

# Prioritising children's emotional wellbeing and involvement in education programmes:

## Volunteer teachers' experiences of applying the Leuven scales in community learning spaces in Myanmar



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### Abstract

Over 30% of school-age children in Myanmar continue to face barriers to education in the aftermath of the 2021 military takeover, with conflict-affected areas experiencing disproportionate rates of out-of-school children (Fukao *et al*, 2024). Mental health among young people and adolescents is a key driver of overall health, wellbeing, and socioeconomic development, yet until recently, it has been relatively neglected in global policy discourse (Carroll *et al*, 2021). One of the determinants of poor mental health and wellbeing in Myanmar is conflict. This paper explores the relevance of the 'Leuven scales', a practical teachers' technique for observation of children's emotional wellbeing and involvement in learning, in conflict settings. The paper highlights the experiences of 13 volunteer teachers using the Leuven scales and their reflections on their practice when teaching children affected by armed conflict and disrupted access to education.

### Key Words

Myanmar, Leuven scales, child wellbeing, teachers

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## Introduction

An estimated 268 million children and adolescents are affected by crises globally, with numbers increasing due to conflict and extreme weather events exacerbated by climate change (Valenza and Stoff, 2023). Children living in contexts of conflict and crisis are among the most developmentally and educationally marginalised in the world; they face potential long-term impacts on their physical and emotional wellbeing and on their educational outcomes (Kim *et al.*, 2024).

This paper reports on a local-level educational intervention at 13 community learning spaces in conflict-affected areas of Mon State in south-eastern Myanmar. The intervention trained 13 volunteer teachers – one at each learning space – to use the Leuven scales to observe 232 children's emotional wellbeing and level of involvement in different activities to improve learning and development outcomes.

The Leuven Scales are a tool used by teachers (typically in early childhood settings) to assess children's emotional wellbeing and level of involvement in learning activities, focusing on how comfortable and engaged the child feels within an educational environment, measured on a 5-point scale with higher scores indicating confidence and active participation; developed by researchers at Leuven University in Belgium, led by Ferre Laevers.

The Leuven scales offer the potential to help teachers understand the needs of children in their learning spaces. This paper seeks to answer the following research question: To what extent were volunteer teachers able to apply the Leuven scales to observe and support children's emotional wellbeing and involvement in learning in community learning spaces?

## Literature review

The Myanmar military deposed the country's democratically-elected leaders in February 2021. The literature on the impact of the four years of ensuing conflict on children's wellbeing, learning, and development is limited. Research conducted prior

to the current conflict pointed to poor mental health, for example among 10-17 olds in Kachin State, but wider, more generalisable research is lacking (Lee *et al.*, 2018). While the importance of adolescent mental health and wellbeing has gained a sharper focus in recent years, there is a need to address adolescent mental health and wellbeing and invest in better data collection efforts in Myanmar (Carroll *et al.*, 2021). More widely, emerging evidence suggests that for many children and youth affected by conflict and crisis, regular routines which provide a sense of consistency and belonging improve mental health and resilience outcomes (Taylor and Kaplan, 2023). In formal educational settings, the importance of 'warm' teacher-student relationships and a sense of safety have been identified as important in supporting school-related wellbeing of children living in conflict-affected locations (Ariyo *et al.*, 2022).

## Education crisis in Myanmar

Twin crises in Myanmar – the Covid-19 pandemic and the escalation of conflict since the onset of the 2021 military coup have heavily impacted children. According to the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for 2024, some 18.6 million people in Myanmar require humanitarian assistance, while over 30% of school-aged children are not engaged in any form of learning (Fukao *et al.*, 2024). Specific literature relating to the impact of the current crisis in Myanmar on children's achievement in academic, social-emotional and physical outcomes remains limited due to the collapse of the education system and reliable education monitoring systems. And the ongoing conflict has disrupted research and data collection, given the safety concerns, withdrawals of funding, and ethical considerations of navigating research in conflict zones.

This paper draws on an 'education in emergencies' project which involved engaging volunteer teachers to establish community learning spaces in 13 conflict-affected villages in Mon State. VSO helped parents to create learning spaces for their out-of-school, displaced, or vulnerable children, often in a volunteer teacher's home. Figure 1 shows the rationale for establishing community-learning spaces.

Figure 1. The purposes of community learning spaces



The community learning spaces do not follow a formal curriculum, instead they respond to the context and needs of individual communities, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of stakeholders and the learning spaces

	Characteristics
<b>Children</b>	Children's access to education is compromised by conflict and protracted crisis, impacting academic, social, and emotional learning as well as mental health. An average of 18 boys and girls aged 5 -15 years attend each learning space, some internally displaced by conflict, all from low socio-economic backgrounds and children of migrant workers based in Thailand. 3% of the total number of children have disabilities.
<b>Teachers</b>	13 volunteer teachers (average age 24) are mobilised by the local community with the support of a local civil society organisation. Some volunteer teachers have a teaching qualification in primary or early childhood and work in government schools (5 teachers) or ethnic education systems (2 teachers). The remaining volunteer teachers (6) have no formal teaching qualifications. All the volunteer teachers received 2 hours of training on the Leuven scales.
<b>Parents and community</b>	Parents largely have limited educational qualifications with many working and living across the border in Thailand.
<b>Learning environment</b>	Community learning spaces were set up as temporary, safe spaces and have now been established by communities, including volunteer teacher's houses. One learning space is in an internally displaced persons camp in a monastery.
<b>Curriculum, pedagogy and resources</b>	No formal curriculum is used in the spaces. The aim is to ensure children can continue to access learning opportunities, connect with their peers and support them to transition back into educational settings where possible. Informal short-term education programmes focus on play, the arts and wellbeing. Learning spaces are low-resource environments but provide consistency, routines, and predictable environments.

Due to concerns about children’s long-term absences from school and exposure to conflict, there was an urgent need to support volunteer teachers to address children’s social and emotional needs. The Leuven Scales were identified as a practical, evidence-based approach for measuring children’s wellbeing and involvement. The scales are based on observations made by teachers, supporting them to make immediate links to their classroom practice and routines.

The Leuven Scales

The Leuven scales were first created by a team of researchers at the Leuven University in Belgium in 1993 (MacRae and Jones, 2023). The five-point scales were designed as part of the Process-Oriented Monitoring System (POMS) (cf. Laevers *et al.*, 2013) to be used by teachers to assess the emotional wellbeing and level of involvement of preschool-aged children in learning activities. Emotional wellbeing and level of involvement provide measures for understanding the quality of children’s experiences (Laevers and Declercq, 2018). The scales in Table 2 below act as a starting point for teachers to reflect on what can be improved regarding the environment, teaching style, and relationships with children. The Leuven scales suggest that when there are high levels of child wellbeing and involvement in learning activities, deep learning can take place.

Table 2. The Leuven Scales

The Leuven involvement scale	The Leuven well-being scale
>1 Extremely Low: No activity	>1 Extremely Low: Outspoken signs of distress
>2 Low: Interrupted activity	>2 Low: Signs of distress predominate
>3 Moderate: Activity without intensity	>3 Moderate: A mixed picture, no outspoken signs
>4 High: Activity with intense moments	>4 High: Signs of enjoyment predominate
>5 Extremely High: Continuous intense activity	>5 Extremely High: Outspoken signs of enjoyment

The literature review has not found any evidence of usage of the Leuven scales in any conflict and crisis settings to date, whether in Myanmar or elsewhere. The scales have been widely used and are part of the non-statutory guidance for Early Years in some countries across Europe and Latin America, as well as in Australia, Japan, South Africa, and USA. A set of Process-Oriented Monitoring System guidelines were developed in Asia for VVOB (a Belgian-based non-profit organisation), which was working on a project in collaboration with the Vietnam Early Childhood Education Department. Whilst the tools were adapted, simplified and translated, the modality of the monitoring system aligned with the original design and was delivered in the way it was intended in a formal education system with preschool-aged children. For this research, the decision was made to use the original tool with local volunteers validating the final translation.

A framework for synthesizing evidence for policy and programming in education in conflict and protracted crisis

In a 2025 working paper, ERICC (‘Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis’, a UK government program) identified four ‘drivers of learning and development’ – access, quality, and continuity of education, along with coherence between the first three – as crucial for children affected by protracted crises (Kim *et al.*, 2025). These four ‘drivers’ provide a framework for organising evidence in the field of education in emergencies.

Within the framework, ‘access’ is defined as ‘awareness of, and the opportunity and capacity to participate in, educational experiences.’ Safe physical spaces as well as psychosocial support for children to learn and develop in crisis settings are crucial for access to education. (Kim *et al.*, 2025). Children’s emotional wellbeing and their involvement in learning environments are key components of educational quality (Kim *et al.*, 2025). The ERICC framework recognises the importance of children’s educational experiences and involvement (including relationships, interactions and practices) as necessary for holistic learning, development and

wellbeing. The framework posits that children's educational experiences and interactions occurring at the local systems level (in classrooms, schools and their local communities) directly impact on their learning, development and wellbeing. This paper examines the Leuven scales as a practical tool for teachers in education in emergency settings to better understand the impact of children's emotional wellbeing and engagement on learning outcomes.

## Methodology

This research draws on (i) the results of 1,311 observations with 232 children participating in activities in community-learning spaces within the first 3 weeks of them attending the space (predominantly 6 observations each; 3 for wellbeing and 3 for involvement) with volunteer teachers employing a tick sheet with the scale and space for comments on observations they made. The Leuven scales were used across 13 learning spaces in Mon State alongside (ii) 13 individual Key Informant Interviews (KII) with each volunteer teacher to understand their perceptions of the Leuven scales as a tool for assessment and its application in informal learning spaces. The research scope was expanded following the interviews to include the applicability of the scale in a protracted crisis, teachers' adoption of the scale in informal spaces, and the potential for scalability.

Primary data was collected on three separate occasions over a 3-week period in July 2024 with volunteer teachers observing children in a regular activity such as planting, drawing, singing and dancing for 30 minutes. Volunteer teachers used the five-point Leuven scale and the corresponding descriptors to make an assessment of each child's wellbeing (three scores over the three weeks) and involvement (three scores over three weeks). They averaged the three scores for each child's wellbeing and averaged the three scores for each child's level of involvement.

Volunteer teachers were trained how to use the scales, how to reduce any bias, and how to create a positive learning environment. A pilot of the Leuven scales was carried out over a two-month period from October-December 2023 in three learning spaces with three volunteer teachers and 15 children. One volunteer teacher in this research was part of that pilot and was already familiar with the tool. Eleven of the 13 volunteer teachers had also received training

previously in the project on children's wellbeing, but not specifically on Leuven scales.

One of the authors collected data (completed scores) from volunteer teachers sending photographs on Viber (a messaging application commonly used in Myanmar). She then held key informant interviews (KII) using phone calls to ensure the safety of volunteer teachers, mitigating any need to travel and carry documentation containing data through military checkpoints.

The interviews provided an opportunity for volunteer teachers to discuss how and why they allocated certain scores and share their reflections and experiences of using the scales. Interviews were conducted with the informed consent of volunteer teachers. The confidentiality of discussions around specific children or their learning space was assured by volunteer teachers allocating a number to each child for data analysis. The data from the interviews were translated and analysed using a simple code to identify issues related to the applicability of the scales; justifications for children who were assessed as extremely low or extremely high on the scales; and significant changes or adaptations made by the volunteer teachers' classroom practice or routines following the use of the scales. Conclusions were drawn about volunteer teachers' experiences and ways they adapted their teaching approaches. The scale results are not the focus for data analysis; instead the analysis will draw on qualitative findings from volunteer teacher key informant interviews.

The Leuven scales were created to provide a baseline for measuring changes in children's wellbeing and involvement in activities in the community learning spaces. However, interviews with the volunteer teachers (many of whom lack formal teaching qualifications) revealed that the application of the scales also resulted in changes to their teaching practice based on their observations of individual children in their learning spaces. Teachers noticed how their practice impacts children's wellbeing and involvement in learning activities. This opened a research opportunity to better understand the potential of the Leuven scales to support teachers in developing routines and consistency in their classrooms and to reflect on how their practice can enhance the wellbeing and involvement of children living in conflict-affected settings (Taylor and Kaplan, 2023; Ariyo *et al.*, 2022).

Findings

The Leuven scales: useful, user-friendly and effective for volunteer teachers

Overall, the teachers demonstrated greater awareness of the importance of wellbeing and involvement after using the Leuven scales. Volunteer teachers commented that they found the scales useful, user-friendly, valuable, and effective in observing children’s wellbeing and involvement.

During the training of the tool, volunteer teachers discussed misconceptions around the terms ‘wellbeing’ and ‘involvement’, with descriptions often confused with well-behaved and well disciplined. Key words in the scales, such as ‘passive’ (တက်ကွပ်မရှိသော), ‘posture’ (ကိုယ်နေဟန်ထား) and ‘withdrawn’ (သီးခြားနေလိုသော), were also discussed with examples of what that might look like when

observing children in their learning spaces. There were also discussions around the statements for each level and the difference in scores from one to another (particularly the distinction between a score of 1 and 2 and 4 and 5), ensuring consistency during observations of 232 children in the learning spaces. Healthy children are expected to score 4 or 5 on the Leuven scale. Scores 3 or lower indicate that intervention would be recommended.

The scales presented moderate scores for the wellbeing of these children. After a few weeks of children joining the learning spaces, 73% of children were assessed by volunteer teachers to have moderate, low or extremely low levels of wellbeing. Similarly, 72% of children were given a score of moderate, low or extremely low levels of involvement in learning activities.

Table 3: Number of children who scored at each level of wellbeing and involvement

Wellbeing: mean score 2.9 N = 657					Involvement: mean score 3.2 N = 654				
Level 1 Extremely low	Level 2 Low	Level 3 Moderate	Level 4 High	Level 5 Extremely high	Level 1 Extremely low	Level 2 Low	Level 3 Moderate	Level 4 High	Level 5 Extremely high
3	49	119	40	21	3	33	132	38	26

Although similar, in the initial few weeks of joining a community learning space there were higher levels of involvement compared to wellbeing. Over half of the children scored at moderate levels of both wellbeing and involvement; 52 children (22%) were observed as having extremely low and low levels of wellbeing, which is described in the scales as not feeling at ease or showing signs of discomfort. For involvement levels, 36 children (15%) were observed ‘displaying no energy’ and as ‘passive’ in their learning.

Through the course of the interviews with the teachers, it became apparent that the actual scores were not the critical factor in the Leuven scoring process’s effect on learning and development. Whilst, in discussing plans for the next round of observations after 2 months, teachers were hopeful of growth in the children’s scores, the interviews demonstrated the depth of professional learning the teachers received just from this early stage alone. They talked not only about what they observed, and the resulting quantitative scores, but also they reflected on the implications of the process for

the children’s education. and the importance of relationships, interactions, and practices in improving learning outcomes.

‘You notice when you observe’

Using the Leuven scales encouraged the volunteer teachers to consider their relationships and interactions with children. The teachers recognised the benefits of observing the children, noticing individual behaviour more, identifying children’s needs more effectively and therefore providing better care, support, and education. To this, a female teacher commented, ‘You notice when you observe.’ Meanwhile a male teacher said that he would use the scale every month to check in with children’s continued wellbeing. Volunteer teachers noticed that language was a barrier for some children and that the levels of involvement were much higher when the volunteer teacher spoke in the child’s mother tongue. Others noticed that some children needed specific support, that some feared making mistakes, and one



commented that she had seen children learning at different paces. A male teacher noted that ‘a positive and contented mindset enables active participation in lessons.’

Interviewees also reported changes in teaching approaches and prioritising wellbeing and involvement in their learning spaces. One male teacher commented that he previously focused on academic outcomes and that his relationships with children were ‘cold’ and they were afraid of him. He added that using the Leuven Scale helped him to observe children’s wellbeing through various activities, including games and singing poems. He noticed a significant improvement in children’s happiness compared to the previous year and now feels he is fulfilling his responsibility as a teacher, noticing children are happy when they are more engaged. Other adaptations and changes noted by volunteer teachers included greeting children with smiles, encouraging students with compliments when they are working, and using personalised questions for children who have different learning needs.

‘I’ve gained more confidence in teaching, especially after attending regular training sessions. I noticed that the children, most of whom come from poor family backgrounds, are more active and engaged than before, especially when working in groups and discussing lessons. They’ve also become more confident in speaking, for example, introducing themselves or participating in discussions.’ (Female volunteer teacher, learning space number 1).

The opportunity to observe and notice every child in the setting meant that volunteer teachers knew their children well after a short time. This is critically important, particularly in a context like Myanmar where migration and displacement are so common. The observations provided a mechanism for volunteer teachers to reflect on individual children, which strengthened their relationships. This had a positive effect on the children coming to the learning space – and ultimately on the quality of the educational experience. As one teacher expressed, ‘I feel a strong bond with my students’ (Female volunteer teacher, Learning space number 11).

Alongside the tool, the training ensured that there was a common understanding of their role in providing consistency and continuity through the

learning space which was critical given frequent disruption some of the children were experiencing. Using the scales encouraged volunteer teachers to reflect on the importance of continuing education and providing safe learning environments for children who need emotional support.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper demonstrates the applicability of the Leuven scales as a practical tool for helping teachers to support children’s emotional wellbeing and involvement in difficult ‘education in emergencies’ settings in Myanmar and perhaps elsewhere. The findings also demonstrate the potential of the scales in promoting teacher reflection, helping teachers (with varying levels of qualifications and experience) to better understand children’s needs, and encouraging these teachers to adapt their classroom practice to support children’s emotional wellbeing and involvement.

The experiences of volunteer teachers provide an opportunity for richer discussion around the low and high scores for children and considerations of influential forces such as individual circumstances and teaching approaches. In conversation, teachers were able to explain some scores using children’s background, exceptional circumstances, and family situations, which demonstrates how ‘pre-existing risk factors at the local system level’ (as described by the ERICC framework) present barriers to children accessing quality education. Insights from the interviews with the volunteer teachers indicate that training on wellbeing and involvement had practical benefits, particularly the focus on observation in classrooms where there are high numbers of internally displaced children. In these settings, teacher training should prioritize observation of children using practical tools such as the Leuven scales to understand the importance of children’s wellbeing, develop self-reflection skills, and establish safe (emotional and physical) learning environments.

Interviews with the teachers also revealed their willingness and capability to reflect on their own teaching practice and learning environments when discussing the levels of children’s wellbeing and involvement. This suggests the Leuven scale can support a key component of teachers’ professional development in being critically reflective on their own practice, which in turn can drive improvements in the

quality of education they are providing (Kuswandono, 2012). This reflection process is a critical part of learning for new teachers, guiding them to think about pedagogy and holistic approaches to learning rather than focusing purely on the content of their lessons (LaBoskey, 1994).

The authors recommend that further research is carried out on the potentiality of the Leuven tools in a range of education spaces, with children of varying ages, and in other conflict-affected contexts. The training that accompanies the tool should emphasise the benefits of observation as a tool for self-reflection, both to assess how children are doing (Laevers, 2017) and to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Guidance should be given to educators on their role in driving improvements in quality which are so critical to children's wellbeing and involvement. By creating positive learning environments and fostering effective relationships between students and teachers, as well as by providing the benefits and sense of safety that structure and routines can bring, more children can thrive (Taylor and Kaplan, 2023). The authors see the scales as beneficial to all teachers regardless of their experience, qualifications or educational setting, enforcing its scalability across Myanmar and similar contexts of protracted crisis.

Whilst the actual activity that children engaged in was optional (volunteer teachers were asked to observe children in an activity that was known to them and part of their routine), for a more robust comparison and data collection, there should be further discussion around the variance of activities in the different learning spaces. Some activities perhaps seemed more fun (dancing and drawing compared with clearing learning spaces and preparing for class) than others. It is an area that could have affected the types of observations that were made and the findings.

For many children growing up in Myanmar, conflict has become a way of life. The reflections and experiences from this small-scale study point to the potential of the Leuven scales to support teachers in 'education in emergency' settings to embed children's emotional wellbeing and involvement into their practice. The study indicates that community volunteer teachers, with varying levels of qualifications, saw the merit of using the scales to observe children's wellbeing and involvement more

closely and were able to adopt a more reflective approach to their teaching practice as a result. This paper underscores the importance of addressing children's wellbeing and involvement in education research, policy discourse, and programming within areas of conflict and protracted crisis.

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