Contextualising emotional well-being for conflict-affected populations:
A study from the Thai-Myanmar Border

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Abstract

This paper examines the factors that migrant and displaced children from Myanmar consider essential to their emotional well-being. It underscores the importance of locally contextualised assessments of well-being and presents findings from a survey conducted across ten Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs) in Thailand to develop a framework identifying the positive and negative criteria of well-being that conflict-affected children prioritise in this context. In conducting such studies, actors working to support vulnerable groups can collect information to inform more effective and relevant responses to support children's emotional well-being.

Key Words

emotional well-being, migrant education, Myanmar, education in emergencies

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Introduction

Tak Province on Thailand's border with Myanmar is currently home to 63 Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs) providing education to migrant and displaced children from Myanmar. A significant increase in MLC enrolments over the last three academic years coincides with the conflict that has gripped Myanmar following the military coup in 2021. Informal reports from MLC students and teachers suggest that children's experiences of the conflict in Myanmar are negatively impacting their emotional well-being; however little research or analysis exists in this area.

Taylor and Kaplan (2023) note that the 'well-being of displaced children remains a critically understudied topic in developmental research' (pp. 14). Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) experts have called on collective action to improve and scale up evidence-based services in support of the mental well-being of children and young people (UNICEF, 2018; INEE, 2018). The literature in this area highlights a need for culturally-sensitive and methodologically-comparable studies, including 'locally created' measures of well-being, support and resilience (UNICEF, 2023). Approaches to children's emotional development are most effective when tailored to the contextual needs of the children in their own contexts (UNHCR, 2014; Jones and Kahn, 2017; Tam *et al*., 2017).

Studies are therefore needed to assess the scope of the emotional well-being challenges faced by children at MLCs and inform the development of appropriate, context-specific responses. As argued by Krause and Sharple (2019), the ways in which children adapt to traumatic events and stressful

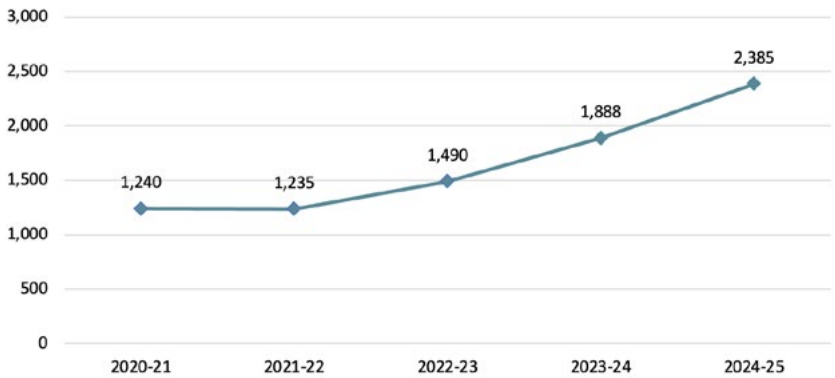
conditions differ depending on their own experience and sociocultural context — and understanding these is crucial to develop effective psychosocial interventions to support the well-being of young people affected by conflict and displacement.

The research context

For decades, a range of push and pull factors have led thousands to leave Myanmar and enter Thailand. At the end of 2019, Thailand hosted an estimated 3.9 million migrant workers, including 2.9 million registered with a work permit (UN Women, 2019; IOM, 2019). Of these, a majority (69%) were from Myanmar (United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand, 2019). Children from migrant communities face significant and multifaceted barriers to accessing education. While Thai schools and non-formal education pathways are options for children from Myanmar, they often present significant enrolment barriers due to financial burden, lack of awareness, and the language of instruction (Tyrosvoutis *et al*., 2023). One of the key alternatives is enrolling into an MLC – community-based schools teaching in Myanmar mother-tongue languages, often following the Myanmar-based curricula (Lowe *et al*., 2022).

MLCs, initially established to provide education for the children of migrant workers, have recently seen an increase in the enrolment of students who have fled the intensifying conflict and crisis in Myanmar following the February 2021 military coup (Figure 1). Data from 10 MLCs supported by the foundation Help Without Frontiers shows that 46% of the students enrolled for 2024-2025 (1,088 of 2,365) arrived in Thailand for the first time after the coup.

Figure 1. Student enrolment at 10 surveyed MLCs, 2020-2024



Understanding emotional well-being

Emotional well-being is often assumed to be restricted to a measurement of 'happiness' but in reality involves a much wider range of concepts and questions (OECD, 2013). As Masten (2014) queries: Who defines well-being and resilience? The individual as they perceive it? Is it objective according to internationally-set standards? Or is it entirely situational? Increasing research on well-being has led to a proliferation of scales and methodologies developed to measure it (Table 1).

Table 1. An overview of emotional/psychosocial well-being frameworks

Source	Type	Region of Origin/Focus	Key Criteria
Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD, 2019)	Assessment Framework	OECD countries	Self (health, education, psychological functioning) School environment (friendships, school work) Out-of-school environment (social connections, living environment, free time)
Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI, 2010)	Core Criteria by Definition	East and Southern Africa	Sense of belonging Relationships with peers Personal attachments Intellectual stimulation Self-worth
Personal Well-being Index (Cummins and Lau, 2023; Chandy *et al*., 2021)	Measurement Framework (11-point Likert Response Scale)	Australia	Happiness regarding: Standard of living Personal health Life achievement Personal relationships Personal safety Community connectedness Future security
Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (Currie *et al*., 2014; Chandy *et al*., 2021)	Cross-national, In-School Study	50 countries mainly across Europe and including USA, Russia, Israel	Social context Health behaviours and outcomes (body image, healthy eating) Risk behaviours Sexual health Family and friend relationships School engagement Social inequality (including food insecurity)
United Kingdom's Office for National Statistics (2024)	Assessment Framework	UK	Happiness Feeling Safe Self-expression Loneliness Health Sleep
Self-Anchoring Striving Scale / Cantril's Ladder (2014)	Assessment Framework	Global – used in Gallup's World Poll 'World Happiness Report'	Self-determining: participants choose and rank factors most important to them

The concept of well-being, as well as the ways in which it is pursued or achieved, varies significantly across societies and cultures (UNICEF, 2021; Diener, 2012; Uchida *et al*., 2015). Since every context is unique in some way, the challenges felt and responses needed are also unique, therefore interventions are likely to be most effective when their designs are underpinned by an understanding of the needs and opportunities of each context (Jones and Kahn, 2017; Chandry *et al*., 2021; WHO, 2005). The INEE argues that 'children know what their challenges are and often what the best solutions are' (2016, p.21). Despite this, there has been limited research to understand migrant children's health experience from their own perspective (Sampson and Gifford, 2010; Dangmann *et al*., 2022; Howard *et al*., 2024). Conducting local assessments

can help us to see contextually-specific factors and coping strategies in children's own definitions of well-being that might otherwise escape attention (APA, 2010; Chandry *et al*., 2021).

The Importance of well-being support

Globally, an estimated 47 million children have been displaced by conflict (UNICEF, 2023). The American Psychological Association notes that psychological difficulties resulting from war-related experiences can adversely affect children's learning, ability to concentrate, and school performance (APA, 2010). Moreover, appropriate well-being support is codified in international human rights documents. Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children have the right to the protection and care necessary for their well-being, and Article 39 states that children exposed to traumatic events during conflict or displacement have a right to psychosocial recovery (OHCHR, 1989). The 'Rebuilding Lives' conference in 2018, which brought together over 50 MHPSS experts, called for greater action to address the impacts of conflict and crisis on the mental health of children and young people. The conference noted that ignoring the catastrophic impact of violence, fear and uncertainty on a child's learning, behaviour and development could also lead to increased chances of self-harm, withdrawn behaviour, substance abuse, and suicide (Hijazi *et al*., 2019).

The issue is exacerbated for migrants and refugees, who are more likely to experience mental health problems due to prolonged exposure to violence or instability (Alawa and Bollyky, 2020). A 2020 study of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia found that 79.2% had poor mental well-being (Htay *et al*., 2020). In the MLC context specifically, the 2022 Stepping Stones report found that 1 in 5 children expressed feelings of depression (Lowe *et al*., 2022), while another report in 2021 found that both migrant parents and teachers were observing a major increase in mental health issues amongst children (Zar *et al*, 2021).

Research shows that promoting students' emotional well-being can have a positive impact on child development and learning, leading to better academic, health and employment outcomes (INEE, 2016; D'Sa *et al*., 2001; Jones *et al*., 2016), and schools can act as enabling spaces for children's health and well-being (Winthrop and Matsui, 2013; Howard *et al*., 2024). However, studies addressing how to effectively support children after crises are scarce (Burde, 2019), and the existing studies on the mental health of refugee children focus on mental health disorders such as PTSD, but not necessarily on well-being (Dangmann *et al*., 2022).

Research aims

This paper profiles a survey conducted by Help Without Frontiers (HWF) – an organisation supporting 10 MLCs in Tak Province – which set out to collect information that could be used to design and develop better, contextualised responses to emotional well-being challenges faced by MLC students. In examining the survey data, this paper seeks to answer two research questions:

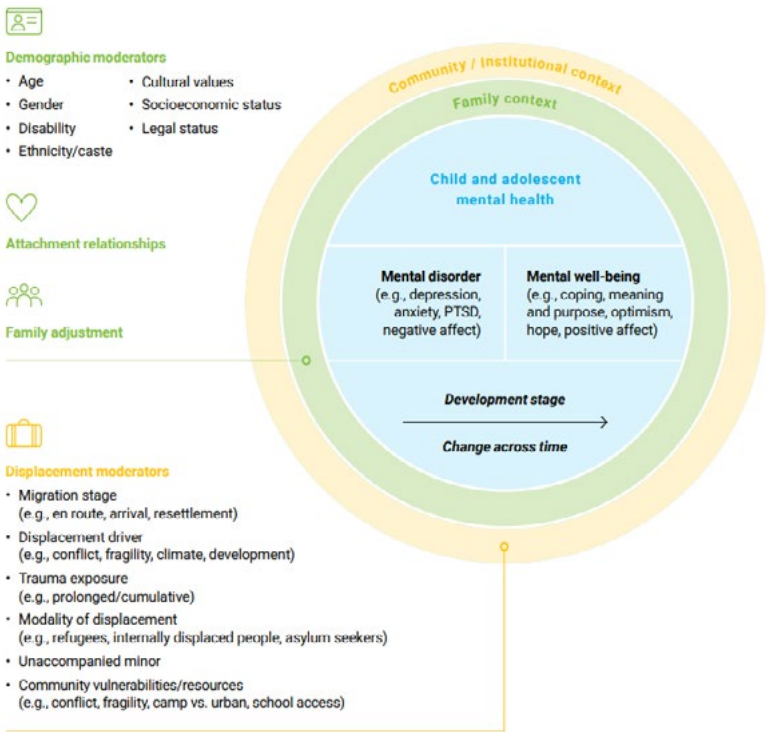
1. What are the key factors that students use to define both positive and negative emotional well-being within their context?
2. What other criteria are important in developing a contextualised framework with which to assess student well-being and develop appropriate interventions?

Methodology

A survey questionnaire was distributed to students who were enrolled at 10 MLCs in Tak Province, Thailand. Participants were invited to complete the survey on a voluntary basis and assured that they could withdraw from the survey at any time. The survey combined quantitative questions with space for broader qualitative comments from the participants. The team who developed, disseminated and analysed the Burmese-language survey – the language of instruction at MLCs – and authored this paper, are employees of Help Without Frontiers, the foundation that directly supports the 10 MLCs selected. In this sense, the paper builds on the rich experience of the practitioners who work within migrant education settings and provides deep insights into lived experiences of children in the context of displacement. While anonymous, the survey collected student characteristics such as age, gender, grade level, household income and information about their stay in Thailand. These

demographic criteria were included in response to recommendations in a conceptual framework developed by UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (Taylor and Kaplan, 2023) for assessing and responding to the well-being challenges of displaced children and youth. This framework draws from a socio-ecological theoretical approach, seeking to understand the key factors that shape children's mental health and emotional well-being, both negatively and positively. Their model, in addition to placing children at the centre and seeking to understand emotional well-being challenges from children's own perspectives, also recommends including key classifications to be able to draw more conclusions from surveys; previous literature has also suggested that age, gender, and socioeconomic status influence children and young people's experiences of mental health (Beckman *et al*., 2023).

Figure 2: Conceptual model of displaced children's emotional well-being (Taylor and Kaplan, 2023)



The study was reviewed and approved by the Mae Sot Community Ethics Advisory Board. A total of 290 students completed the survey in September 2024, and the data was analysed, reporting on various aspects of emotional well-being in order to find correlations between highlighted factors and the children's characteristics. The research was intended to model how to develop contextually-appropriate definitions of emotional well-being. The findings will particularly inform future support programmes and strategies of HWF as well as building the knowledge that could benefit other organisations working with children in contexts of mass displacement.

Findings

The demographic information of the participants was analysed at the preliminary stage. Of the 290 students, 51% were girls and the age range was between 13 and 20, with an average of 15. Ten ethnic groups were represented, with the highest proportions Burmese (49%) and Karen (32%). The mean total monthly income per household (n=85) was 11,441 Thai Baht (approximately 263 GBP – the average monthly household

income in Thailand in 2021 was 27,352 Thai Baht). We found that 42% (n=121) of children had arrived in Thailand after the 2021 coup in Myanmar; and 61% (n=177) were planning to stay in Thailand 'indefinitely.'

Disparities in well-being challenges and effects

Data from the survey showed that migrant students at MLCs were facing significant challenges relating to their emotional well-being, manifesting in physical, social and mental impacts. Girls reported more highly than boys in every reported measure of the impact of negative well-being experienced in the last month (see Table 2), in line with Johansson *et al*.'s notion that older girls expressed deeper negative emotions than older boys (Johansson *et al*. 2007). The frequent reporting of headaches aligns with other studies that document high levels of somatic complaints among migrant and refugee children (Dangmann *et al*., 2022).

Table 2. Most common effects of negative well-being experienced over the last month

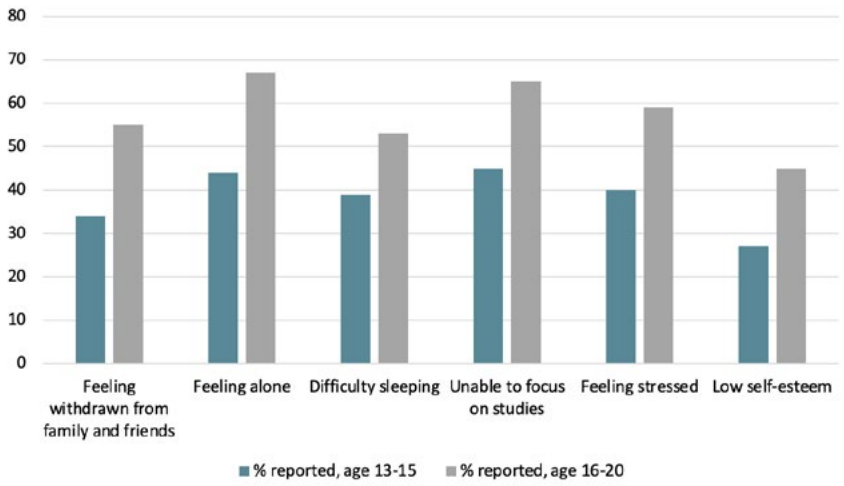
Impact	% of students reporting (n=290)	% of girls reporting (n=147*)	# of boys reporting (n=141*)
Headaches	59%	76%	41%
Feeling more angry than usual	54%	65%	44%
Feelings of loneliness	51%	64%	38%
Inability to focus on studies	51%	53%	50%
Feeling stressed	46%	52%	40%
Difficulty sleeping	44%	52%	35%

*two students did not note their gender

There were also differences in the reported causes of negative emotional well-being. While both girls and boys singled out the situation in Myanmar as the biggest impacting factor (82% of the students reporting that it currently negatively impacts their emotional well-being and 38% reporting that the Myanmar situation 'strongly or always affects' their emotional well-being in a negative way), girls then highlighted worries about the future and family issues – including family problems acquiring legal documentation, and family health problems – as key factors currently affecting their emotional well-being.

Age differences also exhibited some variance in terms of the negative impacts of emotional well-being experienced in the last month (Figure 3). The World Health Organisation notes that increasing responsibility with age may account for studies' findings that older children exhibit more severe mental well-being symptoms (2023).

Figure 3: Reported experiences of students' well-being (n=290)

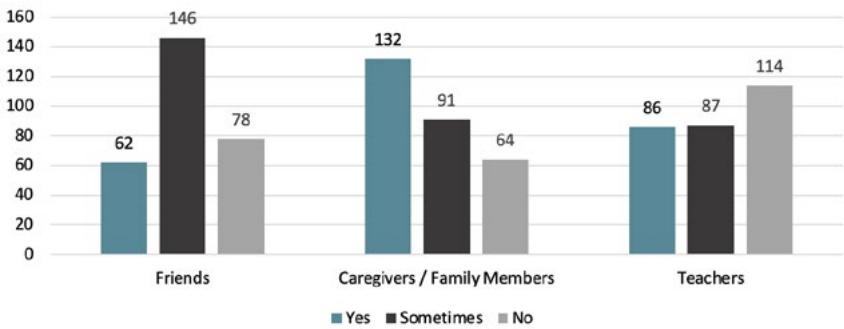


A crisis of confidence

A key finding was the significant lack of confidence amongst students in terms of talking about their emotional well-being: 59% of students reported they were not confident to talk about emotional well-being with others and 40% felt they did not have people they could talk to about their emotional well-being. Other studies have also reflected a reluctance amongst migrant children to discuss their health, in particular with professionals as compared to with their friends and family (Curtis *et al*., 2018; Radez *et al*., 2021). In a review of 53 studies on children seeking help for their mental health problems, Radez *et al*. (2021) found that perceived stigma and embarrassment (either experienced or anticipated) were highly reported barriers for children, as well as not knowing where to find help or who to talk to. While 80% of respondents in our survey reported having an awareness of the things that made them feel happy and unhappy, 39% reported feeling unable to manage their own negative emotions, and 48% reported that they were not confident to ask others for help. As one 15-year-old girl wrote:

'It is difficult to open our feelings to others. That's why, whenever we share our feelings, we want someone to listen to us, patiently, carefully. We need a person like that.'

Figure 4. Students' confidence to discuss their wellbeing (n=287)



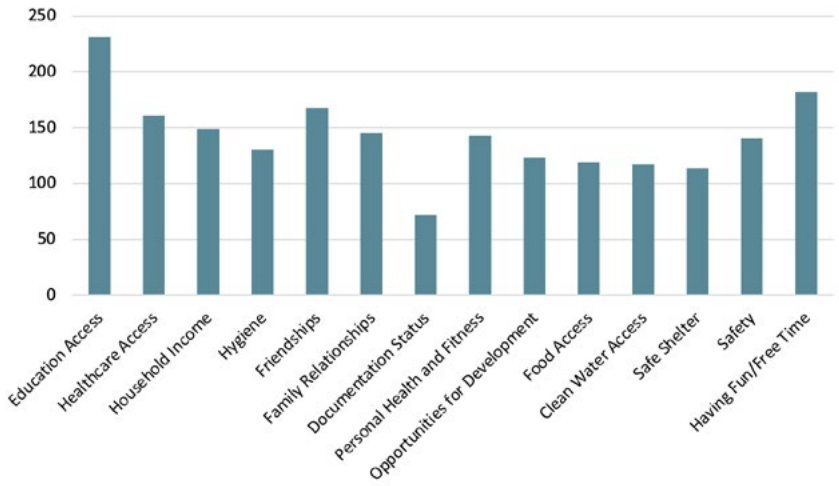
The variation across gender in terms of confidence in talking about emotional well-being with others was not significant. There was however variance between younger and older groups.

Table 3. Confidence in talking about emotional well-being, by age group

Confident to talk about emotional well-being with:	% reported "No", Age 13-15	% reported "No", Age 16-20
Friends	25%	31%
Caregivers/family members	20%	27%
Teachers	31%	55%

Positive emotional well-being – Gender dynamics

Figure 5. Factors listed as most important for students' own emotional wellbeing (n=290)



Disaggregating by gender, healthcare access (62%) and personal safety (56%) were more frequently reported by girls (compared to 50% and 42% respectively for boys) as being important for their emotional well-being. Meanwhile, friendships were more highly reported by boys (67% compared to 50%).

When asked about factors that currently positively affected their emotional well-being, both girls and boys highlighted meeting new people, studying or learning new things, and personal achievement, as well as praise for achievement or effort (see Table 4). Boys reported more frequently that their emotional well-being is positively affected by forms of entertainment – including watching movies (50% to 42%), listening to music (48% to 37%), and playing sports (47% to 37%) – though both girls and boys both strongly reported gaming as a positive factor (49% of boys and 52% of girls).

Table 4. Top ten factors reported to currently positively affect emotional well-being

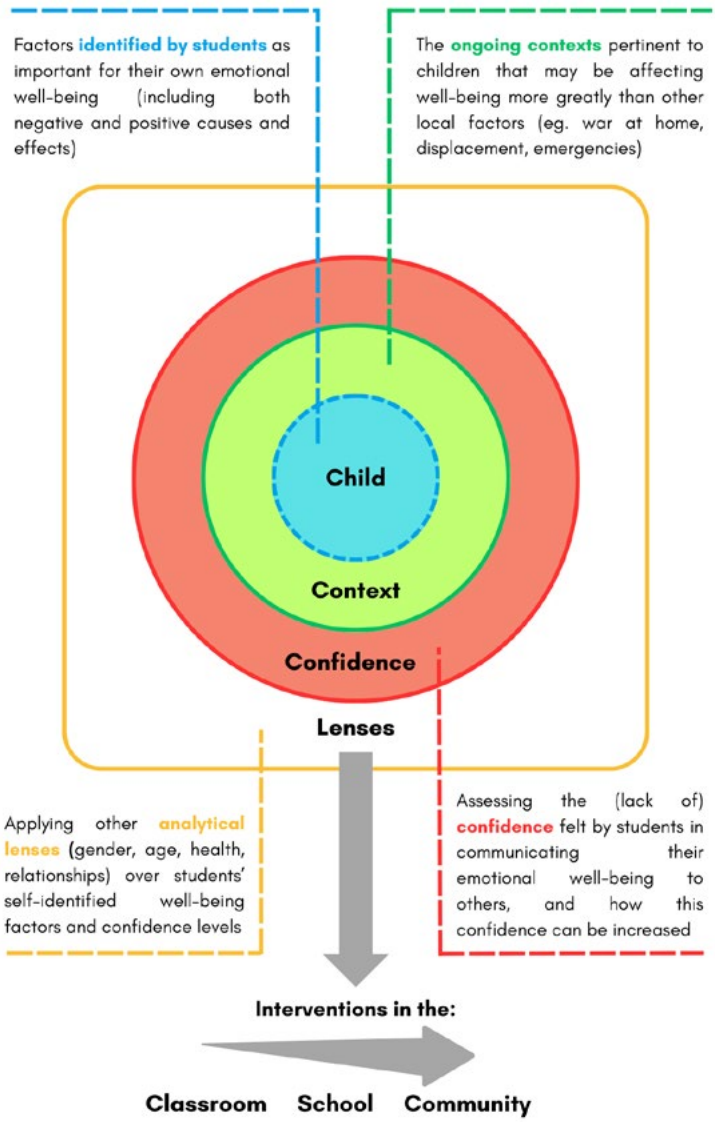
Impact	% of students reporting (n=290)	% of girls reporting (n=147)	# of boys reporting (n=141)
Meeting new people	57%	62%	55%
Studying/learning new things	52%	50%	57%
Personal success of achievement	52%	49%	64%
Receiving praise for achievement/effort	51%	46%	64%
Reading books	50%	46%	50%
Gaming	49%	52%	49%
Time with friends	46%	46%	50%
Personal/quiet time	45%	44%	51%
Watching movies	45%	42%	50%
Time with family	44%	43%	49%

Discussion and implications for well-being support programming

Assessing the data according to some of the demographic moderators suggested in the conceptual framework confirmed that girls and older children were disproportionately affected by negative well-being (Taylor and Kaplin, 2023). However, the data did not confirm findings from other studies that have shown that girls report highly on links between emotional well-being and living conditions (Panter-Birch, 2015; Arakelyan and Ager, 2021), despite the relatively low household income reported in the survey. Poor living conditions and uncertain immigration status have been associated with mental disorders and poor psychosocial adjustment amongst refugees and migrants (Chaudry and Wimer, 2016; WHO, 2023), however in this context the ongoing situation in Myanmar, and concerns about the future, were by far the most highly reported factors negatively affecting emotional well-being. The ongoing conflict, along with the fact that 76% of survey respondents (n=209) reported having family members still living inside Myanmar, are strong contextual factors that could understandably take precedence over the students' current living conditions, especially as they are living in relatively safe and secure areas.

Of further concern is the significant lack of confidence in talking about emotional well-being with others, which was pronounced in the survey data but is not highlighted in the conceptual framework. A revised framework for this context can be seen in Figure 6, which includes the confidence factor in assessments of students' emotional well-being, and the ongoing context factor, alongside other demographic lenses of analysis; and also encourages the inclusion of different levels of environment – the classroom, the whole school, and the household and community – as areas for intervention as well as measures of well-being. Research suggests that a whole-school approach can be beneficial for supporting student's well-being, including embedding well-being concepts in school policies and other academic subjects; and connecting such practices with staff and students' families (WHO, 2005).

Figure 6: Revised conceptual model of displaced children's emotional well-being



Emotional well-being and mental health should be normalised through more regular discussion in the MLCs as young people are more likely to seek help if they feel listened to (Radez *et al*., 2021). However, studies have shown that teachers feel the need for interactive, expert-led training on how to identify and provide early support for struggling students (Shelemy *et al*., 2019; Maclean *et al*., 2022). While MLC teachers in this context have received some basic-level Psychosocial First Aid training since the coronavirus pandemic, additional training in this area may be needed to equip them with the tools required for facilitating such discussions and listening to students in distress.

Alternative communication routes could be implemented in schools to facilitate students' ability to "offload" their emotional well-being challenges and seek help. Participating in this survey itself was noted as helpful by students, who appreciated the opportunity to write about their feelings, stating that they felt 'more fresh'

– or less burdened – after completing the survey. Students also suggested keeping well-being diaries and creating a 'mental mailbox' at schools where emotional well-being challenges and solutions can be shared. Music and arts programmes for migrants and refugees have been found to be beneficial for youth, especially those with exposure to traumatic events, by promoting a sense of agency and belonging, providing opportunities for emotional expressions, and facilitating the accessing of positive memories (White and Kern, 2018; Heyeres *et al*., 2021).

Other forms of research can be used, such as including drawings and photos to overcome difficulties in vocalising feelings, and focus-group discussions allowing children to use their own forms of reference (Smith *et al*., 2021). Beyond this, a large-scale public health initiative – akin to the Time to Change campaign in the United Kingdom – could provide some insights into designing and implementing contextually relevant programmes to reduce stigma, increase mental health literacy, and normalise well-being discussions across schools and communities (Radez *et al*., 2021).

Education access and friendships were highly reported as factors contributing to emotional well-being, highlighting the value of education for displaced children, both as an opportunity to learn and as a place for socialising, acculturation, and de-stigmatisation of mental health (APA, 2010; Kadir *et al*., 2018). Other studies have also shown the impact that regular positive contact with friends can have on maintaining and improving mental health (Matanov *et al*., 2013; WHO mhGAP, 2019), and how social connectedness is one of the strongest determinants of our well-being (Putnam, 2000; Halliday *et al*., 2018). Out of 121 surveyed students who gave additional comments at the end of the survey, 56 recommended holding events to help strengthen and support students' emotional well-being, suggesting motivational speakers, inter-school competitions, field trips and study tours.

Limitations

In addition to collecting results from a fairly small sample of students, the survey only contains data from a 'snapshot' in time. Longitudinal perspectives are needed to examine long-term adjustment challenges (APA, 2010), so that more effective and sustainable interventions to support emotional well-being can be implemented.

Conclusions

This paper examined migrant students' reflections on their emotional well-being and the factors most influential in positively or negatively affecting well-being. The data highlighted, in particular differences in gender and age, the major adverse effect of the ongoing conflict in Myanmar, and a lack of confidence amongst students in openly talking about their emotional well-being with others.

As MLCs and supporting organisations develop new interventions prioritising students' emotional well-being, such interventions must be contextualised, based on locally defined factors integrating children's lived experiences (Abdi, 2018). Further research is needed to dig deeper into the criteria uncovered in this survey and should reach more widely to parents and teachers. In doing so, relevant interventions for supporting student well-being and confidence can be developed and implemented at multiple levels. Monitoring children's own perceptions of their well-being, and crafting policies responsive to those measures, can help children thrive (Chandry *et al*., 2021).

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