

# Education in emergencies: 'What works' revisited



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## Abstract

In this article, we build on our 2015 review of 'what works' in education in emergencies research (EiE) to assess the recent trajectory of the field. We identify significant growth in areas that include refugee education, girls' education, social-emotional learning, and tertiary education for conflict-affected populations; emerging research that includes protecting education from attack and 'preventing violent extremism'; emerging trends that promise to focus on inclusive education for children with disabilities and early childhood development; and a striking absence of research on education and disaster risk reduction, despite the fact that the effects of climate change disasters dwarf those of conflict. We argue that the areas of programming and research that have grown most rapidly within EiE have done so because of a confluence of security and humanitarian interests.

## Key Words

Education

Conflict

Political violence

What works

## Introduction

This article builds on our rigorous literature review of 'what works' in education in emergencies (EiE) research. In that review, we identified access, quality of learning, and wellbeing as the three primary pathways toward positive education outcomes, based on evidence collected to date (see Burde et al., 2015). Our recommendations included calling for an increase in rigorous research in EiE that focused particularly on subgroups (e.g., refugees, girls, children with disabilities) and programmes (e.g., early childhood development, preventing violent extremism) that had not yet received sufficient research attention. We noted the dearth of research on education and disaster risk reduction and called for additional work on disasters and education in conflict-affected countries.

We update our review here, assessing the recent trajectory of EiE research, the extent to which our recommendations were taken up, and why. We find first, consistent with our recommendations, that EiE scholarship continues to privilege access, quality, and wellbeing. Also consistent with our recommendations, we identify significant growth in areas that include refugee education, girls' education, social-emotional learning, and tertiary education for conflict-affected populations; emerging research that includes protecting education from attack and 'preventing violent extremism'<sup>1</sup>; and emerging trends that promise to focus on inclusive education for children with disabilities and early childhood development. Several of our practical

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<sup>1</sup>We use this phrase because it is common in the literature, but we also acknowledge the controversy that surrounds its selective use as well as its lack of analytical clarity.

recommendations were taken up, including our call for greater support for academic/practitioner partnerships and an increased focus on technology.<sup>2</sup>

However, a striking finding of this updated review is the continued absence of research on education and disaster risk reduction, despite the fact that the effects of climate change disasters dwarf those of conflict (Oxfam International, 2007). We attribute this in part to the lack of political will among strong states, particularly the US, to take the consequences of climate change seriously and address them systematically, rather than to treat them as isolated events. This stands in contrast to the approach to education in countries affected by conflict that are perceived as threats to the West. We agree that security interests after September 11, 2001, spurred strong states to increase their overseas development aid and engage in a greater number of education development projects in contexts they perceived to be fragile or hostile to Western states' security (Novelli, 2010). Taking this relationship into consideration, and based on our current review, we argue that the areas of programming and research that have grown most rapidly within EIE have done so because of a confluence of security and humanitarian interests.

### Not just security interests: Humanitarian priorities also benefit

State militaries, UN peacekeeping forces, and multilateral security organisations are often the first to arrive when intergroup tensions escalate into a violent conflict or after a natural disaster. Among these organisations, Western militaries figure heavily in stabilisation projects, which contributes to the militarisation of aid (Novelli, 2010: 456). Citing challenges to impartiality and neutrality, humanitarians often object to what they perceive as strong states' security-minded encroachment and co-optation of the role of NGOs in lifesaving work (Burde, 2014; Abiew, 2012; Stoddard and Harmer, 2006).

However, strong states' security operations in conflict and crisis contexts draw attention and funding to humanitarian priorities, which often is impossible to do through NGO efforts alone (Bell

et al., 2013: 402). Security forces make it physically possible for humanitarians to do their work. They open ports of entry to countries in conflict, allowing humanitarian personnel and supplies to enter and making it possible to distribute food or medicine, and they make travel safer by securing roads. Militaries provide intelligence about credible threats and may protect aid workers and their operations (Seybolt, 2008). Our findings in this review underscore the fact that, despite humanitarians' discomfort with strong states' security interests, these interests may facilitate and contribute to humanitarians' own aims.

Moreover, some humanitarians offer a check on the behaviour of strong states. NGOs have more horizontal organisational structures, greater decision-making manoeuvrability, and specific expertise about the country or region where they work (Bell et al., 2013: 402). As a result, NGOs often are able to steer programming in a direction that they believe makes sense to their humanitarian sensibilities; for example, some use states' security interests in youth and education to develop important new programming and research into the mechanisms that promote civic engagement and prosocial youth behaviour.

### Methods

As in previous reviews, we conducted searches in multiple academic databases such as ERIC, ProQuest Central, PsycINFO, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Worldwide Political Abstracts (Burde et al., 2015; Burde et al., 2017). We prioritised peer-reviewed academic journals and empirical research that employed experimental, quasi-experimental, or rigorous qualitative or observational designs and included grey literature from INEE, International Rescue Committee (IRC), the World Bank, UNESCO, and J-PAL. We selected studies based on their relevance to EIE, whether they presented clear research designs and methods (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed), and year of publication. Our 2015 review included 184 studies, and in 2017 we reported on 121 studies. For this article, we reviewed an additional 76 studies published between 2015 and 2018 and included 29 here on education programs from both

<sup>2</sup>Of course, we do not know what the outcomes would have been absent our recommendations, but articles like ours often serve to advance collective understanding and sharpen the focus on issues that many may already have been considering, therefore adding to the likelihood that they will be taken up by policymakers, researchers, and political actors (see, e.g., Mallett, Hagen-Zanker, Slater, and Duvendack, 2012).

conflict-affected and disaster-related crisis settings. Given space constraints, we prioritised articles that investigate the effectiveness of interventions in ongoing crises. To identify emerging trends, we included both work that recently received significant funding and topics that recently received attention in international conferences.

Of course, employing a literature review to understand what works is only as good as the data available; in other words, there may be many effective programme interventions that simply have not yet been studied. Additionally, scholars continue to debate what constitutes rigour in research (see Burde et al., 2015; Burde et al., 2017). We rely on authors' descriptions of their research designs, methods, and analyses to assess rigour. Although we maintain that observational designs offer critical insights into many aspects of EIE and include them here, we privilege experimental and quasi-experimental designs for assessing cause-and-effect relationships.

### **Trends in access: Girls' education, refugee education, and attacks on education**

The recent literature continues to focus on girls' and refugee education, showing persistent gaps in access for girls and older children, as well as new tools to improve access for refugee populations. The expansion in the scholarship on refugee education within this work is consistent with our hypothesis that the confluence of security and humanitarian interests have driven growth in particular areas of EIE, as funders have focused on displaced populations and offered support to neighbouring countries to keep refugees near their countries of origin.

Since our review in 2015, evidence shows that access to education remains sensitive to conflict (e.g., Ullah, Khan, and Mahmood, 2017), that improving access for girls requires attention to the dynamics of communities, and that changing behaviours remains challenging. Two studies found that education enrolment dropped significantly in regions affected by the conflicts in Nepal (Silwal, 2016) and Ivory Coast (Ouili, 2017). In Ivory Coast, boys' and girls' enrolment were similarly affected, while enrolment in Nepal was disproportionately lower for girls and girls there had lower passing rates

on completion exams. Girls' enrolment also dropped in some conflict-affected areas in Afghanistan, despite the strong support that parents—especially mothers—offer to their daughters' education (Burde and Khan, 2016). Even when girls successfully transition back to school after a conflict, as many did in Karamoja, Uganda, which was ravaged by the Lord's Resistance Army, dominant gender norms present ongoing challenges. An RCT showed that gender sensitivity training (n=299) increased teacher knowledge about gender equality and improved attitudes about gender roles, yet it did not quantifiably change teacher behaviours compared with a control group (n=313) (Chinen et al., 2017). Moreover, behavioural changes were not significant among teachers who received text messages to reinforce the training (n=304), which highlights the need to involve communities in such efforts.

The proliferation of journal issues on refugee education reflects the increase in research on the topic. For example, five academic journals announced refugee education volumes that are planned for 2019 or were published within the last two years.<sup>3</sup> The plight of refugees from Syria and quality higher education opportunities feature prominently in this scholarship. In one qualitative study, both Syrian refugees and their host communities in Iraqi Kurdistan supported sharing local university facilities with refugees, suggesting that this kind of inclusion may build tolerance (Rasheed and Munoz, 2016). Improved infrastructure and information communication technologies (ICTs) in refugee camps have been accompanied by research on technology to support higher education. Online surveys across Somali diaspora communities (n=248) and interviews (n=21) with refugees from the Dadaab camp in Kenya found that ICTs (mobile technology and online social networks) enhanced higher education access, support, and persistence, particularly for women (Dahya and Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

Finally, emerging work by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (Kapit et al., 2018) describes and disaggregates the ways violence affects students, schools, and education personnel during armed conflict. These data offer a point of departure for exploring new questions related to patterns of attack and perpetrators' motivations.

<sup>3</sup>This includes Journal on Education in Emergencies, British Journal of Educational Studies, International Journal of Inclusive Education, Journal of Global Ethics, and Journal of the European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education.

Although the significant increase in attention to refugee education detailed in this section reflects the political priorities and interests of strong states, it also represents an important advocacy position among many humanitarians. Because humanitarians respond to the demand for education among refugees, they often find common ground with strong states.

**Trends in quality: Measurement, language, promoting peace, and preventing violence**

We identify similar trends in educational quality that are supported by attention from security interests and humanitarians. Since 2015, studies have focused on ways to measure learning, the significance of language barriers, and language of instruction, particularly for refugee populations, as well as strategies for promoting tolerance in postconflict settings and for preventing youth from participating in political violence.

Scholars and scholar-practitioners are increasingly concerned with measuring learning outcomes. For example, in South Sudan, a study using the Early Grade Reading Assessment and Early Grade Mathematics Assessment with 2,415 first-grade students in 112 non-formal schools revealed that the majority of students lacked the basic language and numeracy skills to begin first grade. Students with lower socioeconomic status, girls, and students with low proficiency in English scored disproportionately lower on both assessments (Raza, Kabir, and Rashid, 2017). Similarly, IRC (2017) found that Syrian refugee students are not gaining crucial literacy and math skills, which may be partially attributable to language of instruction policies. Indeed, language of instruction is a fulcrum for assessing the quality of education delivered to Syrian refugee students (Madziva and Thondhlana, 2017). Educators interviewed in Turkey noted that language barriers, limited training, sparse classroom resources, and a mainstream curriculum that does not take into account the needs and expectations of the Syrian students hampered instruction (Aydin and Kaya, 2017). However, programmes with sufficient resources may hold promise. A study of 147 Syrian refugee children ages 9-14 who were randomly assigned to participate in an online learning programme found that Turkish language acquisition, computer and cognitive skills, and hopefulness increased among participants (Sirin et al., 2018).

Language learning is key to refugees' and newcomer students' ability to learn in a new place; it can also intensify or relax intergroup tension, depending on whether the linguistic groups feel excluded or welcome.

Strong states have promoted their interest in the effects of education on social cohesion and state stability, and several studies have examined how keeping peace through transitional justice bears on education quality (e.g., Shepler and Williams, 2017). For example, a qualitative study in Guatemala argued that innovative teacher practices that include addressing colonial and indigenous local histories helped promote tolerance by cultivating a shared identity (Rubin, 2016). A rigorous ethnographic study in Guatemala similarly emphasised a transitional justice approach to postwar education reforms. Without this direction, segregated learning and educational narratives focused on divisions between groups, thereby perpetuating societal discord (Bellino, 2016). Yet challenges persist, even in countries where peace education is formally incorporated into the schools. For example, an ethnographic study of Muslims and Tamils in Northern Sri Lanka revealed that formal peace education in secondary schools failed to promote reconciliation, particularly along religious divisions (Duncan and Lopes Cardozo, 2017). Non-formal community education, however, showed potential for encouraging social cohesion.

Understanding how to prevent violent extremism has received significant attention from multigovernmental organisations (UNSC, 2015; UNGA, 2016) and governments seeking to stabilise regions perceived as contributing to radicalisation. Mercy Corps' rigorous experimental research found that vocational education in Afghanistan was tied to statistically significant increases in trainees' current rate of employment, earned income, economic optimism, and cross-tribal economic activity. However, only increased economic optimism showed a statistically significant relationship to a lower propensity for political violence (Mercy Corps, 2015). In Somalia, however, youth participating in secondary education through Mercy Corps' Youth Learners Initiative (YLI) were 48.2 percent as likely as out-of-school youth to report a willingness to support an armed insurgency. Furthermore, when learners in the YLI were also offered civic education, the combined effect was a significantly lower propensity among these students

to support violent political opposition than among out-of-school youth and youth who only received secondary education (Tesfaye et al., 2018: 18). Thus, employing education to dissuade youth from political violence is not just about access and resources; it also depends on the type and nature of educational content in relation to promoting peace or conflict.

### **Trends in wellbeing: Factors affecting learning, training trauma-informed teachers, and providing creative outlets**

The body of EiE research on wellbeing produced since our 2015 study focuses almost entirely on refugees. Studies highlight discrimination as a risk factor for mental health and learning, creative arts and online learning as useful for fostering a sense of belonging (Crawford, 2017; Crea and Sparron, 2017), and the importance of teacher training and wellbeing in supporting student outcomes. Studies that address how to support children most effectively following disasters are still scarce.

Discrimination in host countries poses a significant barrier for refugee students. According to a systematic literature review of 34 studies, discrimination, trauma, and language barriers are significant risk factors for refugee students' learning and wellbeing, while support factors include high personal and educational aspirations, parental and peer support, appropriate academic placement, and teachers' cultural and language awareness (Graham, Minhas, and Paxton, 2016). Qualitative interviews and focus groups with Burmese refugee teachers in Malaysia suggest that discrimination, trauma, and insecurity were major inhibitors in classroom management and learning (O'Neal et al., 2018). Similarly, a longitudinal qualitative study with 47 refugee adolescents who resettled in Australia revealed that age of arrival and experiences of discrimination were major determinants for completing secondary school (Correa-Valez et al., 2017).

Two studies focused specifically on supporting the wellbeing of teachers as a pathway to promoting wellbeing and learning in students. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, researchers conducted an RCT that included 346 teachers in 64 primary schools to investigate the effects of a teacher development program aimed at promoting teachers' wellbeing and enhancing practices in math, reading, and social-emotional learning (Wolf et al., 2015). While motivation increased for the least experienced teachers, there were no effects on motivation or

burnout for the sample as a whole. Among women teachers, job dissatisfaction increased, indicating that they may have been marginalised within the programme. A recent trauma-informed teacher training programme in Australia and New Zealand emphasised the importance of providing teachers with knowledge and strategies on how to support student wellbeing following disasters (Le Brocque et al., 2017), and two thought papers called for evaluating interventions that support children after natural disasters (Kousky, 2016; Feng, Hossain, and Paton, 2018). However, empirical research on coping with disasters and disaster risk reduction remains limited.

### **Security, humanitarian action, and 2015 recommendations**

We argue above that one of the primary reasons for the recent growth in EiE research and programming is also one of the most controversial aspects of EiE: that attention from strong states for what many humanitarians consider nefarious reasons has had the (positive) effect of promoting EiE on the world stage in a way that was not possible before these interests emerged. The research areas in which there has been the most recent growth reflect this. Given the substantial and productive research that has emerged on topics that are crucial to EiE, such as refugee education, we also argue that, simply because some of the reasons for this growth come from motivations that many educators and humanitarians would choose to distance themselves from, does not mean they cannot—or have not—benefited from this attention.

Although the EiE scholarship published since 2015 continues to foreground access, quality, and wellbeing, new trending topics and areas of inquiry have arisen within each of these pillars. We conclude with a few remarks below on how the EiE subfield has consolidated and become more formalised within the past three years.

Although we were unable to identify studies related to children and youth with disabilities, funders, practitioners, and researchers are mobilised to launch new research, as evidenced by the recent well-attended Global Disability Summit sponsored by DFID in July 2018. (<https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/summit>). The UK Secretary of State for International Development has pledged to 'put disability at the centre of everything we do' (<https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2017/12/>

dfid-pledges-to-put-disability-at-heart-of-its-work). Continued UK government support and financing offer an opportunity to educators working on humanitarian programmes to find common ground with this initiative and to make significant progress on promoting inclusive education.

We wrote that actors in the subfield should ‘invest in conducting a systematic review of existing EiE interventions in countries and regions affected by crises in order to identify the most common programmes in a given context, map where there is a dearth or preponderance of data, and (continue to) fund practitioners and academics to work together to conduct rigorous research in these locations’ (Burde et al., 2015: 6). We recommended funding practitioner/academic partnerships. Several of the articles we reviewed above do include academic assessments of programme interventions, and one project—Education in Emergencies: Evidence for Action at New York University (NYU)—aims to establish research-practice partnerships to improve children’s mental health, stress regulation, executive functioning, and literacy and numeracy skills in emergency contexts.

Notably, with regard to our recommendation for greater research on early childhood development (ECD), a \$100 million award from the MacArthur Foundation to Sesame Workshop, IRC, and NYU included significant funding for ECD research (Yoshikawa et al., n.d.).

Finally, the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies continues to set the standard for the field and offer checks on the behaviour of all actors—strong states and educators alike. The organisation launched thematic papers and guidance notes on psychosocial support and social-emotional learning (INEE, 2016, 2018) and on ‘preventing violent extremism’ (2017), in addition to its updated minimum standards for education provision in crises (2010) and research through the new *INEE Journal on Education in Emergencies* (JEiE). Standards like those from INEE for EiE programmes in contexts in which humanitarians frequently work adjacent to security forces and sometimes in tandem with them, and rigorous critique of EiE field work like that published in *JEiE*, help maintain distance between security interests and non-governmental organisation partners.

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