

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Policy Brief



Educational Materials, Teaching Practices and Peacebuilding in Literacy Education for Displaced Children in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

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Executive Summary

Armed conflict and recurrent displacement continue to disrupt the lives and education of millions of children in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In provinces such as Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu, schools serve not only as places of learning but also as spaces where displaced children can rebuild routines, recover from traumatic experiences, and develop relationships with host communities. While significant efforts have been made to maintain access to education in these contexts, less attention has been given to the role of educational materials in supporting peacebuilding, social cohesion, and psychosocial wellbeing.

This study examined the educational materials used in literacy and basic education programs for displaced children in four displacement-affected urban centres: Bunia, Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira. The research sought to understand whether textbooks, literacy resources, and supplementary educational materials contribute to peacebuilding and social cohesion and how they respond to the specific realities faced by children affected by conflict and displacement.

Using a qualitative comparative approach, data were collected through interviews with teachers, school leaders, educational authorities, and humanitarian actors, as well as focus group discussions with displaced learners and parents. The study also reviewed educational materials currently used in schools serving displaced populations.

The findings reveal that schools rely predominantly on standard national curriculum textbooks in French, Mathematics, Science, and Civic Education. These materials are essential for ensuring literacy development and educational continuity but contain limited content explicitly addressing conflict, displacement, reconciliation, trauma recovery, or peaceful coexistence. While some lessons promote values such as citizenship, cooperation, and respect, peacebuilding themes are not systematically integrated into educational resources.

A key finding is that teachers have become the primary agents of peace education. Across all study sites, educators reported using classroom discussions, storytelling, group work, conflict mediation, and extracurricular activities to promote tolerance, mutual respect, solidarity, empathy, and cooperation. In many cases, peacebuilding efforts depend more on teachers' initiative than on the educational materials themselves.

Despite these limitations, schools contribute significantly to social cohesion. Learners reported acquiring important social skills, including sharing, teamwork, helping others, forgiveness, and respectful communication. Parents and teachers observed improved relationships between displaced learners and children from host communities, suggesting that schools can serve as important spaces for building trust and fostering peaceful coexistence.

The study also identified significant psychosocial challenges affecting displaced learners. Teachers consistently reported anxiety, emotional withdrawal, concentration difficulties, and behavioural problems linked to experiences of violence and displacement. However, existing educational materials rarely include content designed to support emotional wellbeing, resilience-building, or trauma recovery. This gap limits the ability of schools to respond effectively to the broader consequences of conflict.

Extracurricular activities emerged as particularly effective peacebuilding mechanisms. Peace clubs, theatre, sports competitions, cultural events, and community dialogue initiatives create opportunities for meaningful interaction among children from diverse backgrounds and strengthen social cohesion both within schools and in surrounding communities.

Context

Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has experienced decades of armed conflict, insecurity, and recurrent population displacement, particularly in the provinces of Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. These crises have disrupted the education of thousands of children, many of whom have been forced to flee their homes, lose access to schooling, and adapt to new learning environments in host communities or displacement sites.

The participants in this study were drawn from communities directly affected by conflict and displacement in Bunia, Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira. They included displaced learners, parents, teachers, school leaders, educational authorities, and representatives of organizations supporting education in emergencies. Many displaced children participating in the study had experienced repeated school interruptions, family separation, loss of property, exposure to violence, or prolonged stays in displacement camps. Teachers and school administrators were simultaneously confronted with overcrowded classrooms, limited educational resources, and the challenge of supporting learners affected by trauma and insecurity.

Despite these difficulties, schools remain among the few institutions that bring together displaced and host-community children on a daily basis. They therefore represent critical spaces for literacy development, psychosocial recovery, social integration, and peacebuilding. Understanding how educational materials support—or fail to support—these objectives is essential for strengthening education responses in conflict-affected settings.

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative comparative approach to examine how educational materials contribute to peacebuilding and social cohesion among displaced children in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The research was conducted in four conflict-affected urban centres that host significant populations of internally displaced

persons: Bunia (Ituri Province), Goma (North Kivu Province), Bukavu, and Uvira (South Kivu Province).

The study engaged a diverse group of stakeholders directly involved in the education of displaced children, including teachers, school principals, educational inspectors, local education authorities, representatives of humanitarian organizations, parents, and displaced learners. This broad participation enabled the research team to capture multiple perspectives on the availability, use, and effectiveness of educational materials in displacement contexts.

Data were collected through three complementary methods. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, school leaders, education officials, and NGO representatives to explore educational practices, peacebuilding initiatives, challenges faced by schools, and the role of learning materials. Second, focus group discussions with parents and displaced learners examined schooling experiences, social relationships, and perceptions of peacebuilding and inclusion within schools. Third, a review of textbooks, literacy materials, teacher guides, and supplementary educational resources was undertaken to assess the extent to which peacebuilding, social cohesion, and psychosocial wellbeing were reflected in educational content.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing researchers to identify recurring patterns and key themes across the four study sites. Findings were strengthened through triangulation, comparing evidence from different participant groups and data sources. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how educational materials support—or fail to support—peacebuilding and social cohesion in contexts affected by conflict and displacement.

Key Findings

1. Educational Materials Prioritize Academic Learning Rather Than Peacebuilding

The study found that schools serving displaced children rely overwhelmingly on standard national curriculum materials provided through the Ministry of Education. Across Bunia, Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira, teachers reported using textbooks in French, Mathematics, Science, and Civic Education that are designed for the general student population rather than for children affected by conflict and displacement.

While these materials play an important role in ensuring literacy development and educational continuity, they contain very limited content related to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, reconciliation, psychosocial wellbeing, or displacement experiences. Some lessons promote values such as

“The textbooks teach reading and mathematics, but peace lessons come mainly from teachers.”

Teacher, Goma

citizenship, cooperation, and respect, but these themes are rarely linked to the realities that displaced learners face in their daily lives.

Participants frequently noted that educational materials fail to reflect learners' experiences of violence, displacement, insecurity, and social fragmentation. Teachers therefore have limited resources for addressing issues that are highly relevant to children's lives.

The findings suggest that while educational materials support academic achievement, they are not yet being fully utilized as tools for peacebuilding and social cohesion.

2. Teachers Are the Main Peacebuilding Actors

Across all study sites, teachers emerged as the principal actors promoting peacebuilding within schools. In the absence of dedicated peace education materials, educators have assumed responsibility for teaching values related to peaceful coexistence, tolerance, cooperation, and respect.

"The textbooks provide knowledge, but teachers teach children how to live together."

School principal, Bunia

Teachers described using a variety of approaches, including classroom discussions, storytelling, group work, conflict mediation, songs, role-play activities, and everyday interactions to encourage positive social behaviours among learners.

The values most frequently promoted by teachers included tolerance, respect, cooperation, conflict resolution and solidarity.

Participants consistently reported that peacebuilding is driven more by teachers' commitment and initiative than by formal educational resources.

Teachers frequently intervene to address discrimination, bullying, and conflicts among learners. They also encourage children from displaced and host communities to work together and support one another.

These findings reinforce the importance of investing in teacher capacity-building as a key component of peacebuilding through education.

3. Schools Promote Social Cohesion and Positive Relationships

Despite the challenges associated with conflict and displacement, schools were widely perceived as spaces where positive relationships can be built and strengthened. Learners, parents, and teachers consistently reported improvements in interactions between displaced children and host-community learners.

Participants emphasized that schools create opportunities for children from diverse backgrounds to learn, play, and cooperate together. Through daily interactions, learners develop important social skills that contribute to peaceful coexistence.

Children frequently identified learning sharing, teamwork, helping others, forgiveness and respectful communication.

Parents reported noticeable changes in children's behaviour both at school and at home. Several explained that their children had become more respectful, cooperative, and willing to support others since attending school.

Teachers also highlighted the importance of collaborative learning activities, which bring together displaced and host-community learners and encourage them to work toward common goals.

These findings suggest that schools play a significant role in promoting social cohesion and reducing social divisions in displacement-affected communities.

4. Psychosocial Needs Remain Largely Unaddressed

One of the most significant findings concerns the psychosocial challenges faced by displaced learners and the limited support available through existing educational materials.

Teachers across all four study sites reported that many children continue to experience emotional and psychological difficulties linked to conflict and displacement. Common concerns included anxiety, emotional withdrawal, concentration difficulties and behavioural challenges.

"Many children carry the consequences of conflict into the classroom, but we have very few tools to help them."
Teacher, Uvira

Teachers described learners who struggle to concentrate, participate in classroom activities, or interact confidently with peers. Many children have experienced displacement, witnessed violence, or lost family members, yet educational materials rarely provide opportunities to discuss these experiences or develop coping strategies.

Participants repeatedly stressed the need for educational materials that promote resilience, emotional wellbeing, and psychosocial recovery. Without such resources, teachers are often left to address these issues independently, despite having limited training and support.

The findings indicate that strengthening psychosocial and social-emotional learning should become a priority within education responses targeting displaced children.

5. Extracurricular Activities Strengthen Peacebuilding

The study found that extracurricular activities are among the most effective peacebuilding mechanisms available in schools serving displaced children. Participants consistently highlighted the positive role of peace clubs, sports competitions, theatre performances, cultural events, and community dialogue initiatives.

These activities create opportunities for children to interact outside the formal classroom environment and encourage cooperation across social, ethnic, and displacement-related divisions. Key extracurricular initiatives identified included peace clubs, sports activities, theatre and storytelling, cultural festivals and community dialogue sessions.

Teachers and school leaders reported that these activities help children develop trust, teamwork, leadership, empathy, and conflict resolution skills.

Unlike classroom lessons, extracurricular activities allow learners to experience peacebuilding in practice. Children collaborate on common projects, participate in mixed teams, and engage in discussions that strengthen mutual understanding.

Participants also noted that many of these activities involve parents and community members, extending their impact beyond schools and contributing to broader social cohesion.

Overall, the findings suggest that extracurricular initiatives complement formal education by creating practical opportunities for relationship-building and peaceful coexistence. Expanding these activities could significantly strengthen education's contribution to peacebuilding in displacement-affected communities.

Overall Finding

Taken together, the findings reveal that schools already make important contributions to peacebuilding and social cohesion in Eastern DRC. However, these outcomes depend largely on teachers and extracurricular activities rather than on educational materials themselves. Integrating peacebuilding, psychosocial support, and conflict-sensitive content into literacy and learning resources would enable education systems to play a stronger role in supporting displaced children and building more peaceful communities.

"Children learn peace by practicing it together through sports, theatre, and peace clubs."
Education officer, Bukavu

Key Recommendations

To strengthen the contribution of education to peacebuilding in displacement-affected communities, five priority actions are recommended.

First, the Ministry of Education should integrate peace education across the national curriculum by incorporating themes such as conflict resolution, reconciliation, tolerance, citizenship, and social cohesion into literacy and basic education materials.

Second, educational resources should be adapted to reflect the realities of conflict, displacement, diversity, and resilience experienced by learners in Eastern DRC.

Third, schools require greater support to address the psychosocial needs of displaced children through social-emotional learning, trauma-sensitive approaches, and resilience-building activities.

Fourth, teachers should receive specialized training in peace education, conflict-sensitive pedagogy, and psychosocial support, recognizing their central role as peacebuilding actors.

Finally, policymakers, donors, and education partners should invest in sustainable extracurricular initiatives—including peace clubs, sports, theatre, and community dialogue programs—that strengthen social cohesion and foster peaceful coexistence among displaced and host-community learners.

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Download the full research report at: <https://code.ngo/tlfcresearch/>.

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