International Journal of Human Behavior and Society Scope (IJHBSS)

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 1 (2026)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

International Journal of Human Behavior and Society Scope (IJHBSS)
Volume 1 Issue 1, Year 2026
https://journals.e-palli.com/home/index.php/ijhbss

Beyond Trauma Recovery: Reframing Community-Based Educational Reintegration as Psychosocial Reconstruction for Conflict-Displaced Youth

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Article Information

Received: August 17, 2026
Accepted: November 06, 2026
Published: November 20, 2026

Keywords

Community-Based Education, Conflict Displacement, Educational Reintegration, Psychosocial Reconstruction, Social Cohesion, Youth Empowerment

ABSTRACT

Educational responses to conflict displacement tend to focus on immediate psychological well-being and access to education. This article argues that community-based education reintegration should be viewed as a psychosocial reconstruction process. This refers to the ongoing process whereby learners are supported by their communities to develop trusting relationships, regain their sense of agency, feel included and have meaningful transitions into adulthood. Utilising a critical interpretive synthesis approach to review international education in emergencies standards, global displacement data, Nigerian safe schools policy evidence and peer-reviewed research relating to psychosocial and accelerated learning interventions, this analysis highlights four key issues. Firstly, access measures can be easily measured. Secondly, clinical MHPSS approaches cannot overcome unsafe and/or excluding school environments. Thirdly, rigid structures do not value the backgrounds, languages and skills of displaced learners. Lastly, short term interventions often have limited sustainable impact. A framework of six elements has been created to support psychosocial reconstruction within education. These include creating a safe and predictable environment, building trusting relationships, acknowledging cultural and linguistic differences, creating progression within education, supporting learner agency and strengthening community-institutional links. Strategies to implement these include co-designing priorities with the community, providing multi-agency support in schools, offering flexible and recognised pathways through learning and measuring outcomes with a focus on long-term social inclusion. This article can be used as a theory of change to adapt and evaluate the framework over time in protracted displacement contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Protracted conflict has a significant effect on children and young people's access to education. Often, schools are damaged or become inaccessible due to conflict, teachers and peers are displaced, records and qualifications are lost and education may not be a priority due to financial strains on families. The UNHCR (2025) Global Trends report highlights an increase in forced displacement due to conflict and violence. Globally nearly half of school aged refugee children are excluded from education (UNHCR, 2024). Approximately 50 million children younger than 18 are currently being forcibly displaced due to armed conflict and emergencies, increasing the risk of exclusion from education and poor mental health (Pluess *et al.*, 2025).

Children and young people in displacement often struggle with accessing host community schools after disruptions. They may attend non-formal education before moving to formal education, often in a language they are unfamiliar with and may be placed in year groups they are not on track for. Adolescents in particular may struggle with exclusion as they have more complex needs than just literacy. Current education in emergency standards (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies [INEE] Minimum Standards), focus on providing quality education through access to, teaching and learning, workforce and policy. They also focus on providing education to improve mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), inclusion and resilience (INEE, 2024). International and regional conflict analysis has highlighted that prolonged conflict causes institutional instability and breaks down Social Cohesion (Mohamedradha *et al.*, 2026). Evidence from climate vulnerable and conflict affected areas has found that children and young people often display psychological outcomes from exposure to multiple shocks. Young children and adolescents often experience increased anxiety, trauma symptoms, emotional withdrawal and disrupted parenting due to conflict (Chimowa *et al.*, 2026). In Nigeria, insecurity in the North-East and an increase in violence in the North-West has had an impact on education. Monitoring of UNICEF Minimum Standards for Safe Schools found that only 37% of schools in 10 states had early warning systems in place and only 14% had safe infrastructures (UNICEF, 2024). Without safe learning environments, children will struggle to achieve educational access. However, they may still feel they are not valued and may not be learning effectively.

Critical Gap

Humanitarian initiatives often want to show quick results such as increases in pupil numbers, school building and resource provision, teacher training and short term

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counselling. However, this can often become a substitute for true reintegration. Children may be physically present but not included, placed in incorrect year groups, not have their prior learning recognised and have limited opportunities to think about their future. Short term counselling cannot remove discriminatory practices, poverty issues and unsafe journeys. International standards do recognise the importance of MHPSS, inclusion, holistic recovery and community involvement (INEE, 2024), however psychosocial and relational aspects are often overlooked due to short timeframes and a focus on showing evidence. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses have shown some improvement in depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms with MHPSS interventions however there is high heterogeneity, limited long-term follow up and strong dependency on context (Bangpan *et al.*, 2024; Douglas *et al.*, 2025). Evidence from intergenerational trauma and abandonment in conflict affected children and young people shows that their desire to migrate and exclusion from education often stems from the psychological strain they are experiencing and feeling like they are not seen by institutions (Hussein, 2026). Children who have never attended school in northern Nigeria are especially vulnerable to exclusion as their prior knowledge is not recognised by the formal education system (Olorunfemi & Garba, 2026). Overall this shows that focusing on access and symptoms is insufficient.

Position and Contribution

This paper shows that education reintegration should be viewed as a psychosocial reintegration. This allows children and young people to not only gain access to education but to feel safe within institutions, valued culturally, build positive relationships, develop academically and have believable pathways to adulthood. While trauma-informed support is vital, it is important to consider the institutional and community aspects. This paper does not state that schools should replace specialist clinical support or solve political issues causing conflict but that education institutions can further exclusion or can be used as tools for reintegration. The paper provides three contributions. Firstly, the difference between trauma recovery and psychosocial reintegration is discussed. Secondly, international guidance and evidence is analysed to show current inconsistencies and limitations in reintegration practices. Lastly, a practical framework with 6 components and policy agenda is provided to apply to conflict affected areas. This paper is relevant to comparative education and youth studies as it links institutional aspects to social and relational outcomes. However, caution is taken regarding the strength of evidence, applicability to different contexts and potential unintended consequences.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design

This study uses a critical interpretive synthesis to analyse policy, institutional and peer-reviewed evidence. It is not a systematic review and does not include primary research. The aim is to look at how education reintegration is described in policy and research, compare this to the available evidence and put together a cohesive argument. This method was chosen so that different types of evidence could be included. Policy standards, statistics, trials and qualitative evidence were included. This method ensures the researcher takes a reflexive approach to analysing the language, assumptions and power dynamics within the sources (Dixon-Woods *et al.*, 2006; Fairclough, 2010). Unlike critical discourse analysis, this did not involve detailed linguistics analysis of a set amount of texts. Instead the focus was on creating a theory to understand the different sources.

Document Selection

The sources were selected based around 4 key themes

1. International guidance and standards for education in emergency situations and MHPSS.
2. Global displacement and refugee education reports.
3. Nigerian safe school monitoring reports.
4. Peer reviewed evidence on accelerated learning, psychosocial support and social and cultural capital of refugee students.

Preference was given to sources published between 2015 and October 2026. Theoretical texts were also included. Sources needed to focus on displaced or conflict affected children, education access/reintegration, psychosocial wellbeing, inclusion, Safe Schools and institutional aspects. Key sources included the INEE Minimum Standards (INEE, 2024), UNHCR education and Global Trends reports (UNHCR, 2024; 2025), UNESCO education in emergency guidance (UNESCO, n.d.), UNICEF safe school monitoring in Nigeria (UNICEF, 2024) and trial and qualitative evidence from Nigeria, Afghanistan and resettlement. Bourdieu's theories of habitus and capital were used to understand how institutions recognise or fail to recognise the resources children have (Bourdieu, 1986). This is an interpretive synthesis. So, the sources included are not representative of every displacement situation.

Analysis

There were 4 stages of analysis. Firstly, sources were analysed to identify if trauma, reintegration, resilience, inclusion, safe learning and recovery were mentioned. Secondly, the sources were compared to understand how issues were described, who was held responsible and what was considered successful. Thirdly, policy statements were compared with findings to identify any similarities, differences and ambiguity. Lastly, patterns were identified and incorporated into the themes and framework presented in the results. 5 themes were identified a priori to organise the evidence:

1. Access and safety.
2. Psychological support and wellbeing.
3. Inclusion and trust.

4. Language, culture and prior learning recognition.
5. Agency, future opportunities and community governance.

No primary data were collected. No causal statements were made. Interpretive judgements were made.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

Key sources, reasoning and references to evidence are provided. This is not a registered systematic review so search terms were not used across databases, sources were not independently screened and risk of bias scores were not used. Institutional sources may be biased towards showing what they intend to do. Published evidence may not represent the true picture of unsuccessful or undocumented practices. This should be viewed as an argument based on evidence and research agenda.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1 – Access Is Essential but Insufficient for Reintegration

Across policy and evidence sources there is a clear pattern that access measures such as pupil numbers, attendance, school building and textbooks are easier to measure. While vital, they do not show if children feel safe, form positive relationships, understand the language they are taught in, recover learning and have a voice. There are still high barriers to education for refugees (UNHCR, 2024). The INEE standards focus on holistic outcomes, inclusion and responsive teaching (INEE, 2024). Adolescents will often be enrolled but years behind their peers, not have recognised qualifications and may have caring or income generating roles. If the focus is solely on attendance you may assume they are not interested in attending. This is not the case as they may feel unsafe, their families are in precarious situations and institutions are not flexible. Reintegration should be viewed as a pathway. While access is vital, children need to feel included, progress academically and have believable future opportunities.

Theme 2 – Clinical Support Can Be Beneficial but Dependent on Context

Structured MHPSS can be beneficial. Meta-analysis has shown that cognitive behavioural interventions may reduce depression in children and adolescents in humanitarian contexts however there is high heterogeneity (Bangpan *et al.*, 2024). Another meta-analysis of 27 trials with over 5700 participants found targeted and universal interventions reduced post-traumatic stress symptoms from passive controls. Targeted interventions showed some improvements in depression however there was high heterogeneity and limited long-term follow up (Douglas *et al.*, 2025). Education can provide structure, relationships, purpose and trusted adults. The INEE guidance states that education should be used as a vehicle for multi-level MHPSS. This includes basic safety, family/community support and specialist care (INEE, 2024). Therefore, counselling cannot be expected to overcome negative classroom environments, discrimination, unsafe travel, food insecurity and frequent school closure. If the institution is causing stress then psychological support may be seen as an individual solution.

Evidence from climate affected districts in Malawi shows children often experience psychological issues due to stress from their carers, disrupted routines, malnutrition and disruption to education (Chimowa *et al.*, 2026). A cluster randomised trial of psychosocial activities in 83 primary schools in rural Afghanistan found positive impacts on particular academic outcomes and reduced discrimination. However there were mixed effects on mental health and social-emotional outcomes depending on subgroups and implementation (Trani *et al.*, 2026). Community based interventions in low and middle income humanitarian contexts have shown moderate average effects on PTSD symptoms. They depend on cultural adaptation, family engagement and consistency (Pluess *et al.*, 2025). Overall, classroom and community interventions have potential but depend on context.

Theme 3 – Accelerated Learning Provides Opportunities But Need Long Term Pathways

Accelerated and non-formal education programmes are an important intervention for children who are older, have not had basic education or cannot access education immediately. A mixed methods randomised control trial of an accelerated learning programme with 1723 children aged 9-14 who were out of school in North East Nigeria found improvements in literacy, numeracy and some social emotional outcomes (Díazgranados-Ferráns *et al.*, 2022). However, just participating does not mean they will successfully reintegrate. A randomised trial of a 6 month accelerated education programme for displaced adolescents found short term improvements in reading (0.32 SD) and maths (0.40 SD). Some changes were seen in conflict related responses however after 12 months both the treatment and control group had similar outcomes in reading, maths and conflict resolution. No long term improvements were seen in self-efficacy or mental health and boys still had hostile attribution bias (Moussa *et al.*, 2026). This shows that post programme mentoring, recognised qualifications, teacher consistency and connections to economic and social services are needed. Synthesis work has shown that working closely with accelerated education providers, formal education and the community will determine long term success (Education.org, 2025).

Theme 4 – Institutional Structures Can Cause Exclusion

Formal education often follows strict timetables, language policies, behaviour policies and assessment. This assumes children have been attending school and their families are providing support. While this can provide consistency, it can often create barriers for children who have had disrupted education. Qualitative research with high school refugee students has shown they struggle with language learning, low self-esteem and motivation

due to this mismatch (Dávila, 2012). Using Bourdieu's theories of habitus and capital we can see that children come with different resources, attitudes and knowledge. Institutions tend to value certain aspects and view others as a deficit (Bourdieu, 1986). Displaced children may not have recognised qualifications or connections to institutions but may have language skills, practical skills and community knowledge. If schools view them as having disrupted attendance, using different languages and displaying stress related behaviours they will be seen as lacking ability.

However, research has shown that schools can create positive outcomes by recognising the social capital within the community (Miller *et al.*, 2024). Research has shown that Sudanese refugee youth often have social capital from church and youth groups which can help them stay in education (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2017). Having more ethnic diversity in classrooms has been linked to less rejection from peers for refugee adolescents due to more positive interactions (Boda *et al.*, 2023). Using funds of knowledge can help children feel more included by using their existing language, family and aspirations (Ivy & Peter, 2025). Community connections should not be idealised as there can be exclusion but it is clear they are socially influenced.

Theme 5 – Community Involvement

Policy documents are increasingly recognising the importance of localisation and community involvement. However, often communities are only consulted after priorities and funding have been decided. The INEE standards highlight that meaningful engagement, coordination, resource allocation and accountability are key to quality responses (INEE, 2024). The UNICEF monitoring of Safe Schools in Nigeria show there are standards in place but they rely on capacity and infrastructure (UNICEF, 2024). If we want to focus on reintegration we need to ask who is defining the problem, whose knowledge is valued and who has authority over adapting education. Displaced youth, their carers, families from the host community, teachers, local health workers and community organisations should be involved when making decisions on learning timetables, reducing stigma, recognising prior learning and connecting schools to other services. Girls, children with disabilities, minority language groups and out of school children need to be intentionally included or they will likely reproduce existing inequalities.

Reconstruction Paradigm Matrix

The table below shows the difference between a narrow recovery approach and psychosocial reintegration approach. These are ideal types and do not represent all current programmes.

This shift reorients programme evaluation from whether learners have been returned to school toward whether they can continue to engage meaningfully. Conventional metrics remain necessary but are situated within a broader evaluative frame.

Table 1: Reconstruction Paradigm Matrix

Dimension	Remedial recovery emphasis	Psychosocial reconstruction emphasis
Primary objective	Return learners to school and reduce immediate distress	Sustain learning, belonging, agency and social participation
Unit of intervention	Individual learner or short-term project	Learner within school, family, peer and community systems
Success indicators	Enrolment, attendance, materials distributed, symptom scores	Learning progression plus trust, belonging, participation, agency and safe relationships
Role of community	Referral source or consultation partner	Co-governor of priorities, adaptation, monitoring and accountability
Understanding of culture	Context to accommodate	Source of knowledge, identity, language and social resources
Time horizon	Emergency response and project cycle	Continuity from emergency through recovery and longer-term development
Accountability	Outputs delivered against project targets	Outputs, equitable outcomes, learner voice and durable pathways

Proposed Psychosocial Reconstruction Framework

The synthesis supports a six-component framework oriented toward safety and predictability, relational trust, cultural and linguistic recognition, academic progression, learner agency, and durable community–institutional linkages. Components are interdependent and non-linear: learners may progress academically yet feel socially unsafe, or build peer trust while struggling with irregular attendance. Continuous assessment and local adaptation are therefore required.

Outcome measures should be broken down by appropriate data points (age, gender, disability, displacement status, language etc.) whilst protecting learners' privacy. Learners should not be labelled as 'traumatised'.

Table 2: Psychosocial Reconstruction Framework

Component	Illustrative practices	Possible indicators
Safety and predictability	Safe routes, early-warning systems, consistent routines, confidential reporting	Perceived safety; school incident response; continuity during closures
Relational trust	Peer groups, mentoring, restorative responses, trusted adult contacts	Peer trust; help-seeking; reported discrimination; sense of belonging
Cultural recognition	Multilingual support, community histories, recognition of prior learning	Learner-reported recognition; language access; placement accuracy
Academic progression	Diagnostic assessment, catch-up support, flexible timetables, credential bridges	Learning growth; retention; transitions to recognised pathways
Agency and civic participation	Youth councils, co-designed projects, peer mediation, community service	Youth influence on decisions; self-efficacy; participation rates
Community–institutional links	School boards with community and health representation; referral pathways	Referral completion; caregiver participation; continuity of services

Discussion

From Trauma-Informed Practice to Reintegration

Whilst there are obvious benefits to using trauma related language in raising awareness of psychological issues and resources, a focus solely on individual symptomology can limit policy. Displacement causes disruption to attachment, fragmentation, reduced access to resources and stigmatisation. Reintegration is a psychosocial process and well-being is constructed through relationships and institutions (Pluess *et al.*, 2025). Specialist support should be provided. Support should be structured around levels of need (basic safety, family and community resources, general support at school and support from qualified practitioners). Teachers should not be required to identify or manage mental health disorders. They should be trained, supervised and have clear referral routes to provide a safe environment within the classroom and to ensure learners can access specialist support (INEE, 2024; UNESCO, n.d.).

Bourdieu, Validated Resources and Institutional Barriers

Bourdieu's theory provides insight into why offering a place in school is not always an equitable solution. Schools often have specific ways of communicating, credentials, behaviours and parental engagement. Displaced learners often do not have the right documentation, constant language and adults to help them make sense of the system. If learners do not have their resources valued then the differences caused by conflict will be seen as individual barriers. Qualitative research with refugee youth shows that the traditional structure of schools can cause learners to lose motivation and confidence (Dávila, 2012). However, validating the cultural capital and social capital within learners' communities has been shown to create more positive educational outcomes (Miller *et al.*, 2024). Funds of knowledge show that utilising learners' language, family and aspiration can increase inclusion (Ivy & Peter, 2025). Whilst a flexible and culturally sensitive approach can be used, it is an indicator of how much reintegration will depend on how learners' are valued and supported by institutions.

Evidence Based Interventions

Evidence from interventions does not suggest there should be a negative outlook towards therapeutic approaches. Overall meta-analyses show there are some benefits to mental health however there were large variations (Bangpan *et al.*, 2024; Douglas *et al.*, 2025). The cluster trial in Afghanistan showed some improvements in academic outcomes and reducing discrimination however there was no consistent improvement in psychosocial outcomes (Trani *et al.*, 2026). The accelerated learning trial in North-East Nigeria has shown how it is important to look at both short term gains and fade out (Moussa *et al.*, 2026). Overall interventions will be influenced by design, length of time, fidelity, subgroups and support after leaving the programme. Reintegration should be community led and tailored to the locality. It should be constantly monitored and outcomes should be measured to ensure the programme has positive impacts. However it is also important to consider the potential negative impacts such as stigmatisation, breach of confidentiality, unequal access, teacher overload and local power being gained.

Policy Recommendations

Schools should have a psychosocial reintegration committee made up of school leaders, teachers, trained mental health/social workers, child protection, carers and young people. This should be used to support preventative measures, referrals, follow up and ensure the school adapts. This should not replace professional clinical support. Due to a lack of specialist staff, mobile teams may be more realistic to cover multiple schools. Referral processes should be clearly defined. Programmes should be designed to ensure learners move into recognised education. Accelerated learning, catch up classes, non-formal education, vocational training and flexible timetables should lead to valid qualifications. Due to evidence showing fade out in short term accelerated learning (Moussa *et al.*, 2026) there should be mentorship

and follow up included in the programme. Leaving the programme should be planned with the focus on ensuring learners are moving forward and receiving continued services.

Schools should have safe policies in place. This includes having confidential reporting systems, anti-discrimination systems, restorative practices, peer support and staff training to manage stress sensitive behaviour. In Nigeria monitoring of safe schools has shown that early warning systems and easy to access infrastructure are a priority (UNICEF, 2024). A safe environment, good buildings, trained teachers and reliable funding are essential. Decisions should be made with the community to ensure displaced learners, the host community, girls, learners with disabilities and minority languages are involved. Processes should be transparent to avoid elite capture. Outcome measures should be balanced between education related outcomes (attendance, retention, literacy, numeracy) and relationship based outcomes (feel safe, belong, trust peers, voice, discrimination, seek support and progression). Age appropriate tools should be used which are culturally and linguistically appropriate to improve outcomes.

Suggested Policy and Research Agenda

The following proposals are offered for adaptation and empirical testing:

1. Incorporate a psychosocial-reconstruction orientation into national and subnational education-in-emergencies plans, encompassing safe access, learning recovery, recognition and youth engagement.
2. Establish reconstruction boards linking schools and communities, ensuring meaningful participation of displaced learners, host communities, girls, learners with disabilities and minority-language groups.
3. Fund multi-year continuity for programmes serving populations in protracted displacement, including mentoring and post-exit transition support.
4. Deploy trained MHPSS and child-protection focal points within school clusters, underpinned by clear referral pathways.
5. Balance outcome measurement across learning and retention indicators and relational indicators of belonging, trust, safety, discrimination and youth empowerment.
6. Provide sustained continuous professional development and psychosocial support for teachers, avoiding the imposition of clinical responsibilities on unqualified staff.
7. Commission longitudinal mixed-methods evaluations of alternative models, examining cost, fidelity, subgroup effects and unintended negative consequences.
8. Establish data-protection rules that prevent sensitive psychosocial information from being used for disciplinary action, exclusion, security profiling or political purposes.

Limitations

This paper has been a desk based review meaning we cannot prove that implementing the recommendations will improve outcomes. This is a theory of change and needs to be evaluated. The literature reviewed covers a range of countries, age groups and intervention types. Findings from Nigeria, Afghanistan, Australia and others cannot be directly applied. Evidence is inconsistent with short term evaluations dominating and less long term relationship based outcomes, empowerment and intergenerational outcomes. There are real policy challenges to consider. Using national curriculum and standardised testing ensures learners are valued however those with disrupted pathways may struggle. Locally flexible can increase relevance however there may be unequal quality. Engaging the community can increase legitimacy however local exclusions may occur. Measuring psychosocial outcomes can help highlight well-being but can cause labelling and breach of confidentiality. Safety, funding and transparency are essential. The use of terms such as psychosocial reintegration should not be used as a means to pass the responsibility of peace building onto displaced youth and teachers. Ensuring protection, justice and creating safe return/durable solutions is the responsibility of the state and those involved in conflict. Education can increase social links and empowerment however cannot replace stopping violence, reducing discrimination, reducing impoverishment and political accountability.

CONCLUSION

Educational reintegration after conflict is most productively understood as a long-term process of rebuilding the social and institutional conditions that enable young people to learn, form trusting relationships, have their histories recognised, and exercise meaningful influence over their futures. Evidence drawn from humanitarian guidance and empirical studies indicates that safe learning environments, structured psychosocial support and flexible learning pathways can yield benefits; yet outcomes are variable and short-term gains are often fragile. The central claim of this paper is that trauma recovery should be embedded within a broader psychosocial-reconstruction orientation. Education systems should therefore attend simultaneously to safety, relational trust, academic progression, cultural recognition, learner agency and community co-governance. Clinical support and measurable learning outcomes remain essential; they are simply situated within a more comprehensive and durable frame. Implementation demands adequate and sustained financing, rigorous longitudinal evaluation, and genuine community adaptation. When education is designed not merely to return learners to classrooms but to restore the conditions for belonging and future-making, it can become a credible foundation for recovery in the aftermath of conflict.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the scholars whose primary and secondary research informed this study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing financial or personal interests that could influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding

The authors receive no funding for this study

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