planned RCT on ethical and contextual grounds, judging that withholding support from highly vulnerable participants was neither appropriate nor aligned

with trauma-informed, participatory practice. While Barron, Abdallah and Smith (2013) reported significant reductions in PTSD, depression and traumatic grief following a school-based TRT programme, they also noted that variable programme fidelity and the need for contextual adaptation shaped uptake and sustainability under conditions of ongoing violence.

Taken together, these studies highlight tensions between experimental rigour and contextually responsive practice in conflict settings and illustrate how reported impacts are shaped not only by intervention content but also by ethical, relational and contextual considerations. Across the literature, authors consistently associate more positive engagement, implementation feasibility and reported outcomes with processes that: initially assess what participants view as relevant issues to address; include children, caregivers and teachers (and possibly others) in decisions about adapting and developing educational activities; provide ongoing support for the involvement of teachers and caregivers; ensure programmes are integrated into educational settings; and take place over sufficient time to allow children to engage with people who, and practices that, contribute to their emotional wellbeing.

Persistent challenges

Notwithstanding the many elements of promising practice, significant gaps remain about how best to support children's mental health and emotional wellbeing in conflict and crisis settings. A recurring limitation is the absence of clearly articulated theoretical frameworks or theories of change, making it challenging to understand assumptions about how and why programme designs and specific activities were expected to contribute to change (Lasater *et al.*, 2022; Kamali *et al.*, 2020).

Across studies, there are limited accounts of commonalities and differences among children, caregivers and teachers within programmes, and insufficient differentiation by gender or displacement status (Saha *et al.*, 2023; Capurso, De Stasio and Ragni, 2022). This makes it challenging to identify whether or what changes programmes or activities have brought about among particular constituencies.

Contextually, little is reported about people's cultures, traditional practices and coping mechanisms in war and conflict and how these might shape responses to interventions (Arega, 2023). Moreover, the role of religion and spirituality in such situations is noticeable by its absence (Sharifian *et al.*, 2023; Kaul, 2016).

Methodologically, many studies rely on measures of mental health and emotional wellbeing developed in high-income and stable contexts, raising concerns about cultural misalignment and reduced relevance of findings to low-income and conflict and crisis-affected contexts (Capurso, De Stasio and Ragni, 2022; Burde *et al.*, 2015; Lloyd and Penn, 2010). While some authors highlight the value of adapting measures (Turner *et al.*, 2022; Olayemi *et al.*, 2021; Vachon *et al.*, 2020; Diazgranados and Lee, 2019), others critique the widespread use of tools like CRIES-13 and the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), noting their frequent application without adequate cultural validation – risking symptom misinterpretation and limiting contextual relevance (Olayemi *et al.*, 2021; Haroz *et al.*, 2020; Frounfelker *et al.*, 2019; Morris *et al.*, 2012). Several studies (Appendix 1) report limitations with the 'battery of tests' (Barron, Abdallah and Smith, 2013), particularly reliance on self-reported (O'Callaghan *et al.*, 2015) and lengthy assessments (Maalouf *et al.*, 2020), leading to participants unwilling to complete them.

While RCTs and other fixed experimental designs play an important role in establishing causal effects on mental health and learning outcomes, they are not necessarily well suited to capturing the relational, cultural and contextual complexity of educational practice (Biesta, 2010; 2026). A growing body of literature calls for complementary research designs that document the processes, people and contexts in which they live, teach and learn (Bell and Aggleton, 2016), alongside a shift towards implementation science that strengthens the relational, organisational and institutional conditions – through supervision, workforce development and system strengthening – necessary to sustain quality MHPSS over time in conflict-affected settings (Yildirim *et al.*, 2026).

Ethical considerations arise across this methodological spectrum. Some authors describe situations where experimental designs were judged inappropriate or unethical through their exclusion of certain groups during crises. For instance,

Hommel and Kaimal (2025), drawing on a decade of iterative programme evaluations within the HEART programme, describe how standardised measures were abandoned where they proved culturally misaligned or insufficiently sensitive, in favour of a participatory, contextually adaptable evaluation framework prioritising local relevance and stakeholder perspectives. Mariam and Ahmad (2023), Capurso, De Stasio and Ragni (2022) and Sokol *et al.* (2021) similarly highlight ethical and practical challenges associated with withholding or delaying support in crisis settings. Conversely, others caution that the absence of robust impact evaluation can itself pose ethical risks – particularly when school-based mental health programmes are scaled without adequate evidence of benefit or potential harm (Foulkes and Stringaris, 2023). Recent meta-analytic synthesis in humanitarian settings highlights heterogeneous and sometimes unintended outcomes across psychosocial interventions (Bangpan *et al.*, 2024). Together, these debates point to the need for evaluation strategies that are ethically grounded, methodologically plural and explicitly aligned with their evaluative purpose.

Finally, multiple studies highlight the risks of over-burdening teachers, counsellors and facilitators, documenting high levels of stress, burnout and emotional labour (Sharifian *et al.*, 2023; Wolf *et al.*, 2015) among adults who are themselves exposed to trauma, insecurity and chronic resource constraints. Barron, Abdallah and Smith (2013) report attrition among trained programme facilitators and difficulties sustaining delivery under ongoing violence, while reviews note educators are often positioned as frontline mental health responders without adequate training, supervision or psychosocial support (Lasater *et al.*, 2022; Falk, Shephard and Mendenhall, 2022; Falk, Frisoli and Varni, 2021).

Concluding thoughts

This narrative and thematic review synthesises evidence on how children's mental health and emotional wellbeing are supported in and through education in contexts of conflict and protracted crisis. Informed by the ERICC and PPCT frameworks, the review surfaces patterns in reported enabling processes in terms of who is engaged, where support is situated, what forms of support are emphasised, and how these are enacted and

evaluated. We also note persistent challenges, gaps and cautions in the evidence base. Implications for policy, programming, practice and future research are developed separately in a companion ERICC policy brief (Greer *et al.*, 2025).

WHO: Across the studies we have outlined how children's mental health and wellbeing are shaped through relational processes between teachers, caregivers, and wider community actors. Given that relationality is a driving force of children's wellbeing development, commonalities and differences within and across groups could be more explicitly documented to help generate a better understanding of how proximal processes – relational, creative, dialogic and routine – help and hinder wellbeing over time.

WHERE: Activities most commonly seek to engage children in school or settings nearby, including non-formal educational environments and CFS. Interventions embedded in familiar, everyday settings can support emotional regulation, coping and relational stability (UNICEF, 2020; Lasater *et al.*, 2022; Lloyd and Penn, 2010). While some studies acknowledge the role of ongoing violence, displacement or insecurity, fewer engage with how culture, religion, power relations, historical injustices, or digital and virtual environments (Navarro and Tudge, 2023) shape experiences of distress and care. Moving beyond Western and Global North epistemologies and engaging Southern perspectives on development (Shah and Dalrymple, 2025) may help foreground wellbeing as locally defined and valued (Bartolomei, Blundo-Canto and De Muro, 2024; Domínguez-Serrano and del Moral-Espín, 2022; White and Van der Boor, 2021), with assessments focused on locally relevant understandings of mental and emotional wellbeing (IASC, 2012; 2007), rather than symptom change alone.

At the meso level, schools emerge as important but uneven sites of support. Frameworks such as the WHO (2021) Health Promoting Schools approach offer ways to situate mental health initiatives within wider school policies, curricula and everyday practices, rather than as stand-alone programmes. Questions remain about how mental health and wellbeing initiatives intersect with conflict-sensitive education principles (INEE, 2013), inclusive curricula and protections for education under the Safe

Schools Declaration (GCPEA, 2025; Minor, 2021; Zwanenburg, 2021).

WHAT: Rather than converging on a single effective model, the review identifies a diverse set of approaches: structured psychosocial group activities, CBT-informed programmes, arts-based and dialogic practices, parenting components and whole-school wellbeing curricula. Analysis of the clustered impact evidence (Appendix 1) suggests the most consistent short-term symptom reductions occur in targeted, specialist-led interventions delivered within schools but outside routine educational processes. Education-integrated approaches more often report mixed, modest or domain-specific effects alongside greater contextual and implementation constraints. Across clusters, what appears most consistent across studies is not the approach itself, but attention to structured yet adaptable activities that enable emotional or artistic expression, relational safety and meaning-making, particularly when sustained over time, embedded in familiar settings, and linked to the wellbeing of key adult actors. Importantly, recent meta-analytic synthesis highlights heterogeneous and, in some contexts, unintended effects for psychosocial programmes involving creative activities, reinforcing that outcomes are shaped by contextual and implementation conditions rather than modality alone (Bangpan *et al.*, 2024).

HOW: Educational and evaluation approaches strongly shape reported outcomes and their interpretation, suggesting that programmes and their attendant evaluations are best preceded by context-sensitive assessments (IASC, 2012; 2007).

Consistent with our values-based view, we foreground the ‘indispensable role of judgement in practising education’ and the need for local ‘meaning making, reflection and judgement’ (Biesta, 2015, p.20). In particular, and to support continuity of provision, where teachers, counsellors and facilitators are positioned as key proximal actors in supporting children’s wellbeing, the evidence suggests programmes must budget for supervision, psychosocial support and care for those who themselves care for and work with children, and who are often operating under conditions of chronic stress and exposure to violence (Greer, 2025; Lasater *et al.*, 2022; Falk, Frisoli and Varni, 2021; Wolf *et al.*, 2015; Barron, Abdallah and Smith, 2013).

Evaluation is a crucial element of programme design and, as with programmes themselves, ‘one size’ appears unsuitable for all contexts. We would argue for evaluation approaches that are ethically grounded, methodologically plural and explicitly aligned to their purpose; establishing causal effects where appropriate, while also documenting context as well as the enactment of a programme and its evaluation.

Complementing experimental designs with interpretive, ethnographic and arts-based methods can capture locally grounded perspectives and processes (Hommel and Kaimal, 2025; Bell and Aggleton, 2016). This aligns with the epistemic humility articulated by Hommel and Kaimal (2025, p.170), recognising that no single approach is ‘the right fit for every context’.

Recent work in global MHPSS similarly argues that the next phase of research must move beyond demonstrating efficacy towards implementation and systems research focused on integration, supervision and workforce development across sectors (Yildirim *et al.*, 2026), reinforcing the need to understand how support for children’s mental health unfolds within and across relational, institutional and policy systems over time.

Returning to the ERICC framework, which positions equity and achievement of holistic child outcomes – including mental health and wellbeing – as precursors to wider societal impacts, we highlight a central tension in current evidence and practice. Aspirations towards peace with social justice, security, prosperity and environmental sustainability cannot be realised through education in conflict and protracted crisis settings unless sustained attention is paid to the proximal processes through which children’s wellbeing is shaped in everyday, relational, politically and culturally embedded contexts. Attention to intersecting factors – including race, gender, displacement status, religious beliefs and experiences of structural and historic injustices and violence – is critical to improving support for mental health and emotional wellbeing in and through forms of dialogic education.

At a moment when the education sector is investing in shared infrastructures to synthesise evidence (What Works Hub, 2025), this review offers a complementary contribution by organising findings – we hope transparently – around a WHO, WHERE,

WHAT and HOW heuristic, foregrounding the contextual conditions, uneven effects and author-reported limitations shaping evidence interpretation and its use. We welcome ongoing dialogue (Elrha, 2025) between researchers, practitioners, funders and policymakers to support context-sensitive judgements about how evidence is gathered, interpreted, adapted and applied in conflict and crisis settings.

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Declaration of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. Dr Geneviève Greer conducted this research independently prior to her employment at the Wellcome Trust, where she currently works as a Senior Research Manager in the Climate and Health team.

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Appendix 1. Summary of 10 education-related impact evaluations reporting mental health and wellbeing outcomes in conflict and crisis settings

Pathway of support clusters	Study, programme and study design	Context (WHERE)	Population (WHO)	Approach, intervention and core components (WHAT)	Delivery processes and ecological level (HOW)	Reported outcomes (mental health and wellbeing)	Limitations reported by authors
1. Education-delivered, education-integrated	Forsberg and Schultz (2022) Better Learning Program Quasi-experimental controlled study	Gaza, Palestine Protracted armed conflict	300 conflict-affected students (aged 9–16, grades 5–10) identified as academically underachieving and exposed to war-related traumatic events; from 30 Ministry of Education selected schools	Targeted Academic support and psychosocial guidance to strengthen engagement and coping; school-based programme combining psychoeducation, stress-management, coping and problem-solving skills; social support and pedagogical components targeting study skills and learning-related executive functions	Delivered by trained teachers in small groups (≈10 students) during the school day across 5 weekly 45-minute sessions, following a train-the-trainer model led by NRC and Ministry of Education and school counsellors, with fidelity monitoring and follow-up; parents informed and engaged via school–family communication. Ecological levels: Micro: child–teacher interactions; peer learning support groups Meso: classroom and	Short-term post-intervention improvements in wellbeing, self-regulation, self-efficacy, learning-related executive and academic functioning, alongside reduced stress-related symptoms; at 5-month follow-up, effects for hope and stress symptoms had weakened, while other psychosocial and school-related gains were more stable	Non-random selection of schools limits generalisability; reliance on student self-report measures; limited demographic data constraining subgroup analysis; ongoing conflict conditions may have influenced outcomes; some effects weakened at 5-month follow-up without continued support
	Shoshani (2020) Positive psychology programme (Maytiv) Quasi-experimental school-based controlled trial	Southern Israel (near Gaza) Protracted armed conflict	2,228 adolescents (aged 11–15) attending four secondary schools in southern Israel, exposed to protracted armed conflict	Universal Positive psychology programme (Maytiv) targeting emotional regulation, wellbeing, compassion, meaning and social relationships	Delivered by teachers as a year-long wellbeing curriculum integrated into classes over 30 weeks, supported by structured training and fidelity monitoring; relational and positive psychology activities. Ecological levels: Micro: student–teacher relationships; peer interactions in classrooms; Meso: whole-school and curricular integration	Significant reductions in psychological symptoms (BSI-18) and increases in life satisfaction and positive affect relative to control; improvements also observed in compassion, trust, willingness to negotiate, and hope for peace	School-level randomisation with small number of schools (n=4) limits generalisability; reliance on self-report measures; absence of long-term follow-up; mechanisms of change inferred rather than formally tested

Pathway of support clusters	Study, programme and study design	Context (WHERE)	Population (WHO)	Approach, intervention and core components (WHAT)	Delivery processes and ecological level (HOW)	Reported outcomes (mental health and wellbeing)	Limitations reported by authors
2. School-based, non-education-delivered	El-Khodary and Samara (2020) Quasi-experimental pre-post study (no control group)	Gaza, Palestine Protracted armed conflict	572 students (aged 12–18) exposed to repeated war-related trauma	Universal Group-based psychosocial counselling activities (e.g. psychoeducation, storytelling, drawing, role play and psychodrama)	Delivered in schools by trained teachers, social workers and counsellors, following a 1-week training provided by Ministry of Education's counsellors, with indirect parental engagement through school counselling services and school-family communication Ecological levels: Micro: child-counsellor; peer group processes; Meso: school counselling services and school-family linkages	Reduction in PTSD prevalence and overall PTSD symptom severity from pre- to post-intervention; no significant change in anxiety; depressive symptoms increased for some adolescents	No control group; reliance on self-report measures; short follow-up period; challenging delivery conditions related to ongoing conflict and school disruption
	Mealouf et al. (2020) FRIENDS Cluster randomised controlled trial (RCT)	Greater Beirut, Lebanon	280 Grade 6 students (aged 11–13) of mixed gender in 10 private middle schools	Universal Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)-based FRIENDS youth resilience programme targeting emotional regulation, coping, cognitive restructuring, problem-solving and peer relationships through a structured, culturally adapted classroom curriculum	Delivered in school classrooms by trained mental health facilitators (non-teaching staff) using a manualised curriculum over 10 weekly sessions (45–50 minutes); facilitators received standardised FRIENDS training and supervision Ecological levels: Micro: child-facilitator interactions; peer group skill practice; Meso: classroom settings in schools	At post-intervention (~3 months), intervention group showed significant improvements in depressive symptoms (Mood and Feelings Questionnaire (MFQ) total) and emotional difficulties (Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) emotional) compared with controls; anxiety symptoms (Screen for Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED) total) improved for female students only, with no overall effect observed for males	Reliance on student self-reported outcome measures; absence of long-term follow-up beyond post-intervention assessment; reported lengthy assessments can increase rates of missing data or decrease participants willing to complete assessment package; sample drawn from a limited number of schools, which may constrain generalisability to other educational or crisis contexts

Pathway of support clusters	Study, programme and study design	Context (WHERE)	Population (WHO)	Approach, intervention and core components (WHAT)	Delivery processes and ecological level (HOW)	Reported outcomes (mental health and wellbeing)	Limitations reported by authors
	Barron et al. (2013) Teaching Recovery Programme RCT	Nabulus, West Bank, Palestine Protracted armed conflict	Students (aged 11–14) with elevated trauma symptoms; selected as 10 highest CRIES-13 scorers per class following school-wide screening (total n=140; intervention = 90; wait-list = 50)	Targeted Teaching Recovery Techniques (TRT): a group-based, trauma-focused CBT programme addressing PTSD symptoms (intrusion, avoidance, arousal) and traumatic grief through psychoeducation, coping strategies and loss-focused activities	Delivered in small groups over 5 consecutive weekly 90-minute sessions during school hours, facilitated by 2 trained school counsellors per group (1 lead, 1 observer). 20 counsellors received 3 days of TRT training from Children and War Foundation trainers on programme values, content and process, using modelling, experiential learning, reflection and feedback. Ecological levels: Micro: child-counsellor therapeutic interactions; peer group processes; Meso: school-based delivery following school-wide screening	Compared with wait-list controls, intervention students showed significant post-intervention reductions in PTSD, depression and traumatic grief, as well as reduced negative impact of trauma on school performance	Small sample and counsellor-level randomisation; baseline group differences (including 1 class with higher trauma exposure); clustering effects not fully accounted for; no follow-up beyond post-intervention; limited reliability of parent/teacher SDQ reports; reliance on retrospective fidelity reporting; and attrition of trained counsellors due to exposure to trauma (6 dropped out of 20 trained)
	El-Khani et al. (2021) Enhancing Teaching Recovery Techniques (TRT) and Parenting Skills RCT (3 arms)	Lebanon, Beqaa Valley (Syrian refugees displaced by conflict)	Syrian refugee children (aged 9–12) with elevated PTSD symptoms (CRIES-13) and one primary caregiver per child (n=119 randomly selected children and refugee families)	Targeted TRT: a group-based CBT trauma recovery programme for children (war-related trauma e.g. flashbacks, nightmares). Plus parallel structured parenting skills sessions addressing caregiver wellbeing and supportive parenting practices	Delivered through school-linked NGO education and psychosocial programmes for Syrian refugee families. Five 2-hour group sessions (TRT) delivered to groups of up to 15 children. Delivered alongside parallel caregiver sessions; enhanced arm included 3 additional caregiver sessions focused on parenting skills. Delivery facilitated by locally trained practitioners, with remote (UK) training and supervision. Ecological levels: Micro: child-facilitator and caregiver-child interactions; Meso: family-school-NGO interfaces in refugee education settings	Children in TRT and Parenting arm showed greater reductions in PTSD symptoms and emotional and behavioural difficulties than those receiving TRT alone or wait-list control. Caregivers in enhanced arm also reported significant reductions in depression, anxiety and stress, indicating benefits at both child and caregiver levels	Attrition and loss to follow-up across study arms, reflecting instability in refugee settings; specialist delivery and reliance on remote training and supervision limited opportunities for in-depth process evaluation; follow-up relatively short (12 weeks); implementation occurred in specific refugee and NGO-supported context, limiting generalisability; security and resource constraints restricted direct researcher observation of delivery fidelity

Pathway of support clusters	Study, programme and study design	Context (WHERE)	Population (WHO)	Approach, intervention and core components (WHAT)	Delivery processes and ecological level (HOW)	Reported outcomes (mental health and wellbeing)	Limitations reported by authors
	Yi et al. (2024) CBT-Art-Music Depression Intervention RCT (3 arms)	Northern Nigeria (Zamfara, Katsina, Yobe) Conflict-affected school settings	Children (aged 10–14) met criteria for depressive symptoms (Children's Depression Inventory (CDI))	Targeted Interactive media-based CBT, art and music therapy delivered in parallel arms; CBT focused on cognitive restructuring, coping skills and problem-solving; arts and music focused on emotional expression, regulation and engagement	Delivered through specialist-led, structured sessions via interactive television with in-person facilitation; 12 sessions over 6 weeks. Ecological levels: Micro: child-therapist interaction, individual engagement with therapeutic content; Meso: school settings as delivery sites (limited institutional integration)	Significant reductions in depressive symptoms across all intervention arms compared to control; CBT showed the largest effect and most sustained effect at post-test and 3-month follow-up; improvements in functional coping reported	Short follow-up period (3 months); delivered by highly trained therapists (PhD-level), limiting scalability; reliance on single outcome measure (CDI); intervention tested only in school-enrolled children in Northern Nigeria, limiting generalisability; integration into overstretched education and mental health systems not assessed
3. Education setting-based, non-education-delivered	Metzler et al. (2015) Child-friendly spaces (CFS) Evaluation of quasi-experimental impact studies	Ethiopia, Uganda, Burundi Crisis and conflict-affected settings	Displaced and conflict-affected children accessing CFS (primarily children aged 6–17)	Universal CFS providing structured play and recreational activities, group activities, routine, supervised safe spaces and opportunities for social connection and psychosocial support	Delivered through community-based CFS established in humanitarian settings, facilitated by trained local staff and volunteers. Open access to children within affected communities. Ecological levels: Micro: child-facilitator interactions; peer socialisation and play; Meso: community-based CFS linked to humanitarian (NGO) response structures	Modest short-term wellbeing and protection improvements. Small but positive short-term effects on children's psychosocial wellbeing and perceived protection; impacts varied considerably by context, age, gender and programme quality, with limited evidence of sustained or large effects across settings	Predominantly quasi-experimental designs; non-randomised comparison groups; variable exposure and programme quality; modest effect sizes; limited evidence of sustained longer-term impacts; challenges attributing outcomes solely to CFS due to contextual variation and implementation differences

Pathway of support clusters	Study, programme and study design	Context (WHERE)	Population (WHO)	Approach, intervention and core components (WHAT)	Delivery processes and ecological level (HOW)	Reported outcomes (mental health and wellbeing)	Limitations reported by authors
	O'Callaghan et al. (2015) Trauma-focused CBT vs CFS RCT (2 arms)	Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Mwenga, South Kivu) Youth club adjacent to school in conflict-affected rural area	War-affected adolescents (aged 14–17), with high trauma exposure recruited through NGO youth club. Former child soldiers included in broader war-affected sample	Targeted (i) Trauma-focused CBT: Group-based trauma-focused CBT targeting PTSD, internalising symptoms (depression/anxiety), and behavioural difficulties (SDQ) (ii) CFS: structured, non-trauma-focused psychosocial activities (creative, protective, recreational group activities in supervised safe space). Both including caregiver sessions on child wellbeing and protection	Delivered in small groups by trained, non-clinical local facilitators using manualised curricula. 9 group sessions (~1.5 hours each), delivered over 3 weeks, plus parallel caregiver sessions. Training, supervision and fidelity support provided; delivery occurred in community and school-adjacent spaces Ecological levels: Micro: child-facilitator therapeutic interactions; peer group processes. Meso: youth clubs and community-based educational spaces	Both improved, and CBT showed a larger PTSD reduction Compared with wait-list controls, both TF-CBT and CFS significantly reduced PTSD, internalising symptoms (depression/anxiety), and conduct problems. No improvement in pro-social behaviour was observed, with CFS showing a decline at 6-month follow-up	Relatively small sample size; short-term follow-up only; intensive training and supervision may limit scalability under routine conditions; reliance on self-report measures with variable reliability across some subscales; findings derived from highly supported NGO-delivered contexts, limiting generalisability
	Sadeh et al. (2008) Huggy Puppy Two quasi-experimental studies	Study I: Displacement camp during 2006 Israel–Lebanon war Study II: kindergartens in affected areas (Israel)	Study I: War-displaced children (aged 2–7) living with caregivers Study II: kindergarten children (aged 3–6)	Targeted Provision of a soft 'Huggy Puppy' comfort object; children encouraged to care for and interact with the puppy; emotional projection and soothing processes supported by parents/teachers	Delivered either through a one-off caregiver-guided activity during displacement (Study I), or through 3 brief sessions (~30 minute) delivered in kindergartens by trained staff (Study II) Ecological levels: Micro: child-caregiver and child-teacher interactions Meso: household and early-years educational settings (camp-based and kindergarten)	Short-term reductions in war-related stress reactions, including sleep disturbances, anxiety symptoms and behavioural stress responses, compared with comparison groups: improved emotional regulation and sense of security, with stronger effects observed when caregiver involvement was present and when children showed greater attachment to the Huggy Puppy	Small sample sizes (particularly in Study I); non-random assignment with baseline group differences; reliance on parent-reported outcomes; short follow-up period (3 weeks to 2 months) with a single follow-up assessment; context-specific findings related to acute war exposure

Appendix 2. Process-oriented approaches to supporting and evaluating children's mental health and wellbeing: HEART and Pashe Acchi

Study and programme	Context and scope (WHERE and WHO)	Core processes and pathways (WHAT)	Delivery and ecological levels (HOW)	Evaluation approach, rationale and limitations reported by authors
Hommel and Kaimal (2025) HEART (Healing and Education through the Arts)	WHERE: Implemented across multiple conflict-affected and humanitarian contexts (30 countries) Delivered in schools, CFS, youth centres and home/community settings WHO: Children and adolescents (aged 4–18); caregivers, families and in some contexts support for facilitator/teacher wellbeing as part of programme ecosystem	Structured yet flexible arts-based modalities (e.g. visual arts, storytelling, movement, drama) supporting emotional expression, meaning-making and relational connection Typically implemented over a school year, with adapted/condensed formats used in emergencies; adopted at scale in several contexts, including national-level integration in Georgia Includes attention to relationships around the child – caregivers/families and trusted adults – as well as explicit support for facilitator/teacher wellbeing to sustain emotionally supportive environments	Delivered to children through weekly sessions over extended period, often 6–9 months, following school year or other organised child-supporting setting, facilitated by trained facilitators (teachers, health workers, social workers, NGO staff) Adaptation to support adults, including parents and caregivers, through weekly or bi-weekly group sessions of 10–15 adult peers for at least 2–6 months (scheduling/duration customised by each local setting) Similar version to support adult staff including teachers, health workers, social workers and NGO staff members Operates across micro (child–peer/facilitator interactions and caregiver relationships), meso (schools, families, community/youth/CFS structures) and macro levels (training infrastructures, system uptake, policy alignment). Includes versions tailored to routine school-year delivery and to acute emergency contexts	HEART documented through qualitative, quasi-experimental and mixed-methods programme evaluations over more than a decade. Several standardised tools and evaluation approaches proved insufficiently culturally appropriate, meaningful or feasible across diverse settings, with early evaluations relying on heterogeneous tools with uneven utility. In response, evaluation practices shifted toward participatory, locally adaptable qualitative and quantitative methods (including focus group discussions and key informant interviews) that prioritised cultural legitimacy, participant voice and process understanding. As a result, findings are context specific and rich in insight into pathways and experiences of change, but do not support consistent causal attribution, and some evaluation choices shaped by cost and feasibility constraints
Mariam and Ahmad (2023) Pashe Achhi 'Beside you' Caregiver-centred, culturally grounded psychosocial support in crisis	WHERE: Bangladesh, during COVID-19 crisis; community and home-based contexts under lockdown and service disruption, including Rohingya and host communities WHO: Primary caregivers (especially mothers) of young children; children engaged indirectly through caregiver–child relationships	Low-intensity, caregiver-centred psychosocial support grounded in locally meaningful concepts of distress and wellbeing (e.g. oshanti, 'lack of mental peace'). Focused on strengthening everyday caregiving practices and relational processes (e.g. emotional attunement, play, routines, storytelling, caregiver reflection) rather than clinical treatment or symptom reduction	Delivered by trained programme facilitators (non-specialist BRAC staff) through flexible, primarily remote and community-linked engagement (e.g. phone-based conversations) Operated mainly at micro (caregiver–child interaction) and meso (community support structures) levels; no specialist mental health delivery or school-based platform, instead prioritising accessibility, cultural relevance and relational support within familiar environments	Mariam and Ahmad (2023) report that plans for an RCT were not pursued on ethical and contextual grounds, arguing that withholding support from highly vulnerable participants during crisis conditions was neither appropriate nor aligned with trauma-informed and participatory principles. The evaluation instead prioritised qualitative, process-oriented and reflective approaches to learning, generating rich contextual insight while limiting claims about causal impact or generalisability

What evidence-based interventions contribute to violence reduction and improved safety in schools in conflict and crisis settings?



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Abstract

This study identifies 16 school safety interventions in conflict and crisis contexts. These include mental health and psychosocial support, approaches based on socio-emotional learning principles, social norms change programmes and interventions focused on engaging communities and empowering children to recognise abuse. We identify limitations in the quality of study designs as well as in the effectiveness, sustainability and cost-effectiveness of the interventions examined. Key challenges include inadequate or absent measurement of safety outcomes, failure to address the root causes of violence and stress factors, and limited inclusion of vulnerable groups. While several interventions improve wellbeing and other intended outcomes, few are shown to be effective in reducing levels of violence and improving safety. There is a need for impact evaluation research that measures violence using validated tools and examines the mechanisms of action of interventions, including well-articulated goals and hypothesised pathways for improving school safety and reducing violence.

Key Words

school safety, effectiveness, interventions, violence, conflict

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Background

Violence against children (VAC) is a global public health concern, particularly prevalent in areas of conflict and protracted crisis (Pillay, 2024). Globally, an estimated 50 percent of children experience some form of physical, sexual or emotional violence every year (Hillis *et al.*, 2016). Active and protracted armed conflicts not only hinder education provision and child protection services and mechanisms (ECW 2023; UNHCR 2024) but also exacerbate pre-existing risk factors for VAC (Stark and Landis 2016). Children in conflict-affected (CAC) settings are at higher risk of violence due to exposure to violent attacks on schools (Bertoni *et al.*, 2019) and other traumatic events, increased mental health distress, widespread insecurity, and changes in household composition and gender norms (Arega, 2023; Stark and Landis, 2016). These conflict-related stressors are likely to exacerbate existing norms that condone and normalise violence, increasing the risk of VAC not only within the household, but also in schools, where it can be perpetrated by teachers, staff and peers (Fletcher, Gitter and Wilhelm, 2017; Stark and Landis, 2016). Preventing and responding to VAC is critical for children's health, wellbeing and development into functioning adults (Le Rose, 2016).

It is estimated that around 224 million school-aged children worldwide are affected by conflict and crisis (ECW, 2023); while the prevalence of school-based violence in these contexts is unknown, it is likely to be high. Schools hold a unique position of influence and can contribute to conflict, manipulation of students and radicalisation or act as drivers of safety and peacebuilding (GCPEA, 2024; Duncan and Cardozo, 2017). Despite the heightened risk of school-based violence in CAC settings, schools remain an important avenue for protection, prevention and response and one of the few environments where children can rebuild a sense of normality and recover from trauma. Schools offer a unique platform to reach large numbers of children simultaneously and to implement systemic interventions given the convergence of interests among pupils, teachers, parents, school administrators and community stakeholders (Naker, 2017; Know Violence in Childhood, 2017). Schools, therefore, offer a potential cost-effective opportunity to mitigate the effects of violence and trauma experienced elsewhere (Global Education Cluster

2018; Greco *et al.* 2018). In this paper, we examine the role of schools in preventing and responding to interpersonal violence in CAC contexts.

Schools can help protect children in their day-to-day lives while also building social foundations toward long-term goals of sustainable development and peace (Pherali, 2022; Betancourt *et al.*, 2013). However, schools must be safe to ensure that children attend regularly, learn and thrive (Sommers and Nasrallah, 2024; Mayer, Nickerson and Jimerson, 2021). Peer-to-peer violence and bullying affect children's educational outcomes and wellbeing and are important mental and public health concerns. There is evidence of successful whole-school interventions in the global North addressing these forms of violence (Sivaraman, Nye and Bowes, 2019). Teacher violence has been shown to be pervasive and have severe consequences for children's health and wellbeing, yet remains under-researched (Baumgarten, Simmonds and Mason-Jones, 2022). In CAC settings, there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of anti-bullying and anti-corporal punishment interventions (Know Violence in Childhood, 2017). Importantly, one in ten children globally has a disability and children with disabilities are twice as likely to experience violence in schools, compared to their peers; however, few violence prevention interventions have directly targeted children with disabilities (Eldred *et al.*, 2025).

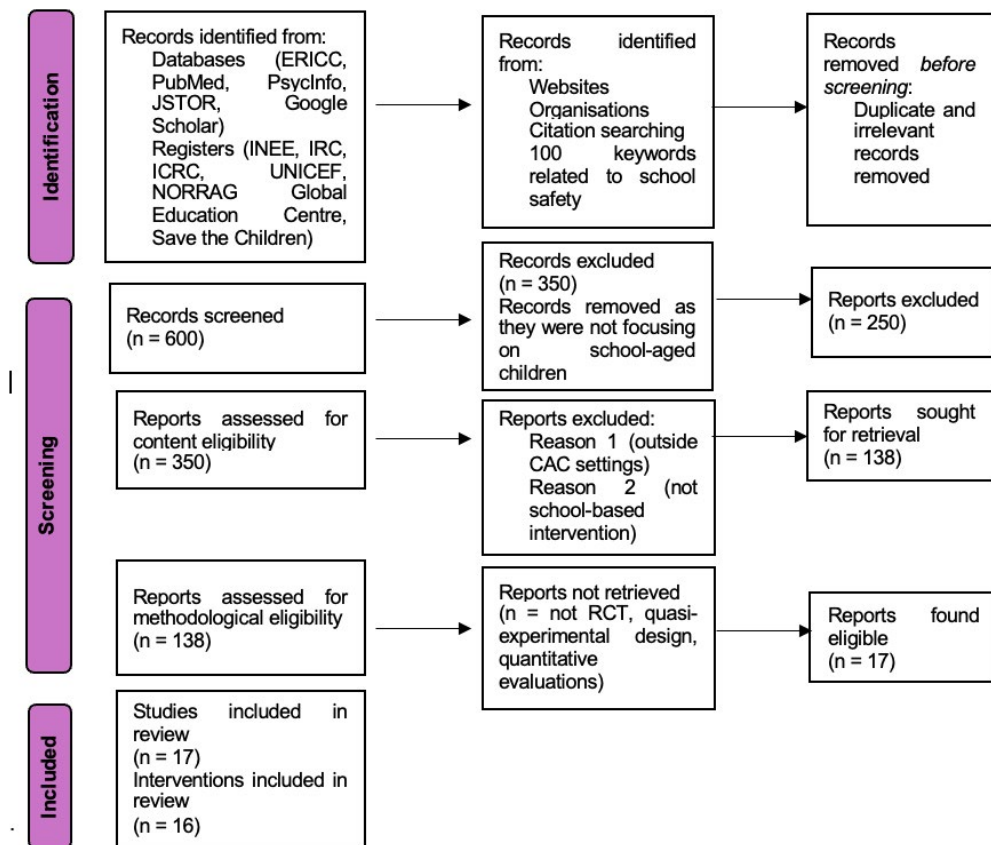
While there is limited but growing evidence on the effectiveness of school-based interventions globally, few have been tested in CAC settings. Furthermore, little is known about the essential components and critical mechanisms of impact of successful and cost-effective interventions (Harte and Barry, 2024). This lack of evidence precludes practitioners' and policymakers' ability to develop and adapt effective programmes to prevent and respond to violence in schools (Fabbri *et al.*, 2023). This study synthesises the research evidence on education interventions and approaches that have demonstrated promising impacts on school safety in CAC contexts. It highlights what works, how it works for children affected by conflict and complements previous reviews of school-based interventions (Mathews *et al.*, 2021).

Methods

This study is a scoping review of academic and practitioner sources published between 2004 and 2024. We first searched 100 keywords related to school safety using Boolean operators such as AND, OR and NOT (e.g. violence, intimidation, conflict, abuse, maltreatment, prevention, protection and reconciliation) through a multi-disciplinary database generated by the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) project. Then we identified additional studies and reports via academic databases (PubMed, PsycInfo, JSTOR and Google Scholar) and education in emergencies repositories (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), Education and Conflict Review, NORRAG Global Education Centre, International Rescue Committee (IRC), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), UNICEF and Save the Children).

We initially identified 250 relevant articles through these searches. After data extraction, studies were screened and only school-based interventions in CAC contexts (Falk *et al.*, 2024) that included school safety in their theory of change were retained, leading to a sample of 138 articles and reports. These were further screened for inclusion based on study design, with only effectiveness studies that aimed to identify the causal impact of interventions (e.g. randomised controlled trials (RCTs), quasi-experimental designs) included (Diazgranados, Guimond and Annan, 2026). We extracted only the relevant references from the systematic reviews identified because none focused on school safety in CAC settings. In the end, 17 studies evaluating 16 interventions were included in the review: nine RCTs, three quasi-experimental designs and five quantitative evaluations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Literature review diagram



Adapted from PRISMA 2020 framework. Page, M.J. *et al.* (2021) 'The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews', *BMJ*, 372, n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>.

This review offers a first synthesis of an underexplored body of literature and extends the evidence base by including grey literature alongside academic articles. Yet it also has limitations: the searches were conducted in English, potentially excluding relevant studies from non-English-speaking regions, particularly those in CAC settings. While keywords were chosen to capture broad themes of violence and safety in schools, the searches may have missed studies focusing on specific ethnic groups, countries, conflicts or intervention types. Furthermore, while we acknowledge that not all studies offer the same level of confidence in the results presented due to differences in study designs and rigour of analyses, we did not conduct a formal quality appraisal as part of this review.

Below, we outline the main intervention approaches assessed in the studies included in the review, including examples from interventions that appeared most promising. We then discuss these interventions using the ERICC framework to examine how school safety is conceptualised and operationalised under

the four domains of access, quality, continuity and coherence (Kim *et al.*, 2026). We finally identify the current gaps and propose recommendations for future research.

Findings

We found a relatively small body of literature on school-based violence prevention in CAC settings; where evidence does exist, the focus on school safety is only marginal. Very few interventions aimed to reduce levels of violence and make school environments safer while also measuring violence outcomes (Fabbri *et al.*, 2021; Corboz *et al.*, 2019; Lam *et al.*, 2018; Namy *et al.*, 2014). Most programmes focused on improving child educational outcomes or mental health and conceptualised safety as either a precondition or an enabler, and only one study measured violence, making it difficult to assess their effectiveness (Torrente *et al.*, 2019). We present a summary of included interventions in Table 1.

Table 1. Included interventions

Type of intervention	Context	Number of studies
Teacher training programmes based on socio-emotional learning (SEL) (different iterations of the Healing Classrooms approach)	Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Niger, Lebanon	5
SEL and mindfulness based programme for students	Uganda	1
Cognitive behavioural therapy-based approaches for students and/or teachers	Refugee camp in Tanzania, Nepal, Gaza	3
Teacher-mediated interventions to include mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in teaching practices	Post-earthquake Nepal, Palestine, Gaza and the West Bank	3
Peacebuilding interventions based on gender equality and non-violent culture	Balkans, Afghanistan	2
Personal safety awareness for students	Sri Lanka	1
Community-based capacity building and grants to schools	South Sudan	1

While all the interventions included school safety as one of their goals, only four explicitly addressed violence as part of the intervention package and/or included explicit components and mechanisms to reduce forms of school-based violence. While this review did not focus on cost analyses, it is worth noting that no study included any information on cost efficiency or cost effectiveness of the intervention assessed.

In the following sections, we synthesise evidence on these interventions and their contribution to school safety. We consider not only their quality and ability to achieve their stated goals, but also programmatic continuity, coherence and coordination with other stakeholders, and the extent to which they ensured equitable access for diverse children. We conclude by discussing the key implications of these findings for policymakers and researchers seeking to strengthen evidence-based interventions aimed at improving school safety in CAC settings.

MHPSS interventions

School-based mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programmes generally focus on supporting children to cope with adversity, improve wellbeing, and restore a sense of normalcy. Interventions include various strategies such as mindfulness, peer support and targeted approaches like cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) to help students manage stress by challenging irrational thoughts.

We included three school-based MHPSS interventions, two of which were implemented in Palestine and one in Nepal. All three were teacher-mediated interventions aimed at improving students' social functioning, coping skills and mental health. Two were not found to be effective across multiple outcomes, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and aggressive and prosocial behaviours (Dhital *et al.*, 2019; Peltonen *et al.*, 2012). However, one – the Better Learning Programme – led to improvements in perceptions of safety and wellbeing (Shah, 2017). None of these studies measured safety outcomes.

A handful of interventions used CBT principles to trigger change in either the teachers' or the students' thought processes with the aim of supporting wellbeing and improving mental health – with mixed results in both violence and mental health outcomes.

One was a peer-guided teacher training programme that aimed to reduce use of corporal punishment through alternative discipline and positive classroom management practices. While improvements in positive practices were observed, the intervention was not found effective in reducing violence due to limited engagement of other school actors and failure to address social norms promoting corporal punishment (Fabbri *et al.*, 2021). Other CBT-inspired programmes targeted students to mitigate the effects of trauma and violence. One intervention implemented among students affected by conflict in Nepal led to minor improvements in prosocial behaviours, resilience and reduced aggression among subgroups of children (Jordans *et al.*, 2010). Another CBT-based counselling intervention implemented in Gaza offered promise in lowering PTSD symptoms but failed to measure safety-related outcomes (El-Khodary and Samara, 2020).

Socio-emotional learning (SEL)

SEL interventions are programmes designed to teach students social and emotional skills (such as self-awareness, emotional regulation and conflict resolution) to foster positive relationships and academic success. The SEL interventions included in this review generally conceptualised school safety as an enabling factor and potential pathway through which interventions contribute to their intended outcomes. Nearly all centred on the Healing Classrooms approach to improve the climate and culture of the school and increase children's sense of safety and security, and found mixed effects on intended outcomes (Brown *et al.*, 2017; Kim *et al.*, 2023; Tubbs Dolan *et al.*, 2022; Torrente *et al.*, 2019; Aber *et al.*, 2017). The theory behind the Healing Classrooms approach posits that better safe and nurturing school environments would in turn lead to improved academic performance. Adaptations of this model were tested in DRC, Niger and Lebanon and while these programmes have shown promise in supporting better student performance in reading and maths in some contexts, their effects on other outcomes including socio-emotional skills (including relationship and social skills and conflict resolution competencies) and mental health were less consistent or not available. One study measured safety as an outcome, in the form of peer victimisation, but found no effect of the intervention (Torrente *et al.*, 2019). An alternative SEL approach

based on mindfulness practice was proven effective in promoting children's social emotional competence and wellbeing but the study did not measure safety outcomes.

Child awareness, skills-building and norms change approaches

The review also covered several interventions that included elements of child awareness and upskilling as well as the promotion of changes in norms around violence. One was a whole-school intervention aimed at preventing school-based violence in Afghanistan that involved a wide range of activities targeted at multiple stakeholders within and outside the school with a focus on improving gender norms (Corboz *et al.*, 2019). The programme was effective at reducing both peer violence and corporal punishment and at improving gender attitudes and non-violence attitudes. Another programme focused on social norms change, but with a much more targeted approach that focused on adolescent boys in post-conflict settings in the Balkans. This led to improvements in gender-equitable attitudes, non-violent intentions, and wellbeing and health knowledge (Namy *et al.*, 2014). One programme in Sri Lanka that aimed to increase child knowledge and ability to recognise and report violence increased perceived child safety in schools and the community (Lam *et al.*, 2018). Finally, a programme in South Sudan supported community engagement in schools' creation of action plans for improving safety; however, whether those plans were implemented was not assessed, and no outcomes at the student or school level were measured. Still, headteachers reported improvement in safety with implementation of school development plans (Ginsburg *et al.*, 2017).

Discussion

This review demonstrates that limited research has focused on school safety in CAC settings with intervention approaches ranging from teacher-only or pupil-only programmes to whole-school models that involve a variety of school stakeholders. The most common intervention approaches that included school safety and violence prevention in their theoretical models were SEL programming and MHPSS-focused interventions; however, few studies among these explicitly addressed drivers of violence

or measured violence outcomes. Only three studies had the primary objective of preventing and reducing forms of school-based violence and measured violence outcomes or perceptions of safety (Fabbri *et al.*, 2021; Corboz *et al.*, 2019; Lam *et al.*, 2018).

Overall, few interventions were shown to be effective in reducing school-based violence or in improving outcomes plausibly linked to lower violence and improved safety (e.g. reducing aggressive behaviours and improving prosocial skills, improving attitudes and acceptability of violence, improving teaching practices) (Purgato *et al.*, 2018). The successful programmes were either complex, multi-layered interventions involving a large number of activities targeted at different stakeholders (Corboz *et al.*, 2019) with limited opportunities for adaptation or replication, or were not rigorously evaluated and/or did not measure final violence outcomes (Lam *et al.*, 2018; Shah, 2017).

Several interventions reviewed emphasised the role of schools as environments where pupils, teachers and other staff can learn and adopt prosocial behaviours and build skills to prevent violence within the school and the community. This is a central element of the ERICC framework (Kim *et al.*, 2026), which conceptualises education systems in conflict and crisis as multi-dimensional ecosystems. In the framework, safe school environments can be linked to four key drivers for children's learning and development: access, quality, continuity and coherence. By strengthening school climate, promoting positive relationships and reducing violence, interventions that improve school safety can enhance the quality and inclusiveness of learning experiences for different children. They may also support access and continuity of participation while fostering coherence between school-based practices and broader education system policies.

Many interventions stated that they aimed to achieve better learning environments and education outcomes through improved safety; however, they rarely provided clear theoretical and empirical links between violence and education access and quality outcomes. Safety was generally conceptualised as an enabler to better school climate and academic achievement, but the literature rarely acknowledged school violence as a potential barrier that can discourage children from attending and remaining in school and most studies did not measure outcomes

such as attendance and retention. SEL interventions and some of the teacher training-based programmes could be classified as quality improvement efforts; however, most studies and intervention theories did not discuss safety in schools as a quality attribute of good school environments. Most MHPSS interventions seemed to use schools as a convenient delivery platform to reach the intended population of school-aged children rather than a key mechanism for the intervention's effectiveness.

Considerations around continuity and coherence were almost non-existent in the literature included in the review. Most interventions did not discuss strategies or opportunities to sustain outcomes through disruption (e.g., displacement, conflict escalation, school closures). This is particularly critical in interventions that focus on child awareness and skills-building interventions as they require consistent reporting and case management mechanisms to sustain change (Bhatia *et al.*, 2022). In terms of coherence, while several of the interventions were implemented in coordination or direct partnerships with local government structures, most appear to have been implemented in isolation rather than as part of system-strengthening approaches or in collaboration with other sectors such as child protection and health services.

Interventions shown to be impactful in improving school safety most often took a holistic, multilevel approach that required collaboration across bodies responsible for the children and involved institutional, community and school staff. This approach was reported to be instrumental in improving safety measures, ensuring safe reporting of violence, establishing accountability mechanisms, and helping change norms and attitudes around VAC (Fabbri *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, interventions should begin with a well-defined baseline and articulated goals grounded in a robust theory of change for improving school safety alongside other outcomes (Sabates *et al.*, 2020; Astor *et al.*, 2010). These goals must be paired with evaluation tools designed to measure progress towards school safety and violence reduction, and capture the long-term effects of these interventions.

Mental health interventions, which are often prioritised in CAC settings, might effectively improve child wellbeing, but their contribution to violence reduction remains unclear. A wide body of literature

is available on school-based MHPSS interventions, however very few have explicitly focused on improving safety (Lasater *et al.*, 2022). For such interventions to reduce VAC, focusing on behavioural change and prosocial attitudes seems promising; however, more rigorous evidence is needed (Bangpan *et al.*, 2024).

Programmes emphasising prosocial behaviours and emotional resilience, and those focusing on children's perceptions of hope and safety, have shown modest success in improving peer interactions and acting as a protective factor against the adverse effects of violence but require intentional cultivation and long-term planning (Burde and King, 2023; Wanjiru, 2018). More research on the causal chains between mental health, prosocial behaviour and violence reduction is necessary to understand the implementation strategies and key mechanisms of interventions that can create change under these circumstances (Corboz *et al.*, 2019; Brown *et al.*, 2017).

Interventions designed to promote safety and reduce violence should centre these goals and ensure accessibility for all children, particularly those from disadvantaged or marginalised backgrounds, and be coordinated with other stakeholders (INEE, 2021; Ozcelik, 2025). Children with disabilities, displaced children and children with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) face increased risk of school-based violence. Such violence often stems from discrimination and prejudice related to gender and social norms. These intersecting forms of exclusion place affected children in situations of acute vulnerability, exposing them to heightened risks of harm and leading to profound experiences of marginalisation and social isolation. Therefore, it is paramount that violence-reduction objectives and methodologies are integrated into interventions, with deliberate efforts to address social norms and promote the inclusion of vulnerable groups of children, as well as working on peer violence, gang involvement and recruitment in war efforts (Parkes *et al.*, 2016). Importantly, interventions aimed at reducing and preventing violence should strive to measure their effectiveness in reducing violence outcomes. While sensitive and challenging, questions about children's experiences of violence should be included in research instruments or interviews to understand the children's perceptions

of safety while putting robust safeguarding and referral mechanisms in place (Wessells and Kostelny, 2021). Evidence from several studies demonstrates that it is possible to collect reliable data on VAC safely and ethically, even in difficult contexts (Bangpan *et al.*, 2024; Bhatia *et al.*, 2022; Devries *et al.*, 2016).

Overall, this study demonstrates that a significant evidence gap persists in the humanitarian sector regarding the impact that education interventions have on school safety, pointing out the urgent need for more policy-relevant and actionable research knowledge in this area. Cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness analyses should be included in intervention assessments to ensure they constitute sound investments and offer viable opportunities for sustainability and scale up (Diazgranados, Guimond and Annan, 2026; INEE, 2021). There is a need for the global community to invest in tools to measure VAC according to standardised protocols, ensuring safety and predefined, clarified outcomes for the intervention, such as improved safety and reduction of incidents of violence. It is also paramount to define the target audience of the intervention – teachers, children or the community – to develop a sound underlying theory of change.

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Declaration of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Appendix 1. Final reviewed interventions

Reference	Population targeted by intervention	Context	Intervention aim	Intervention content	Outcomes
Aber et al., 2017	Teachers in primary schools	Democratic Republic of the Congo	Learning to Read in a Healing Classroom: enhance teachers' motivation and performance and promote student well-being and academic learning. The overall goal is to change the climate and culture of the school in a way that increases children's sense of safety and security and ultimately creates more child-friendly learning environments.	Integrated teacher resource materials (teacher training) and school-based teacher learning circles designed to provide teachers with opportunities to exchange information, collaborate, problem solve and support and motivate one another in learning and implementing new strategies, while nurturing collegiality and an increased sense of professional self-worth (weekly grade-level meetings led by teachers, monthly school-level meetings led by school directors, and quarterly school cluster meetings led by cluster coordinators or master teacher trainers).	Safety outcomes: student reported experiences of peer victimisation. Other outcomes: reading and maths skills, student perceptions of support from teachers, perceptions about the learning environment, and mental health.
Brown et al., 2017	Teachers and students in primary schools	Niger	Tutoring in a Healing Classroom	Tutoring teachers receive five days of in-service training on literacy and numeracy curricula infused with universal socio-emotional learning principles, ongoing support in the form of monthly peer support groups (Teacher Learning Circles), and aligned one-on-one pedagogical coaching by the regional ministry of education. The Healing Classroom approach is integrated by Brain Games activities, focused on promoting children's executive functions, and mindfulness activities, focused on improving emotion and stress regulation. These skill-targeted activities are implemented three times per tutoring session: at the beginning and end, and during the transition from literacy to maths instruction (total 30 min per day, 90 min per week).	Safety outcomes: not measured. Other outcomes: literacy and numeracy and school grades.
Corboz et al., 2019	Children and teachers in secondary schools, parents, community and religious leaders, civil society organisations and influential women (government officials and human rights activists)	Afghanistan	Help the Afghan Children (HTAC) peace education: reduce fighting and aggressive behaviours among students, increase use of non-violence conflict resolution, improve gender norms and educate women about their rights.	Range of activities including peace education curriculum, teacher training, community capacity building, peace committees and radio messaging. Teachers participate in a five-day training programme on how to deliver the peace education curriculum, including a background to peace building and conflict resolution through peace education, the content of the curriculum, how to use the teacher instruction manual with students. The peace education curriculum consists of 99 35-minute lessons designed to be delivered to students over three years.	Safety outcomes: student-reported experiences of peer violence victimisation, peer violence perpetration, and corporal punishment by teachers at school. Other outcomes: school performance (absence and learning achievement), gender attitudes and attitudes towards corporal punishment.

Reference	Population targeted by intervention	Context	Intervention aim	Intervention content	Outcomes
Dhital et al., 2019	Students (and teachers as facilitators) in primary schools	Nepal	Teacher-mediated school-based intervention: instill hope and improve mental health among adolescents in a post-earthquake situation.	Teachers participate in a two-day training programme with a clinical psychologist (eight sessions, with one to two hours for each session). The training enables teachers to apply different components of psycho-social support in their daily classroom activities.	Safety outcomes: not measured. Other outcomes: student-reported post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, depression symptoms and hope.
El-Khodary and Samara, 2020	Students	Gaza Strip	Psychosocial support programme: assist students to stabilise themselves and feel safe; reduce the level of specific psychological symptoms among children who are exposed to ongoing war trauma and accordingly improve the level of functioning.	Psychosocial support carried out over one week (five continuous days, four hours per day). It consists of specific cognitive behavioural techniques, including psychoeducation and speaking about past traumatic experiences with the group, expressive elements, such as structural movements (e.g., physical exercises), cooperative games, and drama.	Safety outcomes: not measured. Other outcomes: student-reported post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, anxiety and depression.
Fabrizi et al., 2021	Teachers in primary and secondary schools	Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, Tanzania	EmpaTeach: reduce and prevent teachers' use of corporal punishment in the classroom.	Behaviourally informed, self-guided teacher training focused on empathy-building exercises and on group work to learn and practice self-regulation techniques, strategies to promote well-being, positive disciplinary methods, and classroom management strategies.	Safety outcomes: student-reported experience of past-week physical violence from teachers and school staff, and student-reported experience of past-week emotional violence from teachers and school staff. Other outcomes: student depressive symptoms and student-reported school attendance.
Ginsburg et al., 2017	Communities and parent-teacher associations	South Sudan	Room to Learn: encourage and enable community participation in improving education access, quality and safety.	In-kind grants and one capacity building workshop for parents and teachers as well as women, youth and other community members to promote participation in the development and implementation of action plans for school improvement.	Safety outcomes: not measured. Other outcomes: number and content of school development plans and grant proposals developed.
Jordans et al., 2010	Students 11 to 14 years	Nepal	Classroom-Based Intervention: combines specific techniques to (1) reduce psychosocial problems and risk of maladaptation and (2) facilitate resilience and empowerment through enhancing coping, prosocial behaviour and hope.	Five-week (three sessions per week) manualised group intervention based on concepts from creative expressive and experiential therapy, cooperative play and cognitive behavioural therapy. Programme delivered by trained lay counsellors, combining therapeutic approaches (cognitive behavioural therapy, psycho education, drama and trauma processing).	Safety outcomes: not measured. Other outcomes: psychological difficulties, positive aspects of wellbeing, and levels of symptomatology. Positive aspects of wellbeing were included as possible antecedents of post-traumatic adaptation or resilience.

Reference	Population targeted by intervention	Context	Intervention aim	Intervention content	Outcomes
Kim et al., 2023	Students in primary schools	Syrian refugees in Lebanon	5CSEL: skill-targeted SEL curriculum including five components targeting the development of (1) executive function, (2) emotion regulation, (3) positive social skills, (4) conflict resolution, and (5) perseverance. The 5CSEL curriculum consists of 30-minute daily standalone lessons embedded in a nonformal remedial education programme for Syrian refugee children: Tutoring in a Healing Classroom (HCT).	30-minute teacher-led daily lessons embedded in a nonformal remedial education programme for Syrian refugee children (HCT). Specific learning objectives guide each lesson to build focal competencies explicitly targeted through a sequence of instruction, activities and discussion. Compared to Learning in a Healing Classroom, this curriculum provides more comprehensive support and coverage for multiple domains of SEL and utilises multiple delivery modalities to build targeted skills.	Safety outcomes: not measured. Other outcomes: proximal social-emotional outcomes (executive function, emotional regulation, perseverance, positive social skills, conflict resolution) and distal academic and mental health and wellbeing outcomes.
Lam et al., 2018	Primary school students and teachers	Sri Lanka	Be Safe: Personal safety, school-based programme using simple messages and child-friendly learning resources to introduce young children to the concepts of safe and unsafe touching, children's rights, adult's responsibilities to protect children from harm, and safe and supportive friendships.	Guidelines for educators, information for parents, and templates and tools to help schools communicate with parents and assist administrators to implement Be Safe. The resources used by teachers aim to build the capacity and skills of children. The lesson cards take around 20–30 minutes to teach and are delivered in all classrooms over a period of 10–12 weeks. The teacher adapts the sessions as appropriate to consider the needs of different ages and cultural backgrounds of children.	Safety outcomes: parents reported a sense of safety in school. Other outcomes: attitudes towards corporal punishment.
Matsuba et al., 2021	Students in primary schools	Northern Uganda	MindUP: social and emotional learning (SEL) mindfulness-based programme to foster self-awareness, self-management and social awareness and change the ecology of the classroom environment to one in which belonging, caring, collaboration and understanding others is emphasised.	Fifteen 45-minute lessons taught once a week. Each lesson incorporates mindfulness practices with activity-based opportunities to learn about the brain, understand how thoughts and feelings affect actions, and strategies to become caring people. The Core Practices (done for three minutes three times a day) consist of focusing on one's breathing and attentive listening to a resonant sound.	Safety outcomes: not measured. Other outcomes: students reported depression symptoms, prosocial behaviours, emotional support and friendships, empathetic concern.
Namy et al., 2014	Male students in vocational high schools	Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo and Serbia)	Young Men Initiative: promotes a lifestyle that prioritises good health, nonviolence and gender equality by helping male youths to overcome a culture of violence and align themselves to a more peaceful, equitable and healthy masculinity.	Eight to ten hour-long sessions, led by trained facilitators integrated into the regular class schedule over the academic year. Focus on four key programme areas: (1) gender attitudes; (2) violence; (3) sex, health and wellbeing; and (4) alcohol and drug use. The programme includes an optional residential retreat where facilitators lead additional sessions and team-building activities. In addition, the programme includes a "Be A Man" lifestyle campaign, intended to reinforce key messages and foster change at the school level and beyond.	Safety outcomes: student-reported peer violence and intimate partner violence. Other outcomes: attitudes about men and women, attitudes towards interpersonal violence, knowledge of sex, health and wellbeing, drug and alcohol use.

Reference	Population targeted by intervention	Context	Intervention aim	Intervention content	Outcomes
Peltonen et al., 2012	Students	Gaza Strip	School Mediation Intervention: children are active participants and responsible actors in improving their peer relationships, solving moral problems, and protecting each other; the intervention expects teachers, parents and school administrations to facilitate pupils' optimal activity.	Activities focused on problem solving, conflict resolution and dialogue skills, and at enhancing mental health through caring for peers and preventing disruptive and aggressive behaviour. Older students act as responsible school mediators, and teachers are supervisors.	Safety outcomes: not measured. Other outcomes: student-reported decreased post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, depression, psychological distress, and quality of friendship, prosocial behaviour and aggressiveness.
Shah, 2017	Students	Gaza and West Bank	Better Learning Programme: improve learning conditions for children and adolescents exposed to war and conflict.	Two components: one is administered by the teacher in the classroom to all pupils and provides psycho-education and coping skills; the second is implemented by trained counsellors and targets pupils who report nightmares and sleep disturbances, linked to a conflict inflicted trauma incidence, and uses a series of structured group and individual sessions to provide them with strategies for calming themselves and improving self-regulation.	Safety outcomes: not measured. Other outcomes: parent-reported wellbeing, feelings of safety in school and life satisfaction.
Tubbs Dolan et al., 2022	Students and teachers	Syrian refugees in Lebanon	Tutoring in a Healing Classroom: create safe and supportive learning environments and promote social and emotional skills.	Teachers receive a five-day training programme on how to integrate core socio-emotional learning principles (intellectually stimulating environment, sense of self-worth, sense of belonging, sense of self-control, and positive social relationships) into instruction through classroom management, critical thinking and positive pedagogy. Teachers deliver sessions to students (10-minute introduction; 40-minute blocks of instruction in Arabic, maths and a second language broken up by two 10-minute breaks; 10-minute wrap-up). For the group receiving the intervention plus mindfulness programme: the introduction and two subject matter breaks are replaced by three 10-minute periods of targeted mindfulness activities (90 minutes per week). For each mindfulness session, teachers choose from a menu of activities they deem appropriate at the time of the session.	Safety outcomes: not measured. Other outcomes: literacy and numeracy skills, perception of school environment, school stress and reactivity, mental health and emotional regulation.
Torrente et al., 2019	Students and teachers	Democratic Republic of the Congo	Learning in a Healing Classroom: improve children's maths and literacy skills while providing foundational social-emotional support, such as a safe and supportive classroom environment, for primary school-aged children in conflict- and crisis-affected settings. Specifically, it mitigates the negative effects of violence by promoting students' feelings of safety, predictability and attachment to their teachers.	Teachers and school staff participate in intensive 10-day training, followed by ongoing training throughout the school year.	Safety outcomes: peer victimisation. Other outcomes: mental health problems, reading and maths performance.

Play, wellbeing and displacement: A scoping review of implementing play opportunities in conflict-affected and crisis settings



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Abstract

Amid escalating global conflict and increasingly protracted displacement, the wellbeing of displaced children is a critical concern. One of the few reliable ways to maintain their wellbeing is play, but this is often sidelined in education in emergencies (EiE) responses. While substantial attention has been given to play-based learning initiatives, far less attention has been paid to access to recreational play. By synthesising 20 studies, this review identifies six interdependent aspects that support children's wellbeing and socio-emotional development: safe play environments, adequate time for play, opportunities to meet peers, access to nature, trained adult facilitators, and opportunities for agency and choice. Guided by Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework and PRISMA-ScR standards, the review highlights structural, cultural and logistical barriers that constrain children's play opportunities and reveals significant gaps in research and practice. The findings underscore the need for child-led, contextually grounded recreational play opportunities to be embedded within humanitarian and EiE responses.

Key Words:

play, displacement, wellbeing, socio-emotional development

Introduction

A child arriving at a refugee camp rarely brings anything more than a change of clothes. What they do bring is a developing mind already working to make sense of the upheaval they have been through. Research shows that certain 'protective factors' help children buffer such shocks: secure relationships, positive self-beliefs, cognitive skills and self-regulation, and a sense of agency (Masten and Narayan, 2012; Betancourt and Khan, 2008; Rutter, 1985). Play is a common thread through these factors. It offers moments of enjoyment, opportunities to practise self-regulation, chances to form friendships, and daily scope to exercise choice and agency. In crisis, these are not luxuries but mechanisms that reduce the likelihood of later psychological harm (Bürgin *et al.*, 2022).

Existing research and practice in education in emergencies (EiE) – such as the LEGO Foundation's PlayMatters programme and NYU's *Ahlan Simsim* initiative, developed in partnership with the International Rescue Committee and Sesame Workshop – frequently conceptualise play primarily through the lens of play-based learning. This is where play functions as a strategy to make educational or psychosocial activities more engaging in order to enhance outcomes. However, this paper adopts a different standpoint. It focuses solely on recreational, unstructured play: play as a lived experience of joy, agency and presence in the moment. This review positions recreational play as a vital, though often overlooked, dimension of displaced children's wellbeing – one that values children's capacity to be rather than framing play solely through interventions to help them become.

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That said, it is important to note that many socio-emotional skills are cultivated through free, self-directed play. Opportunities to negotiate rules, resolve conflicts, take turns, explore ideas, and manage frustration are key ways in which play strengthens the cognitive and emotional systems that underpin future learning. A substantial body of research demonstrates that abilities such as emotion regulation, peer cooperation, attention and confidence are strong predictors of school readiness and later academic performance (Whitebread *et al.*, 2012; Pellegrini and Smith, 1998). Research also links recreational play to healthy emotional expression (Whitebread *et al.*, 2012; Pellegrini and Smith, 1998). In addition, play gives children the opportunity to create and manage challenges (Sandseter and Kennair, 2011), gain a sense of control over a seemingly chaotic environment (Fearn and Howard, 2012; Chatterjee, 2018), and form new friendships to replace those lost (Scharpf *et al.*, 2021). Together, these experiences build children's socio-emotional development: the ability to manage emotions, form relationships and develop coping strategies in response to adversity.

Unlike structured academic activities, recreational play enables children to test ideas, navigate social challenges and build confidence in their own decision-making. These processes align closely with the aims of holistic EiE, positioning recreational play as a complementary and necessary dimension of children's learning and development.

Ensuring opportunities for recreational play as part of humanitarian responses highlights its critical role not only in recovery but in rebuilding futures. This is especially pertinent given that populations are now displaced more frequently and for extended periods (Kishi, 2015). Camps once intended as temporary safe havens often become long-term living environments. It is therefore imperative to uphold the right to recreational play as an essential part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, Article 31), to ensure children's overall social and emotional development through play continues during their displacement.

When discussing improving displaced children's play, it must be acknowledged that there are historical challenges to research in this area: the ethics of data collection from traumatised children, environmental conditions which are too hazardous for researchers,

a lack of initial baseline data, and problems with longitudinal follow-ups due to the fluid nature of camp residents (Masten and Narayan, 2012). As a result, most research is conducted by NGOs operating in a single displacement situation (Wessells, 2016), which can impact the objectivity and comparability of studies. This fragmented evidence base highlights the need for more independent, comparative reviews and research such as this one.

Methodology

The study adopted a scoping study methodology guided by work from Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and Levac *et al.* (2010). Using a scoping study methodology allowed for an overview of the existing literature regardless of methodology. Scoping reviews also provide recommendations for policy and practice and identify gaps in current research.

The methodology followed the five stages recommended by Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) original study: open research questions, identification of studies, study selection, charting data, and collating and summarising results. The review process and final report layout were also guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Tricco *et al.*, 2018).

Research questions

The research questions for this review are intentionally left broad to allow the evidence to guide the study (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005; Levac *et al.*, 2010).

1. What are the key components of high-quality play experiences that would help foster displaced children's overall socio-emotional development and wellbeing?
2. What are the current challenges and opportunities to providing these high-quality play experiences within displacement camps and shelters?

Search strategy

Literature searching occurred between April and July 2023. Searches were conducted using the ProQuest and ScienceDirect databases. Google Scholar was used to search for supporting grey literature. No date exclusions were applied. Reference and citation

searches were conducted on all papers accepted for a full-text review. Simultaneously, a hand search of literature relating to play and displaced children was conducted.

The search criteria were intentionally broad to ensure the initial search was as comprehensive as possible. The search terms used were 'displaced', 'refugee', 'play', 'child-friendly space', 'child-friendly place', 'refugee camp' and 'therapeutic play'.

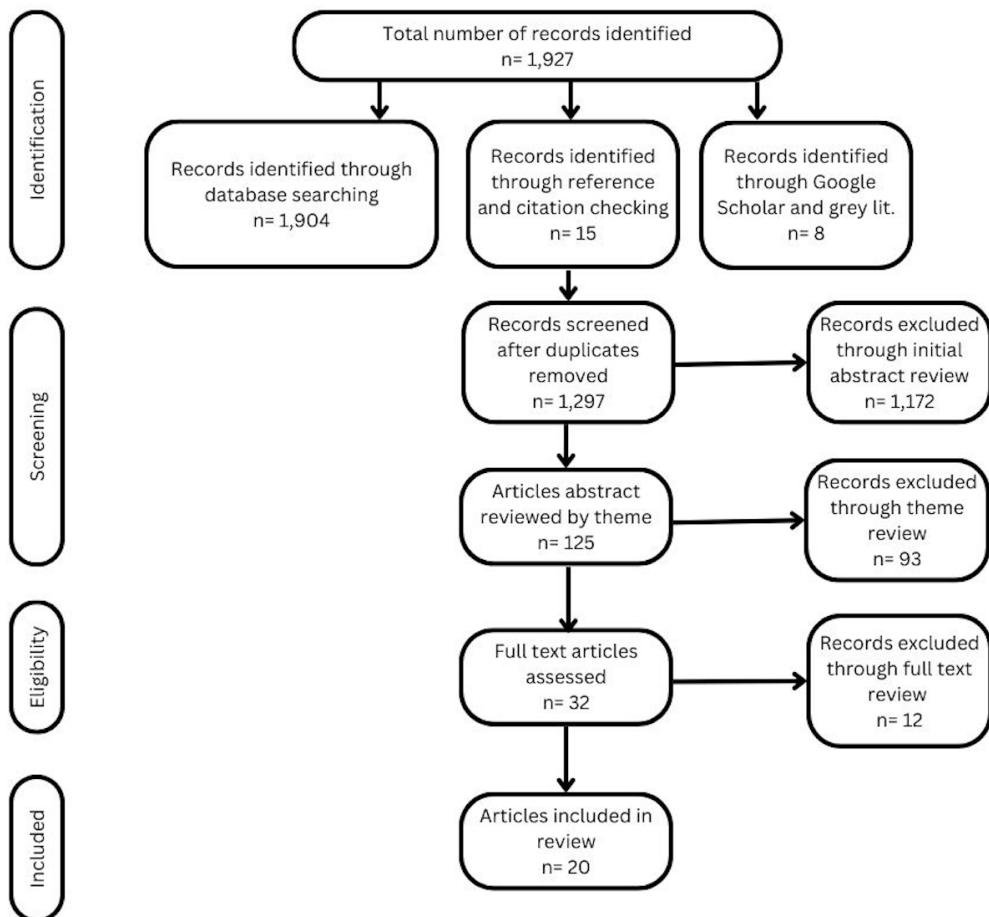
Selection of studies

From an initial 1,927 items identified, duplicate entries were removed, resulting in 1,297 items. Of these, 125 were shortlisted for further review, and

77 were categorised by topic. After categorisation, 32 items on 'displaced children's play' were retained for full-text analysis, with 20 ultimately included to address the research questions.

The first author independently reviewed all articles. The inclusion criteria focused on literature about displaced children's play within camps or shelters, with no restrictions on methodology, participant age (beyond being under 18), geographical location or publication date, to accommodate the limited scope of existing research. Newspaper articles and NGO website publications were excluded, with the review prioritising academic studies.

Figure 1. Flowchart of the search process



Data extraction, collating and summarising

A brief thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach.

Broad themes were identified, and each study was then placed on a spider diagram as a visual aid, showing which studies addressed which theme. This diagram helped map out the six main themes that impacted displaced children's access to play, and therefore their socio-emotional development and wellbeing. These were access to safe play spaces, sufficient time for play, exposure to natural outdoor environments, trained and supportive adult facilitators, opportunities for agency and choice, and the opportunity to build peer relationships.

Quality appraisal

Following Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and Levac *et al.* (2010), this study did not exclude articles based on quality or rigour. Scoping studies aim to map a research area rather than synthesise comparable findings.

Findings

Overall study data

The literature included single-country studies conducted in Asia (n=5), the Middle East (n=4), Europe (n=2) and Africa (n=1). Three studies were conducted across multiple named countries (e.g. Japan and Jordan; Nepal, Japan and Lebanon), four had a global or non-specific international focus and one study did not specify a country of focus. Among the publications were books (n=1), PhD theses (n=1), reports (n=3), journal articles (n=15) and reviews (n=3). The literature covers displacement caused by armed conflict (n=9) and disasters (n=4). All studies (n=20) except one were qualitative with small sample sizes and used various methods to collect their data, including interviews, mapping, drawing, videos, photographs, observations and walking tours.

Access to safe play spaces

Physical safety is consistently identified in the literature as a key factor limiting displaced children's opportunities for play. Children were kept indoors due to threats from disasters such as damaged buildings in Nepal (Chatterjee, 2018), flooded playgrounds and snakes in the floodwater in

Bangladesh (Akhter *et al.*, 2015), and radiation in Japan (Kinoshita and Woolley, 2015). In refugee camps, parents also often restrict children's free movement because camp environments can be volatile with limited law enforcement (Ardelean, 2021). In light of these examples, it is evident that safety concerns often necessitate the restriction of outdoor play for displaced children.

Nevertheless, children continually highlight that being unable to meet with their friends to play makes them unhappy (Akhter *et al.*, 2015). Several studies recognised this need for more planned play spaces: Kinoshita and Woolley (2015) give examples such as play buses and purpose-built indoor play areas in Japan. Woolley (2021) noted purpose-built playgrounds in Jordan, as White (2018) did in France. Together, these findings emphasise that tailored and adaptable play interventions are needed to ensure the wellbeing of children is supported with opportunities for play despite ongoing safety concerns.

The role of nature in play

Another important issue arising from restricting outdoor play is the subsequent lack of access to natural environments. In the International Play Association review by Chatterjee (2017, p.47), a key recommendation was that play spaces should, where possible, 'provide access to nature'. This was informed by interviews with children in Japanese displacement shelters who reported that nature helped them to de-stress (Chatterjee, 2018). Veronese *et al.*'s (2012) mixed-methods study of Palestinian children found they also made connections to the role of nature for their wellbeing. Finally, refugee children's drawings of ideal playgrounds often included 'nature' features such as flowers and trees (Mart *et al.*, 2022). These findings show that across different contexts, children identify the importance of nature for reducing stress and boosting wellbeing. Therefore, research should continue to explore how best to integrate nature into play spaces to support children's wellbeing and stress relief.

As a final point, it is worth noting that access to both outdoor and nature-based play is not equally distributed. Gender and disability significantly affect children's access to these spaces. Both Marshall's (2015) study in a Palestinian camp and Chatterjee's

(2018) research in Nepal found that cultural norms limited girls' access to outdoor play. In terms of play space access for children with disabilities, only one study (Woolley, 2021) – from Jordan – discussed observations of adapted playgrounds. Future research into outdoor play spaces for displaced children should ensure a focus on securing access and researching the types of spaces best suited for these marginalised populations.

Time for play

Time scarcity is another significant barrier to displaced children's play. The studies identified various factors which impact displaced children's time to play. Kinoshita and Woolley (2015) reported that being housed in temporary shelters resulted in school bus journeys of over 90 minutes, leaving little time for play. Household chores and jobs also impacted children's time for play, especially girls (Chatterjee, 2018; Atkinson, 2007). This is yet another example of the impact of gender on play opportunities. As well as completing chores for families, displaced children are often at risk of underage labour, an important income source for many families. However, without time for play, children may find it difficult to create new social connections, which, as the next section will show, are an important coping strategy in difficult circumstances.

The role of play in friendship

When children have time for play, they can form new friendships, which are highlighted throughout the literature as central to displaced children's wellbeing. In Lebanon, Syrian children described losing friends as an important consequence of war for them (Chatterjee, 2018). Loss of friendships due to displacement led to children's withdrawal from play in Japan (Chatterjee, 2018), thereby limiting their ability to rebuild peer relationships. Veronese *et al.* (2012) similarly found strong correlations between friendship and wellbeing. Children reported through the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale that friends helped them cope with distressing experiences. In particular, friendships with peers facing similar circumstances, such as loss of a family member, were especially valuable (Cavazzoni *et al.*, 2021). However, the ability to form new friendships is not equally available to all. In Palestine, girls reported being kept from their peers due to parental fears

about 'bad habits' (Marshall, 2015). These concerns may intensify when families are displaced and live among unfamiliar communities, further isolating girls and reducing opportunities for play and connection. This is yet another example of the role of gender in limiting opportunities for play and its role in maintaining socio-emotional wellbeing. The role of friendship as a psychologically protective factor in children's lives should not be underestimated. Play supports the development and maintenance of these friendships, so promoting opportunities for displaced children to meet and play is key to strengthening resilience, fostering relationships and encouraging emotional expression.

The importance of agency and choice in play

The importance of agency and choice in children's play emerged as an important factor for displaced children's wellbeing from the literature. The report from the International Play Association (Chatterjee, 2017) specifically recommended opportunities for children to explore their own free and self-directed play. It indicated that many play spaces in displacement camps do not offer this option, preferring more structured activities. Ardelean's (2021) study similarly highlights the lack of choice and appropriate adaptation of activities for children attending a centre in Greece. She concluded it was important that play provision in these spaces should reflect all children's 'voices, choices and desires' (p.358).

Agency enables children to take risks in their play, which contributes to building their psychological resilience. Concerning this risky play, a child's statement from Chatterjee (2018) '...though we may sometimes be close to breaking when we challenge ourselves and do a dangerous thing, but it is better for us to have a chance to find a way by ourselves' (p.130) underlined the importance of personal challenge as an essential part of growth and development. In addition, research has indicated that having agency over their play allows children to direct their own play, enabling them to work through traumatic events in a playful manner if they so wish, sometimes termed 'post-traumatic play'. This was observed as 'tsunami play' in Japan (Kinoshita and Woolley, 2015). Playworkers reported in their interviews that they felt most children benefitted from this play as it helped them recreate the moments they were scared of with a satisfactory solution. One playworker explained, 'The child who does not have

words to talk about what is in his heart only has play as a way of expressing themselves' (Kinoshita and Woolley, 2015, p.45). Other studies also report incidences of post-traumatic play: White (2018) in Calais describes children constructing homes and then tearing them down as part of a 'police raid', and Heldal (2021) discussed a child's need to keep flying a plane to find his father. This type of play is complex and dangerous if not guided correctly as children may become 'stuck' in a negative form of play in which they repeatedly re-enact perceived danger. This pattern can intensify traumatic effects and lead to developmental regression rather than emotional resolution (Dripchak, 2007).

Enhanced agency was identified in the literature as enabling children to take risks in their play, to process traumatic experiences, and to relieve stress through deep or dangerous play. Supporting children's agency should therefore be a central aim of play provision in displacement contexts to foster wellbeing and overall resilience.

The role of trained adult facilitators

Trained adult facilitators play a crucial role in ensuring that play provision supports children to develop agency and self-efficacy through play. Several studies (Ardelean, 2021; Heldal, 2021; Chatterjee, 2018; Kinoshita and Woolley, 2015; Naudeau, 2005) highlight the importance of using knowledgeable adults. However, articles based on first-hand experiences in camps show this is not always achieved in reality.

Heldal (2021, p.434) notes that 'most of the volunteers used play activities as a tool to entertain the children rather than facilitate play initiated by the children themselves'. Similarly, Ardelean (2021, p.357) is critical of the staff's lack of knowledge about play, described as 'absence of a holistic understanding of play... stemming from a lack of training'. The importance of having a high level of play knowledge is further emphasised by the situation in Japan, noted earlier, where trained playworkers supported complex play types such as post-traumatic play, which helped children process their experiences. Without training, facilitators may unintentionally undermine children's agency, stopping them from using play for emotional healing and resilience building. Adults need to strike the balance identified by Heldal (2021) of maintaining

some children's autonomy and guiding others to greater independence.

Adults are also responsible for creating psychologically safe spaces. Naudeau (2005) reminds us that less confident children develop a sense of security in play spaces with consistent, supportive adults. Baidya *et al.* (2020) described how community consultation helped BRAC in Bangladesh create safe, practical and culturally welcoming spaces in Rohingya camps. Cultural norms, including the use of draped fabric and painted designs, helped reinforce children's cultural identity and sense of belonging in the new space, thereby improving their wellbeing.

The literature identifies trained facilitators as essential for encouraging children's independent play and creating safe, culturally responsive spaces. In doing so, they help ensure that play fosters emotional expression and personal challenge, thereby improving overall resilience.

Taken together, the six themes identified in this review demonstrate that play, when properly supported, is a powerful tool for encouraging resilience, improving relationships and offering opportunities for emotional expression and regulation in children navigating displacement. In particular, the evidence suggests that effective play provision must balance safety, access and agency, to ensure children's wellbeing in displacement contexts.

Discussion

Within the field of EIE, learning is increasingly understood as a holistic process that encompasses socio-emotional wellbeing, relationships, identity and the ability to adapt to uncertainty. However, EIE programming has predominantly focused on structured play-based learning and psychosocial activities, with limited attention given to children's rights to recreational, spontaneous play. This omission is significant. For displaced children living with chronic stress, recreational play provides experiences of autonomy, joy and peer belonging that are difficult to replicate through instructional activities. Positioning recreational play within EIE therefore expands the conceptualisation of what counts as 'educational,' recognising that wellbeing and learning are interdependent rather than separate domains.

With this in mind, this next section discusses practical solutions to the barriers identified earlier to promoting play in this context. It also identifies gaps in our knowledge that require further investigation.

The need for safe outdoor play

The first key component of creating high-quality play experiences for displaced children is providing safe outdoor play spaces. However, while United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) campsite minimum standards (UNHCR, 2006) stipulate minimum space requirements for creating shelters and schools, it is notable that there are no recommendations for playgrounds or play spaces within these schools. To uphold children's right to play, disaster response protocols should include minimum requirements for outdoor play areas.

However, mandating play space is not a complete solution. In many situations, it is simply too dangerous for children to play outside. Observations of purpose-built playgrounds indicate that displaced children's right to a safe place to play is becoming more recognised. Nevertheless, it should be questioned if playgrounds themselves actually fulfil the need for high-quality play experiences. Where playgrounds have been observed in camps (Woolley, 2021; White, 2018), they often appear tokenistic, shaped by adult perspectives, and are frequently poorly maintained. These types of playgrounds are known to have limitations in terms of choice and agency for high-quality play (Brunelle *et al.*, 2016).

Inter-agency research into more suitable playgrounds could encourage more innovation into flexible, portable or adaptable playgrounds for disaster-prone countries. Promising solutions can be found in Japan's post-tsunami adventure playgrounds (Kinoshita and Woolley, 2015), Alwan's (2016) theoretical study of play kits using repurposed materials in Jordan and the Anji Play movement in China (AnjiPlay, n.d.), which all prioritise agency and cultural relevance while incorporating managed risk. Play spaces are built from available materials and do not require parts or maintenance like traditional playgrounds. They can expand and contract as necessary and do not always have to occupy a fixed space. Play buses carrying this kind of equipment have been used in several disaster situations in Japan. These examples suggest ways of rethinking outdoor play provision beyond fixed playground

models. However, further research is needed to examine whether such approaches can be adapted across different displacement contexts.

Harnessing nature for wellbeing

An important dimension of outdoor play is children's access to nature, which carries distinct socio-emotional benefits. Throughout the review, children identified that contact with nature promoted feelings of calmness and stress relief (Mart *et al.*, 2022; Chatterjee, 2018; Veronese *et al.*, 2012). This highlights the role natural environments play in supporting protective factors such as emotional expression, self-regulation and positive mood. With this in mind, future research and practice in this area could look to the work of the Forest Schools movement (Forest School Association, n.d.). Research from Malaysia by Wahab *et al.* (2020) is promising in combining local indigenous knowledge with Forest School philosophies. In addition, BRAC's Green Play Labs initiative (Zami, 2023) provides an emerging example of how nature can be integrated into play in camp contexts, spotlighting nature as an active resource that directly supports children's wellbeing.

From decoration to co-creation

The communal creation of play spaces is a powerful means of building trust between the adults and children who share them. However, current child-friendly space (CFS) guidelines (Snider and Ager, 2018) primarily emphasise adult-led decoration. Such an approach positions children as passive participants rather than co-designers. In contrast, BRAC's community-based model in Cox's Bazar (Baidya *et al.*, 2020) actively involves children and parents in the design process, fostering agency and embedding cultural traditions within the environment. This participatory approach enhances children's sense of safety and belonging in their play spaces, which has been shown to contribute to feelings of stability and increased wellbeing (Weir *et al.*, 2023).

Why agency matters

As previously highlighted in several papers, agency is a central feature of high-quality play provision (Cavazzoni *et al.*, 2021; Chatterjee, 2017; 2018; Kinoshita and Woolley, 2015). Paradoxically, literature designed to guide the creation of CFSs, notably the

IFRC handbook (Snider and Ager, 2018), actively encourages agency in play in its introduction – noting ‘free play that is child-centred and supported by... facilitators is an essential component of a CFS’, (p.11) – but only allocates 1.5 of 138 pages to the concept of free play. No practical advice on encouraging and supporting free play is given in the handbook or the accompanying session plans. As has been consistently noted, agency in play is essential to children’s wellbeing, and future guidance must clearly set out how it can be supported in CFSs.

From supervision to skilled facilitation

Along with better guidance, there is a need for trained adults to support children’s play (Ardelean, 2021; Heldal, 2021; Kinoshita and Woolley, 2015). Ongoing CFS research (Ager and Metzler, 2022; Hermosilla *et al.*, 2019; Metzler *et al.*, 2015) has also recognised the need for better training for facilitators. There are significant challenges in implementing training in low-resource and sometimes challenging environments, along with the financial difficulties of cross-agency collaboration on this due to funding allocations. However, more focus on creating ways to share best practices across different sites would help improve the quality of adult facilitation.

Further research is needed to identify effective forms of facilitator training and delivery. Suggested approaches include video training, virtual coaching, practical examples, low-cost material guidance and peer exchange (Ager and Metzler, 2022; Gaffar and Campbell, 2021). NGOs such as Seenaryo have also piloted app-based tools providing facilitators access to activity banks, video demonstrations and multilingual instructions (Seenaryo, n.d.).

Research gaps

Although this review has sought to provide a comprehensive overview of the literature on displaced children’s play, several gaps remain. Research on the impacts of gender and disability is particularly limited, and the voices of displaced children themselves are seldom heard. While the studies used in this review frequently consulted children, this is not common in research into CFSs, where children under nine are often excluded from research. While exclusion is often justified as a form of protection, children’s right to contribute to

services designed for them should be more widely recognised.

Conclusion

This review has shown that multiple factors shape the quality of play opportunities for displaced children and has identified core components essential for supporting play to enable future socio-emotional development and wellbeing. It has also highlighted key gaps in research, including the impacts of gender and disability on play opportunities and the need to amplify children’s voices in shaping CFS interventions in camps and shelters. The review offers recommendations for strengthening humanitarian policies and handbooks to ensure that displaced children’s right to safe recreational play is realised. Finally, it reinforces the view that play should be understood not merely as a form of psychosocial support or a vehicle for improved learning but as a foundational practice that enables children to regain stability and rebuild their futures. Addressing these gaps requires the humanitarian sector to recognise and support high-quality recreational play as a core pillar of refugee responses, ensuring that displaced children have safe spaces to play and thrive.

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Appendix 1. Overview of studies included in review

(*) Linked studies with shared data

(**) Linked studies with shared data

Author	Title	Date	Country of study	Type of study – theoretical framework	Sample size and method	Age range of children studied	Methodology	Instruments
Weir et al.	Displaced children's experience of places and play: a scoping review	2023	Various	Place attachment theory	33 articles	Under 18 years	Scoping review	ProQuest and Science Direct for searches
Mart et al.	The Playground Perception of Syrian Refugee Children	2022	Turkey (Syrian refugee children)		46 children – 20 girls and 26 boys; half lived in the refugee camp; a snowballing sample method was used	4 and 6 years	Qualitative: document analysis of children's drawings	Drawings done by the children analysed with thematic analysis
Woolley	Beyond the Fence: Constructed and found spaces for children's outdoor play in natural and human-induced disaster contexts – Lessons from north-east Japan, and Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan	2021	Japan, Jordan	Theory of constructed and found spaces	Two sites: site selection was purposive and practical	No children interviewed	Qualitative: photographs	Primary data collection method: photographs; daily logs made of conversations and observations
Gaffar and Campbell	Play matters: Learning through play: A review of evidence related to play for children's education and development in humanitarian and low-resource contexts	2021	Multiple	Review	30 articles	Varied	Review	Thematic analysis of papers
Ardelean	Play in a refugee camp	2021	Greece		Unknown	Unknown	Case study: personal narrative	
Cavazzoni et al.	Agency operating within structures: A qualitative exploration of agency amongst children living in Palestine	2021	Palestine	Socio-ecological	70 children, using convenience sampling	7 to 13 years	Qualitative: mapping, walk around neighbourhood	Drawings of maps analysed; narratives recorded, translated and transcribed; themes derived from thematic content analysis
Mart Heidal	Perspectives on children's play in a refugee camp	2021	Greece	Sensory ethnographic; considers researcher presence and a holistic understanding of research subject	1	5 years	Qualitative: written observations	Written observations during play sessions; 13 logs comprising situation descriptions, thoughts about the situation, and emotions evoked

Author	Title	Date	Country of study	Type of study – theoretical framework	Sample size and method	Age range of children studied	Methodology	Instruments
Solis, Liu and Popp	The LEGO Foundation: Learning to cope through play: Playful learning as an approach to support children's coping during times of heightened stress and adversity	2020	Various	Review	N/A	N/A	N/A	
Baidya et al.	Designing spaces with victims of humanitarian crisis	2020	Bangladesh	Analysis of a participatory action research project		4 to 12 years, with accompanying mothers and female guardians	Qualitative: interviews	
White	Removing barriers and building bridges: How play cultivates integration and belonging in refugee children	2018	France	Website	N/A	N/A	Qualitative: First-person narrative case study	Not specified
(*) Chatterjee	Children's Coping, Adaptation and Resilience through Play in Situations of Crisis	2018	Japan, Nepal	Review	Typically 40 children per site; 1 site in Japan and 2 sites in Nepal; convenience sampling	6 to 18 years	Qualitative: various methods	Body map, risk mapping, child-led tours; child-led demonstrations of play; conversational interviews with children using a prop; the flower map
(*) International Play Association (Chatterjee)	Access to play for children in situations of crisis	2017	Nepal, Japan, Lebanon		40 children in each site	6 to 18 years	Qualitative: various methods	Body map; risk mapping; child-led tours; child-led demonstrations of play; conversational interviews with children using a prop; the flower map
Atkinson	Living, Eating and Learning: Children's Experiences of Change and Life in a Refugee Camp	2007	Zambia	Anthropological	Size unknown; community; selected and self-selected	7 to 15 years	Ethnographic/qualitative	Semi-structured interviews; participant observation; drawing; mapping; video; photography; emphasis on participatory and child-centred research
(**) Kinoshita and Woolley	Children's play environment after a disaster: The Great East Japan Earthquake	2015	Japan	Qualitative: action research; responsive and iterative semi-structured approach	N/A	Adults	Qualitative: interviews and conversations	Informal conversations; structured conversations; observations
Akhter et al.	Issues with families and children in a disaster context	2015	Bangladesh		17	5 to 10 years	Qualitative: focus groups and interviews	Parental focus groups; child interviews with draw and write technique

Author	Title	Date	Country of study	Type of study – theoretical framework	Sample size and method	Age range of children studied	Methodology	Instruments
Naudeau	Restorative play in refugee situations	2015	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	
(*) (**) Kinoshita and Woolley	Space, People, Interventions and Time (SPT): A Model for Understanding Children's Outdoor Play in Post-Disaster Contexts Based On a Case Study from the Triple Disaster Area of Tohoku in North-East Japan	2015	Japan	SPT model analysing Space, People, Interventions and Time	Varied locations in Japan	Adults	Qualitative: interviews	Semi-structured and informal interviews with a purposive sample of adults
Marshall	We have a place to play but someone else controls it	2015	Palestine	Ethnographic	18 Purposive	10 to 13 years	Qualitative/ ethnographic	
Veronese et al.	Living in the shadow of occupation: Life satisfaction and positive emotion as protective factors in a group of Palestinian school children	2012	Palestine		74	7 to 15 years	Mixed method	PANAS-C (Laurent et al., 1999); the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner & Gilman, 2003, 2006); the Faces Scale (FS) Narratives recorded on discussions and written pieces: 'what makes me satisfied and happy' and after creative work another oral narrative on 'what is good and what is bad in my city'
Hyder	War, conflict and play	2005	Various	Book	N/A	N/A	N/A	

Learning through Play in conflict and crisis contexts:

A review of education interventions



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Abstract

Global attention is trending toward the potential of learning through play in emergencies (LtPiE). This review investigates extant evidence on LtPiE to support education access, quality, continuity and systems coherence as drivers of children's holistic learning and wellbeing. Through thematic analysis of 42 studies of diverse methodologies, we categorise LtPiE interventions into three intervention modalities: learning through play (LtP) as supplementary guided play and games; LtP as formal classroom pedagogy; and LtP as nonformal content and pedagogy. Findings reveal promising evidence across all three modalities. The strongest evidence base is in LtP as nonformal content and pedagogy whereas the weakest evidence base is LtP as classroom pedagogy. Findings also reveal LtPiE interventions support improvements in classroom climate and wellbeing, with emerging yet inconsistent evidence of improvements in literacy and numeracy. A coordinated and comprehensive research agenda on the impact of LtPiE on children's holistic learning can deepen this promising evidence base, strengthening education responses.

Key Words

learning through play, holistic learning outcomes, wellbeing, education quality

Introduction

The global learning crisis necessitates re-evaluating education interventions that improve children's holistic learning and wellbeing in emergencies¹ (World Bank *et al.*, 2022). Learning through Play (LtP) has emerged as a promising approach to improving children's holistic learning (physical, cognitive, social, emotional and creative skills) and wellbeing through actively engaging, meaningful, joyful, social and iterative activities (Zosh *et al.*, 2017). Play is

defined as a spectrum based on initiation, agency and learning objectives with categories of free play, guided play, games and playful instruction (Figure 1) (Zosh *et al.*, 2018). On this spectrum, guided play and games leverage play as content and activities directly involving children, while playful instruction is a pedagogy enacted by an adult facilitator. These categories all directly link to explicit learning goals, a critical component of education interventions.

Figure 1. Play as a spectrum



Source: Zosh *et al.* (2018)

Moreover, RTI International and NYU Global TIES for Children (2023) conceptually posit that children's 'self-sustaining engagement', including behavioural, cognitive and affective dimensions, is critical to LtP. While all play contributes to children's holistic development, LtP as an education intervention refers to guided play, games and playful instruction. Parker and Thomsen (2019) identify promising LtP pedagogies in school, although this review primarily draws from stable minority world contexts, and may not be indicative of the unique challenges and opportunities of emergency contexts, presenting a gap in the literature.

Thus, we define LtP as facilitated playful experiences (characterised as actively engaging, meaningful, joyful, social and iterative) connected to learning objectives in safe environments, primarily categorised as guided play, games and playful instruction.

The promise of LtP in emergencies (LtPiE) is grounded in evidence from high-resource contexts that children learn best through play and can improve myriad skills like literacy, numeracy, collaboration and creativity (Courtois *et al.*, 2024;

Tominey and McClelland, 2011), as well as their psychosocial wellbeing (Flemming *et al.*, 2024). Policies in early childhood development in countries hosting much of the world's displaced population such as Colombia (Rojas Romero *et al.*, 2025), Türkiye (UNICEF Türkiye, 2022), Uganda (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2012), Iran (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2006) and Pakistan (Pradhan and Sahoo, 2024) reveal support for LtP. Emerging evidence on LtP from global majority contexts confirms play is contextual and needs to be grounded in sociocultural expectations of education (Courtois *et al.*, 2024; D'Sa *et al.*, 2024; Moland, 2017). Additionally, research from crisis-affected contexts suggests systemic barriers like limited teaching capacity and overcrowded classrooms may impede LtP's effectiveness (Asfaw *et al.*, 2025; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2021). This is pertinent given decreasing funds for education in emergencies, increasing humanitarian needs, and growing attention toward LtP in policy and practice. Hence, a review of LtPiE interventions can confirm its relevance, feasibility and desirability in emergency contexts and elucidate recommendations for maximising its impact.

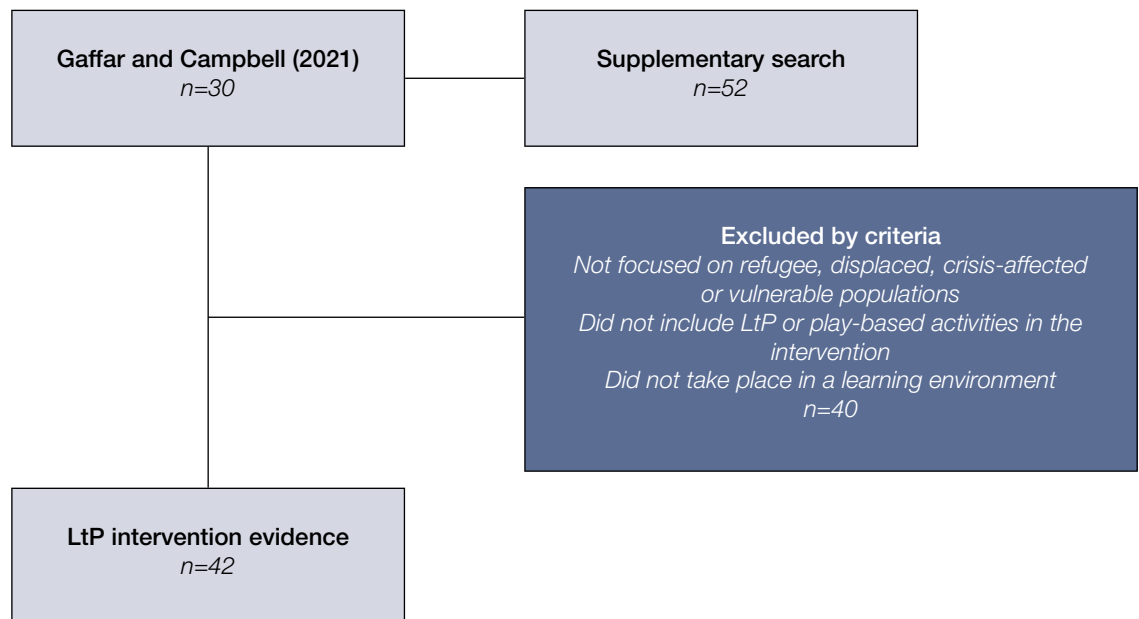
1 Emergencies are considered contexts of acute and protracted crisis, involving refugee, forcibly displaced and returnee populations affected by armed conflict, health epidemics and pandemics, and environmental, political and/or economic crises.

Using the Conceptual Framework for Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (Kim *et al.*, 2026), evidence of LtPiE interventions was analysed by how they affect drivers of learning – access, quality, continuity and system coherence – to impact children’s holistic learning outcomes and wellbeing. While literature suggests that LtP impacts children’s holistic learning outcomes and wellbeing, this analytical framework is used here to further explore how LtPiE interventions achieve their intended impact in contexts of crisis and conflict (Falk *et al.*, 2024).

Methodology

This review synthesises evidence on LtP interventions in education settings from humanitarian contexts, including fragile and post-conflict contexts (Falk *et al.*, 2024). Evidence was sourced from a review focused on LtP in humanitarian and low-resource contexts (Gaffar and Campbell, 2021) and supplemented with academic databases using queries for research published in English between 2019 and March 2025 (see search terms in Appendix 1). Knowledge hubs like the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies contributed additional grey literature to the sample.

Figure 2. Evidence review sample



Of the 82 studies reviewed, 42 were included based on the following criteria: (1) focus on forcibly displaced, crisis-affected or crisis-vulnerable populations; (2) include LtP activities incorporating guided play, games or playful instruction; and (3) occur in education settings. This review excludes home-based/parenting interventions, but acknowledges the value of parental engagement and homes as the only education pathway in some crises. This review also excludes stand-alone free play interventions to primarily focus on education delivery connected to explicit learning objectives, though many LtPiE interventions include free play components and children’s free play is important.

Given the paucity of existing evidence, this review not only includes impact evaluations (experimental, quasi-experimental and Most Significant Change), but also formative research and implementation research using case studies, observational studies and process evaluations (Diazgranados, Guimond and Annan, 2026).

Evidence was categorised into three intervention types based on thematic analysis aligned with the literature. The first type – LtP as supplementary guided play and games – refers to the delivery of play-based child-facing content outside of curriculum delivery designed to target specific competencies

and skills (e.g. numeracy or wellbeing) or sub-populations (e.g. children exhibiting post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms), occurring in both formal and nonformal learning spaces. The second type – LtP as formal classroom pedagogy – integrates playful instruction in curriculum delivery as a teaching approach, leveraging active and

student-centred practices rather than child-facing content. The third type – LtP as nonformal content and pedagogy – combines elements of guided play, games and other foundational learning content with training on playful and trauma-sensitive curriculum delivery through whole-class nonformal learning via non-state actors.

Table 1. Evidence by intervention type (n=42)

Intervention Type	Evidence
LtP as supplementary guided play and games	12
LtP as formal classroom pedagogy	8
LtP as nonformal content and pedagogy	22

Findings

LtP as supplementary guided play and games

The first implementation modality, LtP as supplementary guided play and games, is separate from curriculum delivery targeting specific populations, such as traumatised/at-risk children or out-of-school children, in formal and nonformal education, and can be applied across all phases of crisis from immediate emergency response through post-crisis phases. This modality includes six impact evaluations on movement-based, arts-based and technology-based interventions.

Ager *et al.* (2011) found that incorporating play therapy and cooperative games for internally displaced persons (IDP) in Uganda through a programme called Psychosocial Structured Activities had a positive impact on attendance rates, student grades and student–teacher interactions in the classroom. Another intervention, TeamUp, implemented in refugee settings in Uganda and the Netherlands, consists of sessions involving non-verbal games, physical activity, songs and breathing practices related to themes like friendship, dealing with anger and stress (Bleile *et al.*, 2021). A quasi-experimental study in Uganda revealed statistically significant improvements in emotional and psychological wellbeing, satisfaction with and attitudes toward school, and emotional state (Bleile *et al.*, 2024). These results were not only sustained but additional improvements in friendships and reduced bullying and depression symptoms were observed five months post-intervention, signalling

additional long-term effects (Jordans *et al.*, 2024).

A baseline-endline study in Israel with conflict-affected children found teacher-delivered weekly modules focusing on art therapy and narrative techniques significantly decreased PTSD symptoms (Wolmer *et al.*, 2011). An evaluation of a resilience intervention with vulnerable children (measured against health, education, protection, nutrition and economic vulnerabilities) in Nigeria found peer-support groups using songs, crafts and discussions increased resiliency, social connection and self-esteem and decreased depression compared to the control group (Olowokere and Okanlawon, 2014). HEART, an arts intervention for students, uses centre-based activities in Malawi, Uganda, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Tanzania and Nigeria. In case studies, teachers reported student progress in social emotional learning (SEL) and language skills and improved attention to children’s unique needs. Learners reported improved self-expression and interpersonal interactions (Arslanbek *et al.*, 2024; Parker *et al.*, 2024). Conversely, a programme in Palestine focused on refugee children with PTSD through weekly sessions to speak about their experiences, play games and role play, but found no significant impacts on child outcomes (Thabet *et al.*, 2005).

Can’t Wait to Learn is a digital game-based learning programme for crisis-affected out-of-school children in Lebanon, Sudan and Uganda. It combines experimental learning design with meaningful activities to support literacy and numeracy skills. The programme improved enrolment and attendance and improved numeracy, motivation and self-esteem for

children in quasi-experimental studies in Uganda and Sudan and an endline evaluation of programme data in Uganda, and improved Arabic literacy in Lebanon through a pre-post study (Brown *et al.*, 2023a; Turner *et al.*, 2022; UNESCO, n.d.).

LtP as formal classroom pedagogy

The second implementation modality involves LtP as formal classroom pedagogy for delivering curriculum, usually at the pre-primary and primary school levels. This approach is particularly used in contexts where formal systems are functioning, such as protracted refugee contexts or during long-term recovery/post-crisis phases. There is limited but promising evidence of playful instruction, though none of the eight studies were impact evaluations.

Implementation research of the teacher professional development programme PlayMatters in refugee communities found significant improvements in pre-post observational scores of classroom management practices in Tanzania and significant improvement in pre-post observational scores of classroom management practices, pedagogical practices and student engagement in Ethiopia (Diazgranados *et al.*, 2024; Tandika *et al.*, 2025). Additional baseline-endline analysis in Ethiopia revealed significant increases in numeracy, literacy, empathy, prosocial skills and overall wellbeing, and a significant decrease in depression symptoms (Diazgranados *et al.*, 2024). A crisis-response adaptation of PlayMatters with internally displaced children in Ethiopia integrated LtP with multi-sectoral inputs like school feeding, water point rehabilitation and vaccinations. Implementation research revealed a significant increase in average student enrolment, attendance and lesson recall (Lenjebo, Kwok and Smiley, 2023). Similarly, a case study on Ubumwe – a co-created arts-based intervention piloted in primary schools in a Ugandan refugee settlement that infused arts education with integrated instructional practices – revealed improvements in student attendance, student–teacher relationships and student-centred pedagogies (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2024).

Teacher RePlay is a teacher-focused formative reflection toolkit to facilitate LtP in classrooms in post-conflict, returnee and refugee settings in Bangladesh, Colombia and Uganda. Implementation research found that teachers found the toolkit helpful

in connecting with students and reported a notable increase in student enthusiasm for learning. They also reported more effective lesson planning and critical self-reflection to integrate intentional LtP activities (D'Sa *et al.*, 2024; Omoeva *et al.*, 2024; Pyle *et al.*, 2024; Zosh *et al.*, 2024). These findings suggest that LtP pedagogies can support education access, continuity and quality, though the evidence base is limited.

LtP as nonformal content and pedagogy

The third implementation modality is LtP as nonformal content and pedagogy, which combines elements of guided play, games and basic training on playful and trauma-sensitive pedagogical approaches in nonformal education. It is used particularly in emergency response phases when the formal system cannot fully deliver education services or meet the unique needs of crisis-affected children. This modality includes six impact evaluations, two Most Significant Change studies, and one systematic review of five impact evaluations, indicating a strong evidence base. Nonformal learning opportunities are designed to increase education access and continuity amid crisis, thus evidence below focuses on education quality, holistic learning and wellbeing outcomes.

The Better Learning Programme (BLP) 1 provides whole-class play-based psycho-education in conflict-affected contexts like Afghanistan, Colombia, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon and Palestine. Most Significant Change evaluations of BLP in Palestine and Jordan revealed improvement in children's ability to focus and learn, improved school attendance, and the development of coping mechanisms for improved wellbeing (Shah, 2017a; 2017b). Moreover, McEvoy (2019) found that BLP 1 in Afghanistan improved teacher–student bonds and children reported feeling less scared. Exploratory analysis in Lebanon found that host community teachers of Syrian refugee and Lebanese children trained via government actors reported greater awareness in crisis-sensitive and empathetic teaching approaches (Schenzle and Schultz, 2024). Finally, programme evaluations of BLP 1 in Kenya and Colombia found teachers reporting reduced school dropout and higher attendance and improved child capacity to learn, while children reported reduced stress, anxiety and restlessness (Flemming, Henao Guáqueta and Olwala, 2024). In a similar intervention, Gupta and

Zimmer (2008) found that training teachers in an IDP camp in Sierra Leone on child development and integrating group activities like role play, singing and dancing revealed significant decreases in intrusion and arousal symptoms and PTSD, and increases in avoidance reactions from baseline to endline.

A remedial tutoring intervention for refugee, vulnerable and conflict-exposed students in Lebanon, Niger and Sierra Leone provided tutoring in safe learning environments and integrated play-based SEL activities to develop executive function, emotional regulation, positive social skills, conflict-resolution and perseverance. Through a series of randomised controlled trials in Niger and Lebanon, the combination of remedial tutoring services integrating LtP as both pedagogy and skills-targeted activities, particularly mindfulness rather than brain games, improved literacy, numeracy, academic grades and some SEL outcomes (Brown *et al.*, 2023b; Brown *et al.*, 2023c; Kim *et al.*, 2023; Tubbs Dolan *et al.*, 2022). Implementation research in Sierra Leone revealed LtP-based skills-targeted SEL activities could increase attendance and prosocial behaviour and reduce concentration problems (Wu *et al.*, 2023).

Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) has been implemented in diverse IDP and refugee settings by integrating activities that encourage holistic development such as singing, drawing, recreational activities, life-skills training, literacy and non-violent conflict resolution. An impact evaluation and qualitative study in Uganda found CFS was associated with increased literacy and numeracy scores, and wellbeing indicators like improved appetites, sharing and helpfulness, indicating positive effects of CFS to deliver LtP (Maxwell, 2019; Kostelny and Wessells, 2008). A systematic review from five impact evaluations in Uganda, Ethiopia, Jordan, Nepal and Iraq for children aged 6–11 found CFS attendance was associated with improved psychosocial wellbeing (albeit with a small net intervention effect). Additionally, positive impacts on developmental assets were statistically significant in Uganda and Iraq but weak and insignificant when pooled (Hermosilla *et al.*, 2019).

Building on CFS, Humanitarian Play Labs (HPL) used multi-stakeholder design to deliver early childhood development for Rohingya children in Bangladesh. Rohingya mothers facilitated local games, art projects and other LtP activities targeting

developmental domains (Mahbub *et al.*, 2024). A quasi-experimental study of HPL found significant improvements in communication and problem-solving skills compared to the control group and a significant difference in depression symptoms (Tasnim *et al.*, 2020). Qualitative studies further highlighted the value of HPL in establishing a sense of community, improving coping mechanisms and supporting wellbeing amid displacement (Mariam *et al.*, 2021; Baidya *et al.*, 2020).

Another promising early childhood development intervention integrating LtP in refugee communities in Chad, Cameroon, Tanzania and Greece is Little Ripples (Scott, 2020). Little Ripples integrates academic curriculum with LtP and mindfulness activities. Analysis of programme data in Chad revealed improvements in the number of students able to count to five or higher and to recite at least the first ten letters of the alphabet without mistakes, though there was no control group (Dallain and Scott, 2017). Community members reported the intervention produced top-performing students upon matriculation to primary school (Humanitarian Education Accelerator, 2022). Additionally, in a case study in Tanzania, all teachers surveyed reported improvements in students' academic performance and behaviour, and students reported better lesson recall, feeling safe during lessons, and friendly teachers (Dalrymple, 2019). Collectively, evidence across CFS, HPL and Little Ripples indicates positive effects of LtP on nonformal education access and quality and children's holistic learning and wellbeing in crisis-affected contexts.

Discussion

Overall, we find evidence that LtPiE interventions support education access, quality and continuity in emergency contexts. Disentangling the effects of access, quality and continuity was challenging, revealing the interrelated nature of the drivers of learning. Evidence suggests LtP improves children's engagement and interest in learning processes and environments, increasing children's desire to attend education programmes and opportunities to learn, though there is little quantitative documentation of these effects as few studies explicitly analysed or reported on attendance and continuity (Arslanbek *et al.*, 2024; Flemming, Henao Guáqueta and Olwala, 2024; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2024; Lenjebo, Kwok and

Smiley, 2023; Wu *et al.*, 2023; UNESCO, n.d.; Ager *et al.*, 2011). Key characteristics of quality identified were improvements in teacher–student relationships (Diazgranados *et al.*, 2024; Omoeva *et al.*, 2024; Dalrymple, 2019; Ager *et al.*, 2011) and in classroom climate (Tandika *et al.*, 2025; Baidya *et al.*, 2020).

Additionally, we find limited but promising evidence that LtP interventions can and should leverage diverse stakeholder engagement to strengthen system coherence. Evidence described the value of participatory and meaningful design of LtPiE interventions with affected communities, though this was limited to the adults who facilitate LtPiE experiences rather than children themselves (Pyle *et al.*, 2024; Mahbub *et al.*, 2024; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2024; Schenzle and Schultz, 2024). This aligns with literature suggesting that perspectives of LtPiE are not monolithic (Courtois *et al.*, 2024) and meaningful engagement to design LtPiE interventions can improve quality, though implementation fidelity may vary (Moland, 2017). Most studies did not report on alignment with policy at a national level.

Finally, we find evidence of LtP's impact on children's holistic learning and wellbeing outcomes, though the strength of the evidence base varies across intervention modality. There is significant promise that LtP can improve academic learning, literacy and numeracy, though these results are not consistent and guaranteed, requiring greater causal evidence into identifying the right conditions and dosage (Diazgranados *et al.*, 2024; Tubbs Dolan *et al.*, 2022; Dallain and Scott, 2017). Moreover, there is positive and growing evidence that LtP improves SEL, such as social connectedness, emotional regulation and prosocial behaviour, and mental health outcomes like reduced depression (Diazgranados *et al.*, 2024; Hermosilla *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2023; Tasnim *et al.*, 2020; McEvoy, 2019; Wolmer *et al.*, 2011). There is less evidence on LtPiE's impacts on academic outcomes compared to SEL and wellbeing outcomes, likely because play has not historically been associated with academic learning, particularly in global majority contexts, leading to fewer LtPiE interventions targeting and/or measuring academic outcomes (Asfaw *et al.*, 2025; D'Sa *et al.*, 2024). While not all LtPiE interventions produced significant positive effects across all outcomes, measuring holistic learning outcomes and wellbeing can bolster understandings of the power of LtPiE for all children to thrive.

Collectively, evidence of LtP's effects on children's holistic outcomes in humanitarian contexts is promising but thin. LtP as formal classroom pedagogy has the weakest evidence base to date, with no completed impact evaluations compared to the promising evidence base of LtP as supplementary guided play and games and the strong evidence base of LtP as nonformal content and pedagogy. Approximately 70% of studies were published after 2019, signifying increased attention to LtPiE. With a growing evidence base, a comprehensive LtPiE global research agenda, including longitudinal studies and implementation research, is needed to complement the existing knowledge base on the conditions, modalities, costs and differentiated effects of LtP on children's holistic learning and wellbeing in contexts of conflict and crisis.

Given these findings, practitioners and policymakers can support children's access to education through LtP to make learning environments engaging, safe and enjoyable for out-of-school children to enrol and retain attendance. LtP can improve children's education continuity through targeted LtP activities to help learners catch up on content and be reached through low- and no-technology play-based activities. LtP can strengthen education quality through the integration of quality teaching pedagogies informed by conflict sensitivity. As more countries recognise the value of play-based and learner-centred education approaches in their policies, delivery of LtP with, through or aligned with government systems can ensure coherence of service delivery through all phases of crisis. Collectively, practitioners and policymakers can harness the power of play to ensure children everywhere can learn and thrive.

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Disclaimer

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Appendix 1. Academic database search terms

'Learning through Play' OR 'LtP' OR 'play-based learning' OR 'play-based instructional' OR 'PBL' OR 'play'

AND

'Humanitarian' OR 'Cris*' OR 'emergenc*' OR 'refugee*' OR 'IDP' OR 'Internally displaced*' OR 'fragile' OR 'migrant' OR 'migrat*' OR 'conflict' OR 'crisis' OR 'crises'

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Appendix 2. Disaggregated table of evidence by intervention and study type (n=42)

Study type		Case study	Field note	Impact evaluation	Most Significant Change	Baseline – endline	Participatory action research	Process evaluation	Systematic review	Total
Learning through play (LTP) as supplementary guided play and games										
Can't Wait to Learn	-	-	-	2	-	1	-	-	-	3
HEART	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Psychosocial Structured Activities	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Resilience training	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
TeamUp	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	1	-	3
Unnamed	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	2
Sub-total	2	-	-	6	-	3	-	1	-	12
LTP as formal classroom pedagogy										
PlayMatters	1	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	3
Teacher RePlay	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Ubunwe	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Sub-total	6	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	8
LTP as nonformal content and pedagogy										
Better Learning Programme (BLP)	2	-	-	-	2	1	-	-	-	5
Child Friendly Spaces (CFS)	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	3
Healing Classrooms + social emotional learning (SEL)	-	-	-	4	-	1	-	-	-	5
Humanitarian Play Labs (HPL)	-	1	-	1	-	-	2	-	-	4
Little Ripples	3	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Rapid-Ed	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
Sub-total	6	2	2	6	2	3	2	-	1	22
TOTAL	14	2	2	12	2	8	2	1	1	42

The promise of Catch-up Clubs as a robust, contextually adaptable solution for countering learning loss for conflict-affected children



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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness and contextual adaptability of Catch-up Clubs, a model developed by Save the Children to address learning loss among children, including those affected by conflict. Grounded in the Teaching at the Right Level methodology, Catch-up Clubs aim to improve foundational literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills through short learning cycles with a focus on community engagement, play-based learning and wrap-around support for children. We explore whether and how Catch-up Clubs as an evidence-based solution can be responsive to local, contextual realities. Drawing on evaluations from programmes across five countries and a case study from Colombia, the analysis highlights both the successes and challenges of the model, and how it is implemented in practice. We argue that Catch-up Clubs are not a one-size-fits-all solution but a flexible framework that can be adapted to local political, social and systemic realities to achieve meaningful, sustainable impact.

Key Words

accelerated education, teaching at the right level, foundational literacy and numeracy, education in emergencies

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Introduction

The call for papers for this special issue describes a key tension in the delivery of education in emergencies.

Based on what is generally reported, low education outcomes are often explained in terms of a lack of cost-effective technical solutions, so the key to solving them is typically seen in terms of developing solutions. This approach insufficiently considers the political economy dynamics, deeply rooted structural inequalities and incoherence in education system operations, often hindering proper implementation of available solutions. (UCL, n.d.)

This paper looks at this tension through the implementation of Catch-up Clubs, a 'technical solution' that Save the Children initially piloted in 2021 as a response to school closures triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, we use the term 'Catch-up Club' to describe a specific Save the Children intervention. 'Catch-up Clubs use the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach to grouping learners by ability rather than age or grade, first developed by the NGO Pratham (Banerjee *et al.*, 2017; TaRL, n.d). This is combined with methods developed through Save the Children's Literacy and Numeracy Boost common approaches (Morgan, 2021; Save the Children, 2018). Learners may be in school or have been out of school less than one year: this is generic guidance based on the length of time beyond which a child may need more structured, curriculum-aligned support (such as accelerated education) to meet grade-level expectations and re-enter formal school. Individual programmes can adapt this guidance, determining eligibility criteria based on local policy norms for out-of-school children or additional criteria related to children's baseline learning levels.

Catch-up Clubs can be delivered either in or outside school by community facilitators or teachers. They emphasise play-based approaches to support children's holistic development, socio-emotional learning (SEL) and psycho-social needs. Criteria for determining the fidelity of implementation are shown in Box 1. Since 2021, Save the Children has delivered Catch-up Clubs in both humanitarian and development contexts in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo,

Egypt, El Salvador, India, Indonesia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, the Philippines and Uganda.

Box 1. Principles for fidelity of implementation of Catch-up Clubs (Save the Children, n.d.)

Catch-up Clubs must:

1. Be an intensive short-term intervention
2. Use the Teaching at the Right Level methodology
3. Focus on differentiated, age-appropriate and play-based learning
4. Support children in the upper grades of primary school
5. Support children's well-being and socio-emotional learning
6. Provide additional training and coaching for facilitators
7. Include additional economic support for families
8. Strengthen child protection pathways for children.

For this paper, we root the idea of a 'solution' within the 'policy' stream of John Kingdon's Multiple Streams Approach (MSA). The purpose of the MSA is to identify how 'policy windows' are created, providing opportunities for meaningful, systemic change (Kingdon, 2010). The framework posits that these windows open at the juncture of a) the recognition of a problem, b) the existence of a policy (or programme) that proposes a viable solution to that problem, and c) the political will to use the policy solution to address that problem.

Using the MSA, we frame our opening tension as the risk that we deliver solutions that are both ignorant of the politics needed to systematise them and address the wrong problem or the wrong part of the problem. This risks the relevance, coherence, effectiveness and sustainability of programmes.

Catch-up Clubs, as a community-oriented response, present an opportunity to navigate this tension as a solution that is both portable and contextualised (Arlini *et al.*, 2023c). To understand how this opportunity has manifested in practice for children affected by conflict, we use the lens of the MSA. We first ask whether they represent a viable solution

for improving learning outcomes; in other words, if they can fulfil the requirements of the policy stream. We then examine the degree to which they are, or can, be adapted to local needs, allowing us to look at whether they can be aligned with local problems, and contextualised within local politics.

Our research questions are:

1. Do Catch-up Clubs represent a promising technical solution for improving learning outcomes of learners affected by conflict and crisis?
2. To what extent have Catch-up Clubs been delivered in ways that consider

political dynamics, structural inequalities and incoherence in the operation of education systems?

For the first question, we synthesise the findings of six evaluations covering five programmes, as shown in Table 1. These were chosen for a) their focus on populations affected by conflict, including those who have migrated due to conflict, and b) the availability of (quasi-) experimental data on impact on learning outcomes. This excludes several programmes that have been evaluated but do not meet the first criteria.

Table 1. List of reviewed evaluations

Title of evaluation	Authors	Country of focus	Year of publication
Evaluation of Catch-up Clubs' pilot in the conflict-affected areas of Rakhine and Kayin in Myanmar.	Arlini, S.M., Chia, J.S., Oo, T.Z. and Shrestha, N.	Myanmar	2023
Endline Evaluation of Catch-Up Clubs Project Phase III.	Waswaga R. and Namisi G. M.	Uganda	2024
Endline Assessment for Catch-up Clubs Project in Three Refugee Settlements in Western Uganda.	Abdalla, R.	Uganda	2023
Evaluación de Impacto de los Clubes de Lectura (Catch-Up Clubs) en Colombia.	Cortes, J. and Pava, C.	Colombia	2023
Pilot of a Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)-based approach in Lebanon.	World Bank	Lebanon	2025
Play-based, Holistic, Remedial Education Model in the Philippines: evaluating the impact of the Catch-up Clubs for displaced and conflict-affected children in the Mindanao region.	Arlini, S.M., Oo, T.Z. and Shrestha, N.	The Philippines	2023

For the second question, we look at how Catch-up Clubs have been implemented in practice, what variance has existed, and what supplementary activities have been implemented alongside them. This is done in reference to the fidelity of implementation criteria detailed in Box 1.

To contextualise this variation, we use Colombia as a case study to look at how Catch-up Clubs as a policy solution are adapted to local realities. This case study proves valuable by demonstrating the process of designing and delivering Catch-up Clubs, examined through the lens of Kingdon's MSA.

The synthesis of findings is informed by coding existing evaluation reports. We developed a

framework of questions and indicators that we used to draw excerpts from evaluation reports, which are presented here in summary tables or the report narrative. The case study on the programme in Colombia is based on the reflections and recollections of the two listed co-authors associated with the programme, along with their analysis of programme documents and data.

Do Catch-up Clubs represent a promising technical solution for improving learning outcomes of learners affected by conflict and crisis?

Table 2 shows that all the evaluated programmes have shown success in improving literacy outcomes.

This is not surprising, considering previous synthesis of Catch-up Club data across humanitarian and development contexts (Morgan, 2022) as well as the body of evidence that exists for the TaRL approach on which Catch-up Clubs are based. This includes a synthesis of the cost-effectiveness of the approach that identified TaRL as one of the World Bank’s ‘Best Buys’ for global education (World Bank, 2023). Evidence suggests that the Catch-up Clubs model has been successfully adapted and delivered for conflict-affected learners. While Catch-up Clubs

focus on developing SEL, this was not evaluated consistently across the programmes. Where it was evaluated, the results were mixed, with positive results seen in Myanmar (Arlini *et al.*, 2023a) but not the Philippines (Arlini *et al.*, 2023b). Evaluation of the programmes in Lebanon and Uganda focused on numeracy (Waswaga and Namisi, 2024; World Bank, 2025), finding significant improvement in scores as compared to a control group in Lebanon, but not in Uganda.

Table 2. Impact of Catch-up Clubs on learning outcomes

Measure	Colombia (Cortes and Pava, 2023)	Lebanon (World Bank, 2025)	Myanmar (Arlini <i>et al.</i> , 2023a)	The Philippines (Arlini <i>et al.</i> , 2023b)	Uganda*
Literacy					
Improved as compared to a control group	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Effect size (in standard deviations)	0.5				0.35
Likelihood of improving by one level (odds ratio)			7.79	5.43	
Likelihood of reaching highest level (odds ratio)			2.29	5.71	
Numeracy					
Improved as compared to a control group		Yes			No
SEL					
Improved as compared to a control group			Yes	No	

* This brings together findings from the evaluations of the second and third phases of the programme, with literacy evaluated during the second phase (Abdalla, 2023) and numeracy during the third (Waswaga and Namisi, 2024).

Table 3 shows evidence on the interaction of learner characteristics and learning gains from Catch-up Clubs. We have only included data that shows a clear interaction, rather than showing the impact of learner characteristics on learning outcomes. This data is relatively sparse. All papers report the impact of learner characteristics on learning outcomes, but only in Colombia and Uganda is the impact on treatment effects explored.

In both cases, this analysis shows groups for whom Catch-up Clubs have helped to close pre-existing gaps in learning outcomes, and those for whom it

failed to do so. In Colombia, learners from lower socioeconomic households progressed more at a lower baseline than their peers, while learners of African descent started with a lower baseline score and this gap remained at the endline. In Uganda, older learners progressed more than younger learners, and children with disabilities failed to make the learning gains that their peers did.

Where analysis of the impact on learning outcomes is not available, there are other insights provided by the evaluation reports. For example, qualitative data from the Philippines reported that cash transfers

were perceived to have reduced the burden of household work for girls, allowing more time to engage with Catch-up Clubs (Arlini *et al.*, 2023b). In Uganda, refugee learners fared better than their host community peers only when Catch-up Clubs were

run outside of schools by community facilitators. When Catch-up Clubs were delivered in schools by teachers, host community learners fared better than refugee learners (Abdalla, 2023).

Table 3. Equity findings from evaluations of Catch-up Clubs

Measure	Colombia (Cortes and Pava, 2023)	Lebanon (World Bank, 2025)	Myanmar (Arlini <i>et al.</i> , 2023a)	The Philippines (Arlini <i>et al.</i> , 2023b)	Uganda
Positive interaction with treatment effect	Children from lower socio-economic status backgrounds	None reported	None reported	None reported	Older learners
Negative interaction with treatment effect	Learners of African descent*	None reported	None reported	None reported	Children with disabilities

* We use this term as a translation of the term Afrodescendiente used in the original evaluation.

From this selection of evaluations, we can see evidence for Catch-up Clubs' effectiveness in improving learning outcomes of children affected by conflict, and a forthcoming meta-analysis published by Save the Children International will further expand on this (Pitchford *et al.*, in development). While the selected evaluations contain some costing data, it is not sufficient to draw conclusions on cost-effectiveness. Wider analysis of the cost-effectiveness of Catch-up Clubs is underway, which will allow us to draw conclusions around whether they represent a cost-effective solution. More evidence is also needed on how the effects of Catch-up Clubs are mediated by learner characteristics, and the extent to which they close or maintain pre-existing gaps in learning.

Taken together, there is strong evidence of the viability of Catch-up Clubs as a technical solution for improving learning outcomes. This gives us the confidence to say that they fulfil the needs of the policy stream of Kingdon's MSA. What remains to explore is the extent to which the solution can (and has) been adapted to align with the problem and politics streams.

To what extent have Catch-up Clubs been delivered in ways that consider political dynamics, structural inequalities and incoherence in the operation of education systems?

To help us answer this question, we want to understand:

1. What was implemented in practice, and how did this vary across countries?
2. How did teams approach the process of making these decisions, and ensure that the programme was considerate of political dynamics, structural inequalities and system (in)coherence?

What was implemented in practice?

Table 4 outlines the variation in the delivery of Catch-up Clubs across the evaluated programmes. This is based on information available from the evaluation reports and may not represent the totality of what was formally or informally implemented by programme teams.

Table 4. Activities in practice across contexts

Element	Colombia (Cortes and Pava, 2023)	Lebanon (World Bank, 2025)	Myanmar (Arlini <i>et al.</i> , 2023a)	The Philippines (Arlini <i>et al.</i> , 2023b)	Uganda
Setting	In schools	Double-shift (AM and PM) schools	Outside of schools	In school, during and around school hours	Outside of schools
Grades targeted	P3–P5 including over-age learners in P2	P3 and P4	P3–P6	P4–P6	P4–P7 (or equivalent in accelerated education programmes)
Facilitators	Community learning facilitators	Public school teachers*	Community learning facilitators	Community learning facilitators supported by mentors nominated by Department of Education	Community learning facilitators
Length of cycle	3 cycles of 10, 10 and 8 sessions	18.5 weeks (AM) 12.5 weeks (PM)	3 cycles of 3, 2 and 2 weeks with daily sessions	3 cycles of 3, 2 and 2 weeks with 4–5 sessions per week	Not reported**
Subjects covered	Spanish literacy	Arabic literacy English and French literacy Numeracy	Burmese literacy SEL	Tagalog literacy SEL	English literacy Numeracy (second phase)
Supplementary activities	Community- based child protection Provision of teaching and learning materials Cash assistance for the most vulnerable families	Support for transportation for teachers and learners	Cash voucher assistance Community- based child protection	Cash assistance for the most disadvantaged children Financial literacy support for families Community- based child protection	Back-to-school drives Support for menstrual hygiene management Training of school stakeholders Teacher professional development Awareness raising with local government Community- based child protection Levelled learning in schools

* The evaluation does not specify which subjects or grade levels were taught by Catch-up Clubs teachers.

** While not reported in the evaluation report, discussions with the programme team suggest that the model was close to the standard model of short cycles with 3–4 sessions per week.

From this we can see that the programmes implemented broadly align with the eight principles for Catch-up Clubs presented in Box 1.

What is reported through the evaluations is close to the model set out in the global guidelines for Catch-up Clubs (Save the Children, n.d.), but with variation in how these elements are put into practice. The subjects covered, setting, choice of facilitator and how closely the programme collaborates with schools and government systems vary between programmes. What is not made clear in the evaluations is the basis on which Catch-up Clubs were chosen as an intervention, and the process and rationale behind these design decisions.

In terms of supplementary activities, the level of detail on the implementation varied between evaluations, and so it is possible that there are activities that were not detailed in the final evaluation reports. From what is available, not all programmes appear to have implemented both the financial support for families and support for child protection pathways, and some included supplementary activities not included in the global guidance. This included:

- Cash assistance for families in Colombia, Myanmar and the Philippines (Arlini *et al.*, 2023a/2023b; Cortes and Pava, 2023)
- Strengthening child protection systems in Colombia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Uganda (Waswaga and Namisi, 2024; Abdalla, 2023; Arlini *et al.*, 2023a/2023b; Cortes and Pava, 2023)
- Support for the formal education system in Colombia, the Philippines, and Uganda (Waswaga and Namisi, 2024; Abdalla, 2023; Arlini *et al.*, 2023b; Cortes and Pava, 2023)
- Other activities to support access to education in Lebanon and Uganda (World Bank, 2025; Waswaga and Namisi, 2024).

In assessing the impact of Catch-up Clubs, the evaluations do not distinguish between core elements and supplementary activities, presenting them instead as single programmes. This shows us that while there is clearly a model for what Catch-up Clubs as a solution to improve literacy and

numeracy could be, it is not an off-the-shelf package but rather an approach that has been successfully implemented as part of more holistic programmes. To look at how programmes are designed in practice, we turn to a case study in Colombia.

Catch-up Clubs in Colombia

Within the La Guajira region, the impact of migration both into and within the region driven by longstanding conflicts and other crises has resulted in many over-age children being at risk of dropping out of school (UN OCHA, 2024). Drop-out is largely due to their challenges in adapting to school dynamics or school failure due to missed learning (Cortes and Pava, 2023). There is a lack of flexible education models within educational institutions to serve over-age and out-of-school children who do not meet the age and grade criteria to re-enter school.

The Catch-up Clubs were established based on previous work done with the municipal education secretariat and other educational institutions. Save the Children had previously mapped children outside the school system, and the education secretariat had worked to open pathways for these children to return to school. During this process it became clear that there was a need to support re-entry, and to mitigate the risk of these children dropping out again. The solution proposed was to create spaces outside of school to reinforce skills that allow them to overcome school challenges that arise in the process of adapting to school. Referring to the MSA framework, this shows how a problem was identified. It also shows an understanding of the political dynamics that needed to be navigated to enact change.

The approach was designed with the local cultural and ethnic context in mind, and particularly the presence of indigenous populations. To respond to this context, the design of the Catch-up Clubs emphasised motivation as a key factor in supporting school survival and learning outcomes, and the focus on community engagement in the model was seen as a way of creating stronger connections between communities and schools. The design emphasised playful learning activities that reinforced

both foundational and socio-emotional skills, which were considered essential for supporting school re-entry and continuity. Previous experience of community-based transitional learning projects allowed the project team to standardise approaches to and tools for activities such as targeting, registration, monitoring attendance, construction and pedagogical activities. All of this was necessary for contextualising and delivering the Catch-up Clubs model. Linking to the MSA framework, Catch-up Clubs were deployed as a policy solution, but done in a way that was sensitive to both the problem (i.e., the needs of the local population) and politics (i.e., what could feasibly take root and be successful within communities and the system) strands.

As is to be expected in crisis-affected contexts, implementation was not without challenges. Agreeing on timing for Catch-up Clubs within schools was difficult because of the programme's intensive nature and the scale of the need. Unforeseen events such as community campaigns or other local activities led to spaces that had been used for Catch-up Clubs no longer being available, either temporarily or permanently. Responding to logistical challenges required a dynamic approach to engaging with schools and communities to ensure continuity of delivery.

Responding to problems of the context that affect children and that put their well-being at risk, including the effects of extreme weather or different kinds of violence, also presented challenges. To this end, Save the Children used the learning space as an interdisciplinary and responsive environment. Through joint work with other schools and with communities, the design and delivery of activities was linked to topics such as environmental care, how to take care of oneself in the face of the consequences of climate change, prevention of gender-based violence, and sexual and reproductive rights. In addition to the programme's overall goal of supporting re-entry into education, these additional activities sensitised children to their rights. This included the recognition of issues in their school environment related to gender-based violence, climate change, sexual and reproductive rights and mental health. Children learned concepts and acquired skills that allowed them to identify, reflect on and navigate their way through challenging situations.

This case study shows that the basic structure of Catch-up Clubs was replicated from a global model (the policy) to respond to a local need identified through years of deep work with communities (the problem). This was done by intentionally building on collaboration within communities and with the education system (an understanding of politics). This implies an implicit recognition of the need to navigate the tension between delivering an evidence-based solution, and the need to understand and navigate local realities and concerns.

Conclusion

The challenge presented at the beginning of this paper was whether we can balance a desire for portable solutions that improve foundational skills with a need to recognise and engage with the local social and political dynamics of crisis-affected populations. We have explored how this tension is navigated through the growing body of evidence for Save the Children's Catch-up Clubs. From our review we conclude that Catch-up Clubs are a promising solution for improving foundational learning in that they have demonstrated strong learning gains across conflict and crisis contexts. More evidence is emerging on the cost-effectiveness of the model, but so far, the indications are promising.

Beyond this, we should reflect on what is meant by a 'solution'. Catch-up Clubs were delivered within holistic interventions that varied across contexts. In this sense, the 'solution' represents a set of principles or core elements that draw on an evidence base and a set of tools that allow them to be easily and quickly put into practice. This aligns with literature on scaling in education interventions (Jetten, Jones and Radford, 2024). However, in none of the evaluations can we separate the impact of the academic activities from the supplementary activities. Adapting activities to address the specific needs of learners and education systems is a core element of the Catch-up Clubs model, but future evaluations could seek to dissociate the impact of core activities and supplementary activities, for example through A/B testing of combinations of interventions.

This recognises the need for holistic approaches, as well as the need for teams to have autonomy to design packages of interventions that address local community and system needs. From our case

study in Colombia, we observe that the design process was part of a long-term trajectory built up over time and through collaboration with a range of stakeholders. It was responsive to emerging and complex local needs, the understanding of which shaped both how the programme was delivered and what it aimed to achieve for learners. This was possible while maintaining fidelity to the model.

Returning to Kingdon's multiple streams, Catch-up Clubs are a viable policy solution to the problem of learning loss for children affected by conflict and crisis. However, we should ask ourselves how we know that Catch-up Clubs are always the right policy solution, whether they are addressing the most important problems, and whether they do so in ways that are sensitive to political dynamics and system (in)coherence. As demonstrated by our case study, teams who translate solutions into practice navigate these questions in ways that are often not captured by impact evaluations. This does not mean, however, that other solutions are not available, and we should continue to consider what alternatives exist, and how we can be certain that what we are doing is the best possible use of resources.

The idea that Catch-up Clubs are 'off-the-shelf solutions' delivered without consideration for local dynamics is neither the intention of the model, nor is it occurring in practice. However, we should continue to interrogate the relevance and coherence of our programmes. This requires open discussions about alternative approaches, as well as ensuring that we regularly reflect on their unexpected or unintended consequences. In addition to building the evidence base on the cost-effectiveness of Catch-up Clubs as a solution for learning loss, we should also capture insights on how they are designed, delivered and adapted in practice.

To respond quickly in crisis and deliver interventions at scale, replicable evidence-based solutions such as Catch-up Clubs have clear value. This is particularly true in times when global funding for education in emergencies is shrinking. However, when we talk about a policy solution, we should continue to reflect on what problem we are trying to solve, and whether we have the right solutions. When we think about what works, we should ask ourselves for whom it will work, and what it will achieve. It is imperative to continue to gather evidence on effectiveness without neglecting discussions of what is happening in

practice, and how this is shaped by the local realities and the local knowledges needed for the successful application of technical solutions.

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Declaration of interest

All of the authors have had some involvement in the delivery of Catch-up Clubs, and work within the Save the Children movement. Apart from this, there are no competing financial or non-financial interests.

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Remote teaching and learning in emergencies:

A rapid evidence review

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Abstract

This rapid evidence review synthesises recent evidence on effective pedagogies and teaching practices for emergency remote learning, focusing on its relevance for future crises. Employing a rigorous methodology informed by Cochrane Collaboration guidance, the review analysed 50 sources published between 2010 and 2025, encompassing academic and grey literature on emergency remote teaching (ERT) both within and beyond the context of Covid-19. The review finds that core pedagogical principles remain relevant, but their implementation in ERT contexts requires creativity, adaptability and strong digital and pedagogical skills from educators. Despite this, there are often significant gaps in teacher training and support during crises. There is a notable absence of strong quantitative evidence directly linking ERT pedagogies to learning outcomes. However, there is an emerging robust evidence base linking interactive engagement, particularly methods to reinforce teaching presence and caregiver involvement, with improved learning outcomes in remote learning during emergencies in low- and middle-income countries.

Key Words

emergency remote teaching, pedagogy, EdTech, education in emergencies

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Introduction

Emergencies, including conflicts and natural disasters, can cause significant disruption to education systems. Ensuring learning continuity for children and youth during crises is therefore an urgent global priority. Remote teaching and learning has increasingly been adopted as a tool in crisis response to address these challenges, most notably during the 2020–2022 Covid-19 pandemic.

Whilst there have been some important recent contributions exploring the state of evidence on educational technology¹ (EdTech) in emergencies with a focus on programmes, platforms and devices (Barnes, Ramesh Vasudevan and Flam, 2025), there is a lack of research synthesising pedagogical approaches and teaching practices in emergency remote teaching (ERT) and learning. This review adopts UNICEF and EdTech Hub's (2022) definition of emergency remote learning as a method of learning where the teacher and learner are not physically present together in an academic institution as a result of an emergency. Relatedly, emergency remote teaching (ERT) is conceptualised as an urgent and temporary shift in instructional delivery to an alternative remote mode due to crisis circumstances (Iglesias-Pradas *et al.*, 2021; Thumvichit, Varaporn and Tuvachit, 2021; Hodges *et al.*, 2020). Commentators have emphasised the importance of avoiding equating ERT with online learning or more traditional distance education, arguing that 'emergency remote teaching is about creating short-term access to learning while constrained by a crisis, rather than (re)creating an instructional ecosystem' (Thumvichit, Varaporn and Tuvachit, 2021, p. 184).

It is now well established that 'how EdTech is used' is more important than 'what EdTech is used', including during emergencies (Tauson and Stannard, 2018). Hence, debates in the sector are beginning to shift from 'EdTech to PedTech' (Aubrey-Smith and Twining, 2024), as researchers and implementers seek to put pedagogy at the centre of conversations about technology in education. In light of this, this rapid evidence review asks the following critical question:

What does the available global evidence tell us about pedagogies, teaching methods and practices that are effective in supporting student learning and well-being in emergency remote education?

Methodology

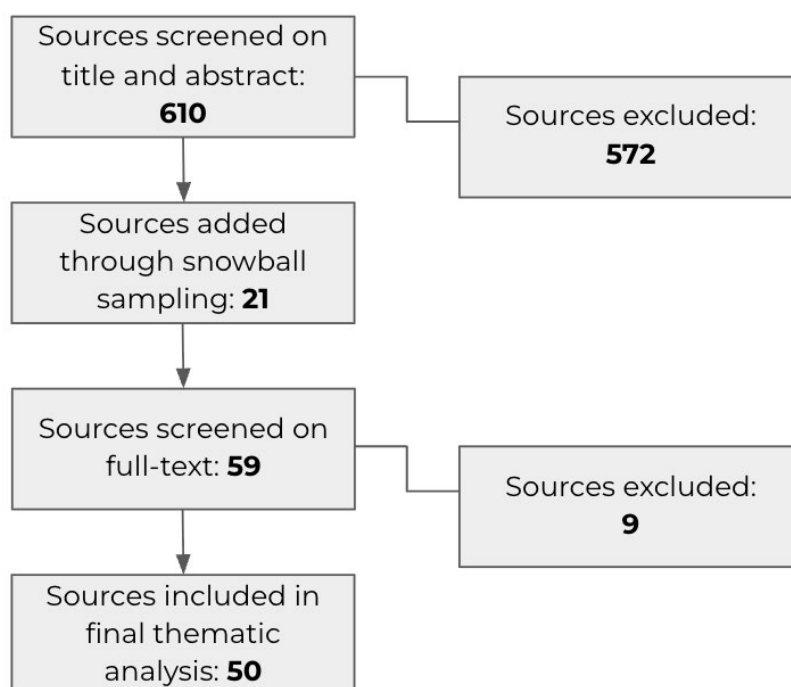
The methodological approach for this rapid evidence review is informed by Cochrane Collaboration guidance on producing rapid reviews (Garritty *et al.*, 2021). To be included, sources had to:

- relate to remote learning or distance education in emergencies and/or crisis
- have been published in English between 2010 and 2025, and
- present evidence of effective or promising pedagogical practices or teaching strategies for remote education during emergencies, or education that includes a remote component.

Keywords aligning with these parameters were combined into search strings, which were input into Google Scholar and the main Google search engine in order to capture academic and grey literature (see Annex). Additional sources were added via snowball sampling. Following a screening process involving relevance and quality checks, 50 sources were identified for analysis (See Figure 1). These sources were subject to a full-text screening whereby content relevant to the core topics of pedagogy and teaching were extracted and then inductively coded to produce key themes.

1 Technologies – including hardware, software and digital content – that are either designed or appropriated for educational purposes (Hennessy *et al.*, 2021).

Figure 1. Search and screening results



Overview of the sample

The 50 sources are detailed below by type, methodology, emergency, context and educational level.

- **Type of source:** 24 journal articles, 16 reports, two evaluations, two guidance documents, three working papers, one book chapter, one article pre-print and one background paper.
- **Type of data/methodology:** Nine desk reviews incorporating secondary data and four documents synthesising guidance from reputable experts in the field. Of 37 primary data sources, only three were randomised controlled trials; others employed mixed-methods (11), qualitative (18) or other types of quantitative methods (5). 23 sources were single-country studies, with the remainder being multi-country or cross-cutting studies.
- **Types of emergency:** 41 sources (82%) focus on the Covid-19 pandemic. Four sources refer to multiple crises, or emergencies broadly. Two sources relate to climate or natural disasters.

Three relate to situations of conflict or violence.

- **Focus contexts:** Covid-19 sources spanned low-, middle- and high-income settings. Specific crises included the war in Ukraine, violence in North-Eastern Nigeria and educational restrictions in Afghanistan (since 2022). Natural disaster contexts comprised both high-income countries (New Zealand earthquake, Hurricane Katrina) and lower-middle-income countries (Pakistan floods).
- **Educational Level:** Seven sources discuss research relating to primary education, six focus on secondary and 12 on higher education. Twenty-five sources covered a mix of educational levels (primarily K-12).

While there is an important and growing amount of evidence relating to the effectiveness of EdTech in emergencies (Barnes *et al.*, 2025), initial screening revealed a clear gap in research focusing specifically on remote pedagogies and teaching practices in emergency contexts, especially outside of the Covid-19 pandemic. This aligns with earlier reviews in this area (Crompton *et al.*, 2021). Of the sources

screened on full-text, many provided self-reported data in lieu of robust quantitative evidence linking ERT pedagogies to learning outcomes.

It is important to underline that a high proportion of sources relate to Covid-19. The pandemic has fundamentally altered the education-in-emergencies evidence landscape. Indeed, although versions of remote learning have been adopted across crisis contexts pre- and post-Covid, the label 'emergency remote teaching' grew rapidly in prominence during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many sources from the Covid-19 crisis emanate from high- or upper-middle-income contexts with robust digital infrastructure; learnings from these contexts may be therefore less relevant for low- and lower-middle-income countries. Furthermore, Covid-19 represents a specific type of crisis, characterised by prolonged nationwide school closures and limited scope for the physical convening of learners due to social distancing guidelines. Crises are diverse and multidimensional, differing by type, phase, scale and stakeholders, all of which shape the educational conditions within them (Falk *et al.*, 2024). Other types of crisis, such as conflict and environmental disaster, may affect learners in a more localised way, may be characterised by damage or disruption to physical and digital infrastructure, and may be more acute or protracted depending on the nature of the crisis. In addition, the search strings used for this review, which were primarily focused on the terms 'emergency' and 'crisis', may have limited the retrieval of relevant research from protracted crises or refugee settings that may not have been framed through an emergency lens.

Nevertheless, it makes sense to cautiously examine what can be learned from the evidence on ERT both within and beyond Covid-19 to help guide future practice in education in emergencies, whilst remaining cognisant of the fact that learnings from Covid-19 may have useful but limited application for other types of crisis.

Thematic analysis: Promising approaches to remote teaching and learning during crises

McAleavy and Gorgen's (2020) rapid evidence review undertaken at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic summarises what was then known

about best practice in remote teaching. They report that the general principles of effective pedagogy remain consistent across face-to-face and remote teaching, but that remote teaching presents specific challenges. Other sources synthesising secondary data on both remote learning and EdTech in emergencies form similar conclusions, variously asserting that core principles of pedagogy – such as active and personalised learning, scaffolding and feedback, student engagement, and content that hooks onto previous learning – remain key to effective learning regardless of context (Bharti and Musthafa, 2023; Guglielmi *et al.*, 2021; Education Endowment Foundation, 2020; Tauson and Stannard, 2018). However, the specific challenges associated with remote teaching necessitate significant adjustments in how these pedagogical principles are put into practice. These challenges can be: (1) technological, e.g. issues with connectivity or access to devices for learning; (2) pedagogical, e.g. difficulties in structuring content, lack of digital skills among teachers and learners, lack of learner engagement, lack of social and cognitive presence among teachers, difficulties in tracking student progress remotely; and (3) social, e.g. lack of interaction between students and teachers, or amongst peers (Ulla and Perales, 2021; Doucet *et al.*, 2020; Ferri, Grifoni and Guzzo, 2020).

The following discussion explores insights from the literature regarding promising practices for implementing these principles in remote learning during crises, organised thematically in three sections: (1) Instructional design and preparation, (2) Pedagogy and delivery and (3) Teacher support.

Instructional design and preparation

In discussing the effective adaptation of education to suit a remote learning context, available research emphasises the ways in which curriculum and content may need to be redesigned to better suit this alternative teaching and learning modality. Literature emphasises the importance of prioritising core subject content when changing the modality of instruction in order to reduce costs and use time most efficiently (INEE, 2022; Barron Rodriguez *et al.*, 2021). In terms of the volume of content, some literature suggests that it is unrealistic to replicate the pace and type of work that would be done at school (Doucet *et al.*, 2020), and reducing content was highlighted by other research as a key practice to

enable effective remote learning (Fan Su, Wang and Kohnke, 2024; Clum *et al.*, 2022; Barron Rodriguez *et al.*, 2021). UNESCO guidance developed at the outset of Covid-19 through crowdsourcing amongst teachers, academics and professionals also strongly affirms the primacy of health, safety and well-being considerations when developing plans for ERT (Doucet *et al.*, 2020).

Communication and sensitisation in preparation for ERT

Given the significant shifts in delivery methods and educational content required for transitioning to ERT, a key theme in the literature is the importance of clear and consistent communication, ensuring that learners, caregivers and teachers are fully informed of the modified plans. Evidence emphasises the importance of establishing communication protocols at the system level – typically coordinated by departments or districts – to ensure concise, timely messaging during school closures (Doucet *et al.*, 2020). At the school and class levels, setting clear expectations for students and caregivers is crucial for maintaining learning continuity (Ahmadi, 2024; Fan Su, Wang and Kohnke, 2024; Mackey, Gilmore and Dabner, 2012). Leveraging widely used social media tools – such as WhatsApp, Facebook and other messaging platforms – proved effective for disseminating guidance and updates during Covid-19, especially in low-resource contexts (Shraim and Crompton, 2020).

Balancing synchronous and asynchronous instruction in ERT

In relation to remote instructional design during crises, there was significant discussion in the literature as to the optimal balance between synchronous and asynchronous learning. The Education Endowment Foundation's (2020) rapid evidence review found no clear difference in outcomes between synchronous and asynchronous teaching. However, subsequent research indicates some degree of nuance.

For example, Horváth's (2023) study, which surveyed over 4,000 teachers in Hungary during the pandemic, identified pedagogical strategies that teachers perceived as particularly successful with specific groups of learners. The study found that for primary students, a loosened structure with more supportive teacher behaviour, formative

feedback and asynchronous learning opportunities was the most appropriate approach. In contrast, for lower secondary learners, more teacher control, summative feedback and synchronous learning opportunities were perceived to be more effective. Other research from high-income countries echoed these findings, with a UK study concluding that the most effective approach to distance learning may be 'phase-dependent' with 'pre-made asynchronous and paper-based materials being more commonly used in primary settings, while live teaching was more popular in secondary school settings' (Müller and Goldenberg, 2021, p. 7).

Elsewhere, qualitative case studies and expert guidance suggest a mix of both synchronous and asynchronous formats, tailored to the specific context (Clum *et al.*, 2022; Doucet *et al.*, 2020). Clum *et al.* (2022) describe how university instructors in the United States, New Zealand and South Africa varied the types of synchronous and asynchronous learning activities to maximise learner engagement during Covid-19. Other available research also highlights the importance of a contextualised approach for learning equity. For example, at the higher education level in conflict-affected and low-income contexts, asynchronous content, such as pre-recorded lessons, may be particularly valuable as it can provide flexibility and access for students with limited connectivity (Kaminsky, 2024; Koh and Daniel, 2022). However, Koh and Daniel's (2022) systematic review found that although learning access equity strategies were successful in maintaining some level of student equity through asynchronous learning, this created challenging student learning experiences and affected learning consistency.

Pedagogy and delivery

Part of the perceived value of synchronous learning is that it promotes student–teacher interaction (Fan Su, Wang and Kohnke, 2024). Ultimately, as Lennox, Reuge and Benavides (2021) assert in their analysis of UNICEF data on education during Covid-19, the data trends indicate that what really matters for student learning are interactions among educators, learners and educational materials.

Teaching presence in ERT

In particular, developing and maintaining 'teaching presence' is considered vital for enabling learners

to thrive in remote settings. According to McAleavy and Gorgen's review of literature on remote teaching and learning, available research 'highlights the importance of developing and maintaining "teaching presence", in order to ensure that learners thrive when studying remotely' (2020, p. 2). Furthermore, in emergency contexts, a strong teacher presence may serve a dual function by also supporting the well-being of learners navigating uncertainty and instability (Ahmadi, 2024; Corcuera and Alvarez, 2021; Toquero and Toquero, 2023; INEE, 2022; Khlaif *et al.*, 2020; Rose, Aslam and Downing, 2021; UNESCO, 2020; Mackey, Gilmore and Dabner, 2012).

Indeed, a number of sources across all educational levels highlighted the role that teachers play in supporting students' well-being during ERT (Toquero and Toquero, 2023; Ahmed and Opoku, 2022; Clum *et al.*, 2022; Müller and Goldenberg, 2021; Rose, Aslam and Downing, 2021; Thumvichit, Varaporn and Tuvachit, 2021; Doucet *et al.*, 2020; Green, Burrow and Carvalho, 2020). For example, in their evaluation of Girls' Education Challenge (GEC-II) programmes focusing on teachers and teaching, Rose, Aslam and Downing (2021) describe how teachers were at the front line of providing both adapted learning opportunities and critical well-being information and pastoral support. However, some evidence suggests that these additional responsibilities may be associated with poorer student performance. US language teachers attributed lower academic outcomes during the Covid-19 emergency to attention diverted to students' 'basic needs' (Moser, Wei and Brenner, 2021, in Thumvichit, Varaporn and Tuvachit, 2021).

Peer interaction for learning and well-being

Peer interaction also emerges within the research as a critical component for both engagement with learning and students' emotional resilience (Ahmadi, 2024; Clum *et al.*, 2022; Khan *et al.*, 2021; Doucet *et al.*, 2020). Literature across different educational levels highlights that opportunities for students to connect with one another – through structured group work, informal check-ins or peer discussion forums – contribute to both learning and psychosocial well-being (Ahmadi, 2024; Kissau *et al.*, 2024; Clum *et al.*, 2022; Khan *et al.*, 2021; Müller and Goldenberg, 2021; Doucet *et al.*, 2020; Green, Burrow and Carvalho, 2020). For instance, following

Hurricane Katrina in the US in 2005, student and faculty accounts highlighted how class discussions and student-to-student interactions provided emotional support and a shared space for dealing with the aftermath of the disaster (Clum *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, students in China who felt socially supported by both teachers and peers reported significantly higher levels of engagement in remote language learning during the Covid-19 pandemic (Thumvichit, Varaporn and Tuvachit, 2021).

However, research with university students in Lebanon and India during Covid-19 found that students perceived student–content engagement, such as accessing class recordings or screen sharing by the instructor, to be more effective than student–teacher or student–student interactions such as Q&A sessions or group work (Abou-Khalil *et al.*, 2021). Abou-Khalil *et al.* (2021) suggest that in low-resource settings where access to full and complete course content cannot be assumed, students may prioritise access to educational content over interactive ERT opportunities.

Interactivity in 'low-tech' settings

In lower resource settings not served by online learning, teacher presence and peer support were still considered key contributors to student learning and well-being in ERT. Indeed, this is one of the areas where we see the strongest evidence of impacts on learning outcomes within the literature. Some of these efforts can be categorised as remote teaching, as they took place via phone calls or messaging (Rose, Aslam and Downing, 2021; Angrist *et al.*, 2020). Others adopted a hybrid approach, reinstating a physical teacher presence at the community level to support broader remote learning strategies (Wawire *et al.*, 2023; Khlaif *et al.*, 2020).

For instance, in North-East Nigeria during the Boko Haram insurgency, combining remote radio instruction with mobile classroom visits proved 25% more effective for literacy and numeracy than radio alone (Jacob and Ensign, 2020). GEC-II projects also found community-based teachers instrumental in supporting girls' engagement and reducing dropouts (Rose, Aslam and Downing, 2021). Research highlights the importance of community-based teachers supporting girls' remote radio learning in Kenya during Covid-19 school closures (Pacitto *et*

al., 2023). Notably, a mixed-methods study found that these radio lessons were not associated with higher performance unless girls listened in groups facilitated by community teachers (Amenya *et al.*, 2021).

In a rapid randomised trial in Botswana during the Covid-19 pandemic, Angrist *et al.* (2020) found weekly SMS maths problems augmented by a 15-20 minute facilitator phone call yielded positive effects twice as high as SMS alone because it provided personalised support, motivation and accountability. However, one-to-one calls can face scalability issues in low-resource settings due to high human resource requirements (Islam *et al.*, 2022).

Caregiver Participation in ERT

Caregivers are crucial in mediating EdTech use and may take on teaching tasks during emergency remote learning (Barnes, Ramesh Vasudevan and Flam, 2025; Lennox, Reuge and Benavides, 2021). In Angrist *et al.*'s (2020) study of SMS/phone-learning support in Botswana, the authors assert that with light support from facilitators, parents may partially substitute for schooling by acting as 'at-home teachers' (Angrist *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, teachers from a mixed-methods study in Bangladesh reported that parental and sibling engagement and support can help to achieve learning outcomes using simple pedagogical methods (Khan *et al.*, 2021).

A randomised controlled trial on interactive audio lessons in Bangladesh also highlights the crucial role of caregiver involvement as facilitators, with a key finding suggesting that success depends on caregivers being motivated, having a clear role and being regularly 'nudged', such as being sent reminders via SMS (Islam *et al.*, 2022). The studies by Islam *et al.* (2022) and Angrist *et al.* (2020) focus on primary-level learners, and other research similarly indicates that caregiver involvement is particularly important at the primary level, where children are less able to learn independently and it can be more difficult for teachers to adapt age-appropriate content into digital formats (Kaminsky, 2024).

There are, however, significant considerations in emergency and low-income contexts that pose challenges to caregiver engagement in children's remote learning. Kaminsky (2024) highlights the difficulties of maintaining high levels of parental support during wartime conditions in Ukraine.

Other sources highlighted inequalities in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) that can also affect parents' capacities to support their children's learning (Mazari *et al.*, 2023; Khan *et al.*, 2021). For example, in the context of the 2022 Pakistan floods, findings from a case study involving 89 parents and teachers indicated that families lacked time and sometimes literacy skills to support their children's learning (Mazari *et al.*, 2023). This finding is also substantiated by Aurino, Tsinigo and Wolf (2022), who revealed that nudge messaging designed to increase caregiver engagement with their children's remote learning was ineffective when caregivers had no formal schooling.

Feedback in ERT

Guglielmi *et al.*'s (2021) report on 'what works' to support learning outcomes for girls in emergencies, which collected data through a rapid evidence review and expert consultations, affirms the link between teacher presence and another key pedagogical tenet: feedback. They found that 'distance teaching presence, including feedback between teacher and learner, promotes stronger learning outcomes and builds social and emotional skills' (Guglielmi *et al.*, 2021, p. 17).

Although some studies report challenges in developing appropriate formative and summative assessments for remote learning contexts (INEE, 2022; Moretti-Pires *et al.*, 2021), other studies provide examples of innovative practice in this area. Wawire *et al.*'s (2023) scoping review of Covid-19 responses in sub-Saharan Africa highlights that assessment practices focused on take-home quizzes and homework, social media and web-based assessment platforms, high-stakes examinations and evaluation of learning loss. In higher education settings, innovative assessment approaches included oral assessments via video calls, asynchronous assignments with open-book formats, randomised digital quizzes and video-recorded student presentations (Moretti-Pires *et al.*, 2021).

In terms of impact, regular formative assessment was found to have contributed to positive student perceptions of remote teaching at the higher education level in high-income settings (observed in the United Arab Emirates) (Ahmed and Opoku, 2022), and reported as key to effective remote

teaching by teachers working at lower secondary levels in lower income contexts (Occupied Palestinian Territories, Afghanistan, Libya) (Khlaif *et al.*, 2020). Equally, Rose, Aslam and Downing's (2021) study links teacher feedback to sustained motivation and engagement with learning by primary and secondary learners.

Alongside feedback from teachers to students, the literature also highlighted the importance of establishing feedback channels from learners and caregivers to teachers and decision-makers. These channels are a critical component of effective remote pedagogies and enable productive adaptation in the delivery of ERT, particularly when adopting modalities that are new or untested in a given context (Ahmed and Opoku, 2022; Doucet *et al.*, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020).

At the system level, during Covid-19, countries deployed low-tech tools such as SMS (Tanzania), chatbots (Mongolia) and platforms like U-Report (the Gambia and Moldova) to gather feedback from parents and stakeholders, informing real-time improvements in remote education (Dreesen *et al.*, 2020). According to Barron Rodriguez *et al.* (2021), education systems that embedded robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, as well as a culture receptive to feedback, were more successful in tailoring remote learning to the evolving needs of teachers and learners.

Teacher support

The critical role played by teacher training and support in enabling effective ERT is highlighted in several studies, covering all educational levels (Cameron *et al.*, 2024; Kasperski, Porat and Blau, 2023; Barron Rodriguez *et al.*, 2021; Muñoz-Najar *et al.*, 2021; Rose, Aslam and Downing, 2021; Dreesen *et al.*, 2020; Ferri, Grifoni and Guzzo, 2020; McAleavy and Gorgen, 2020). Some research also asserted the importance of continued teacher professional development in gender-responsive digital pedagogies in particular, to support girls' learning outcomes during remote learning (Guglielmi *et al.*, 2021; Rose, Aslam and Downing, 2021). Rose, Aslam and Downing (2021) highlighted the importance of adjusting TPD during the Covid-19 crisis to reflect the expanded roles and responsibilities of teachers 'including issues such as remote or adapted pedagogies, psychological first

aid (PFA), and Covid-19 safety' (p. 31).

Some literature refers to the adoption of communication methods to create digital communities of practice (CoP). These forums can be effective as both a source of information and exchange of best practices for remote teaching and also to perform a social-emotional function for teachers working in a crisis context, building a sense of community and providing a safe space for teachers to share their concerns (Clum *et al.*, 2022; Barron Rodriguez *et al.*, 2021; Ulla and Perales, 2021; Green, Burrow and Carvalho, 2020; Shraim and Crompton, 2020).

Many sources, however, also identified a lack of TPD or pedagogical experience among teachers – or a lack of access to support or training in digital skills or remote pedagogies – as a key barrier to ERT (Cameron *et al.*, 2024; Mazari *et al.*, 2023; Wawire *et al.*, 2023; INEE, 2022; Center for Learning in Practice, 2021; Khlaif *et al.*, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020). Literature from LMICs in particular indicates that only a limited number of teachers were able to benefit from TPD on remote teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic (Cameron *et al.*, 2024; Wawire *et al.*, 2023; Khan *et al.* 2021).

As well as not serving learners well, the lack of teacher training and support during the Covid-19 pandemic was shown through the literature to have had negative impacts on teacher well-being (Burns, 2023; Rose, Aslam and Downing, 2021; Khan *et al.*, 2021), and existing global evidence suggests that teachers struggled with burnout and anxiety over this time (Muñoz-Najar *et al.*, 2021).

Discussion and conclusion

This rapid evidence review examines literature on effective pedagogies and teaching practices for remote learning during crises. Thematic analysis of this literature indicates that core pedagogical principles remain essential for successful remote instruction. However, transitioning these principles into ERT contexts presents significant challenges and demands creativity, adaptability and strong digital and pedagogical skills. While teacher training and support are critical enablers, significant gaps evident in recent crises (particularly Covid-19) have impacted both teacher effectiveness and well-being. The rapid evidence review also highlights the

interconnectedness between instructional design, pedagogy and student well-being. Adaptation of content and structure, plus reassertion of core pedagogical principles like student–teacher and peer interaction, serve a dual purpose: promoting student learning and fostering well-being. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the most effective ERT relies on interactive engagement, which encompasses the key themes of teaching presence, peer interaction and caregiver involvement.

Sources provide examples of good practice, with some (primarily self-reported) data related to effectiveness and student satisfaction and some showing improvements in student well-being linked to specific modalities of teacher–student engagement and support. There also seems to be an emerging foundation of more rigorous quantitative evidence in LMICs linking methods reinforcing ‘teaching presence’, including methods to support caregiver enactment of teaching presence, to improved learning outcomes in remote learning. At the same time, there is some evidence to suggest that effective ERT may differ by educational stage, with younger learners benefiting more from flexible, asynchronous and caregiver-supported approaches, and older learners from more structured and synchronous methods.

Although the literature insights are informative, perhaps the most critical finding of this review is the absence of discussion relating to pedagogy within much of the EdTech literature retrieved during initial screening, particularly with regards to literature on crises beyond Covid-19. There is equally an enduring lack of robust quantitative evidence linking ERT pedagogies to learning outcomes and measurable metrics of social and emotional well-being, or on the interplay between technology and pedagogy in driving remote learning outcomes.

Building on these insights, we identify two key implications for future research: (1) adopt a ‘pedagogy-first mindset’ and (2) rethink the parameters of ‘ERT’.

As decision-makers, implementers and educators working on education in emergencies in LMICs build on the lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important that resources are allocated to generate robust evidence on how to maximise the effectiveness of ERT in diverse crisis contexts by aligning technological tools with sound pedagogical

beliefs and approaches. Future research should prioritise building on promising evidence from LMICs to interrogate causal links between specific methods for reinforcing teacher presence, caregiver involvement and peer interaction and both learning outcomes and improvements in well-being across different educational levels.

The parameters of this review, informed by prominent conceptualisations of ERT (Iglesias-Pradas *et al.*, 2021; Thumvichit, Varaporn and Tuvachit, 2021; Hodges *et al.*, 2020), provided a feasible scope for the work. However, the emphasis on ‘emergency’ and ‘crisis’ within the search strings may have prevented the retrieval of relevant evidence from protracted crisis settings that were not framed using this terminology (e.g., Schwartz *et al.*’s 2024 randomised controlled trial on caregiver delivery of remote early childhood education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon). Future evidence reviews could therefore build on this work through more targeted searches to retrieve evidence from chronic and protracted crises. Furthermore, researchers working in this area should consider adapting current definitions of ERT so that they are more closely aligned with established education in emergency frameworks such as the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Minimum Standards (INEE, 2024).

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Declaration of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies

The original paper written for this rapid evidence review was over 10,000 words. The authors used Gemini Pro 2.5 Flash to assist with the reduction of content to 4,000 words as per the word limit for this journal. Following editorial recommendations, the authors rigorously reviewed and edited the AI-condensed article to ensure the quality and meaning were maintained across versions.

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Annex: Search strings

For Google Scholar:

- ("remote teaching" OR "student-centred remote teaching" OR "remote education" OR "distance education") AND ("emergency" OR "crisis" OR "low- and middle-income countries" OR "natural disasters") AND ("teaching best practices" OR "pedagogy" OR "teaching strategies") NOT ("covid-19" OR "pandemic")
- ("pedagogy" OR "teaching methods" OR "teaching best practices" OR "pedagogical techniques") AND ("remote teaching" OR "distance learning" OR "remote learning") AND "emergencies"
- ("pedagogy" OR "teaching methods" OR "teaching best practices") AND ("remote teaching" OR "distance learning")
- ("remote teaching" OR "student-centred remote teaching" OR "remote education" OR "distance education") AND ("conflict" OR "earthquake" OR "floods" OR "natural disasters") AND ("teaching best practices" OR "pedagogy" OR "teaching strategies")
- "remote instruction" AND ("emergency education" OR "education in emergencies" OR "crisis-affected education") AND ("effectiveness" OR "impact") AND ("pedagogical strategies" OR "best practices teaching")
- ("remote teaching" OR "student-centred remote teaching" OR "remote education" OR "distance education") AND ("conflict" OR "earthquake" OR "floods" OR "natural disasters") AND ("teaching best practices" OR "pedagogy" OR "teaching strategies")
- ("digital pedagogical strategies" OR "teaching best practices" OR "teaching guidance") AND ("remote teaching and learning" OR "remote education" OR "distance education" OR "distance learning") AND ("natural disasters" OR "earthquakes" OR "floods" OR "hurricane" OR "conflict")
- ("pedagogy" OR "teaching methods" OR "teaching best practices" OR "pedagogical techniques") AND ("remote teaching" OR "distance learning" OR "remote learning") AND "emergencies" Date range: 2010-2019

- ("pedagogy" OR "teaching methods" OR "teaching best practices" OR "pedagogical techniques") AND ("hybrid" OR "blended learning") AND ("crisis" OR "emergency")

For Google main:

- pedagogical practices, distance learning, remote teaching
- best practices, distance learning, remote teaching, emergencies
- best practices for remote education distance learning in emergencies and crisis
- best teaching practices for distance learning, remote education, conflict, crisis
- remote learning, emergencies
- pedagogy, remote learning, crisis
- pedagogy teaching best practices for remote education distance learning in emergencies and crisis (1 Jan 2010 – 31 Dec 2019)
- teaching strategies practices for distance learning remote education in emergencies conflict crisis disaster (Jan 1, 2010 – Dec 31, 2019)

Expanded roles, limited support: A critical review of teacher professional development and professionalisation in conflict and protracted crisis settings



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Abstract:

Despite global commitments to quality education and widespread recognition of teachers' unparalleled role in their learners' lives, teacher professional development (TPD) fails to meet teachers' needs. This failure is felt acutely in education in emergencies and protracted crises (EiEPC), where teachers contend with complex classroom dynamics and face similar adversities as their learners. Further, this failure exacerbates the de-professionalisation of the teacher workforce, even as education is idealised as a solution to social challenges. This paper aims to identify effective approaches to TPD that support and enhance teachers' professionalisation in EiEPC. Applying intersectionality and political economy as a hybrid theoretical lens, we reviewed 158 publications and concluded that TPD can enhance professionalisation in practice and policy through bolstering teacher agency, providing recognised qualifications and linking TPD with career progression. Yet, contextual barriers pose significant challenges for achieving this, leaving teachers without the critical support they deserve.

Key Words

teacher professional development, teacher professionalisation, intersectionality, political economy

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Introduction

The role of teachers in education in emergencies and protracted crises (EiEPC) cannot be underestimated. Teachers provide academic and psychosocial support to their learners, often taking on 'expanded roles' to protect the holistic well-being and development of children and youth amidst adversity (Falk, 2023; Kirk and Winthrop, 2007; 2013). They do so despite receiving insufficient support for their professional development, and in spite of global commitments to uphold quality education and lifelong learning (Mendenhall, 2024a; Burns and Lawrie, 2015). In tension with these global commitments is the disinvestment in and de-professionalisation of the teaching workforce (Akyeampong, 2022).

Research suggests that government, humanitarian and development actors are failing to provide quality teacher professional development (TPD) in low- and middle-income countries as well as those affected by conflict and crisis (Popova *et al.*, 2022; Burns and Lawrie, 2015). TPD refers to learning that strengthens teachers' knowledge, skills and other characteristics as educators, with the goal of improving teaching practice and learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017). Conflict and crisis exacerbate challenges in designing and delivering TPD, leaving teachers to contend with complex teaching and learning environments with little-to-no support (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2019; 2015). Further, in these settings, teachers often experience the same hardships as their learners, yet few policies and programmes focus on supporting teachers' professional or personal well-being (Brandt and Lopes Cardozo, 2023; INEE, 2021; Falk *et al.*, 2019).

There is growing evidence in EiEPC, documenting challenges and opportunities for delivering quality TPD (Pherali and Mendenhall, 2023; INEE, 2019; 2022; Burns and Lawrie, 2015). However, this research either evaluates individual interventions or reports on the general challenges facing TPD. We seek to bridge these bodies of literature to identify effective approaches for TPD that enhance teachers' professionalisation in EiEPC by asking three interrelated questions:

1. How can TPD enhance teachers' professionalisation in EiEPC?
2. What are the persistent challenges and promising practices in implementing quality TPD?
3. How do these approaches vary by teacher profile?

To answer these questions, we reviewed 158 academic articles and grey literature on TPD and teachers in EiEPC. We apply intersectionality as a theoretical lens to analyse how social categories and characteristics shape teachers' access to and experiences in TPD (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). Our analysis also takes a political economy approach in order to identify the political, economic, social and cultural factors and processes that inform TPD as well as how power shapes decision making and service delivery (Carvalho and Dryden-Peterson, 2024; Hickey and Hossain, 2019). We find that TPD promotes professionalisation in practice and policy as an ongoing process and as a tangible outcome by strengthening teacher agency, offering recognised qualifications, and aligning with career advancement opportunities. However, contextual constraints thwart the realisation of these benefits, leaving teachers without the essential support they need to thrive.

This paper begins with background information on teacher profiles and TPD in EiEPC. Then, we introduce our hybrid theoretical framework and outline our methodology before presenting findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of key tensions that emerged from the findings and reflections on the utility of intersectionality and political economy approaches for TPD research in EiEPC.

Background: Teacher profiles and TPD in EiEPC

Teachers' profiles

Teachers in EiEPC have multifaceted profiles, and recent typologies offer a useful framework for identifying teacher populations (Mendenhall, 2024a; Kirk and Winthrop, 2013; Sesnan *et al.*, 2013):

- **National teachers** have citizenship in the country where they are working in EiEPC. They teach in schools in refugee camps

or settlements, host communities, and urban centres; those working in camps and settlements are often deployed far from their homes. While most national teachers have recognised teaching qualifications, their training often does not include teaching in EiEPC. In some settings, there may also be national teachers who lack formal teacher qualifications but join the profession to fill teacher gaps.

- **Refugee teachers** are refugees who teach in camp, settlement or community schools; in a few instances, they may teach in national public schools. They often do not have the legal right to work in the host country and are employed as volunteer teachers by international non-governmental organisations (I/NGOs). In most cases, qualified and unqualified refugee teachers lack access to formal TPD that culminates in recognised qualifications. Refugee teachers with formerly earned qualifications may no longer be in possession of official documents or have access to equivalency processes.
- **Internally displaced teachers** have been displaced within their country of origin and work in schools in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, settlements or host communities. Similar to refugee teachers, they may have been teachers before displacement or joined the profession when displaced. They often face challenges in the following areas: collecting salaries, particularly if they have to travel to retrieve their payment in centralised location points that may be a distance from their communities; claiming basic entitlements and benefits; and accessing TPD that culminates in recognised qualifications.
- **Returnee teachers** are refugees or IDPs who, upon returning to their country or community of origin, resume teaching. They may have been formally trained before displacement and/or received TPD from I/NGOs during their displacement. They cannot work in the national education system without recognised qualifications.

Regardless of their profile, teachers in EiEPC face numerous challenges, including overcrowded classrooms with learners of varying ages, languages and psychosocial needs; limited teaching materials;

inadequate infrastructure; irregular pay; and insecure employment (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2015; 2019; Winthrop and Kirk, 2008). In some contexts, teachers are targeted with violence (Marchais *et al.*, 2025; Brandt, 2021), and most experience similar hardships as their students (Falk, 2023; Adelman, 2019). Despite these conditions, access to quality TPD remains limited (Burns and Lawrie, 2015). Many teachers enter the profession spontaneously – due to prior education, community leadership or economic necessity – as it is one of few viable options (Falk, 2023; Kirk and Winthrop, 2007). Without adequate TPD to build knowledge, skills and career pathways, these teachers often develop tentative professional identities, which in turn affect teaching quality and retention (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2019; Kirk and Winthrop, 2007).

Types of TPD

TPD is fundamental for improving education quality as teachers are the strongest school-level factor for student achievement (Akyeampong, 2022). The literature documents three main categories of TPD:

- **Pre-service teacher education** refers to the formal training teachers receive before joining the profession, culminating in recognised qualifications. In most cases, national teachers attend pre-service training in institutions known as primary teacher colleges (PTCs) or teacher training colleges (TTCs) for between two and four years, combining theoretical classes with practical student teaching. In EiEPC, most refugee and IDP teachers lack access to pre-service training if they cannot meet entry requirements or if restrictive labour policies apply; instead, they receive a brief induction training organised by their employer – often an I/NGO – that may last as little as one day (Mendenhall, 2024a; Burns and Lawrie, 2015).
- **In-service teacher education** refers to the ongoing training provided by PTCs, TTCs or I/NGOs to upgrade teachers' qualifications and refresh teachers' knowledge and skills. In-service training varies in length and in whether it culminates in recognised qualifications, depending on the provider and teacher profile. As with pre-service training, access to formal in-service training that culminates in recognised qualifications is limited or completely unavailable for displaced teachers,

particularly refugees, who frequently face restrictions enrolling in PTCs and TTCs and joining the national teaching workforce (Kirk and Winthrop, 2013; Sesnan *et al.*, 2013).

- **Continuous professional development (CPD)** refers to professional development support outside of training workshops, such as coaching, mentoring, supportive supervision and communities of practice. Many TPD interventions in EiEPC from I/NGOs integrate CPD with in-service teacher education; however, these efforts face challenges with sustainability due to funding cycles and constraints across the humanitarian and development sectors (Mendenhall, 2024a; Burns and Lawrie, 2015).

While there has been growing recognition of the need for more robust and continuous TPD, current practices still heavily rely on short-lived, one-off training events. This leaves teachers unsupported and isolated in their efforts to manage complex responsibilities inside and outside of their classrooms.

Theoretical framework

Intersectionality was introduced as a framework to analyse how individuals' social identities interact to shape their lived experiences, particularly in relation to systems of oppression and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). It has since been employed as a theoretical lens in education and refugee and forced migration studies (Taha, 2019; Tefera *et al.*, 2018); however, few studies have explicitly connected intersectionality with TPD. We apply intersectionality to examine how social categories and characteristics of teachers in EiEPC – such as gender and displacement status – influence their access to and experiences in TPD. Intersectionality enables us to assess the dynamic relationships between individual and institutional factors and how these interactions shape teachers' experiences of inequality.

Political economy approach enables a better understanding of the broader contextual factors

that influence education systems, and more specifically teachers, in EiEPC. Education systems are embedded within complex historical, social, political and economic contexts that shape their underlying purposes, policy orientations and day-to-day practices. Political economy analysis (PEA) recognises the complexity of these contexts by examining the processes and incentives that create, sustain or change the distribution of power among different groups over time (Zetter, 2021; Hickey and Hossain, 2019). Many scholars have utilised PEA in EiEPC to illuminate how power dynamics, governance structures and political settlements influence what reforms are prioritised, how they are carried out, and who benefits from them (see for example, Carvalho and Dryden-Peterson, 2024; Pherali and Sahar, 2018; Novelli *et al.*, 2014). However, few studies focus specifically on teachers or TPD, which limits understanding of the factors that enable or restrict TPD's potential to strengthen teachers' professionalisation.

Methodology

We conducted a scoping review to analyse evidence on TPD in EiEPC, drawing from diverse sources including empirical research, theoretical work and existing reviews spanning academic and grey literature publications (Munn *et al.*, 2022). The review was guided by Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-step framework, which involves formulating the research question, gathering relevant literature, selecting studies for inclusion, organising the data, and presenting a summary of the results.

This study builds on a large-scale review of evidence in EiEPC led by the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Programme,¹ which analysed 482 peer review articles and grey literature with the ERICC Conceptual Framework (Kim *et al.*, 2026). Publications for this review were identified through: 1) two existing systematic reviews in EiEPC (Burde *et al.*, 2019; 2015); 2) seven country-level rigorous literature reviews in Bangladesh, Jordan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria; and 3) searches in academic databases (e.g. Education Resources Information Center,

1 Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) is a six-year EiEPC research programme funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) that aims to address critical evidence gaps and identify the most effective approaches for improving access, quality and continuity of education to support sustainable and coherent education systems and holistic learning outcomes for children in conflict and crisis settings.

EBSCOHost in Google Scholar) and websites of humanitarian and development organisations. These searches in academic databases – which included key words such as teachers, TPD and training – added an additional 40 sources, bringing the total to 522 publications.

We reviewed these 522 sources and coded them with four key labels: teachers (general), TPD, teacher management, teacher well-being and school leadership. In total, the coded sources resulted in 158 studies that we review in this paper, 36 of which focus specifically on TPD policies or practices. While this scoping review focuses on TPD, we draw on all 158 studies because TPD cannot be disconnected from teachers' lived experiences or from the broader conditions of their work (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2024; Shah, 2023). Nevertheless, this paper has limitations, including the exclusion of non-English publications due to language limitations of authors, and methodological constraints preventing a structured systematic review.

Findings

Quality TPD in EiEPC

There are two main mechanisms for TPD delivery in EiEPC: national systems overseen by the government and parallel systems led primarily by I/NGOs or by non-state local actors. The majority of the research focuses on in-service teacher education in parallel systems provided by I/NGOs, primarily for refugee and national teachers (INEE, 2019; 2022; Bergin, 2017; Burns and Lawrie, 2015). Operating outside of national systems impedes opportunities for TPD to enhance teachers' professionalisation and poses challenges for sustainability. Compounding these challenges is the competitive service provision environment in many EiEPC settings, with TPD remaining fragmented with little incentive for alignment (Mendenhall, 2024a; Burns and Lawrie, 2015).

Evidence demonstrates that quality TPD is continuous, practical and contextualised to classroom realities (Popova *et al.*, 2022; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2021a; INEE, 2022; 2019; Burns and Lawrie, 2015). It focuses on strengthening relationships and integrates time for teachers to practice what they learn during and in-between training workshops in supportive environments with their peers (INEE,

2022; 2019; Bergin, 2017; Burns and Lawrie, 2015). Quality TPD often takes a whole-school approach that bolsters efforts to transfer knowledge from TPD into practice through collective efforts of teachers and support from school leadership (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2021a).

Quality TPD enhances the professionalisation of teachers by involving them in the design, implementation and evaluation of their learning and linking TPD with career progression pathways (Mendenhall, 2024a; 2024b; Burns and Lawrie, 2015). For TPD to be successful, it must be accompanied by efforts to improve the conditions where teachers work, including decent and regular compensation and benefits, longer term contracts, improvements to school infrastructure, and access to sufficient and relevant teaching and learning materials (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2024). It must also recognise and address larger contextual barriers – such as the right to work or freedom of movement for refugee teachers (Shah, 2023).

TPD and professionalisation

Quality TPD enhances the professionalisation of teachers in practice and policy, both by process and by outcome. By process, upholding professionalisation in TPD requires taking an assets-based approach that recognises teachers as educational experts and partners in designing, delivering and evaluating their learning (Zakharia, 2024; Mendenhall, 2024b; INEE, 2022; 2019; Pherali *et al.*, 2020). Fostering assets-based approaches is relevant and applicable to all forms of TPD. By outcome, TPD can enhance the professionalisation of teachers by culminating in recognised qualifications – across contexts (e.g., host country, country of origin) – that are connected to career progression opportunities and compensation scales (Mendenhall, 2024a; Tsegaye, 2023a). Concerning both process and outcome, TPD should strengthen teacher agency – that is, teachers' ability to actively inform their work and its conditions at the school, community or national level (Edwards, 2023; Sayed *et al.*, 2021; Biesta *et al.*, 2015).

Professionalisation in practice

There are numerous examples of TPD initiatives that centre professionalisation in practice, the majority of which are in-service led by I/NGOs and/or national

and foreign universities that operate outside of national systems, such as the International Rescue Committee's Healing Classrooms Initiative (HCI) in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone (Wolf and Peele, 2019; Wolf *et al.*, 2015; Kirk and Winthrop, 2007; 2008; 2013; Winthrop and Kirk, 2008); the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) Transforming Education in Challenging Environments in Lebanon, co-designed and produced with Lebanese and Syrian teachers and professors from the University College London (UCL) and the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS) (Moghli, 2023; Pherali *et al.*, 2020); and the Teachers for Teachers initiative in northwest Kenya, co-developed and implemented with refugee and national teachers, the Teachers College at Columbia University, the Lutheran World Foundation (LWF) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Mendenhall, 2024b; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2021b).

These initiatives were informed by rigorous research, oftentimes qualitative and action research, and were developed in collaboration with teachers to facilitate their meaningful participation in the process of designing, delivering and evaluating their TPD. This approach ensured that TPD was relevant and responsive to teachers' classroom realities. Collaborating with teachers in curriculum development and co-facilitation, particularly on sensitive topics like corporal punishment, enhanced cultural appropriateness and local buy-in (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2021b; Pherali *et al.*, 2020). While these initiatives embraced partnerships with teachers – regardless of their profile – and disrupted hierarchical knowledge dynamics, they failed to work with and through national systems, which limited their ability to provide recognised qualifications upon completion. Additionally, these interventions did not assess the extent to which they enhanced teachers' agency.

A few promising examples of I/NGOs working within national systems also emerged from the evidence that enabled teachers to gain recognised qualifications in TPD. In Chad, refugee teachers (primarily from Sudan) can acquire both primary and secondary education teaching certifications through Chadian TTCs. Through agreements between the TTCs, UNHCR, and/or other I/NGOs (which include scholarship support for tuition fees), refugee teachers can complete condensed coursework during school

holidays and acquire nationally recognised teaching credentials. While this opportunity contributes to overall teacher professionalisation and improved wages (in some cases), refugee teachers are limited to teaching in the refugee camps (Mendenhall and Hough, 2024; St. Arnold, Fouda and Bruni, 2023). The TTCs also provide CPD to their teacher trainees, but it has proven difficult for teacher educators and supervisors to provide consistent support to teachers working in remote refugee camps (Mendenhall and Hough, 2024; St. Arnold, Fouda and Bruni, 2023).

Another promising example emerged in Central Europe, where UNICEF supported the integration of displaced Ukrainian teachers into host country education systems (Naletto, 2023). In the Czech Republic, UNICEF helped design and implement an 80-hour qualification course to prepare Ukrainian teaching assistants to support children in schools. In Slovakia, UNICEF collaborated with the National Institute of Education and Youth (NIVAM) to offer Slovak language courses to achieve full certification (B2 level), a key step toward the recognition of their qualifications (Naletto, 2023).

While these models are important for teachers' professionalisation and TPD sustainability, evidence suggests that national pre- and in-service teacher education is theory-heavy and delivered through lectures, leaving little time for teachers to experience the pedagogies they are learning or to practice these new approaches themselves (Popova *et al.*, 2022; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2021a). Additionally, there is little evidence on the impact of these interventions, which limits our understanding of teachers' experiences of these programmes and how they felt their professionalisation was enhanced.

Professionalisation in policy

Few TPD initiatives explicitly prioritise teacher professionalisation in policy, although some promising examples have emerged. The Djibouti Declaration on Refugee Education (2017), developed by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) – a bloc of eight countries in the East and Horn of Africa – affirms the rights of refugee and returnee teachers to remain in the profession. It promotes their integration into national education systems and calls for strengthened regional and national frameworks, including mechanisms for

cross-border recognition of qualifications (Tsegaye, 2023a). The declaration also emphasises the importance of pre- and in-service TPD for improving education quality. To advance this, IGAD, in partnership with GIZ and Particip GmbH, piloted an in-service TPD programme for refugee and national secondary teachers in Ethiopia, Sudan and Uganda, in collaboration with national ministries of education. The programme exceeded initial reach targets and was recommended for inclusion in national in-service systems. However, it failed to yield recognised qualifications, improved compensation and benefits, or enhanced career advancement opportunities – essential elements of teacher professionalisation (Tsegaye, 2023b).

Another policy-level effort to professionalise teachers through TPD can be found in Uganda in the 2019 National Teacher Policy, which requires all teachers to have a bachelor's degree in education by 2030 (Republic of Uganda MoES, 2018). For national and refugee teachers, the latter of whom can work in Uganda should they hold Ugandan qualifications to teach, this new policy introduced acute stress and fear of losing their jobs, as many teachers could not afford to upgrade their qualifications and there were limited-to-no scholarships to do so (Mendenhall and Richardson, 2024). Furthermore, it was unclear how much of the teachers' former training could be counted towards this degree, or whether national pre- and in-service teacher education curricula had been assessed and improved with this policy enactment, which – if not done – would compromise the policy's potential of strengthening support to teachers despite upgrading their qualifications (Mendenhall and Richardson, 2024; Falk, 2023).

These examples emerge from relatively progressive refugee policy contexts in the East and Horn of Africa that are open to the inclusion of refugees into national systems, yet their implementation remains hindered by fragmented legal frameworks governing refugee rights. While the right to education is often provided, the focus – and funding – is primarily on learners' basic education and not on teachers' professional learning. At the same time, the right to work and freedom of movement is often restricted, preventing refugee teachers from travelling for TPD that culminates in recognised qualifications or to formally join the national teacher workforce upon completing national TPD programmes (Mendenhall *et al.*, forthcoming; Mendenhall and Falk, 2023;

Gichuhi, 2023; Kurian and Kurian, 2023). Segregated teacher management systems are common in more restrictive policy environments, such as those in Bangladesh, Malaysia and Tanzania (Mendenhall, 2024a). Refugee teachers across settings receive lower pay, few or no opportunities for professional development, and limited career progression compared to national teachers or refugees in other sectors. These conditions undermine teacher professionalisation, reduce teaching quality, and hamper retention efforts (Henderson, 2025; Mendenhall and Henderson, 2024; Shohel *et al.*, 2024; Rahman and Husain, 2022; Kiriuki and Angoye, 2018).

The dearth of evidence on TPD for IDP teachers also limits our understanding of the challenges and opportunities for enhancing their professionalisation – highlighting the urgent need to invest in research and programming on TPD in IDP settings, particularly since IDPs make up the largest percentage of those forcibly displaced (UNHCR, 2025). Finally, the experiences of female teachers require attention (Kirk, 2008; 2004; 2003). Teaching is a highly gendered profession, which manifests differently across settings and educational levels, where you might observe female teachers concentrated in lower grades, earning less pay, and receiving less recognition for their work. Professionalisation efforts for female teachers require additional care if they have been recruited into the teaching profession without having finished secondary school or having acquired the minimum academic qualifications for entry into PTCs and TTCs.

Conclusion

Improving TPD that enhances teachers' professionalisation in EiEPC requires more than isolated interventions – it demands a systems-oriented, holistic approach that grapples with persistent structural tensions. First, while teacher training remains the most common form of teacher support due to its necessity and feasibility, it continues to be delivered in short-term, fragmented ways, limiting its long-term impact despite the emergence of innovative and promising practices. Second, even the most well-designed and well-resourced TPD initiatives cannot offset the consequences of poor teacher compensation, which drives attrition and necessitates repeated

investments in training new cohorts – undermining efforts to build a sustainable teaching workforce (Mendenhall *et al.*, forthcoming). Third, although aligning TPD with certification and formal qualification pathways is a crucial step toward professionalisation, such efforts are often disconnected from broader employment and policy frameworks, especially for refugee teachers in host countries (Mendenhall *et al.*, forthcoming). Finally, even when the path forward is clear, donors and their implementing partners may not want to invest limited resources in upgrading teacher qualifications as teachers' needs are often secondary to learners' needs despite the obvious link between the two. The current disruptions to education sector financing are likely to further rollback efforts to support these costs (Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2025; Huckstep *et al.*, 2025). National governments may also discourage it given their inability to assume oversight and financial responsibility. Without absorptive capacity and political will to integrate trained teachers into national systems and ensure stable career trajectories for all profiles of teachers in EiEPC, professionalisation risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

Addressing these tensions requires coordinated policy and programmatic responses that move beyond technical fixes toward political commitment and structural change. By applying intersectionality and political economy approaches in tandem, future work on TPD in EiEPC can move beyond surface-level interventions to generate deeper, contextually grounded insights. Intersectionality can illuminate how overlapping identities such as gender, displacement and qualification status shape teachers' differential access to TPD and their experiences within it, thereby ensuring that research and programming avoid one-size-fits-all solutions. Political economy analysis helps unpack the structural conditions, financing flows, governance arrangements and power dynamics that sustain or constrain reform, offering a clearer understanding of why promising initiatives succeed or stall. Taken together, these approaches can link the micro-level realities of teachers' lives with the macro-level forces that shape education systems. This hybrid lens provides new directions for research by promoting inquiry into underexplored teacher profiles (such as IDPs and female teachers), underexamined policy environments, and the long-term impacts of TPD on professionalisation. For policy and practice,

it highlights the need for strategies that are not only technically sound but also politically feasible, equitable and responsive to diverse teacher realities. In doing so, intersectionality and political economy can support the development of transformative TPD policies and practices that strengthen teacher professionalisation and, ultimately, improve the quality of education in crisis-affected contexts.

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Conspicuous absence: Pre-service teacher education for education in emergencies and protracted crises



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Abstract

This paper reviews the integration of content related to education in emergencies and protracted crises (EIEPC) into pre-service teacher education and training (PRESET) in conflict-affected contexts. Through a critical interpretive synthesis of normative frameworks, policies and empirical case studies, the review explores PRESET norms and initiatives embedding mental health and psychosocial support, socio-emotional learning, inclusive pedagogy, peace education, trauma-sensitive pedagogy and ways to deal with controversial issues. The richest body of practice comes from community-led initiatives and refugee camps where innovations have emerged, albeit relatively few and small in scale. Overall, evidence of systematic PRESET integration is rare. Its absence is the most remarkable, and concerning, finding of this review. In light of the current global situation and declining funding, more engagement with national PRESET systems is urgently needed to reach the masses of teachers who otherwise enter the profession unprepared for conflict-specific dynamics.

Key Words

pre-service teacher education, education in emergencies, teacher professional development

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Introduction

Over the past 25 years, practical insights and research evidence on education in emergencies and protracted crises (EiEPC) have shaped a distinct field of policy, programming and research (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2024). The roles of teachers in peacebuilding (Horner *et al.*, 2015; Sayed and Novelli, 2016) and higher education in peacebuilding (Kester, 2021; Milton and Barakat, 2016; Millican *et al.*, 2021) have been documented, yet the links between these two research strands have received far less attention. Indeed, pre-service teacher education and training (PRESET) programmes that include content on EiEPC in conflict- and crisis-affected settings remain rare (Brandt *et al.*, 2022). Teacher professional development (TPD) approaches for EiEPC tend to be project-based, in-service, short-term, fragmented and not always well aligned with national education systems (INEE, 2022; Haßler *et al.*, 2020; Sayed and Bulgrin, 2020). As a result, most teachers enter the profession unprepared for the challenges of these contexts.

Integrating EiEPC into PRESET offers multiple benefits: promoting equitable TPD to all teachers and not just those targeted through short-term projects; reducing donor dependence and fostering local ownership in a climate of declining international funding, thereby enhancing sustainability and better supporting the aims of the humanitarian–development–peace nexus. As Millican *et al.* (2021, p.582) wrote, ‘University teacher training departments can play a unique role in leading the future of schooling in places deeply affected by trauma and division’.

Previous reviews of TPD with a similar thematic and geographic scope focused on in-service training (Kisaakye *et al.*, 2024; Mitchell *et al.*, 2024; INEE, 2019 and 2022). This article addresses this gap in exploring the following research question:

- What evidence exists on integrating EiEPC-related content into pre-service teacher education in conflict-affected contexts?

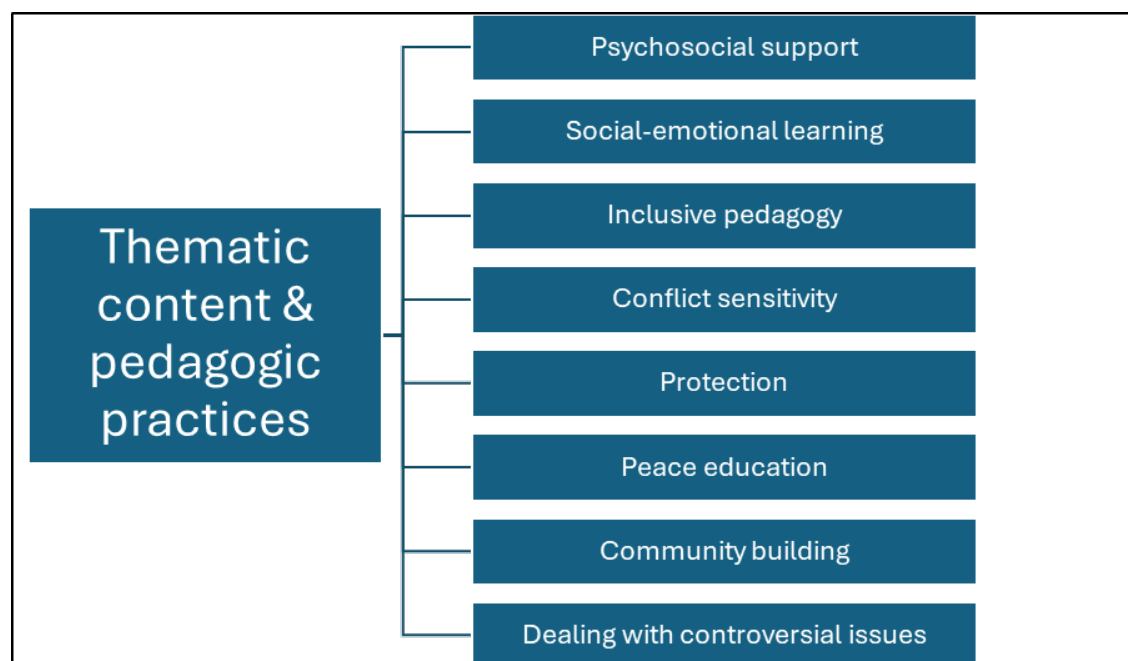
The paper begins by outlining the methods and analytical approach before analysing the literature identified through the search process. Overall, we find that research on national-level PRESET is relatively scarce, challenging to identify and largely descriptive. The most substantial evidence base

derives from community-based initiatives and programmes for refugee teachers, which have developed innovative models out of necessity but remain small in scale. This notable absence of systematic PRESET integration is a central finding of the review and underscores the urgency of pursuing systemic reforms to embed EiEPC within national teacher education systems, alongside research to support such efforts.

Methods and analytical approach

We carried out a rigorous review of themes and content that are relevant to education in emergencies in PRESET in conflict-affected contexts. Our objective was to identify and analyse literature about the integration of content related to EiEPC (subject-content knowledge and pedagogical-content knowledge) into PRESET curricula and practices in contexts of acute and recurrent armed conflicts (see Figure 1). The goal was not to better understand specificities around the relevant content, such as trauma-sensitive approaches in PRESET in general. Rather, we wanted to understand the developments that have taken place over the past 25 years in conflict-affected contexts.

Figure 1. EiEPC-related content



We consulted the following academic databases: Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, PubMed, Google Scholar, EBSCO, 3ie repositories and JSTOR. Grey literature was sourced from relevant international organisations such as Education Cannot Wait, Education Development Trust, Global Partnership for Education (GPE), Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), Norwegian Refugee Council, Save the Children, UNESCO IICBA, UNESCO IIEP, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and UNICEF. The search included publications in English and French. The relevant content and themes we explored, and hence search strings we applied, are mainly based on concepts described in INEE Minimum Standard 14: Training, Professional Development, and Support, plus one term that points to a policy dimension ('strategy') and, finally, three different ways of describing PRESET (see the following list: 'pre-service' OR 'initial teacher education' OR 'teacher college'). Additionally, drawing from previous research that highlights the importance of this issue (Marchais *et al.*, 2022), we included the question of how teachers deal with 'controversial issues' in the classroom, a topic that is not covered by the INEE Minimum Standard. Variations of the following were applied, matching the specificities of the different websites,

as well as their French translations:

('education in emergencies' OR 'conflict-affected context' OR 'emergency' OR 'crisis' OR 'conflict' OR 'displacement' OR 'child protection' OR 'refugee' OR 'psychosocial support' OR 'social emotional learning' OR 'peace education' OR 'conflict sensitive education' OR 'trauma' OR 'strategy' OR 'controversial issues') AND ('pre-service' OR 'initial teacher education' OR 'teacher college')

We repeated this by successively adding the name of each of the countries included in our sample. No specific timeframe for publications was applied. Given the paucity of resources that met the criteria for inclusion, we reached out to approximately a dozen practitioners and researchers working in the field of TPD in EiEPC to source additional documentation.

Regarding our inclusion/exclusion criteria, we included normative frameworks, policy documents, teacher guides, studies on national-level PRESET and papers on PRESET equivalents for refugee teachers in refugee camps. National curricula and policy documents were limited to the 38 countries on the World Bank's 2026 List of Fragile and Conflict-affected Situations, while literature on

refugee camps was included without geographic limitation. The absence of documents in Arabic or Ukrainian may have led to the exclusion of relevant sources. Likewise, this sampling approach omitted literature from Israel, since only the West Bank and Gaza are on the World Bank's list. Papers on PRESET in conflict-affected contexts that did not address EiEPC content (e.g. Burke *et al.*, 2020) were excluded, as were studies focused solely on higher education or on conflict-sensitive education within higher education without links to EiEPC or teacher education. Evidence from in-service teacher training was not considered. Research on teaching refugee students outside camps or conflict-affected settings (e.g. in Canada), and studies focusing exclusively on disasters, climate change or the Covid-19 pandemic were also excluded. A key limitation of this desk-based review is that EiEPC-related content in national PRESET curricula may not be visible in public sources, potentially underrepresenting existing materials; however, the review found no indication that such content is currently available.

The review included 19 documents in total: nine normative and ten empirical (five national-level, two community-based and three on refugee teachers). The normative frameworks span Africa, the Arab region and the global level. Country cases are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa – Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, South Sudan and Zimbabwe – with additional cases from Myanmar, the West Bank and Jordan, and Ukraine. Most studies employ qualitative methods, including document and policy analysis, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and classroom observations, with some using surveys or longitudinal administrative data. The identification of only two community-based programmes should not be taken as evidence that others do not exist; rather, it likely reflects the difficulty of finding and locating such initiatives, many of which operate informally, are poorly documented or are recorded in local languages beyond our search scope.

This review follows the principles of critical interpretive synthesis (Depraetere *et al.*, 2020), a qualitative, iterative approach for integrating and critically analysing diverse forms of research evidence. This goes beyond aggregating findings by emphasising interpretation and re-conceptualisation of evidence to generate new insights and theoretical

understandings relevant for policy, practice and future research. Unlike traditional systematic reviews, which rely on predefined frameworks and narrow inclusion criteria, critical interpretive synthesis is adaptive and reflexive, allowing engagement with a broad range of study designs and iterative refinement of concepts and relationships. This makes it particularly valuable for complex fields such as EiEPC, where evidence is heterogeneous and context dependent (Mitchell *et al.*, 2024).

Findings: Pre-service TPD on EiEPC

Our research found no fully institutionalised PRESET with specific content on EiEPC in conflict-affected contexts. Overall, we found that EiEPC content for PRESET in conflict-affected and crisis settings is largely or fully absent in prominent publications on TPD in EiEPC contexts (Kisaakye *et al.*, 2024; GPE, 2022; INEE, 2019; 2022; Sayed and Novelli, 2016) as well as evaluations of relevant programmes, notably Education Cannot Wait's Multi-Year Resilience Programmes (Venäläinen, Anderson and Elite, 2021). The following analysis is separated into four main types of literature: normative frameworks (including training guides and strategies), national level (empirical), community based (empirical) and refugee camps (empirical).

Table 1. Key findings

Literature reviewed	Key findings
Normative frameworks (including training guides and strategies)	Provide strong conceptual foundations for integrating EiEPC and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into teacher preparation, but rarely distinguish clearly between pre-service and in-service training, and concrete operational guidance for PRESET is mostly absent.
National level (empirical)	Evidence is fragmented and largely descriptive. Some policy reforms mention inclusive, peace or trauma-informed approaches, but implementation remains partial, uneven and far from institutionalised.
Community based (empirical)	The most innovative and context-responsive PRESET models come from community-led initiatives. These programmes embed EiEPC content effectively but remain small-scale and locally specific, and are rarely documented comprehensively.
Refugee camps (empirical)	PRESET pathways exist but are limited. Promising examples show how accredited or structured preparation can support teacher competence and continuity, yet evidence is primarily narrative and focused on implementation rather than systemic integration.

Normative frameworks

National EiE strategies remain scarce. We only found EiE strategies in Burkina Faso and DR Congo as well as a ‘Teacher Professional Guide on Education and Disasters’ in Zimbabwe (Ministère de l’Éducation nationale et Nouvelle Citoyenneté 2025; Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de l’Alphabétisation et de la Promotion des Langues Nationales, 2019; Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2019). None of these addressed PRESET. While a tight application of our inclusion and exclusion criteria should have discarded them for this reason, we decided to include them to demonstrate the absence of EiEPC PRESET in relevant policies which intend to address the triple nexus and improve planning, coordination and governance structures around EiEPC.

The INEE Minimum Standards provide a widely used normative framework for teacher training in emergencies (INEE, 2024). Minimum Standard 14 on Training, Professional Development, and Support is especially relevant to understanding the potential scope of PRESET in conflict-affected and protracted crisis contexts. Three aspects stand out for this review. First, the Standard acknowledges that crisis situations often require condensed and context-responsive pre-service models. Teacher preparation may need to be accelerated in order to address shortages, but should nevertheless include core competencies for working with learners affected by displacement, trauma and disrupted schooling. This

creates a rationale for examining evidence on ‘rapid or modular pre-service approaches’ and whether these contribute to teacher effectiveness in crisis settings. Second, the guidance emphasises the integration of crisis-relevant content into teacher education curricula. This includes mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), socio-emotional learning, child protection, health and safety, inclusion of marginalised learners, and preparedness for climate or disaster-related disruptions. Third, the Standard underlines that PRESET should be embedded within broader systems of professional support, including mentoring, peer learning and communities of practice.

The Teachers in Crisis Contexts Peer Coaching Pack, developed by an inter-agency working group convened by INEE, provides standardised but adaptable content to train teachers working in emergency and refugee settings (INEE, 2018). While it has been widely used in in-service programmes, in PRESET we found evidence of its use only in the case of a community-based programme in Myanmar (Kayah, 2019).

The UNESCO (2024) guide on Transformative Education in Pre-Service Teacher Training in the Arab Region provides a normative and conceptual framework. In our sample, the countries that fall under common definitions of the ‘Arab Region’ are Iraq, Libya and Palestine. The guide outlines how transformative education, rooted in global citizenship

education, peacebuilding, sustainability and rights-based frameworks, can be embedded into PRESET. It emphasises transversal integration across subjects, co-created learning and pedagogical shifts toward affective and behavioural learning domains. Developed from a multi-country consultative process, it promotes theoretically grounded strategies for future institutionalisation in higher education systems.

The Continental Strategy on MHPSS for Teachers in Africa (African Union Commission, 2025) highlights PRESET as a key driver of systemic change. The monitoring framework includes an indicator on the 'share of countries that integrated MHPSS content in pre-service teaching curriculum' (p.8). Under Pillar 1: 'Enabling Environment', Strategic Objective 2 calls for collaboration between education systems, universities and teacher training colleges to embed MHPSS in both pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes, equipping future educators to manage their own mental health and support peers (p.20). This is operationalised under Pillar 2: 'Teacher Training and Community Sensitisation', Strategic Objective 4, which targets 'teacher training on MHPSS (pre-service and in-service)' (p.21). However, the strategy does not explore the differences between pre-service and in-service programmes. In line with this strategy, UNESCO's International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA) has developed a comprehensive training guide and piloted face-to-face training programmes for pre- and in-service teachers in several African countries (UNESCO IICBA 2023). While providing strong content and practical orientation, these initiatives likewise do not distinguish between the specific needs of pre- and in-service training.

An initiative led by the Government of South Sudan and the Curriculum Foundation co-developed a national pre-service syllabus for early childhood and primary education (Curriculum Foundation, 2023). The National Teacher Education Policy and its Implementation Strategy incorporate concepts such as inclusion, child protection and safeguarding, peace and life skills education, gender equity and learner-centred, contextually rooted pedagogy (Ministry of General Education and Instruction, 2023a; 2023b). The strategy also emphasises teacher wellbeing and alignment with professional standards and codes of conduct. While these

priorities reflect international EiEPC discourse, the available documentation remains descriptive. References to detailed syllabuses and a guidance booklet suggest further operationalisation, but without these materials it is difficult to assess how far the reform advances concrete, crisis-responsive and participatory teacher preparation.

Taken together, the frameworks call for embedding EiEPC, MHPSS and transformative education in PRESET, yet they often fail to distinguish clearly between pre- and in-service training, and few national EiE strategies address PRESET directly. The 'rapid or modular pre-service approaches' mentioned in the INEE Minimum Standard 14 warrant closer examination in future research.

National level (empirical)

At the national level, we identified four case studies on initiatives to embed EiEPC content in PRESET: inclusive education in Iraq, trauma-sensitive pedagogy in Ukraine, peace education in Zimbabwe and Nigeria, and dealing with controversial issues in DR Congo.

In Iraq, Murad and Bartels (2024) and Vierbuchen and Bartels (2024) trace evolving efforts to bring inclusive education into PRESET. While not framed explicitly as EiEPC, these reforms respond to the legacies of conflict, discrimination and exclusion that shape Iraqi classrooms. Integration has remained uneven: inclusive education is promoted in policy and curriculum reform, with some new content introduced in teacher education programmes and NGO-led workshops, yet specialised modules are limited and implementation at training institutes remains fragmented.

Holovatenko (2023; 2024; 2025) analyses trauma-informed PRESET reforms in Ukraine. The 2023 study examines pre-service teachers' perceptions of their knowledge and competence in trauma-informed practices during wartime. It finds limited perceived knowledge but higher confidence in applying strategies, indicating both readiness and a curricular gap, and argues for systematically embedding trauma-informed content into PRESET. The 2024 article shifts to institutionalisation, showing how trauma-informed principles can be integrated into syllabus design. Drawing on comparative pedagogical research and the Missouri

Model,¹ it proposes strategies such as inclusive language, content warnings, flexible deadlines and student choice. The 2025 book chapter extends this to language teacher education, outlining a competency-based matrix of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for trauma-informed practice. Triangulating curriculum analysis, policy frameworks and teacher perspectives, it positions trauma-informed teaching as a core competence for educators in crisis-affected settings.

We also found evidence of a limited number of initiatives to integrate peace education into PRESET in countries affected by conflict or fragility. In Nigeria and Zimbabwe, some dimensions of EIEPC content have been formally or informally integrated into PRESET with varying depth and institutionalisation. In Nigeria, Muhinat (2021) documents a longstanding policy commitment to integrating peace education into teacher education and its formal inclusion in the National Commission for Colleges of Education curriculum. However, as the author explains, this integration often remains superficial or textbook-based, with lecturers lacking training and pedagogical capacity to deliver peace education effectively. The review highlights fragmentation across institutions and a lack of clarity in content delivery. In Zimbabwe, a study on peace education in pre-service colleges finds that while it is recognised in policy and curriculum documents, it is rarely timetabled or assessed (Makoni, 2015). Instead, it is delivered as part of other subjects such as Religious and Moral Education or Social Studies. Lecturers often rely on didactic rather than experiential pedagogies, limiting its transformative potential. Nonetheless, they note increased interest among lecturers and suggest that peace education has potential for expansion if formally embedded into pre-service modules.

Documented cases highlight that teachers have been harassed, imprisoned or even attacked for discussing politically sensitive topics (GCPEA, 2024). Sheria Nfundiko's thesis (2020) and chapter (2021) document a teacher education initiative in eastern DR Congo (Bukavu), which integrates peace education into PRESET. The approach includes teaching about local conflict history and supporting student teachers to explore the roots and impacts of

conflict in the region. A key pedagogical focus lies in helping pre-service teachers to 'decentre' dominant narratives and engage with multiple perspectives, particularly through storytelling and classroom discussions. Nfundiko (2020) critiques formal curricula for their omissions and instead proposes a more grassroots-oriented, relational pedagogy rooted in local realities.

Overall, where PRESET integration is reported, it is partial and uneven, often superficial or textbook-based (Nigeria, Zimbabwe) or omitted from formal curricula (DR Congo), with Iraq an exception due to its inclusion-focused curriculum work. Overall, no case demonstrates a fully institutionalised EIEPC PRESET.

Community based (empirical)

In rare cases, grassroots initiatives addressed gaps in state-led EIEPC within PRESET, most notably in Myanmar, where local organisations have developed their own teacher training models. The Karen Teacher Working Group (KTWG), a community-based NGO on the Thai–Myanmar border, established the Karen Teacher Training College, which provides both PRESET (via its Teacher Preparation Centre) and continuous professional development (Johnson, 2016; Naw Sandrena, Naw Eh Wah Paw and Saw Way Can, 2025). The KTWG model addresses the realities of hard-to-reach, crisis-affected areas, integrating themes such as community engagement, peace education, conflict-sensitive learning environments, multilingual and culturally relevant pedagogy, and preparation for teaching in resource-constrained and unstable environments. Teachers are trained to work in mobile schools, use low-tech methods and respond to the needs of displaced learners, thereby promoting long-term teacher development rooted in communities.

Recent evidence from Naw Sandrena, Naw Eh Wah Paw and Saw Way Can (2025) shows that amid intensified conflict following the 2021 military coup, KTWG-trained teachers were able to maintain education delivery, support learners' emotional and psychosocial needs and adapt to crisis conditions through collaborative, flexible and socially responsive practices. The study highlights how trained teachers

1 The Missouri Model is a Developmental Framework for Trauma-Informed Approaches, see: <https://dmh.mo.gov/media/pdf/missouri-model-developmental-framework-trauma-informed-approaches>.

helped sustain community cohesion and educational continuity during displacement and school relocation. It documents significant increases in student enrolment and shows that teacher retention and morale remained high despite insecurity.

In Kachin State, Myanmar, the New Generation Teacher Training Center, established by Jesuit Refugee Service and the Catholic Diocese, provides seven months of PRESET followed by a practicum and two years of continuous professional development for teachers working in internally displaced and conflict-affected communities controlled by ethnic armed organisations (Kayah, 2019). The curriculum draws on Myanmar's teacher competency standards and the Teachers in Crisis Contexts Training Pack, integrating child-centred pedagogy, classroom management, lesson planning, peacebuilding and child protection, including measures to prevent recruitment into armed groups. As of 2019, 81 teachers had completed the training. This represents a clear example of PRESET embedding EiEPC content, although the lack of formal accreditation limits its recognition and scalability within the national system.

In sum, community providers demonstrate impressive PRESET embedding of crisis-responsive content, with credible operational effects despite their relatively small scale.

Refugee camps (empirical)

Most TPD programmes for refugee teachers are in-service, while formal options in refugee settings remain limited or absent (Richardson, MacEwen and Naylor, 2018). In Ethiopia, research shows that 'there is no pre-service training offered for refugee teachers and PRESET for national teachers does not consider refugee teaching environments.' (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2020, p.14). Nonetheless, our findings indicate that given the protracted nature of many refugee crises, some have begun to broaden their focus to PRESET.

Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) is an initiative in the Dadaab refugee camps (Kenya) that creates an accredited academic pathway for refugee and host community teachers (BHER, 2025; Miller *et al.*, 2019). BHER offers a one-year Certificate in Education Studies (accredited by York University, Canada) for aspiring teachers without post-secondary education, followed by a Diploma

in Teacher Education from Kenyatta University. It intends to offer 'equitable, inclusive, gender-sensitive, and culturally-responsive university' programmes (BHER 2025, 2nd paragraph) and applies a social justice lens (Miller *et al.* 2019). The curriculum covers foundational pedagogy (child development, classroom management, subject instruction) tailored to local needs. The delivery modality is blended: courses combine online learning with on-site instruction in the camps, supported by teaching practicums in local schools. BHER shows promising effects, as more than 300 teachers have graduated with a teaching degree and graduates are now teaching in Kenya and Somalia, with some progressing to bachelor's or master's studies (University of British Columbia, 2025). Alumni have founded new schools, led in-service training and counselling in the camps and contributed to girls' retention. Overall, evidence is largely narrative and funding of the programme has ended.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has long invested in systematic teacher preparation for its schools serving Palestinian refugees (UNRWA 2023; Pontefract and Dabit, 2019). Its two pre-service colleges in Jordan and the West Bank have offered structured programmes for decades, upgrading in 1993 to a four-year, degree-level programme leading to a first university qualification. Graduates are required to teach in UNRWA schools for two years, creating a pipeline of qualified teachers. Building on this foundation, UNRWA's 2013 Teacher Policy set out to strengthen classroom practice and career pathways, leading to the integration of peace and citizenship dimensions through its Inclusive Education, Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance toolkits, but it remains unclear how this has been absorbed by the PRESET programme. Evidence suggests the UNRWA approach has paid off: the World Bank (2014) reported that UNRWA attracts high-quality teachers and that its students outperform peers in public schools. Together, these measures illustrate a coherent strategy that links robust PRESET with continuous professional development to prepare, support and retain teachers in refugee contexts. However, concrete data or conceptualisations on PRESET are largely absent from major policy documents (UNRWA, 2011; 2013).

In sum, PRESET in refugee camps pathways remain

rare but promising, with evidence largely narrative in documenting implementation and reforms.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how far conflict-related EiEPC content is integrated into PRESET in conflict-affected and protracted crisis settings. Overall, we found that EiEPC PRESET is severely underrepresented in both normative frameworks and empirical evidence. We acknowledge the argument that rapid in-service training may be more feasible in emergencies, yet our review suggests that relying on it alone reinforces short-termism and leaves most teachers chronically underprepared. Across our review, only a small set of relevant documents could be identified, which we categorised into four dimensions: (1) normative frameworks, (2) national-level PRESET, (3) community-based PRESET and (4) PRESET for refugee teachers.

Among the normative frameworks, the Continental Strategy on MHPSS for Teachers in Africa stands out for its explicit inclusion of PRESET. Other frameworks, such as the INEE Minimum Standards and UNESCO's guides on transformative education, highlight relevant areas but remain more aspirational than operational. Rapid or modular pre-service approaches mentioned in INEE Minimum Standard 14 merit further attention in subsequent studies.

Evidence on national-level PRESET is scattered, thin and often descriptive, yet it indicates possible pathways. The examples from South Sudan, Ukraine, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and DR Congo all point to the potential of including content related to EiEPC in PRESET. However, they mainly highlight progress in policy formulation and shortcomings in implementation. There are no studies of successful institutionalisation or effectiveness.

The richest body of practice comes from community-based PRESET and PRESET for refugee teachers, where innovative models have emerged. Case studies from UNRWA's teacher colleges for Palestinian refugees, the BHER initiative in Kenya and community-led teacher education in Myanmar demonstrate how crisis-responsive, accredited or semi-accredited pathways can prepare teachers for realities of displacement, resource scarcity and insecurity. These initiatives suggest that when PRESET is embedded in community and institutional

structures, it can contribute not only to teacher competency but also to teacher retention and more resilient communities. Future work should align training content with real-life complexities, ensuring teachers gain both technical tools and the analytical, reflexive and emotional capacity to navigate multi-dimensional crises (Falk *et al.*, 2024).

Our review suggests several practical implications. Governments and teacher education institutions should integrate core EiEPC content into PRESET curricula and strengthen the capacity of teacher educators to deliver it. Donors should shift support from short-term, in-service projects toward longer-term system strengthening, including curriculum reform and multi-year financing. Community-based initiatives should be supported to document and share their models and, where possible, link them to national systems.

At the same time, our review highlights a deeper epistemic challenge. The 'what works' gaze, which we intended to apply but then had to adapt because of a lack of findings, tends to privilege interventions that can be assessed through (quasi-)experimental designs and measurable effectiveness indicators. Evaluations of the impact of EiEPC-PRESET interventions do not exist in conflict-affected contexts. The absence of this type of evidence does not mean that PRESET is irrelevant or ineffective, but rather reflects the methodological challenges of studying long-term institutional reforms and the lack of attention to the field of EiEPC PRESET. However, if funding decisions continue to be tied primarily to evidence of 'what works' as defined by impact evaluations, resources will flow disproportionately to short-term, in-service interventions where such designs are more feasible. This creates an epistemic bias with very practical consequences: PRESET remains underexplored, underfunded and marginal to both research and practice, despite its potential to prepare large numbers of teachers for crisis-affected classrooms.

Ultimately, integrating EiEPC into PRESET is a systemic challenge that cannot be solved through isolated projects. It requires political will, curriculum reform, institutional capacity building and sustainable financing. Global North universities, non-governmental organisations and donors have an important role to play, but primarily as supporters of state- and community-led reforms rather than

as drivers of external projects. To meaningfully address the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, EiEPC content must be institutionalised within national PRESET systems as a core dimension of professional teacher preparation. Without such integration, most teachers will remain underprepared for the realities of conflict-affected classrooms, and the promise of education as a stabilising and peacebuilding force will remain unfulfilled.

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We confirm that we have no affiliations, financial involvement or personal relationships with any organisation or individual that could be perceived as influencing the content, analysis or conclusions presented.

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Appendix 1. Included documents

19 in total: 9 normative; 5 national-level (empirical); 2 community-based (empirical); 3 refugee teachers (empirical)

Geographic area	Thematic focus	Type	In-text reference
Africa	TPD: MHPSS	Normative	African Union Commission, 2025
Africa	TPD: MHPSS	Normative	UNESCO IICBA, 2023
Arab region	Transformative Education	Normative	UNESCO, 2024
Burkina Faso	TPD	Normative	Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de l'Alphabétisation ..., 2019
DR Congo	Peace education	National-level (empirical)	Sheria Nfundiko, 2020, 2021
DR Congo	TPD	Normative	Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et Nouvelle Citoyenneté, 2025
Ethiopia	TPD	Refugee teachers (empirical)	Bengtsson <i>et al.</i> , 2020
Global	TPD	Normative	INEE, 2024
Global	TPD	Normative	INEE, 2018
Iraq	TPD: Inclusive education	National-level (empirical)	Murad and Bartels, 2024; Vierbuchen and Bartels, 2024
Kenya	TPD in refugee camp	Refugee teachers (empirical)	BHER, 2025; Miller <i>et al.</i> , 2019; University of British Columbia, 2025
Myanmar	Community-based TPD	Community-based (empirical)	Johnson, 2016; Naw Sandrena, Naw Eh Wah Paw and Saw Way Can, 2025
Myanmar	Community-based TPD	Community-based (empirical)	Kayah, 2019
Nigeria	TPD: Peace education	National-level (empirical)	Muhinat, 2021
South Sudan	TPD	Normative	Curriculum Foundation, 2023; Ministry of General Education and Instruction, 2023a, 2023b
Ukraine	TPD: Trauma-informed pedagogy	National-level (empirical)	Holovatenko, 2023, 2024, 2025
West Bank and Jordan	TPD	Refugee teachers (empirical)	UNRWA, 2011, 2013, 2023; Pontefract and Dabit, 2019; World Bank, 2014
Zimbabwe	TPD: Peace education	National-level (empirical)	Makoni, 2015
Zimbabwe	TPD: Education and disasters	Normative	Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2019

