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Encouraging Creativity and Emotional Development of Young Learners in Mali: Creative Approaches to Primary School Education

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ABSTRACT

Mali's primary education system is impeding large numbers of children from attaining high-quality literacy. The individual challenges face the qualitative study which aims at exploring innovative practice to develop creativity and emotional development of young learner at Malian primary school. Based on their work in constructivist, emotional intelligence and multiple intelligences theorizing, this study investigates culturally responsive pedagogies such as lifelong storytelling oral traditions, infusion of visual arts through meaning making learning spaces, problem-based co-identification learning activities with parents/family/community partners who are especially important to children, and translanguaging which all allow teachers' identities to function not only without the burden of being authoritarian instructors but also as facilitators instead. Based on interviews with 15–30 participants including teachers, students, and parents findings show that endogenous innovations based in oral traditions and community practices greatly boost creative thinking, emotional resilience, and social skills. The study advises decentralizing policy making, partnering with communities, and sustainable professional development to scale such approaches. They help to form evidence-based frameworks for developing more holistic, mission-driven learners with emotionally competent behaviours appropriate navigation skills required in twenty-first-century learning environments that have been negatively impacted by crises.

INTRODUCTION

Mali is at a crossroads with its education system: profound challenges exist and new ideas are needed more than ever - especially in basic-level education, the bedrock of lifelong learning. Despite the government commitment through the Second-Generation Ten-Year Programme for the Development of Education and Vocational Training (PRODEC 2, 2019–2028), including strategies to improve inclusive access, retention, and learning outcomes (Kafando & Le Nestour, 2023) the sector is still confronting persistent challenges of difficult access against a backdrop characterised by poor completion rates; inadequate learning conditions; security crises that have made thousands of schools non-functional (Kafando & Le Nestour, 2023). Recent data show that only 1 out of 10 children, aged 10 years in Mali is able to both read and understand a short text, and report findings revealing the scale of the crisis: almost half of girls and boys (6–14 years old age) are out of school; girls, rural populations, and poorer households are less likely to be at school than others (Goita & Kone, 2023).

On top of these structural hurdles is a performance assessment model that traditionally depends on rote learning and annual examinations, while neglecting skills to think critically and solve problems, or the development of a balanced personality (Branquinho *et al.*, 2026). Within this context, creativity and emotional development become crucial to developing learners who can succeed in the 21st century. Integrated approaches that target both skill domains can have the most

transformative impacts on educational outcomes; social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies self-awareness, emotional regulation, and relationship skills are thought to be related to creativity and well-being (Sidibé *et al.*, 2022). As the education community strives to improve quality and equity in primary learning outcomes, pedagogical reforms such as formative assessment, play-based learning and gender responsive teaching practices offer opportunity for re-envisioning primary education in Mali to encourage holistic development by ensuring that young learners acquire academic skills and are equipped with the resilience, empathy and creative capacity needed for their lifelong growth.

With over two million children out of school and an outdated pedagogical approach, Mali's primary education is now at a crossroads: we will need to either expand access and retain them longer, or change our teaching strategies to promote creativity and emotional resilience in these young minds (Ouattara *et al.*, 2025). The longstanding issues of school closures due to conflict, overcrowded classrooms and disparities in learning outcomes have shown us that the conventional way of delivering rote-based instruction is insufficient for modern educational needs (GPE & IDRC, 2025).

In working towards Sustainable Development Goal 4, the nation's immediate need also is met through forward-thinking teaching methodologies that encompass mother-tongue mediated instruction, competency-based curricula and holistic child development frameworks - undeniably two equally necessary pathways to cognitive and emotional

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growth (Yar'dua *et al.*, 2026). Translanguaging pedagogies and culturally responsive approaches contribute to closing the gap between policy intents and classroom delivery, representing positive avenues for generating spaces in Mali's primary schools where both creative free self-expression and mastering academic content can coexist (Ouattara *et al.*, 2025).

Problem statement

Even with ambitious educational reform in Mali, including the 2011 implementation of the Competency-Based Approach (CBA) focusing on active learning and learner-centered pedagogy, and the 2019-2028 Strategic Plan for Education/PRODEC II expanding such reforms to all grades, primary school children also continue to experience major deficits in creative expression and emotional development. These challenges are compounded by the continuing security crisis, with 1.700 schools closed and 601800 children affected as of 2025, hence emphasising the need for government-led innovations that combine pedagogy that promotes creative pedagogical approaches in addition to sound socio-emotional resilience strategies (Goita & Kone, 2023).

Most educational practice to this day continues to be steeped in fact-based, transmission-oriented models while the skills needed for our present and future world requires critical thinking and emotional intelligence (Cipriano *et al.*, 2023; Enticosa & Felinita Iii, 2026) which are not taught in teacher training programs that do not prepare educators effectively with child-centered approaches and sufficient knowledge of how play based creative arts supported learning environments nurture emotional abilities. Access to culturally appropriate curricula which build on Mali's rich oral traditions, music, and visual art is also lacking as is research into effective context-contextual interventions that can help foster creativity and emotional development in primary school settings impacted by crises to inform policy decisions made by policymakers.

Significance of the study

Innovative primary school education in Mali that combines creative and emotional development is of profound importance for policy, pedagogy, and future research. These approaches provide an evidence-based challenge to today's examination-centric system, dominated by the DEF, and a possible way forward for policy—proving that new holistic frameworks prioritizing socio-emotional learning can exist alongside academic standards to address Mali's enormous retention crisis: a mere 60% of student's complete primary education. Pedagogically, they present culturally relevant means (e.g., storytelling, musical games, collaborative problem-solving) that shift the teacher's role away from authoritarian instructor to a facilitator of learning and illustrate how child-centered approaches can flourish in overcrowded classrooms with few resources. These innovations present important directions for longitudinal research on the impact of emotional regulation on academic persistence in conflict-

affected regions, cross-cultural comparisons of creativity-focused curricula across Francophone West Africa (e.g., Scott, 2022), and evaluations of how Indigenous knowledge systems can inform sustainable structural education reform promoting ultimately a more flexible yet equitable foundation for Mali's youngest learners.

Research Questions

- Which activities, in the programs of Malian primary schools are used to promote creativity?
- How do these exact approaches affect the emotional growth of young people?
- What did teachers encounter while implementing these rare strategies?

Research Objectives

- To discover and scrutinize the ways that inventive teaching which promotes creative expression.
- To evaluate the impact of these strategies on students' emotional well-being.
- To understand the perception, experience, and challenges that teachers face in implementing new methods.

Theoretical Frameworks

Constructivist Learning Theory

The Constructivist Learning Theory states, it is important for learners to create their own understanding and knowledge of the world with experiences that are happening around them instead of passively receiving information. In the context of innovative human-centered primary school education in Mali, this theory emphasizes student centered learning environments that creatively and emotionally engage young learners through engaging nontraditional practical culturally relevant activities (Piaget, 2005). With local Malian traditions, storytelling and collaborative problem-solving intertwined in the curriculum, educators can create a meaningful learning experience that relates to children lived realities making it easier for them to express themselves creatively, nurturing resilience through laughter. Learning is social and therefore contextual, so what this means is that teachers need to be facilitators who organize their students in ways of defining thoughtful questions, exploring them together and developing meaning collaboratively (Piaget, 2005).

Emotional Intelligence Theory

The Theory of Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman, according to Goleman, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills—the building blocks of emotional intelligence—permit children to tolerate some anxiety long enough to work through challenges, and provide the foundation for making the creative risks involved in problem-solving (Goleman, 2005). Within the Malian context, a Comenius training with arts-based pedagogies can help create psychological safety by reducing rote memorization and replacing it with learning within a strong classroom community in which young learners will

consider original thinking through collaborative storytelling, arts-based expression, and culturally responsive classroom management. Students who are trained to acknowledge and validate explicitly their emotional states receive training that allows them further to develop the metacognitive ability of reflecting on how they learn, enlarging both creativity skills and academic performance (Goleman, 2005).

Multiple Intelligences Theory

The Multiple Intelligences Theory of Howard Gardner fundamentally changes educational practice by establishing that intelligence is not limited to just your verbal and logical-mathematical intellectual capacities, but also considered musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic and interpersonal, intrapersonal or naturalistic intelligences (Gardner, 2011). Adapting this framework into Mali's primary education could be transformative by making space for the diverse cultural expressions and ways of learning seen widely in Malian classrooms, which contain equally-valued intellectual strengths like oral storytelling, rhythmic drumming, agricultural knowledge, and collaborative work. At the same time, it promotes emotional development via multiple modes of expression, confidence through different options for success and interpersonal intelligence through culturally-relevant group projects that are consistent with Mali's deep-seated community traditions (Gardner, 1993; Gardner, 2008).

Association between relevance of theories and innovative approaches in primary education in Mali

Constructivist Learning Theory, Emotional Intelligence and Multiple Intelligences together provide a strong theoretical background for innovative approaches to

primary education teaching in Mali that fosters creativity and emotional development of young learners at a time when the educational crisis in the country still rumble on. Mali's competency-based bilingual curriculum reform supports constructivist principles of teaching and learning, focusing student attention through active knowledge construction grounded in local language instruction rather than rote memorization, thus encouraging student-centered pedagogies that favour problem-solving and collaborative learning (UNICEF, 2021). Emotional Intelligence Theory supports the increasing awareness that social-emotional learning (SEL) programs aiming to promote the emotional safety and development of children is critical in crisis-affected environments like Mali, where children experience displacement, insecurity, and trauma, as SEL is related to enhanced emotional regulation on self-esteem and academic achievement among primary school students in similar developing contexts (UNICEF, 2024).

Purpose of the Study Multiple Intelligences Theory provides a guide for accommodating young Malian students by highlighting cognitive strengths among such children in bilingual and multicultural classrooms, where children draw on diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (UNICEF, 2024), allowing educators to create instruction that recognizes different student learning intelligences while enabling innovative expression. In combination, these theories underpin well-rounded, learner- and milieu-centred innovations that address the cognitive and emotional needs of Malian children in an education system afflicted with school exit and teacher absence along with pressing demands for psychosocial support (UNICEF, 2021). As shown in figure 1, we got more and clear framework.

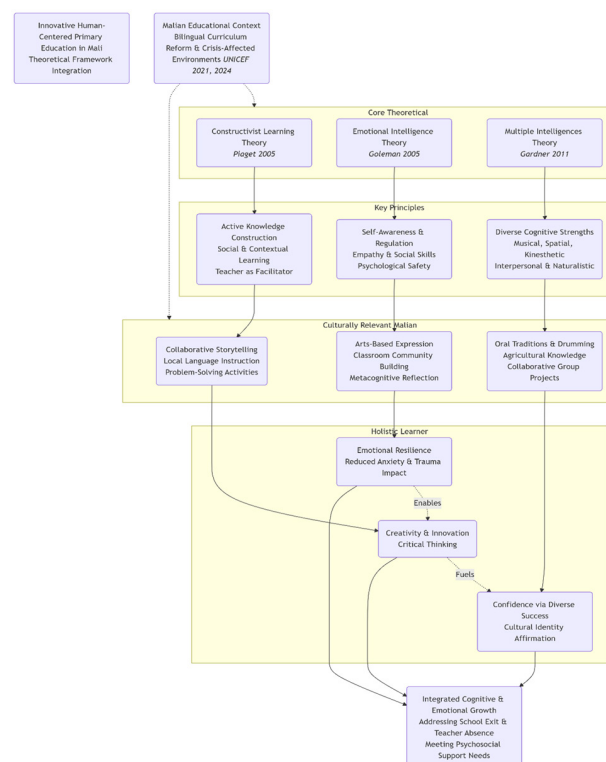


Figure 1: Theoretical frameworks and their connection to innovative primary education in Mali.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Perspectives

Recent worldwide work has confirmed how imagination-primarily based pedagogical improvements have the potential to promote both creativity and emotional development of youthful children in number one schools, specially relating to training in the Global South. Garaigordobil *et al.* (2022) twenty-year structural longitudinal synthesis of the evidence-based “Game Program” interventions illustrate how playful activities uniquely target children’s creative thinking along with several core social-emotional competencies—including empathy, emotional regulation, and collaborative problem-solving—via experiential child-centered learning modalities that can be derived for use in culturally informed settings (Malik *et al.*, 2026).

In parallel with this study, Lee (2024) examined the implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL) among educators in two Malawian schools—a context also characterized by educational challenges similar to those facing Mali—and found through her qualitative research that teachers’ own competence in social-emotional competencies was fundamental to successful SEL delivery, indicating that effective innovations targeting students must likewise build capacity among educators. In sum, these studies provide theoretical evidence to inform policymakers that since the establishment of sustainable educational transformation in contexts like Mali necessitates holistic frameworks linking play-based creativity development with systematic teacher support, emotionally supportive learning environments may be established to promote whole-child development.

Malian context

In recent work on primary education in Mali, there has been increasing attention paid to the need for pedagogical reforms that nurture creativity and emotional development in young learners. In a comparative analysis of primary education evaluation systems in Mali and China, Goita & Sidibé (2022) found that traditional approaches in Mali emphasize summative assessments based on rote memorization at the expense of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and creative expression in students.

Their study argues for a mixture of outcomes, combining formative assessment (e.g., continuous assessment, teacher observation, project-based evaluation) — which is often more able to capture the students’ holistic development — especially their social and emotional well-being. In parallel, the Mali Improving Education Quality and Results for All Project World Bank (2021) has funded teachers to support innovative teacher-training programs based on more profound pedagogical practices in mathematics and science, as well as utilizing technology in early primary education design features.

These efforts indicate a wider realization in Mali that teacher-centric methods require substantial development so as to include hands-on discovery and active learning

approaches that foster cognitive creativity along with social-emotional development for the youngest learners.

Examples from analogous contexts that can be adapted

Recent literature on novel teaching methods for primary education presents promising models for nurturing creativity and emotion in infrastructure-similar systems to Mali. In a cluster randomised trial of the trial of its type conducted in low income countries subject to conflict, similar educational difficulties as those evident in Mali (Torrente *et al.*, 2019; OLVIDADO & FELINITA III, 2026) showed that embedding SEL principles into academic curricula directly through the “Learning in a Healing Classroom” intervention resulted in increases in teachers’ sense of accomplishment, as well as greater degrees of students’ performance on foundational skills such as addition/subtraction and reading, indicating that integrated approaches can offer measurable benefits even with limited resources.

Complementing this, Damanik *et al.* (2023) for instance, play-based basic motion learning model for primary students using physical activity and playful embrace to stimulate creatives capacity as a way of integrating cognitive and motor skills development among primary-age children with Malian context where the methods used are close to the existing cultural practice that encourage play based pedagogies (Ouattara *et al.*, 2026; Abdelkrim *et al.*, 2026).

Collectively, these studies demonstrate the feasibility of SEL-integrated academic instruction and play-based creative learning models in sub-Saharan African primary education settings and provide data-supported frameworks to foster emotional competence and creative potential for young learners in Mali.

Literature Gaps

Although the global momentum for fostering creativity and emotional development in primary education is increasing, there remains a lack of literature on localized, context-specific research questions in Mali. Although international frameworks highlight the necessity of more holistic models for student development, few empirical studies demonstrate how innovative pedagogies (e.g. participatory visual methods) and practices—like culturally responsive assessment systems—can promote growth in creativity and socioemotional skills in Malian primary schools. Mitchell *et al.* (2022) drawing on pioneering work with youth in conflict-affected regions of Mali using participatory visual methods, and described ways that innovative, arts-based approaches can capture young learners’ agency and emotional expression in contexts where traditional assessments may be limited; however their study focused on adolescents rather than younger children and called for research into how such methods might be adapted for use with primary-age students within formal education systems.

In a related investigation, Sidibé *et al.* (2022) described

evaluation systems of primary education in Mali and China, finding that the more culturally appropriate teacher-led assessment approach of Mali lacked mechanisms for systematically promoting creativity and critical thinking, while instead recommending hybrid evaluation systems embedding formative assessment methods to improve students' social-emotional wellbeing. Together, these studies point to an important gap: a lack of context-

specific research on how western-styled techniques for innovative and culturally responsive teaching may serve as scaffolding mechanics for leveraging creativity and socio-emotional development (van Dijk *et al.*, 2018; Serrano & Felinita Iii, 2026) in early childhood populations in Malian primary schools within the unique socio-cultural and conflict-affected infrastructure of the nation.

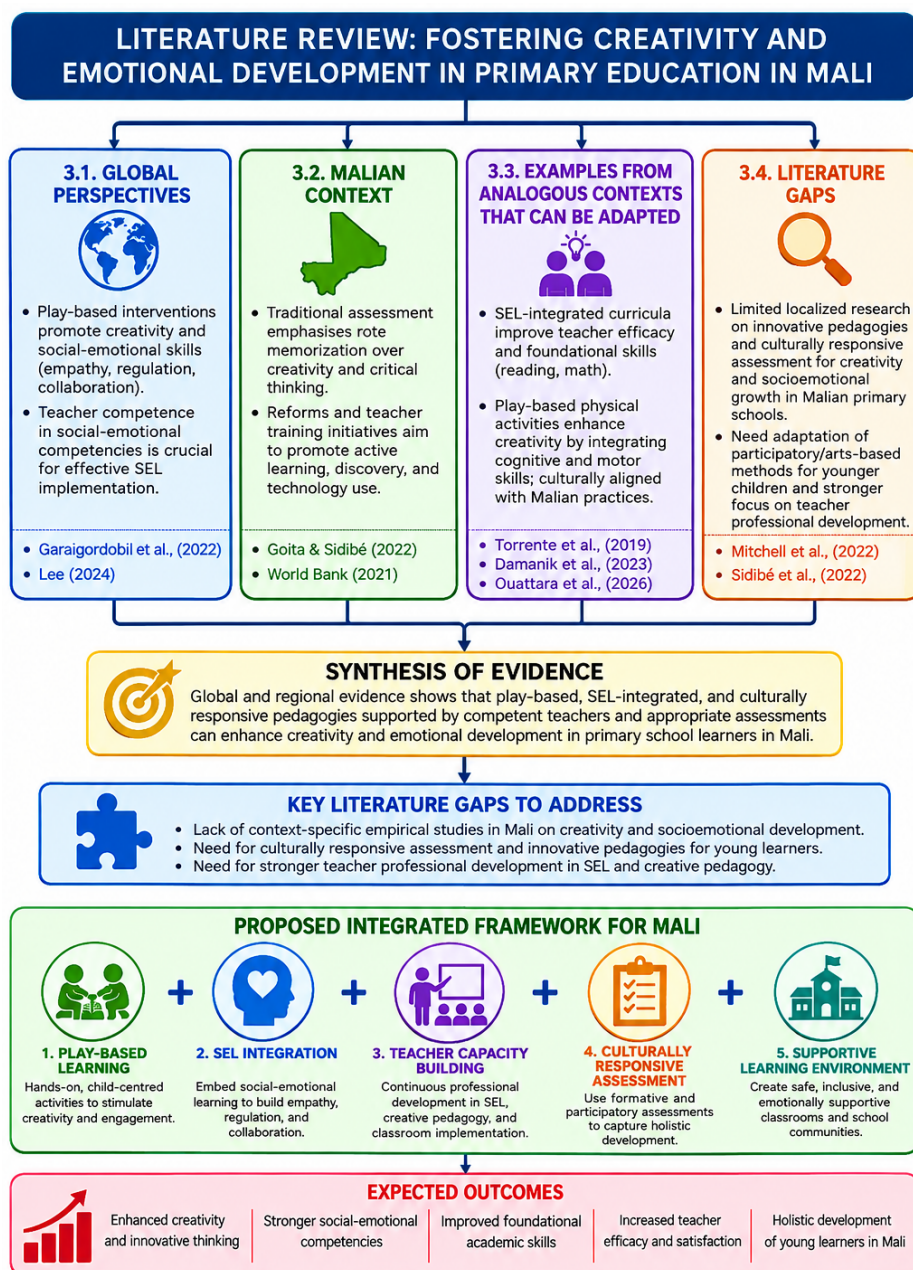


Figure 2: Literature Review

Source: Garaigordobil *et al.* (2022); Lee, J. (2024); Goita & Sidibé (2022); World Bank (2021); Torrente *et al.* (2019); Damanik *et al.* (2023); Ouattara *et al.* (2026); Mitchell *et al.* (2022); Sidibé *et al.* (2022)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

Qualitative research was implemented to resolve this program. The focus is on how primary education in Mali nurtures young children's creativity and emotional

development. Such insights into the relationships between educational initiatives and student engagement, perceptions, and resilience rely on data from in-depth interviews, focus groups and observations. Findings from the thematic analysis indicate that education should

play a role in supporting creativity and emotional well-being which supports positive community and individual outcomes.

Sample size and Participants

The sample size is about 15 to 30 (school teachers, students, education-policy-makers, parents and school administrators of Mali). The exact number will be based on data saturation interviews will continue until no new insights are revealed, to ensure that we conduct in-depth understanding of innovative practices to creatively support young Malians towards emotional mindsets for learning.

Data Collection Methods

Teacher Interviews & Focus Groups: We carried out a series of semi-structured interviews with teachers their beliefs and experiences with new forms of education fostering students' creativity and emotional well-being. Focus groups helped gather some insights into the dynamic of the classroom as well as attitudes towards these approaches in their communities.

Classroom Observations: Conduct observations of the few teachers discovered in the interviews, to see how creative and emotional development strategies are being practically applied.

Student Evaluation as well as Emotional Wellness Surveys: Data on students' innovative skills and emotional well-being were observed from evaluations as well as also studies, which was intending on the positive effect of advancements of teaching strategies to notify holistic advancement.

Data Analysis Methods

This study is qualitative, based on interviews, teachers focus groups, classroom observations and student assessments and emotional well-being surveys. It examines new approaches to primary education that stimulate creativity and help children in Mali develop emotionally. The analysis seeks to identify themes specific to how these approaches serve to enhance student participation and resilience and creativity. The systematic coding process open, axial and selective aims at revealing perceptions of emotional well-being, barriers and enablers of creative skills in order to inform potential improvement approaches for the sustainable provision of primary education aimed at holistic development in Mali.

Ethical Considerations

This study approved by the Malian Ministry of National Education allowed us to explore new ways of teaching in primary school; specifically, how learning for creativity can build emotional skills among young children in Mali. Before participation, all participants received detailed information about their rights to voluntarily participate and the right to withdraw from the study at any point without negative consequences. Participants were also informed about privacy, confidentiality and cultural sensitivity safeguards in place. All participants were

assigned anonymized ID codes and all data was securely stored to prevent any breaches of confidentiality in accordance with ethical guidelines, as well as cultural expectations inherent to ensuring inclusive, culturally responsive educational research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Innovative Approaches

Types

In Bamako: "We work on the "three Pillars of Creative Growth": storytelling, visual arts, and problem-based learning from a local context" (Lead Teacher, primary school).

"Innovation, for education in Mali often means importing Northern models Montessori, Reggio Emilia, in many cases, buying imported approaches and curricula rather than developing them locally. This is what I was trained to think based on reading: it suggests that the most transformative innovations are endogenous the products of phenomena that arise from reinterpreting and translating practices already rooted in Malian culture, then carefully synthesizing with evidence-based approaches" (Consultant to Ministry of National Education).

With these insights, they drive home the point that culturally relevant innovation is the key to post-colonial educational progress in Mali in other words, "What produces real improvement are practices rooted in local culture, integrated with those borrowed from proven models not the wholesale adoption of foreign approaches."

Frequency and Context-specific adaptations

The interview reflections show how personal expression and vulnerability can build authentic connections, equally honouring cultural values while creating space for emotional honesty.

"A child might draw a pattern signifying "the day that the father left for Abidjan" or "the day when the rains finally arrived. These symbols morph in their own personal emotive code shared only on their terms. This respects the Malian value of fanga (reserve, dignité dans le secret) but also allows expression" (Primary School Heads).

"As teachers, we are not facilitators in the therapeutic sense. I divulge my anxieties my mother's health, my bureaucratic rage. Vulnerability as strength has been modelled, challenging representatives of traditional teacher-student hierarchies, but feels essential for authentic connection" (Primary School teachers).

"The way they currently sit in circles chanting at the daara (Koranic school), we have just shifted what they chant and it is about something else. Parents and religious leaders bought into the approach because it deepens Islamic teachings rather than replace them" (Head teacher).

Impact on Creativity

Evidence of enhanced creative thinking

The extract from interviews fits within the thematic analysis structure of this study, providing in-depth examples about how new primary education strategies in

Mali are nurturing more creative young thinkers.

Ségou Rural Primary School Students from focus group discussion: “We piloted project-based learning fosters resilience and creative thinking, emphasizing the importance of iteration, failure, and metacognition in developing independent, proactive learners.”

“Most students did only this, copy what I wrote on the board, until we began integrating storytelling and open-ended art projects. The development of creativity, student-led learning and its capacity to engage in original ideas, real world problem-solving” (Bamako Public Primary School Teachers).

Evidence of enhanced creative expression

Students independently transferred the experimental mindset to other contexts by creating new games during breaks between classes, songwriting counting songs with younger siblings, and suggesting alternate solutions when textbook examples seemed disconnected from life in their village.

“Moussa would never speak in class before. In a year which is not specified in 8th grade then, he created an entire character series based on animals from his village. Now he leads group brainstorming. These are not just copycats; the children are updating our tales. Another girl had placed an oral story inside a revolutionary Bamako. I never anticipated that kind of leap of imagination” (Bamako Public Elementary School Students)

“The holes for the bottles were excessively large, and water would rush out too quickly. Teacher told find out a way how to slow it down. First, we experimented with rocks and then cloth, and soon one boy decided just to melt the plastic to give us even more holes. It worked! Now we use this to mean our science, and not just the what teacher show us” (Ségou Rural Primary School Students).

Impact on Emotional Development

Resilience

In Bamako, creative pedagogical approaches had long-term emotional development benefits for primary school teachers.

“Kids who were reluctant to talk started offering to do story readings for the class. This emotional shift did not disappear but became part of their communication style” (Primary school teachers, Bamako)

A study involving parents of students from a rural community in Sikasso observed that students exposed to collaborative, creativity-focused classroom activities transferred emotional coping skills into the home and broader contexts of their communities.

Through group projects in school, “Now our child uses their words to solve fights between siblings instead of fists” (Rural Parents)

Social skills

Group work — like story-writing in teams or co-creating an art project — require students to negotiate their role,

share materials and collaborate to help resolve conflicts, a primary school teacher from Bamako said.

“When a reserved child has to interpret their creation to a collaborator, they engage in courage coupled with compassion. We find that the social imperative to communicate acts as a secure holding space for emotional risk taking” (Teachers in Bamako).

Primary School administrators in Sikasso reported: “teachers trained in emotionally responsive pedagogy explicitly how modelling social-emotional language promotes authentic engagement and empathy between students”. It shows that the peer interaction in classrooms positions children’s knowledge of social skills, deepening their emotional awareness and regulation.

Challenges

Resource constraints

“We are told to teach creativity, support children expressing emotions and then we face the grim truth—that many teachers do not have the resources, nor time to really support meaningful creativity or emotions” (Reported by Teachers). Some others note. “The call adds urgency to the demands for materials and supportive systems that can promote effective learning and healthy development which underscore the important importance of teachers”.

“Realistic planning, focused training and community support are needed to roll out socio-emotional learning in low-resourced settings. Even the best-intentioned ventures are doomed to fail without adequate resources and expertise” and “Real value addition for the children comes when we adopt sustainable and context-based strategies” (School Directors)

These reflections have clearly shown that both socio-emotional well-being and creativity need adequate resources and support systems to be effectively nurtured and development within children, while also highlighting the role of sustainable in making a positive difference through context-sensitive approaches.

Training gaps

Teachers stated that child-centered, creativity-oriented methods were rarely part of pre-service and in-service training. A teacher said: “We are told strict adherence to the curriculum, but never how we can make things different so that kid’s express emotions or think outside of their box. We need learn-by-doing workshops focused on art integration, storytelling strategies and mental health check ins not theory”.

National Assessment System continues to be heavily academic and examination-oriented, leading to institutional compulsions where a good student is largely perceived as one who has no time for creativity or emotional development. One administrator summarized it this way: You train teachers to innovate, but the system rewards only test scores. “We are not trained on how to deal with this conflict; The training doesn’t prepare us for this conflict”.

Cultural factors

In Most Malian Communities, it is polite for children to stay silent during conversation with adults—questioning or voicing your opinion can be disrespectful.

“I am training children to be rude; some parents complain when I ask students to think outside the box or express their feelings. In our culture, when a child talks too much, it is considered bad breeding” (Teacher explained). This shows how cultural conditioning blocks core human skills such as self-expression, critical thinking and emotional vulnerability to creativity and emotional growth.

It simply cements the social friction that can happen when one child’s unique artistic or emotional expression in a Malian classroom is sometimes seen as undermining group harmony, with the perception that standing out from the class is outing themselves.

“If a student comes up with something new, children can say they are trying to be better than everyone. Parents also prefer learning to remain practical, not individualistic what is good for the family or village, not self-expression” (Administrator noted). They highlight a tension between attuning to personal expression, and upholding cultural values of humility and collectivism.

Opportunities

Supportive policies

“Policy is in place as a matter of paperwork but the policy opportunity exists to decentralize resources. In classrooms, the transformation often begins when local inspectors have small grants to support teacher creativity” (Education policymaker, Ministry of National Education, Bamako).

“We took the long morning block, shortened it, and created a 45-minute “free expression time”, Some Garden, some dance, some build with recycled materials. The policy allows this flexibility, but hardly any schools make use of it. Parents fear time wasted” (School administrators and heads of parent associations).

These insights tell us: great education is transformational; to be transformational it needs flexibility and localized resource allocation with trust in creativity. Student engagement and innovation in learning can be enabled by empowering teachers and addressing parental concerns.

Community involvement

The powerful way the schools evolved to meet cultural needs understanding other cultures, enhancing confidence in students and emotional well-being of all despite some challenges. Formalizing partnerships and mentorship are an important step in connecting our communities and supporting learning.

“The importance of local knowledge to contextualise your education. Establishing such formal partnerships can deepen cultural understanding and build student confidence and that is really progress” (Parent Association Leaders).

“The role of locally led mentoring in establishing mental and relational well-being among students” (Rural Primary School Administrators)

While these findings correspond to the creative and socio-emotional development aspect we targeted in our study, they also expose how community engagement differs by providing unique opportunities, but rising against systemic barriers, within Mali’s primary school context.

Teacher training

The teacher acknowledges the importance of creativity and social-emotional development, but notes an essential disconnect between policy talk and meaningful professional development that takes context into account. “Creative teaching and supporting children emotionally are all well and good, but very practical in its application practical hands-on training specifically related to real classroom challenges can build the ability of teachers to help foster that emotional wellbeing and creativity in children” (Rural Teachers).

They illustrate extant student-engagement strategies (storytelling for emotional processing and the like) while embodying an organic, bottom-up innovation. With no institutional backing on the other hand, scalability can be jeopardized.

“Formal acknowledgement and recognition could really magnify your impact thank you for your commitment to empowering children through shared wisdom” (Urban Public School Teachers).

These case studies indicate that when implemented together, a blended dual-track strategy, consisting of practical workshops combined with peer-led networks can have a profound impact on professional development and improve creativity & emotional growth in the Malian context for education.

Discussion

Innovative Approaches to Primary School Education: Nurturing Young Learners’ Creativity and Emotional Development in Mali, the topic of Malian education was chosen for the site of words; a big part of this research focuses on primary school education as well as discovering new forms and refreshing the approaches how it can create and develop new ideas and talents among Malian children at schools.

Teaching Innovation in Malian Primary Schools

You are learning based on projects like now storytelling and few current local cultural activities, to promote creativity. Although I studied in Mali for many years, it was long enough to discover that the primary education system there was unique—this country is attempting some innovative ideas to overcome challenges of linguistic barriers (Mali has more than 150 local languages), trauma from decades of war and instability, and severe resource limitations (Fernandez *et al.*, 2026). The Malian Ministry of Education and UNICEF now incorporates psychosocial support and SEL into teacher training, blending mental health tools and activity sheets in the third generation of modules for 2023 to better assist students with expressing emotions, developing empathy and enhancing resilience (UNICEF, 2023). Research

also indicates that use of translanguaging pedagogy, using the full linguistic repertoire of students, including Bamanankan and French, can be beneficial for language learning (Ouattara *et al.*, 2025), which include increasing engagement in learning activities, decreasing language anxiety among students, and promoting inclusivity. Such measures will require support through improving teachers' psychosocial and communicative skills development and critical changes to the language policies in Mali if its young readers are to be successful. Pragmatic scaling and adaptation of these interventions to diverse needs should be the focus for sustainable future work.

Impact on Emotional Development

Creative-centered pedagogies through which evidence-based Emotional Development (ED) strategies are promoted and integrated into primary schooling in Mali will be well received by many young learners. In a realistic cluster-randomized trial among children in the Democratic Republic of Congo, adding social and emotional learning (SEL) elements into literacy and mathematics curricula targeted to Grades 2–4 improved more than average academic performance—the added value was enhanced by creating safe classroom environments supportive of high-quality emotional support (Aber *et al.*, 2025). Most recently, a quasi-experimental study in Ghanaian basic schools during 2025 revealed that classrooms where teachers integrated SEL into classroom assessments gained statistically significant effects on pupils' emotional well-being (happiness, vitality and interest in life) with medium effect size Cohen's $d = 0.52$, whilst reducing stress/anxiety/depression symptoms (Ankomah *et al.*, 2025; Enticosa & Felinita Iii, 2026).

Importantly, the Ghanaian data provided clear evidence that self-awareness acted as a significant mediator of the relationship between exposure to SEL and total well-being: demonstrating that creative activities that promote both reflection and emotional expression are not only peripheral but aspect of holistic development (Ankomah *et al.*, 2025). In Mali—where the majority of learners contend with socioeconomic adversity—embedding these culturally responsive, creativity-driven SEL strategies into pre-service teacher training and curricular design can help create classrooms where emotional competencies reinforce academic learning.

Challenges and Opportunities for Teachers

Most new teachers in their first years are entering situations of limited resources and inadequate training however they are also in unique positions to facilitate student agency, cultural relevance, and in fact identity relevant learning. It has considerable challenges as well as great opportunities for teachers in Mali to adopt new ideas about how primary schools should work. Implementing imaginative teaching strategies that help learners grow cognitively and emotionally is one of the most significant challenges they are faced with, because they do not have enough resources and training (Conto *et al.*, 2021). Inadequate infrastructure, poor access to

modern teaching materials and lack of professional development means that imaginative pedagogies are often hard to implement.

But these challenges also lay the paths for opportunities: harness community-based initiatives and digital tools to build connections and boost cognitive engagement and emotional well-being among young learners. Using some novel strategies can be transformational in making for more generation of inclusive and emotionally safe classrooms leading to improved learning outcomes and creativity. As Mali develops its educational system, equipping teachers with appropriate training and materials remains essential to turn these opportunities into sustainable benefits for primary education (Sitio & Machfud, 2025).

Implications

Our study of new methods for delivering primary education in Mali highlights the importance of creativity and emotional support for young children that educators, policymakers and curriculum developers need to prioritise if good educational outcomes are to be achieved. This can be through student-centered pedagogies, socio-emotional learning opportunities and the culturally relevant pedagogy that could increase engagement, resilience and cognitive flexibility on young children (Luis *et al.*, 2021). For policymakers, this means establishing appropriate frameworks and allocating the necessary resources to practice meaningful teacher preparation in new approaches to teaching/learning as well as socio-emotional learning for all students everywhere. Curriculum developers should be inspired to design curricula that are both flexible and creative, to fit Mali's cultural context while integrating creativity in the curriculum (Hayashi *et al.*, 2022) thereby instilling emotional intelligence into our children so that along with scientific knowledge they are also trained for emotional regulation which is crucial. Such strategies are necessary to deal with specific challenges facing Mali's education system and to cultivate a cohort of learners who thrive academically as well as emotionally.

Limitations of the study

A few notable limitations should be acknowledged with this study. This reflects the main limitation; that is, these rely on qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups and classroom observations), with small sample sizes (15–30 individuals) from specific regions of Mali. The generalizability of findings across the highly heterogeneous educational contexts in Mali are therefore severely restricted. Second, owing to the cross-sectional design of the study, a longitudinal tracking on how innovative approaches influence students' creativity and emotions could not be determined (nor can causality or durability of findings). Third, participant responses may be influenced by possible researcher bias and social desirability effects, especially considering the hierarchical relationship of teachers to administrators and teachers to researchers as well as culturally conditioned norms relating

to expressing criticism of the education system. Fourth and lastly, the study does not employ direct quantitative measures of student creativity or emotional well-being, depending on teacher or parent perceptions that might not adequately represent children's inner experiences or actual developmental gains.

Recommendations

Do not import innovation, scale endogenous culturally rooted models

Innovative pedagogical structures in Mali adapt the oral traditions we noted above—storytelling, griot practices, drumming, and other cultural practices into modalities for learning. Rather than bringing in models like Montessori, policymakers should fund action research to codify them. Creativity and Resilience Are Soaring: The Three Pillars of Creative Growth – Storytelling, Visual Arts & Local Problem-based Learning Adapting and scaling these approaches can be achieved through establishing regional innovation hubs and by providing small grants to local educators.

Systematic integration of Psychosocial Support and SEL into pre-service and in-service teacher training

Teachers tend to promote theory rather than practice majoring in studies that facilitate creativity and emotional development. You can use 2023 UNICEF modules to build some basic knowledge but this cannot be the only training subjecting staff in their second language, through oral testing you must offer more rigorously structured workshops a hands-on experience coupled with peer support and preparation techniques like translanguaging. Otherwise, innovations will remain isolated and unsustainable.

Policy Objective to Reform Assessment and Accountability Systems to Value Holistic Development

The system centered around the examination hinders creativity and emotional development. Policymakers need to adopt hybrid assessments; revise teacher evaluations on socio-emotional skills, protect “free expression” time and redesign culturally responsive rubrics that weight collective and oral skills higher than other aspects of communication.

Utilising Community and Religious Frameworks to Establish Legitimacy for Child Centred Pedagogy

The cultural Imaginarium sense that emotional expression and creativity are unhelpful to harmony and religion. Strategies include engaging local leaders, partnering with knowledge holders and setting up mentorship programs. Policymaking should embrace and elevate creativity and emotional skills as strengths that make families and communities more resilient.

Focus investments on sustainable resource allocation and basic infrastructure in the regions affected by the crises

Despite the massive shortage of resources, many schools are shut until 2025, affecting hundreds of thousands of

children. Proposed Solutions include cheap teaching kits, mobile support teams, responsive model classroom, and scalable SEL systems. Instead of funding one-off projects short-term initiatives at reduced costs, the donors and the government need to adopt context-appropriate long-lasting strategies.

CONCLUSION

Innovative homegrown culturally driven approaches like Project-based learning with an arts integration have shown to improve creativity in primary schools as well students' emotional self-development for young learner as evidenced by a study conducted in Mali. Resource constraints, poor teacher training and cultural tensions in favour of collective experience over individualism are certainly major obstacles, but the evidence suggests that approaches based on emergent cultural practices—supported by carefully chosen evidence-based methods—hold the most promise for sustainable reform in Mali. If Mali's education system is to cultivate children's holistic development, policymakers must look beyond exam-centric accountability, decentralize resources that allow teacher creativity, and scale psychosocial support and translanguaging pedagogies so that classrooms can become emotionally safe spaces for children where academic learning and emotional resilience reinforce one another.

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