

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Research Summary



Play-based learning in emergencies

In 2024 and 2025, the Canadian NGO CODE commissioned a series of African research studies in partnership with Global Affairs Canada, to help build the regional evidence base on what works to improve literacy and learning outcomes for children in refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) communities. Some of these studies explored how play-based learning approaches can support children's academic progress and well-being in emergency settings.



Across crisis-affected contexts, children often face disruptions to their education, along with emotional and social challenges linked to conflict and displacement. Research by Dr. Belay Hagos Hailu in post-conflict Tigray, **Ethiopia**, shows that play-based and joyful learning approaches can help address both challenges at once. His study examined an accelerated learning program designed for out-of-school children. It found that students were able to catch up on missed learning through a condensed curriculum, while also improving their literacy and numeracy skills. In fact, children in the program outperformed their peers in regular schools. At the same time, the use of joyful, play-based methods was linked to fewer behavioural difficulties, suggesting that these approaches can support both learning and emotional well-being.

Research by Dr. Tadesse Jaleta Jirata, also in **Ethiopia**, highlights the importance of using culturally relevant play in early literacy development. His study focused on Grade 2 students living in displacement contexts, where indigenous play practices were used as part of literacy instruction. Over a four-month period, teachers integrated these local games and activities into reading lessons. The results showed significant improvements in literacy scores among students who participated in the program, compared to both their own previous performance and to a control group of students who did not receive the intervention. These findings suggest that familiar, culturally grounded play activities can be a powerful tool for improving literacy in crisis settings.

