

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Research Paper

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

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Abstract

Education is increasingly recognized as a critical component of peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies. In contexts of forced displacement, schools not only provide learning opportunities but also serve as spaces for socialization, psychosocial recovery, and community reconstruction. However, limited research has examined the role of educational materials in promoting social cohesion and peace among internally displaced children.

This study investigates the educational materials used in literacy and basic education programs for displaced children in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), focusing on their contribution to peacebuilding and social cohesion. Using a qualitative comparative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, Focus Group Discussions, and document analysis in Bunia, Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira.

Findings reveal that educational provision relies predominantly on national curriculum materials, while resources specifically designed for peacebuilding remain scarce. Teachers emerge as the primary agents of peace education through classroom practices, discussions, and extracurricular activities. Although learners report positive outcomes related to cooperation, tolerance, and mutual respect, current educational materials inadequately address displacement experiences, trauma, reconciliation, and social cohesion.

The study argues for the integration of conflict-sensitive and peace-oriented content into educational resources and highlights the importance of contextualized pedagogical approaches in displacement settings.

Keywords: Peace education, displacement, literacy, educational materials, social cohesion, Democratic Republic of Congo, education in emergencies.

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1. Introduction

Armed conflicts continue to disrupt educational systems across many parts of the world. According to UNESCO and UNICEF, millions of children living in conflict-affected regions face interrupted schooling, inadequate learning resources, and reduced access to quality education. Beyond academic achievement, education is increasingly viewed as a vehicle for promoting social cohesion, reconciliation, and long-term peacebuilding in fragile settings.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) provides a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics. Eastern DRC has experienced recurrent cycles of violence involving armed groups, intercommunal tensions, forced displacement, and humanitarian crises. These conditions have resulted in significant disruptions to educational provision and have generated large populations of internally displaced persons (IDPs), including school-aged children.

To address educational disruptions, government institutions, humanitarian organizations, and development partners have implemented various educational responses, including temporary learning spaces, relocated schools, accelerated learning programs, and catch-up classes. While considerable attention has been devoted to access and continuity of education, less attention has been paid to the content and nature of educational materials used in these settings.

Educational materials constitute an important dimension of the learning environment. They shape knowledge acquisition, transmit values, and influence social attitudes. In conflict-affected contexts, educational resources can either contribute to peacebuilding and reconciliation or reproduce exclusion, prejudice, and social fragmentation.

This article examines the educational materials used with displaced children in Eastern DRC and assesses their contribution to peacebuilding and social cohesion.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What educational materials are used in literacy and basic education programs serving displaced children?
2. To what extent do these materials incorporate peacebuilding and social cohesion content?
3. How do educational actors perceive the contribution of these materials to peaceful coexistence and reconciliation?
4. What improvements are needed to strengthen the peacebuilding potential of educational resources?

2. Education in Emergencies and Displacement

Over the past two decades, education has become increasingly recognized as a central pillar of humanitarian response and post-conflict recovery. Traditionally, educational interventions in emergencies focused primarily on restoring access to schooling following crises. However, contemporary approaches conceptualize education as a protective, developmental, and peacebuilding intervention capable of fostering resilience, social cohesion, and long-term recovery (INEE, 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

The growing emphasis on education in emergencies emerged from recognition that conflict and displacement disrupt not only children's learning trajectories but also their psychosocial wellbeing, social relationships, and future opportunities (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003). Schools often represent one of the few stable institutions remaining in conflict-affected environments. Consequently, they can provide safe spaces where children regain routines, receive psychosocial support, and rebuild a sense of normality amid uncertainty (Burde et al., 2017).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023), more than 114 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced, including millions of children. Many displaced learners face significant barriers to education, including insecurity, poverty, language differences, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to learning materials. In protracted displacement contexts, educational disruption often extends beyond temporary interruptions and may result in permanent exclusion from schooling.

Research conducted in conflict-affected regions such as South Sudan, Afghanistan, Syria, Colombia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo demonstrates that education can contribute to resilience and recovery when appropriately designed (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Kirk & Winthrop, 2007). Educational interventions help restore social networks, strengthen coping mechanisms, and create opportunities for positive interaction between displaced populations and host communities.

However, scholars have also cautioned against assuming that education automatically promotes peace and social cohesion. Education systems can reproduce social inequalities, reinforce exclusionary narratives, and exacerbate tensions when curricula, pedagogical approaches, or institutional practices marginalize certain groups (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo & Smith, 2017). Consequently, increasing attention has been devoted to conflict-sensitive education approaches that seek to minimize potential harms while maximizing positive contributions to peacebuilding.

Within displacement settings, educational materials constitute a critical yet often overlooked dimension of educational quality. While access to schooling has received considerable policy attention, less research has examined how textbooks, literacy

materials, and pedagogical resources shape children's experiences of conflict, displacement, and coexistence.

2.1 Peace Education

Peace education emerged as a distinct field following the Second World War and has since evolved into a multidisciplinary area drawing from education, sociology, psychology, political science, and conflict studies. At its core, peace education seeks to equip learners with the knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills necessary to prevent violence and build peaceful societies (Harris & Morrison, 2013).

The field has evolved from narrow understandings focused on the absence of war toward broader conceptions emphasizing social justice, human rights, intercultural understanding, democratic participation, and sustainable development. Peace education therefore addresses both direct forms of violence and the structural conditions that generate exclusion, discrimination, and inequality (Galtung, 1996).

Galtung's distinction between negative peace and positive peace remains particularly influential. Negative peace refers to the absence of direct violence, whereas positive peace encompasses the presence of social justice, equitable institutions, and harmonious social relationships. Educational interventions aimed at promoting peace must therefore move beyond simply preventing conflict to actively fostering inclusion, participation, and mutual respect.

In conflict-affected contexts, peace education often focuses on developing competencies such as: conflict resolution; dialogue and communication, empathy and perspective-taking, non-violent problem-solving, human rights awareness and tolerance and respect for diversity.

Evidence from countries such as Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sierra Leone, and Colombia suggests that peace education programs can contribute to improved intergroup relations, reduced prejudice, and increased civic engagement (Salomon & Cairns, 2010). However, outcomes depend heavily on contextual adaptation, teacher preparedness, and institutional support.

In Africa, peace education has increasingly been integrated into responses to armed conflict, displacement, and social fragmentation. Programs implemented in Uganda, South Sudan, Kenya, and the DRC have sought to strengthen coexistence among communities affected by violence. Yet studies indicate that peace education remains insufficiently integrated into formal curricula and educational materials in many contexts (Bajaj, 2008).

For displaced children, peace education assumes particular importance because many have experienced violence, trauma, social exclusion, and disrupted social relationships. Schools therefore become important spaces for rebuilding trust and fostering social

cohesion. Educational materials that promote empathy, inclusion, and dialogue may contribute significantly to these processes.

2.2 Educational Materials and the Hidden Curriculum

Educational materials are commonly understood as tools for transmitting academic knowledge. However, sociological and educational research has long demonstrated that textbooks, teaching guides, illustrations, stories, and classroom resources also convey implicit messages about identity, power, citizenship, and social relations (Apple, 2004).

This broader process is often conceptualized through the notion of the hidden curriculum. Originally developed by Jackson (1968) and later expanded by scholars such as Apple (2004) and Giroux (1983), the concept refers to the unofficial lessons, values, and norms transmitted through educational institutions.

Educational materials contribute to the hidden curriculum in several ways. Through their selection of topics, representation of social groups, portrayal of historical events, and presentation of cultural values, they shape learners' perceptions of themselves and others. Consequently, textbooks are never politically neutral; they reflect particular understandings of society and social order.

In conflict-affected societies, educational materials can either contribute to reconciliation or reinforce divisions. Studies conducted in Rwanda, Bosnia, Lebanon, and Northern Ireland demonstrate that textbooks often become sites of contestation because of their role in constructing collective memories and national identities (Paulson, 2015).

Bush and Saltarelli (2000) introduced the notion of the "two faces of education," arguing that education can simultaneously serve as a force for peace and a mechanism for conflict reproduction. Educational materials that exclude certain groups, perpetuate stereotypes, or ignore historical grievances may contribute to social tensions. Conversely, materials that encourage critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and mutual respect can support peacebuilding efforts.

Recent research on education in emergencies highlights the importance of conflict-sensitive educational materials that acknowledge children's experiences while promoting resilience and social cohesion (Novelli et al., 2017). Such materials may include narratives emphasizing cooperation, stories reflecting diverse identities, activities promoting dialogue, and content addressing trauma and recovery.

Despite growing interest in peacebuilding through education, relatively few studies have examined educational materials specifically used in displacement settings. This represents an important gap in the literature, particularly in contexts such as Eastern DRC where displacement has become a long-term social reality.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives: Conflict Transformation Theory and Social Learning Theory.

Conflict Transformation Theory

Conflict Transformation Theory, developed principally by John Paul Lederach (1997), offers a framework for understanding peacebuilding as a long-term process of transforming relationships, institutions, and social structures that sustain conflict.

Unlike approaches focused solely on conflict management or conflict resolution, conflict transformation emphasizes the need to address underlying causes of violence and to create constructive patterns of interaction. According to Lederach, sustainable peace emerges through changes in attitudes, perceptions, relationships, and social systems.

Within educational contexts, learning materials can contribute to conflict transformation by: encouraging dialogue; promoting empathy; challenging stereotypes; fostering inclusive identities; and supporting reconciliation processes.

Educational resources therefore become instruments capable of shaping how young people understand conflict, diversity, and social coexistence.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) provides a complementary perspective on how children acquire social attitudes and behaviors. The theory posits that learning occurs through observation, imitation, and interaction with significant others.

Children learn not only from direct instruction but also by observing role models, narratives, and social interactions within their environments. Educational materials therefore serve as important sources of social learning because they present examples of behavior, relationships, and problem-solving strategies.

In displacement contexts, educational resources may influence learners' attitudes toward: other social groups, cooperation and competition, violence and non-violence, inclusion and exclusion and trust and social responsibility.

When educational materials consistently model peaceful interactions and inclusive values, they may contribute to the development of prosocial attitudes and behaviors.

Analytical Model

The study assumes that educational materials influence peacebuilding outcomes through both direct and indirect pathways. Directly, materials may include explicit messages about peace, tolerance, and coexistence. Indirectly, they contribute to the hidden curriculum by shaping norms, identities, and social expectations.

The interaction between educational materials, pedagogical practices, and learner experiences is therefore expected to influence social cohesion, peaceful coexistence, and resilience among displaced children.

This conceptual framework provides the basis for examining how educational materials used in Eastern DRC contribute to literacy development while simultaneously supporting - or limiting - peacebuilding processes in contexts of displacement.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative comparative research design to explore the role of educational materials in promoting literacy, social cohesion, and peacebuilding among internally displaced children in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate because the study sought to understand the experiences, perceptions, and practices of educational actors operating within complex conflict-affected environments.

Qualitative research is particularly useful when investigating social phenomena that are context-dependent and not easily measurable through quantitative indicators (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the present study, the objective was not simply to identify the types of educational materials available but also to understand how these materials are used, interpreted, and experienced by teachers, learners, parents, and educational authorities.

The comparative dimension of the research enabled the examination of similarities and differences across four urban contexts affected by conflict-induced displacement. By comparing findings from Bunia, Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira, the study sought to identify common patterns as well as context-specific dynamics related to educational provision and peacebuilding.

The study was guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences. This perspective allowed the researchers to capture diverse viewpoints regarding educational materials and their perceived contribution to social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

3.2 Study Sites

The research was conducted in four cities in Eastern DRC that have experienced significant displacement due to armed conflict: Bunia (Ituri Province), Goma (North Kivu Province), Bukavu (South Kivu Province) and Uvira (South Kivu Province).

These four sites were selected because they represent major displacement-affected urban centers where educational responses have been established and where significant interaction occurs between displaced populations and host communities. Various educational responses have been implemented in the four cities, including temporary learning spaces, relocated schools, and catch-up programs.

3.3 Study Population and Sampling Strategy

Study Population

The study targeted key stakeholders directly involved in educational provision for displaced children. Participants included:

- Teachers working in schools enrolling displaced children;
- School principals and head teachers;
- Educational inspectors and provincial education authorities;
- Representatives of non-governmental organizations involved in education programming;
- Parents of displaced learners;
- Internally displaced children enrolled in schools and learning centers.

The inclusion of multiple categories of participants enabled triangulation of perspectives and provided a comprehensive understanding of educational materials and peacebuilding practices.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to identify information-rich participants capable of providing detailed insights into the study topic (Patton, 2015). Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Direct involvement in educational activities targeting displaced children;
- Experience using or managing educational materials;
- Knowledge of educational challenges in displacement settings;
- Willingness to participate in the research.

The sample included actors from governmental institutions, schools, civil society organizations, and affected communities to ensure diversity of perspectives.

Sample Composition

Across the four study sites, data were collected from:

Research site	Interview	FGD	Classroom observation
Bukavu	34	3	2
Bunia	14	2	1
Goma	10	2	1
Uvira	5	1	1
Total	63	8	5

The final sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, whereby no substantially new themes emerged during data collection.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected between September 2025 and February 2026 using three complementary methods: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary data collection method. Interview guides were developed around five thematic areas: educational experiences of displaced children, availability and use of educational materials, peacebuilding and social cohesion initiatives, perceived impacts of educational materials and recommendations for improvement.

Semi-structured interviews allowed researchers to maintain consistency across participants while providing flexibility to explore emerging issues.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were conducted in French, Swahili, or local languages depending on participants' preferences.

With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented by detailed field notes.

Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted separately with: Displaced children and Parents of displaced children.

Each focus group included between 8 and 10 participants.

The discussions explored: Experiences of schooling in displacement contexts, Perceptions of educational materials; Social relationships within schools; Experiences of inclusion and exclusion; and Perceived messages related to peace and coexistence.

FGDs provided opportunities for participants to collectively reflect on shared experiences and generated rich insights into community perceptions.

Document Analysis

Document analysis was conducted to examine the content and characteristics of educational materials used in schools and learning spaces.

The materials reviewed included: national curriculum textbooks, teacher guides, literacy manuals, educational posters, NGO-produced learning resources and supplementary educational materials.

Particular attention was paid to identifying content related to: Peace, Tolerance, Conflict resolution, Human rights, social cohesion and diversity and inclusion.

Document analysis enabled comparison between reported practices and actual educational content.

3.5 Data Management and Analysis

All interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim following data collection.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework:

- Phase 1: Familiarization: Researchers repeatedly read transcripts and field notes to gain an overall understanding of the data.
- Phase 2: Initial Coding: Meaningful units of text were assigned descriptive codes reflecting key ideas and concepts.
- Phase 3: Theme Development: Related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories.
- Phase 4: Theme Review: Themes were refined through iterative comparison across participants and study sites.
- Phase 5: Theme Definition: Final themes were clearly defined and organized according to the research objectives.
- Phase 6: Interpretation: Themes were interpreted in relation to existing literature and the study's conceptual framework.

The analysis generated several major themes, including: availability of educational materials, peacebuilding content, teachers as agents of peace, social cohesion outcomes, psychosocial needs of displaced learners and gaps in educational resources.

Cross-site comparisons were conducted to identify common trends and contextual differences among the four cities.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical principles for social science research. Participants received information regarding: the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Special precautions were taken when engaging displaced children. Parental or guardian consent was secured where necessary, and discussions were conducted in safe and supportive environments.

To protect participants' identities, all interview transcripts were anonymized and identifying information removed during analysis. The study also followed the principle of "Do No Harm" to ensure that participation did not expose individuals to additional risks, distress, or social repercussions.

4. Findings

4.1 Educational Materials Used in Displacement Contexts

The findings indicate that educational provision for internally displaced children in Eastern DRC relies primarily on the official national curriculum and associated teaching materials distributed by the Ministry of Education. Across all study sites, teachers reported using standard textbooks in French, Mathematics, Science, Civic and Moral Education, and Reading. Educational authorities confirmed that displaced learners generally follow the same curriculum as children from host communities, with no separate instructional materials specifically designed for displacement settings.

A representative from the educational administration in Bunia explained: *"We only use the national curriculum. No school can simply decide to teach something different. The textbooks and learning materials are those approved by the Ministry of Education and distributed through the educational system."*

Similarly, school principals in both Bunia and Uvira emphasized that most learning materials available in their schools originate from government distribution mechanisms and are intended for all learners regardless of their displacement status.

Beyond official textbooks, some schools reported receiving educational support from humanitarian organizations and development partners. These materials included literacy booklets, worksheets, posters, exercise books, and, in some cases, audio-based learning resources. In a displacement camp school in Goma, teachers explained that humanitarian agencies had previously supplied radios and recorded lessons that enabled children to continue learning during periods of insecurity.

One teacher described: *"We used audio lessons provided by NGOs. Children listened to the lessons through radios, and afterwards we explained the content and answered their questions. It helped us continue teaching when other resources were unavailable."*

In Uvira, community organizations involved in peacebuilding and education reported using supplementary materials such as awareness-raising leaflets, discussion guides, and thematic educational sessions on peaceful coexistence, although these resources were generally not integrated into formal classroom teaching.

Despite these efforts, the study found widespread shortages of educational materials across all research sites. Teachers, school administrators, and parents consistently identified the lack of textbooks and teaching aids as one of the most significant challenges affecting learning quality. In many schools, several students shared a single textbook, while others had no access to books at all.

A teacher from a displacement camp school in Goma explained: *"We often do not have enough textbooks. Sometimes one book is shared by five or six learners. We are forced to make photocopies whenever possible, but even that requires resources that are not always available."*

Similarly, a school director in Bunia noted: *"The demand is much higher than the supply. With the arrival of displaced children, enrolment increased significantly, but the number of textbooks remained the same. Teachers have to improvise."*

In response to these shortages, teachers frequently developed their own educational materials. These included handwritten exercises, locally produced posters, flashcards, and improvised teaching aids. Several teachers reported spending personal resources to photocopy sections of textbooks or create learning materials tailored to their students' needs.

One teacher explained: *"Many times, we prepare our own materials because we cannot wait for external support. We create charts, copy lessons by hand, and use locally available resources to teach."*

The study also revealed important differences between academic materials and peacebuilding resources. While standard textbooks were generally available, participants consistently reported a lack of educational materials specifically designed to promote peace, reconciliation, conflict resolution, or psychosocial recovery.

A teacher working with displaced children in Goma stated: *"We teach peace, tolerance, and respect, but we do not have special textbooks or manuals that address these issues. Most of what children learn about peaceful coexistence comes from our explanations and discussions."*

Similarly, an NGO representative in Uvira observed: *"There are very few materials that directly address the realities of conflict and displacement. Most resources focus on literacy and academic subjects, leaving teachers to introduce peacebuilding themes on their own."*

The findings therefore suggest that educational materials used in displacement contexts can be classified into three broad categories:

1. **Official Government Materials:** In this range the study highlighted the National curriculum textbooks, the Teacher guides the Reading books and Civic and moral education manuals.
2. **Humanitarian and NGO-Supported Materials:** Literacy booklets; Educational posters; Worksheets; Audio learning resources and Awareness-raising materials.
3. **Locally Produced Materials:** Photocopied lessons, Handwritten exercises, Flashcards, Teacher-created posters and Improvised classroom teaching aids.

Overall, while schools have succeeded in maintaining educational continuity through a combination of official and locally adapted materials, the shortage of resources remains a major challenge. Furthermore, the absence of dedicated peacebuilding and psychosocial educational materials limits the capacity of schools to address the specific needs of displaced children living in conflict-affected environments.

4.2. Limited Presence of Explicit Peacebuilding Content

A major finding of this study concerns *the limited integration of explicit peacebuilding content within the educational materials* used in schools serving displaced children across Bunia, Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira. Although teachers, educational authorities, and school administrators acknowledged the presence of occasional references to values such as respect, cooperation, citizenship, and national unity in official textbooks, there was broad consensus that peacebuilding is not systematically incorporated into learning materials.

Participants reported that the vast majority of textbooks currently used in schools focus on traditional academic subjects, including literacy, mathematics, science, and civic education. While some lessons indirectly promote social values, few educational resources explicitly address issues that are particularly relevant to children affected by conflict and displacement, such as conflict resolution, reconciliation, trauma healing, social inclusion, and coexistence between diverse communities.

A senior education official in Bunia explained: *"There are some texts in French and Civic Education that speak about peace, good citizenship, and respect for others. But there are no specific manuals designed to help children understand the conflicts they have experienced or how to rebuild peaceful relationships."*

This observation was confirmed by educational inspectors and school principals in all four study sites. Participants frequently noted that although the national curriculum contains general messages about good behaviour and civic responsibility, it does not adequately address the realities faced by children living in conflict-affected environments.

Limited Representation of Conflict and Displacement Experiences

One of the most striking findings was the absence of learning materials reflecting the lived experiences of displaced children. Many participants observed that textbooks rarely portray situations involving forced displacement, loss of livelihoods, family separation, or community violence.

In Bunia, where many children have experienced repeated displacement due to intercommunal conflict, teachers noted that learners often struggle to relate textbook examples to their own experiences.

A teacher at Saint Luc School for displaced children remarked: *"The stories in the textbooks talk about ordinary village life, farming activities, or family celebrations. Very few examples reflect what our children have lived through. Many have fled violence, lost relatives, or spent months in displacement camps, but these realities are absent from the books."*

Similarly, in Goma, teachers working in camps for internally displaced persons highlighted the disconnect between official learning materials and children's daily realities.

One teacher explained: *"Our learners have witnessed armed attacks, displacement, and insecurity, yet the textbooks do not help them discuss these experiences. As a result, teachers must create opportunities themselves to talk about peace, resilience, and coexistence."*

Absence of Structured Conflict Resolution Content

Across all sites, participants emphasized the scarcity of educational materials that teach practical conflict resolution skills. Although civic education lessons occasionally encourage respectful behaviour, they rarely provide concrete tools for managing disputes, negotiating differences, or addressing violence.

This limitation is particularly significant in contexts such as Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu, where children regularly interact with peers from communities that have historically experienced tensions or violence.

A school principal in Uvira stated: *"Many of our pupils come from different ethnic groups and displacement backgrounds. We need materials that teach children how to solve conflicts peacefully, but currently we depend mostly on teachers' initiatives."*

In several schools, teachers reported using their own examples and classroom discussions to address conflicts among students. However, these efforts were rarely supported by structured pedagogical resources.

Weak Integration of Reconciliation Themes

Participants also highlighted the limited attention given to reconciliation processes within educational materials.

This issue was particularly evident in Bunia and Uvira, where communities continue to experience the long-term effects of intercommunal violence. Teachers explained that schools often bring together children whose families may have been affected by different sides of a conflict. Yet textbooks provide few opportunities to discuss forgiveness, reconciliation, or rebuilding trust.

An NGO representative working in peacebuilding in Uvira observed: *"Children are expected to live together after conflict, but they are not given enough educational tools to understand reconciliation. Most peace messages come from awareness sessions organized by NGOs rather than from school textbooks."*

Several respondents argued that educational materials should include stories demonstrating successful reconciliation initiatives, community dialogue processes, and examples of peaceful coexistence among formerly divided groups.

Lack of Psychosocial and Trauma-Sensitive Materials

Another significant finding concerns the near absence of educational resources addressing trauma and psychosocial recovery.

Teachers across all study sites reported that many displaced learners exhibit signs of emotional distress, including anxiety, fear, withdrawal, aggression, and difficulties concentrating. Despite these challenges, educational materials rarely include activities designed to help children process traumatic experiences or develop coping mechanisms.

A teacher working in a displacement camp near Goma explained: *"Many children have experienced terrible events. Some witnessed violence or lost family members. Yet we do not have books or activities that help them express their emotions or understand what they have gone through."*

Parents participating in focus group discussions echoed similar concerns. Several argued that schools should provide opportunities for children to discuss their experiences and rebuild their confidence.

In Bukavu, one parent commented: *"Education should not only teach reading and writing. Our children also need help recovering from what they have experienced."*

Limited Promotion of Diversity and Social Inclusion

The findings further suggest that educational materials insufficiently address issues of diversity, inclusion, and coexistence among different social groups.

Although official textbooks generally promote national identity and citizenship, participants noted a lack of content specifically designed to encourage understanding between displaced populations and host communities.

In displacement settings, children often come from different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Schools therefore play a critical role in fostering positive interactions and reducing prejudice. However, respondents observed that current materials provide few examples illustrating cooperation across social differences.

A teacher in Bukavu stated: *"Children learn together in the same classroom, but the books rarely show examples of people from different communities working together. We need stories that reflect the diversity of our society."*

Teachers Filling the Gap

Because of the limited peacebuilding content in educational materials, teachers have become the primary actors responsible for integrating peace education into classroom practice.

Across all four study sites, teachers described using storytelling, classroom discussions, theatre activities, songs, and practical examples to promote: respect; tolerance; cooperation; forgiveness and peaceful coexistence.

A teacher in Bunia summarized this situation: *"The textbooks provide the academic content, but we provide the peace lessons."*

While these efforts demonstrate remarkable commitment, they also reveal an important structural gap. Peacebuilding education currently depends largely on individual teachers rather than on institutionalized educational resources.

4.3 Teachers as Central Peacebuilding Actors

One of the most significant findings of this study is *the pivotal role played by teachers in promoting peacebuilding and social cohesion within schools serving displaced children*. Across all study sites -Bunia, Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira - teachers emerged as the principal actors responsible for integrating peace education into daily school life. In the absence of educational materials specifically designed to address conflict, displacement, reconciliation, and trauma, educators have developed their own strategies to foster peaceful relationships among learners.

Participants consistently emphasized that peacebuilding in schools is less a product of formal curricula and textbooks than of teachers' personal commitment, pedagogical practices, and interactions with students. Through classroom discussions, storytelling, examples drawn from everyday life, counselling, conflict mediation, and disciplinary approaches, teachers actively promote values of tolerance, solidarity, mutual respect, and cooperation.

As one teacher in Bunia explained: *"The textbooks teach children how to read and write, but it is the teacher who teaches them how to live together."* This statement captures a recurring theme across the study sites: while educational materials provide academic

content, teachers provide the social and moral guidance necessary for peaceful coexistence.

Promoting Tolerance and Respect in Diverse Classrooms

Schools in displacement settings often bring together children from different ethnic, linguistic, religious, and geographical backgrounds. Many learners have experienced violence, displacement, or loss, while others belong to host communities that may have different experiences of the conflict. Teachers therefore face the challenge of creating inclusive learning environments where children can interact positively despite these differences.

In all four cities, educators reported intentionally promoting tolerance and respect through classroom conversations and daily interactions.

A teacher at Sakoko School in Bunia stated: *"Every morning we remind pupils that they are all equal in the classroom. It does not matter where they come from or whether they are displaced. We encourage them to see one another as brothers and sisters."*

Similarly, a teacher working with displaced children in Goma explained: *"Some children arrive with stereotypes or fears because of what they have heard about other communities. We try to challenge these ideas by encouraging friendship and cooperation."*

Teachers reported that simple classroom routines – such as mixed seating arrangements, group work, and collective activities – were deliberately used to reduce social divisions and strengthen relationships among learners.

Storytelling as a Tool for Peace Education

Storytelling emerged as one of the most frequently used methods for promoting peacebuilding values. In contexts where specialized peace education materials are unavailable, teachers often rely on local stories, proverbs, religious teachings, and personal experiences to illustrate lessons about cooperation, forgiveness, and peaceful coexistence.

In Uvira, a teacher explained: *"When there is a conflict among pupils, I sometimes tell stories about communities that reconciled after disagreements. Children understand these examples better because they relate to real life."*

Teachers in Bukavu reported using stories about solidarity during times of crisis, emphasizing how communities can support one another despite differences. These narratives were often linked to local experiences of displacement and mutual assistance.

One teacher noted: *"Many of our children have seen people helping displaced families. We use these examples to teach solidarity and compassion."*

Storytelling therefore serves as an informal but powerful educational tool that complements formal learning materials.

Encouraging Cooperation Through Group Learning

Across all study sites, teachers identified collaborative learning activities as important mechanisms for building social cohesion. Group work, peer support, and collective problem-solving were frequently used to encourage interaction between displaced learners and host-community children.

A teacher in Bukavu explained: *"We deliberately create mixed groups so that displaced children and local children work together. When they solve problems together, they begin to trust one another."*

Several teachers observed that cooperative learning helped reduce discrimination and fostered friendships among students from different backgrounds.

In Bunia, one educator remarked: *"When children complete activities together, they start seeing each other as classmates rather than as members of different communities."*

These findings suggest that classroom organization itself can become a peacebuilding strategy.

Teachers as Mediators of Conflict

Participants reported that conflicts occasionally arise among learners due to competition, misunderstandings, trauma-related behaviours, or tensions carried over from the broader social environment. Teachers therefore play an important role as mediators.

In Goma, a teacher explained: *"When disputes occur, we encourage children to talk about the problem instead of fighting. We ask them to explain what happened and find a solution together."*

This approach reflects broader peacebuilding principles emphasizing dialogue, active listening, and non-violent conflict resolution.

Similarly, a school principal in Uvira stated: *"Teachers spend a lot of time helping pupils reconcile after disagreements. This is not written in the textbooks, but it is part of our daily work."*

Many educators described conflict mediation as one of their most important responsibilities in displacement settings.

Addressing Discrimination and Stigmatization

Teachers also reported actively challenging discrimination against displaced learners. In several schools, educators noted that newly arrived students sometimes experienced exclusion, ridicule, or marginalization.

To address these challenges, teachers organised discussions on equality and inclusion and intervened when discriminatory behaviours occurred.

A teacher in Bunia explained: *"We tell children that displacement is not a choice. Anyone can become displaced. Therefore, we must treat displaced pupils with respect and kindness."*

Parents participating in Focus Group Discussions confirmed that schools often serve as important spaces where children learn to overcome prejudice and develop empathy toward others.

Beyond the Classroom: Peacebuilding Through Extracurricular Activities

Many teachers extended peacebuilding efforts beyond formal classroom instruction. Participants described organizing: peace clubs, school debates, theatre performances, sports activities, cultural events and community service initiatives.

These activities provided additional opportunities for learners to develop teamwork, leadership, and conflict resolution skills.

An educator in Uvira explained: *"During peace club meetings, children discuss how to resolve conflicts, help others, and become good citizens. These activities often have a stronger impact than ordinary lessons."*

Several respondents suggested that extracurricular activities offer practical experiences through which peacebuilding values can be internalized.

The Burden of Individual Initiative

Despite their commitment, many teachers expressed concern about the heavy reliance on individual initiative. Participants repeatedly noted that they receive limited training, guidance, or pedagogical resources related to peace education.

A teacher in Goma summarized this challenge: *"We do what we can, but we need more support. Peace education should not depend only on the motivation of individual teachers."*

This concern was echoed by educational authorities who acknowledged that peacebuilding remains insufficiently institutionalized within educational materials and teacher training programs.

4.4. Educational Materials and Social Cohesion

One of the most encouraging findings of this study concerns the contribution of educational practices and learning materials to the promotion of social cohesion among displaced children and host-community learners. Although participants frequently highlighted the limited availability of educational materials specifically designed for peacebuilding, both children and parents reported positive changes in social relationships within schools. These changes were associated not only with classroom instruction but also with the values communicated through teachers, school activities, and certain educational resources.

Across the four study sites, participants consistently described schools as important spaces where children from different backgrounds learn to interact, cooperate, and develop mutual understanding. In contexts characterized by displacement, insecurity, and social fragmentation, schools often provide one of the few environments where children from diverse communities meet regularly and engage in shared activities.

A parent participating in a focus group discussion in Bunia explained: *"Our children come from different villages and different communities. At first, they did not know each other, but through school they have learned to study together, play together, and respect one another."*

Similarly, a parent in Uvira observed: *"The school has helped our children feel accepted. They are no longer isolated because they have friends from both displaced and host families."*

These testimonies suggest that educational environments play an important role in facilitating social integration and reducing barriers between displaced populations and host communities.

Learning the Values of Sharing and Solidarity

Children participating in focus group discussions frequently identified sharing as one of the most important lessons they had learned at school. In many cases, learners described situations in which they shared books, school supplies, food, and classroom materials with their peers.

A displaced learner in Bunia stated: *"Before, I only wanted to use my own things. At school, I learned that sharing helps everyone learn together."*

Another learner in Goma explained: *"Sometimes some children do not have notebooks or pencils. The teachers encourage us to help one another instead of laughing at those who have less."*

These experiences are particularly significant in displacement contexts where material scarcity can easily become a source of tension. By encouraging sharing and solidarity, schools help create supportive learning communities.

Teachers also reported intentionally promoting collective responsibility and mutual assistance. Classroom activities often encouraged learners to support classmates who were struggling academically or socially.

As one teacher in Bukavu explained: *"We tell children that learning is not a competition. If one child succeeds, everyone benefits. We encourage stronger pupils to help those who need support."*

Teamwork and Collaborative Learning

Another frequently mentioned outcome was the development of teamwork skills. Across all study sites, children reported participating in group assignments, collective projects, and collaborative learning activities.

Teachers deliberately organized mixed groups consisting of displaced and host-community learners in order to foster interaction and cooperation.

A teacher in Uvira noted: *"When children work together on the same task, they begin to see each other as partners rather than as people from different communities."*

Learners themselves recognized the value of teamwork.

One child in Bunia explained: *"I learned that when we work together, we finish faster and we learn more. We help each other understand difficult lessons."*

These findings suggest that collaborative learning activities contribute to building trust and reducing social distance between learners.

Helping Others and Building Empathy

The development of empathy and prosocial behaviour emerged as another important dimension of social cohesion.

Parents frequently observed that their children had become more willing to assist others since enrolling in school.

A mother participating in a focus group discussion in Uvira stated: *"My child has learned to help classmates and neighbours. Before, he was shy and kept to himself, but now he understands the importance of supporting others."*

Teachers also described how educational activities encouraged children to recognize and respond to the needs of peers who had experienced displacement or hardship.

In Goma, a teacher explained: *"Many displaced children arrive with difficulties. We encourage classmates to welcome them, help them catch up with lessons, and include them in games and activities."*

These practices contribute to the development of empathy and reinforce positive social relationships within schools.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

One of the most notable findings concerns the role of schools in teaching forgiveness and reconciliation. Both children and teachers described forgiveness as an important lesson promoted through classroom discussions, disciplinary practices, and everyday interactions.

A learner in Bunia explained: *"I learned to say sorry when I make a mistake and to forgive others when they hurt me. This helps us remain friends."*

Teachers reported encouraging children to resolve disputes through dialogue rather than retaliation. When conflicts occurred, students were often guided through processes of apology, reconciliation, and mutual understanding.

A teacher in Bukavu noted: *"When children quarrel, we ask them to talk about what happened and find a peaceful solution. They learn that forgiveness is important for living together."*

In regions where communities continue to experience the effects of armed conflict, these lessons may contribute to broader processes of reconciliation and coexistence.

Respectful Communication

Respectful communication emerged as another recurring theme across participant accounts. Children described learning how to express themselves politely, listen to others, and avoid insulting language.

A learner in Uvira explained: *"The teachers tell us that we must listen when others are speaking and avoid words that hurt people."*

Similarly, parents reported observing improvements in children's behaviour at home.

One parent remarked: *"My child has become more respectful. He now understands how to communicate without shouting or fighting."*

Educational authorities also emphasized the importance of respectful communication as a foundation for social cohesion and peaceful relationships.

Schools as Spaces of Social Cohesion

Despite ongoing insecurity and tensions in the broader social environment, participants overwhelmingly perceived schools as spaces where social cohesion can be nurtured and strengthened.

Many respondents contrasted the divisions sometimes observed in communities with the more inclusive atmosphere found within schools.

A school principal in Bunia explained: *“Outside the school, there may be tensions linked to conflict or displacement. Inside the school, our objective is to create a community where all children feel accepted.”*

Similarly, an educational official in Uvira stated: *“Schools provide one of the few places where children from different backgrounds interact daily and learn to live together peacefully.”*

These observations highlight the important role of education in promoting social cohesion in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Persistent Challenges

Although the findings are largely positive, participants also identified challenges that can limit the contribution of schools to social cohesion. These include: the overcrowded classrooms, the limited educational resources, the Trauma-related behaviours among learners, the Economic inequalities between families and the occasional discrimination against newly displaced children.

Teachers emphasized that additional support, particularly in the form of peace-oriented educational materials and psychosocial resources, would strengthen their capacity to address these challenges.

4.5 Psychosocial Needs and Educational Gaps

A prominent finding across all study sites concerns the psychosocial challenges faced by displaced learners and the limited capacity of educational materials to address these challenges. Teachers, school administrators, parents, and educational authorities consistently reported that many children enrolled in schools serving displaced populations exhibit signs of emotional distress associated with exposure to violence, displacement, loss of family members, insecurity, and prolonged uncertainty.

Although schools have become important spaces for restoring normalcy and stability, participants emphasized that many learners continue to carry the psychological consequences of conflict into the classroom. These experiences affect not only their emotional wellbeing but also their ability to engage effectively in learning activities.

As one teacher in Bunia explained: *“Many of our pupils have witnessed violence, fled attacks, or lived in displacement camps. Even when they return to school, the memories remain with them and affect their learning.”*

The findings suggest that educational challenges among displaced learners cannot be understood solely in academic terms. Rather, learning difficulties are often closely linked to unresolved psychosocial needs.

Concentration Difficulties and Interrupted Learning

One of the most frequently reported concerns was learners' difficulty concentrating during lessons. Teachers observed that many displaced children struggle to maintain attention, complete tasks, or participate consistently in classroom activities.

A teacher working in a school hosting displaced children in Goma explained: *"Some learners seem physically present but mentally absent. They often stare into space or become distracted very quickly. When we talk to them, we discover that they are thinking about events they experienced during displacement."*

In Bunia, educators linked concentration difficulties to repeated interruptions in schooling caused by displacement and insecurity.

One school principal noted: *"Many children have missed months of schooling. Some have moved several times. It is difficult for them to reconnect with learning after such experiences."*

Parents participating in focus group discussions also expressed concern about children's reduced interest in school following traumatic events.

A parent in Uvira stated: *"Before the conflict, my child was very active in school. After displacement, he became withdrawn and lost interest in studying."*

These observations suggest that educational recovery requires attention not only to academic catch-up programs but also to learners' emotional wellbeing.

Anxiety and Persistent Feelings of Insecurity

Teachers across all four sites reported that anxiety is common among displaced learners. Many children continue to experience fear related to insecurity, future displacement, or separation from family members.

In Goma, where many families have experienced multiple waves of displacement, teachers described children becoming distressed when hearing rumours of renewed violence.

One educator explained: *"When there are reports of fighting nearby, some children become visibly anxious. They worry that they will have to flee again or that something will happen to their families."*

Similarly, in Uvira, teachers reported that some learners remain highly sensitive to loud noises or unexpected events.

A teacher recounted: *"Sometimes a sudden noise outside the classroom causes children to panic because it reminds them of what they experienced during attacks."*

Educational authorities acknowledged that these forms of anxiety can undermine both learning outcomes and social interactions.

Behavioural Challenges and Classroom Management

Participants also reported behavioural difficulties among some displaced learners. Teachers described incidents involving aggression, irritability, withdrawal, and difficulties complying with classroom rules.

In Bunia, one teacher observed: *"Some children react aggressively to minor disagreements. We believe this is related to the stress and violence they have experienced."*

Other educators emphasized that behavioural difficulties should not be interpreted simply as disciplinary problems but rather as manifestations of psychological distress.

A school principal in Bukavu explained: *"When a child refuses to participate or becomes disruptive, it is often a sign that something deeper is happening. Many of these children are carrying emotional burdens."*

These findings highlight the importance of trauma-informed educational approaches that recognize the links between emotional wellbeing and behaviour.

Emotional Withdrawal and Social Isolation

In addition to externalized behavioural difficulties, participants frequently reported cases of emotional withdrawal among displaced learners.

Teachers described children who rarely spoke in class, avoided interactions with peers, or appeared disengaged from school activities.

One teacher in Uvira explained: *"Some children isolate themselves. They do not participate in games, avoid group activities, and speak very little. Building their confidence takes time."*

Parents also reported observing signs of sadness, loneliness, and reduced social engagement among their children following displacement.

A mother in Goma stated: *"My daughter used to be very sociable. After we were displaced, she became quiet and avoided interacting with others. School has helped her somewhat, but she still struggles."*

These accounts suggest that displacement affects not only academic performance but also children's social and emotional development.

The Absence of Psychosocial and Resilience-Building Educational Materials

Despite widespread recognition of these psychosocial challenges, participants consistently noted that existing educational materials provide little support for addressing emotional wellbeing, trauma recovery, or resilience-building.

Most textbooks used in schools focus primarily on literacy, numeracy, science, and civic education. While these subjects are important, teachers observed that they rarely contain activities or content designed to help learners process traumatic experiences or develop coping strategies.

A teacher in Goma explained: *"The textbooks teach reading and mathematics, but they do not help children talk about fear, loss, or displacement. We have to address these issues ourselves."*

Similarly, an educational inspector in Bunia stated: *"There are no specific manuals that guide teachers on how to support children affected by conflict. Teachers rely on their own experience and intuition."*

Several respondents suggested that educational materials should include: stories of resilience and recovery; activities encouraging emotional expression; exercises promoting self-confidence and coping skills; lessons on empathy and mutual support and guidance for teachers on psychosocial support.

An NGO representative in Uvira observed: *"Children need opportunities to see that recovery is possible. Educational materials should help them understand that they are not alone and that they can overcome adversity."*

Teachers Filling the Psychosocial Support Gap

In the absence of specialized resources, teachers have assumed responsibility for providing informal psychosocial support. Across study sites, educators described spending time listening to learners, encouraging peer support, and creating safe classroom environments.

One teacher in Bukavu explained: *"Sometimes children simply need someone to listen to them. Before teaching, we often spend time talking about how they are feeling."*

Teachers also reported using songs, storytelling, games, and group discussions to help children rebuild confidence and reconnect with peers.

However, many educators expressed concern that they lack formal training in psychosocial support and trauma-sensitive pedagogy.

A teacher in Bunia stated: *"We try our best, but we are not psychologists. We need tools and training to help children more effectively."*

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that educational materials currently used in displacement contexts in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo contribute only partially to peacebuilding objectives. While schools provide important opportunities for literacy development, social interaction, and educational continuity, the resources available to

learners and teachers remain largely oriented toward academic instruction rather than the specific social and psychosocial realities associated with conflict and displacement. The findings therefore support broader debates within the literature on education in emergencies, peace education, and conflict-sensitive education.

Educational Continuity versus Contextual Relevance

A first important finding concerns the predominance of standardized national curriculum materials in schools serving displaced learners. Across Bunia, Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira, educational provision relies primarily on textbooks developed for the general school population. Although these materials support educational continuity and curriculum standardization, they rarely address the lived experiences of children affected by armed conflict, forced displacement, family separation, and insecurity.

This finding aligns with research on education in emergencies, which has highlighted a persistent tension between maintaining educational continuity and ensuring contextual relevance (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; UNESCO, 2024). International frameworks emphasize that education in conflict settings should not merely replicate conventional schooling but should respond to learners' specific protection, psychosocial, and social integration needs (INEE, 2024).

The results suggest that while educational authorities have succeeded in preserving access to formal education for displaced children, less attention has been devoted to adapting educational content to the realities of displacement. Similar observations have been reported in studies conducted among refugee and displaced populations in South Sudan, Afghanistan, and Syria, where educational systems prioritized curriculum continuity but often failed to integrate themes related to resilience, recovery, and peacebuilding (Kirk & Winthrop, 2007; Burde et al., 2017).

From the perspective of Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 1997), this limitation is particularly significant. Conflict transformation emphasizes addressing the underlying social and relational dimensions of conflict rather than simply restoring institutional functions. Educational materials that ignore children's experiences of violence and displacement may contribute to academic learning while missing opportunities to support broader processes of reconciliation and social healing.

Teachers as Peacebuilders: Evidence from Social Learning Theory

A second major finding concerns the central role of teachers in promoting peacebuilding and social cohesion. Across all study sites, educators described how they compensate for the absence of explicit peacebuilding content through classroom discussions, storytelling, conflict mediation, group activities, and everyday interactions.

This finding strongly supports Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which argues that children acquire attitudes, values, and behaviours through observation and

interaction with significant role models. In displacement contexts, teachers emerge as critical agents of social learning who model cooperation, empathy, tolerance, and non-violent conflict resolution.

The findings demonstrate that peacebuilding within schools is often embedded in pedagogical practice rather than in educational materials themselves. Teachers encourage learners to share resources, support classmates, respect differences, and resolve disagreements peacefully. These practices create opportunities for children to observe and internalize prosocial behaviours.

The importance of teachers as peacebuilding actors has been documented in previous studies of education in conflict-affected societies. Research in Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Sierra Leone, and Colombia demonstrates that educators often play a decisive role in shaping attitudes toward reconciliation and coexistence (Salomon & Cairns, 2010). Similarly, Bajaj (2008) argues that peace education is most effective when teachers actively embody and model the values they seek to promote.

However, the present findings also reveal a structural vulnerability. Because peacebuilding depends largely on individual teacher initiative, educational outcomes may vary significantly according to teachers' personal commitment, experience, and capacity. This observation supports calls within the literature for greater institutionalization of peace education through curricula, teacher training, and educational materials (Harris & Morrison, 2013; Kuppens and Sheria, 2025).

Schools as Sites of Social Cohesion

A third important finding concerns the contribution of schools to social cohesion among displaced and host-community learners. Children, parents, and teachers consistently reported positive outcomes related to cooperation, sharing, mutual assistance, forgiveness, and respectful communication.

These findings support a growing body of research suggesting that schools can function as important sites of social integration and peacebuilding in fragile contexts (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo & Smith, 2017). The 4Rs framework developed by Novelli and colleagues identifies redistribution, recognition, representation, and reconciliation as key dimensions through which education contributes to sustainable peace. The present study illustrates several of these dimensions in practice.

First, schools provide opportunities for meaningful interaction between learners from different backgrounds. Through collaborative learning, extracurricular activities, and daily social interactions, displaced and host-community children develop relationships that transcend social divisions.

Second, educational environments promote recognition by encouraging respect for diversity and inclusion. Teachers frequently challenge discriminatory behaviours and foster positive attitudes toward displaced learners.

Third, activities such as peace clubs, sports competitions, and cultural events contribute to reconciliation by creating opportunities for dialogue, trust-building, and cooperation.

These findings also resonate with Galtung's (1996) concept of positive peace. Rather than merely preventing violence, schools appear to contribute to the development of relationships characterized by mutual respect, cooperation, and social solidarity. In this sense, educational environments become spaces where the foundations of peaceful coexistence can be cultivated.

The results further support research conducted in refugee and displacement settings showing that educational institutions can strengthen social capital and community resilience by facilitating positive interactions across social groups (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

The Hidden Curriculum and Peacebuilding

The findings also shed light on the role of the hidden curriculum in displacement settings. While educational materials contain relatively little explicit peacebuilding content, learners nevertheless reported acquiring important values related to cooperation, empathy, forgiveness, and solidarity.

This observation reflects the arguments advanced by Apple (2004), Giroux (1983), and Jackson (1968) regarding the hidden curriculum. Educational institutions transmit norms and values not only through formal curricula but also through everyday practices, relationships, and organizational cultures.

In the schools examined in this study, peacebuilding appears to occur largely through this hidden curriculum. The ways teachers organize classrooms, manage conflicts, encourage collaboration, and interact with learners communicate powerful messages about social relationships and coexistence.

However, relying primarily on the hidden curriculum presents limitations. As Apple (2004) notes, implicit educational messages may be inconsistent, unevenly implemented, and dependent on individual actors. Explicit integration of peacebuilding themes into educational materials could strengthen and complement these informal learning processes.

Psychosocial Recovery and the Missing Dimension of Educational Materials

Perhaps the most significant limitation identified by this study concerns the lack of educational resources addressing trauma, resilience, emotional wellbeing, and psychosocial recovery.

Teachers across all study sites reported concentration difficulties, anxiety, behavioural challenges, and emotional withdrawal among displaced learners. These findings are consistent with international research documenting the psychological consequences of armed conflict and forced displacement on children (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003; Burde et al., 2017).

Yet despite the prevalence of these challenges, existing educational materials rarely include content related to emotional healing, resilience-building, or trauma-sensitive learning. This represents a critical gap given the experiences of many learners in Eastern DRC.

From the perspective of peace education, this omission is particularly problematic. Contemporary peace education extends beyond conflict resolution to encompass emotional wellbeing, empathy, healing, and social reconstruction (Harris & Morrison, 2013). Similarly, Galtung's (1996) notion of positive peace emphasizes the importance of addressing structural and psychological dimensions of violence.

The absence of psychosocial content suggests that educational materials currently support cognitive learning more effectively than emotional recovery. As a result, teachers often assume responsibilities for which they have received little formal training.

The findings therefore support growing calls within education-in-emergencies scholarship for the development of conflict-sensitive and trauma-informed educational resources that recognize learners' lived experiences and promote resilience (UNESCO, 2024; INEE, 2024).

Implications for Peacebuilding through Education

Taken together, the findings suggest that educational materials in Eastern DRC occupy an intermediate position between educational continuity and peacebuilding. While they contribute to literacy acquisition and provide a foundation for social interaction, their potential as instruments of peacebuilding remains underdeveloped.

The study indicates that strengthening peacebuilding outcomes requires moving beyond traditional curriculum models toward educational approaches that intentionally integrate: conflict transformation, social cohesion, reconciliation, emotional wellbeing, resilience building and inclusive citizenship.

Such reforms would align educational practice more closely with contemporary theories of peace education and conflict transformation while responding more effectively to the realities of conflict-affected learners.

Ultimately, the findings reinforce Lederach's (1997) argument that sustainable peace emerges through the transformation of relationships and social structures. Educational materials, when appropriately designed, can become powerful tools for supporting this transformation among children growing up in contexts of displacement and conflict.

Conclusion

This study examined the educational materials used in literacy and basic education programs serving internally displaced children in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and explored their contribution to peacebuilding and social cohesion. Conducted across four displacement-affected urban centers—Bunia, Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira—the research sought to understand how educational resources, teaching practices, and school environments respond to the complex realities of children living in contexts of conflict and displacement.

The findings reveal that educational provision for displaced learners is largely based on the national curriculum and standardized teaching materials designed for the general school population. These resources have played an important role in ensuring educational continuity and preventing further disruption of learning among children affected by conflict. In environments characterized by instability, displacement, and limited resources, the maintenance of formal educational structures represents an important achievement for both educational authorities and humanitarian actors.

However, the study also demonstrates that existing educational materials are only partially responsive to the needs of conflict-affected learners. While textbooks and learning resources support literacy acquisition and academic development, they contain limited content related to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, reconciliation, trauma recovery, social cohesion, and resilience. The lived experiences of displaced children - including forced migration, exposure to violence, family separation, loss, and insecurity - remain largely absent from the educational materials currently available in schools.

As a consequence, much of the responsibility for peacebuilding falls on teachers. Across all study sites, educators emerged as the primary agents of peace education. Through classroom discussions, storytelling, cooperative learning, conflict mediation, counselling, and extracurricular activities, teachers actively promote values of tolerance, mutual respect, solidarity, empathy, and peaceful coexistence. Their efforts help create inclusive learning environments where displaced and host-community children can interact positively despite broader social tensions and divisions.

The study further highlights the important contribution of schools to social cohesion. Learners and parents reported improvements in relationships among children, including increased cooperation, sharing, forgiveness, teamwork, and respectful communication. Schools were widely perceived as safe spaces where children from different backgrounds can build trust, develop friendships, and learn to live together peacefully. Extracurricular activities such as peace clubs, theatre, sports competitions, cultural events, and community dialogue initiatives were found to reinforce these outcomes by providing practical opportunities for interaction and collective problem-solving.

At the same time, the research reveals a significant gap in addressing the psychosocial needs of displaced learners. Teachers consistently reported challenges related to trauma, anxiety, emotional withdrawal, behavioural difficulties, and concentration problems among children affected by conflict. Yet educational materials rarely provide guidance or activities aimed at supporting emotional recovery, resilience-building, or psychosocial wellbeing. This limitation constrains the capacity of schools to respond effectively to the broader consequences of displacement and violence.

Taken together, the findings suggest that educational materials possess considerable untapped potential as instruments of peacebuilding. While schools already contribute to social cohesion through the commitment of teachers and the positive interactions they facilitate, more intentional integration of peacebuilding principles into educational resources could significantly strengthen these outcomes. Educational materials that reflect children's lived experiences, promote empathy and dialogue, address trauma and resilience, and encourage inclusive citizenship could become powerful tools for supporting both learning and recovery in conflict-affected contexts.

The study therefore argues that peacebuilding should not be viewed as an additional component of education but as an integral dimension of educational quality in contexts of displacement. Strengthening the peacebuilding function of education requires moving beyond a narrow focus on academic achievement toward a more holistic approach that recognizes the social, emotional, and relational dimensions of learning.

Ultimately, the future of many displaced children in Eastern DRC will depend not only on their ability to read, write, and succeed academically but also on their capacity to rebuild trust, navigate diversity, resolve conflicts peacefully, and participate in the construction of more inclusive and peaceful communities. Educational materials, when deliberately designed to support these goals, can play a critical role in transforming schools from spaces of instruction into spaces of healing, resilience, and sustainable peace.

7. Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that educational materials currently used in displacement contexts in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo provide important support for literacy and academic learning but remain insufficiently equipped to address

peacebuilding, social cohesion, reconciliation, and psychosocial recovery. To maximize the transformative potential of education in conflict-affected settings, coordinated efforts are required from government institutions, humanitarian organizations, schools, teacher training institutions, donors, and researchers.

The following recommendations are proposed.

7.1 Recommendations for the Ministry of Education and New Citizenship

Integrate Peace Education Across the Curriculum

The Ministry should mainstream peace education throughout the national curriculum rather than limiting it to isolated civic education lessons. Themes such as non-violent conflict resolution, tolerance, reconciliation, empathy, human rights, citizenship, diversity, and social cohesion should be embedded across subjects including languages, social sciences, history, civic education, and arts education.

In provinces affected by conflict and displacement, peacebuilding should be recognized as a cross-cutting educational competency alongside literacy and numeracy.

Revise and Contextualize Educational Materials

The Ministry should undertake a systematic review of textbooks and learning resources to ensure they reflect the realities of conflict-affected learners.

Future educational materials should: Include stories and examples drawn from displacement-affected communities; Promote positive representations of diversity and coexistence; Address peaceful conflict resolution; Encourage critical thinking and dialogue and highlight local experiences of reconciliation and resilience.

Contextualized educational materials would allow learners to see their own experiences reflected in what they study and strengthen the relevance of schooling.

Develop Dedicated Peacebuilding and Social Cohesion Resources

Specific educational materials should be developed for schools located in conflict-affected areas, including: Peace education manuals; Conflict-resolution guides; Classroom activities promoting dialogue; Child-friendly materials on reconciliation and Storybooks emphasizing cooperation and inclusion.

These resources should complement existing curricula rather than replace them.

Integrate Psychosocial and Social-Emotional Learning Content

Educational materials should include activities that support: Emotional literacy; Stress management; Resilience-building; Self-esteem; Empathy and Positive peer relationships.

Such content is particularly important for learners who have experienced displacement, violence, or loss.

Strengthen Teacher Training

Teacher training institutions and continuous professional development programs should incorporate modules on: Peace education; Conflict-sensitive pedagogy; Social-emotional learning; Psychosocial support and Inclusive education in displacement contexts.

Teachers require both theoretical knowledge and practical tools to address the challenges encountered in conflict-affected classrooms.

7.2 Recommendations for Humanitarian Organizations and Development Partners

Support the Production of Contextualized Educational Materials

Humanitarian agencies should collaborate with educational authorities, teachers, researchers, and local communities to develop educational materials adapted to displacement contexts.

Particular attention should be given to: local languages; cultural relevance; conflict sensitivity and child participation in material development.

Invest in Psychosocial and Social-Emotional Learning Resources

Development partners should support the creation and distribution of: Child-friendly psychosocial support materials; Classroom activities focused on resilience; Guidance tools for teachers and Storybooks addressing trauma and recovery.

These materials should complement broader mental health and psychosocial support interventions.

Strengthen Teacher Capacity

Organizations supporting education programs should expand training opportunities for teachers working with displaced children. Capacity-building initiatives should focus on: Classroom-based peacebuilding, Inclusive teaching practices; Trauma-sensitive pedagogy; Learner-centred approaches and Conflict prevention strategies.

Promote Community-Based Peacebuilding Through Schools

Educational interventions should be linked to broader community peacebuilding initiatives. Schools can serve as platforms for dialogue, reconciliation, and community engagement when supported by local organizations and authorities.

Ensure Sustainability of Educational Interventions

Many successful peacebuilding initiatives disappear when project funding ends. Humanitarian actors should therefore prioritize sustainable approaches that strengthen local ownership and institutional capacity.

7.3 Recommendations for Schools and Educational Practitioners

Establish and Strengthen Peace Clubs

Schools should institutionalize peace clubs as permanent structures promoting: Dialogue; Leadership; Conflict resolution; Civic engagement and Community service.

Peace clubs should involve both displaced and host-community learners.

Develop Peer Mediation Programs

Learners should be trained as peer mediators capable of assisting classmates in resolving disputes peacefully. Such programs can strengthen learners' conflict resolution skills while reducing tensions within schools.

Expand Extracurricular Peacebuilding Activities

Schools should continue to invest in: Theatre for peace; Sports for development; Cultural festivals; Storytelling initiatives; Debate clubs and Community outreach activities.

These initiatives provide practical opportunities for cooperation and social interaction.

Foster Inclusive School Environments

School leadership should actively promote inclusion by:

- Preventing discrimination;
- Encouraging participation of displaced learners;
- Supporting vulnerable children;
- Creating safe learning spaces;
- Promoting diversity and mutual respect.

Strengthen School–Community Relationships

Schools should engage parents, community leaders, and local organizations in educational activities aimed at strengthening social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

7.4 Recommendations for Teacher Training Institutions

Integrate Peace Education into Pre-Service Training

Universities, teacher training colleges, and pedagogical institutes should ensure that future teachers receive training in: Peace education; Conflict transformation; Social cohesion; Inclusive education and Psychosocial support.

Develop Practical Training Modules

Training programs should move beyond theory and provide teachers with practical tools for implementing peacebuilding activities in classrooms.

Promote Reflective Practice

Teachers should be encouraged to critically examine their own attitudes, biases, and pedagogical practices to strengthen their role as peacebuilding agents.

7.5 Recommendations for Researchers and Academic Institutions

Conduct Longitudinal Research

Future studies should examine the long-term effects of peace-oriented educational materials on learners' attitudes, behaviours, and social relationships.

Longitudinal research would provide valuable evidence regarding the sustainability of educational peacebuilding interventions.

Explore Children's Perspectives More Deeply

While this study incorporated children's voices, further research should place greater emphasis on learners' own understandings of peace, conflict, reconciliation, social cohesion and displacement.

Child-centred methodologies could generate important insights into how educational interventions are experienced by young people.

Evaluate the Impact of Specific Educational Materials

Experimental and mixed-methods studies should assess the effectiveness of different educational resources in promoting peacebuilding outcomes.

Expand Comparative Research

Comparative studies across provinces, countries, and displacement settings would enhance understanding of how educational materials influence peacebuilding in different contexts.

Strengthen Collaboration Between Research and Practice

Universities, research centres, educational authorities, and humanitarian organizations should collaborate more closely to ensure that educational policies and programs are informed by evidence.

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