

Research on Education in Emergencies: Current Status and Dilemmas

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63990/ejtel.v3i2.13860>

Received: July 09, 2025; Revised: April 19, 2026;

Accepted: June 18, 2026

Abstract:

Sound, ethical, and rigorous reflective research practices are essential for the development of education in emergencies as a strong and respected field of study. This review examines the current state of research in this area and its related challenges. It analyzes the main research themes, the most commonly studied topics, and the research methods used. It also considers the key features of education in emergencies that affect how research is conducted. The review was conducted based on relevant articles published in peer-reviewed journals since the mid-1990s. Grey literature was also consulted, particularly regarding the status of research conducted on education in emergencies. The results of the scoping review indicated that studies focusing on conflict, qualitative research, and practical applications dominate research on education in emergencies. It was also found that a large proportion of the studies were conducted with the participation of researchers from the Global North, with fewer than a fifth of the studies being conducted by researchers from the Global South alone.¹ Review of the accessible literature also disclosed that research on education in emergencies is characterized by multiple dilemmas which need to be resolved in the development process of the field as an established field of inquiry. These and many other findings of the review are helpful inputs as education in emergencies is being recognized as an area for academic research and graduate-level training in Ethiopian universities and beyond.

Key terms: *displacement, education in emergency, humanitarian response, research on education in emergency*

Introduction

Education in emergency refers to the provision of quality learning opportunities for individuals of all ages during crises (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies /INEE, 2012). It is an education provided in situations where children lack access to their national education systems, due to man-made crises or natural disasters. Its precise interpretation varies, from a

1. Even though there is no universal agreement on what the global north and global south represent, they are economic and political classifications of countries rather than geographic regions. The global north typically includes countries with stronger economies, such as the United States, Canada, England, nations of the European Union, as well as Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and even some countries in the southern hemisphere: Australia and New Zealand. The Global South is home to the majority of the world's population, but that population is generally young and resource-poor, living in economically dependent nations. This group includes formerly colonized countries in Africa and Latin America, as well as the Middle East, Brazil, India, and parts of Asia. (Lara Braff and Katie Nelson, 2022). The Global North: Introducing the Region. In Fernandez, Nadine T., and Katie Nelson, eds. *Gendered Lives: Global Issues*.

concern with emergency education during the first few months after a crisis, to the years taken to restore normal education systems after a “complex humanitarian emergency”. Even though there are fundamental international treaties and conventions (e.g., the 1948 human rights convention and the 1951 refugee conventions), the emergence of the discourse on education in emergency in its present form coincided with the end of the Cold War (i.e., during the 1990s), and the expansion of intrastate violent conflicts after that. There are conditions which are central to the coming into being of the discourse on education in emergencies during this time amid the interstate conflicts. Among these are the ratification of The Convention on Children’s Rights (1989), The Education for All global initiative (Jomtien 1990), and the 2000 Dakar Framework on Education for All within the agenda of the Millennium Development Goal. The post 2015 sustainable development goals, with focus on equity, among others, gave further impetus for the continued concern about education in emergencies.

Humanitarian relief entailed the provision of food, shelter, water, and sanitation and health care until very recently (INEE, 2012). In that sense, education was seen as part of longer-term development work rather than as a necessary response to emergencies. However, with the growing conception of humanitarianism (Davey et al., 2013), which gradually brought about a concern not only with individuals’ basic needs but also with fulfilling their rights to a certain standard of life has contributed to the development of education in emergencies. Besides, the fact that people came to realize that education cannot wait (Tomasevski, 2003) made it an issue of humanitarian response. Today, education in emergencies is a right for children affected by shocks and stressors due to one or the other reason. It is one of the pillars of humanitarian response with the aim to provide protection, provision of safe space for children, maintenance of a sense of normality during emergencies, and a means towards sustainable development, including post-conflict recovery. It is also today considered as an academic discipline (an area of academic research) even though, as Kagawa (2005) alluded, it is at its infancy.

Even though the concept of education in emergencies has been part of humanitarian discourse for over three decades, persistent dissatisfaction remains regarding the performance of systems in delivering effective educational responses during crises (Taka 2023). Among others, there are still problems of access and quality. Institutionalized support systems are lacking and, in most cases, it is based on project-based initiatives from various humanitarian organizations. This is primarily due to the severe shortage of funding for education in emergencies. For example, the EU (2017) report indicated that only 3% of global humanitarian aid was allocated to education in emergencies. Consequently, Taka (2023, citing the UNHCR) stated that over half of refugee children (i.e., individuals forced to flee their country due to persecution, war, violence, or a lack of governmental protection [UNHCR, 2025]) aged between five and seventeen missed school in 2016. The author indicated that this problem is exacerbated at the post-primary level due to donors' focus on primary education. Therefore, it is fair to say that the performance of education in crisis settings is unsatisfactory.

There is also weak commitment of host governments (Crisp, 2003), often the country’s laws limit the rights of the refugees. Sometimes, the host states are not on good terms with the home

states; the host governments feel that they have enough of their own problems, and those governments use aids to the refugees simply as sources of foreign currency. Hence, genuine commitment towards ensuring the rights of refugee children to education is often lacking.

Despite all the dissatisfaction and failures there is a quest to identify what educational practice works in emergency settings. This calls for scientific research, which is a pillar for evidence-based decision-making, a source for knowledge construction in this growing field of study, a mechanism for objective understanding, and a tool for its continuity. According to Islam (2023), one way a discipline of study guarantees its own continued existence and development is through research. In the field of education in emergencies, research plays a critical role in bridging evidence gaps and establishing pathways for the effective translation of findings into policy and practice. It is also through research that a field of study strengthens the literature in the field since a field of study is expected to have its own literature. Research is also a strategic means for the collection, curation, and dissemination of knowledge and evidence in the sphere of education in emergencies. With this background, the paper intends to appraise the current state of research in the area of education in emergencies (EiE), identify major challenges to research on EiE, and sort out some dilemmas connected to research on EiE based on a scoping review of the literature. The practical value of this study is evident. It sheds light on pressing issues in the field of Education in Emergencies (EiE) and offers insights that may inform practitioners and policymakers. The theoretical contribution of the study lies in its ability to unravel conceptual understandings of the unique feature of doing research on education in emergency settings.

Methods

This study aimed to examine two key issues in education research in emergencies: its current status and related challenges. To examine the current status of research in this field, I conducted a scoping review, a type of study designed to map existing literature on a specific topic or research area (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). To examine the dilemmas and related challenges, I conducted a thorough review of the available literature and drew on my personal experience as a researcher. **Scoping review:** Five interrelated stages were applied in conducting the scoping review:

Stage 1: identifying the research question or issues: the key issues identified for the study were (i) the main focuses of research on education in emergencies; (ii) the areas of education in emergencies that have been commonly addressed in published research; (iii) the dominant research methods commonly used in these studies; and (iv) the inherent characteristics of education in emergencies that influence the pursuit of academic research on the subject.

Stage 2: identifying relevant studies – two broad databases were considered, namely, Google Scholar and ERIC. One hundred fifty-two (152) published articles were identified for examination using such search terms as ‘the state of research in education in emergency’, ‘research and teaching-learning process in emergency settings’, ‘challenges to research on

education in emergency as humanitarian aid', and 'partnership on research on education in emergencies.'

Stage 3: study selection – The review is delimited to emergencies or crises resulting from armed conflict and education provided in settlement camps/sites. The research considered encompasses both theoretical analyses and intervention-based studies. The reviewed research works included those targeting general education in schools, mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa and other host countries in the Global South. Taking these as selection criteria, articles published in peer-reviewed English-language journals since the mid-1990s were identified from two broad databases: Google Scholar and ERIC. Of the 152 published articles identified, 22 satisfied the selection criteria. While the grey literature far outnumbers the body of literature on education in emergencies (Wright, 2012). However, for the present purpose, only 11 articles that appeared as grey literature which satisfy the selection criteria were considered for the review. These were obtained mainly via 'Google Search Free' rather than from Google Scholar and ERIC.

Stage 4: Charting the data – this stage involved reading and re-reading of the 22 selected scholarly articles and the 11 articles in the grey literature to identify which of the issues identified for the review study were addressed, and how they were addressed. Notes were taken based on insights obtained from the close examination.

Stage 5: Collating, summarizing, and reporting the results: Once the review concluded, the results obtained have been reported using five sub-thematic areas: type of emergency studied, methods used, participating researchers' origin (global north or south), sources of fund and major foci of the studies.

A comprehensive review of the related literature was conducted to identify the challenges in educational research in emergencies: I believe that dilemmas are not just what we specifically identify in articles or what we physically count therefrom. Rather, they are what we deduce or induce based on our understanding developed through studying the available literature. Therefore, I decided to read widely and note down the main dilemmas that the field is experiencing today. Reflecting on my experience of researching in the field of education in emergencies in Ethiopia has helped me to apply understandings obtained from the literature review to situations in the Global South.

Results

The results of the review have been organized under the following key headings: types of research on education in emergencies, dilemmas, challenges, and promises. At the Implications for the future of research on education in emergencies have been outlined.

Types of Research

Five thematic areas were used to examine the identified scholarly articles: the type of emergency studied; the major focus of the studies, the methods used in the studies (qualitative, quantitative or mixed); the researchers involved (Northern, Southern or joint research) and the sources of

funding (from the North, from the South or a contribution from both). Table 1 summarizes the results from the content analysis.

Table 1: *Summary of the content analysis of the scholarly articles*

<i>Thematic Area</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Type of emergency studied</i>	<i>Conflict</i>	6	27.3
	<i>Non-conflict – other hazards (e.g., flooding)</i>	1	4.5
	<i>Non-conflict – COVID-19</i>	4	18.2
	<i>Emergency in general*</i>	11	50
Total		22	100
<i>Major focus</i>	<i>Practical problems</i>	22	73.33
	<i>Theoretical understanding/conceptions</i>	3	10
	<i>Both</i>	5	16.67
Total		30**	100
<i>Method</i>	<i>Qualitative</i>	20	90.9
	<i>Quantitative</i>	-	-
	<i>Mixed</i>	2	9.1
Total		22	100
<i>Researchers</i>	<i>Southern scholars</i>	4	18.18
	<i>Northern scholars</i>	8	36.36
	<i>Co-researched (North & South Scholars)</i>	10	45.45
Total		22	100
<i>Sources of fund</i>	<i>Global South</i>	2	9.1
	<i>Global North</i>	5	22.72
	<i>Shared – North & South</i>	0	00
	<i>Unidentified</i>	15	68.18
Total		22	100

* *The articles do not specify the type of emergency.*

** *Possibility for double rating.*

It is widely conceded that research on conflict-based emergencies dominate the types of emergencies researched (Wright (2012) & Montjouridès & Liu (2019). Studies focusing on natural disasters tended to be geographically biased. For instance, the few available disaster-based emergency studies are dominantly from Southern Asia (Samada, Arifina and Abas, 2025). The fact is that such non-conflict emergencies have been written about by organizations (e.g. INGOs) in the form of grey literature. In recent years, COVID-19-related works dominate available reports around non-conflict-induced emergencies in general. The results reported above tend to comply with these points. While 50% of the reviewed works talk about education in emergency in general (conflict-induced or otherwise), 27% of the results talk about education of population displaced by conflict. Studies related to emergencies due to COVID-19 make up about a fifth of the studies. This aligns with Durrani and Ozawa's (2024) assertion that studies

focusing on COVID-19 contagion tended to be the most popular of all the non-conflict-induced emergencies.

The sources indicated that majority of educational research conducted in emergency settings is based on problem-solving and is not as such critical (Wright, 2012; Durrani & Ozawa, 2024; Shah, 2024). As reported in Table 1, 73% of the studies reviewed target practical problems of the sub-sector, where theoretical work alone makes up only 10% of the studies. Studies targeting problem-solving risk existing only to serve the purpose of immediate action (Tilley, 2019) and sometimes tended to be confirmatory, attempting to confirm experts' hypotheses. If well thought out, the scope of research in the field of education in emergencies can expand from conceptual clarification through introducing theories of education transfer to critically examine issues in the field, such as policy borrowing and education model transfer. This may include critical analysis of the implications of new education models and/or development of pre-existing models when examined in emergency settings.

The current status of research on education in emergencies can also be examined in terms of researchers and situation of the research funds. As observed from the published works, most of the lead researchers of studies conducted on education in emergencies in the global south are foreign to the contexts in which they work (Shah, 2024; Wright, 2012). As reported in Table 1, most of the studies are either joint researches or conducted by northern scholars. It was only 18% of the studies that were conducted solely by researchers from the global south. One risk of such a situation is that exotic researchers often lack lived experiences of the situation in which their research is conducted.

Another concern is research funding. This is important because it affects the autonomy of researchers. As reported in the reviewed literature (Shah, 2024; Bolat & Karakuş, 2023; ElAsad, 2025), research funds for education in emergencies in the Global South (SSA) often come from Northern institutions. As shown in Table 1, about 23% of the studies clearly indicate that they received funding from northern institutions, while approximately 68% did not identify any source of funding. However, given the scarcity of research funding in the Global South (Chankselian, 2023), and the fact that most humanitarian aid, including education in emergencies, is left to international organizations (ALNAP, 2025), it is reasonable to assume that the sources of research funding in which Northern scholars participated (over 81% of the reviewed studies) were from the Global North. This situation puts experts from northern institutions in a position to dictate the design and implementation of research projects (Menashy & Zakharia, 2022). For instance, it is not uncommon that researchers from global south often serve as data collectors, even though they are sometimes as senior as the lead researchers from global north. In such a situation, researchers from the South lack a say in interpreting the data from their home perspectives. And, for Shah (2024) this can be a cause for concern regarding the positionality of the researchers. Northern researchers often lack the Southern perspectives and also lack awareness of the context of the research and the researched. Related to this situation are two important factors: extreme shortage of research fund at home (i.e., Global South) and Southern researchers search for fund is limited (Wright, 2012) – partly due to

preoccupation with routines at their home institutions or due to lack of skills in grant writing or even due to ontological gap between the North and the South – which often limit the acceptability of grant proposals from southern scholars.

The type of research methodology employed can also be used to talk about the status of research on education in emergencies. Historically, the qualitative approach tends to dominate research in the field of education in emergency (Wright, 2012). The purpose of such studies tends to be to understand, make sense of, or interpret phenomena; with the aim of dealing with practical problems. The results reported in Table 1 indicate that about 91% of the studies reviewed were conducted using the qualitative approach. Nonetheless, Wright stressed that there is a growing number of quantitative studies in recent years, including intervention/ evaluative research, which tend to have a clear and quantifiable starting point. Globally, this may be a prevailing recent trend. Yet, the result reported above does not prove that.

While much data is frequently collected in situations of emergency, very little of that has been utilized for further critical analysis (Montjouridès and Liu, 2019; Martin & Umubyeyi, 2019; Wright, 2012; Tilley, 2019). In fact, the collection of statistical data tended to be an everyday experience of most field workers in emergency or settlement camps (Wright, 2012; Montjouridès and Liu, 2019). Therefore, it is not uncommon to experience data wastage in emergency situation.

While longitudinal studies can be immensely important to learn about long-term impacts of interventions, it is difficult to do because of (i) lack of long-term funding commitment due to instability and expensive nature of such research, and (ii) mobility of the clients (displaced people), which makes tracking of clients difficult. Hence, most of the studies tend to be cross-sectional, though, as Matutes *et al* (2021) noted, there are rare cases where ex post facto studies are conducted.

Finally, 'grey literature', i.e., information produced outside of traditional publishing and distribution channels (McKenzie, 2023), dominates the field of education in emergencies today. As it does not undergo a peer review process, the quality of grey literature can vary considerably. Such literature is often criticized for glorifying project successes without providing a balanced or unbiased analysis of their genuine strengths and weaknesses (Wright, 2012). In this writer's view, much of this literature is based on advocacy research, where researchers set out to 'prove' their claims. Consequently, their methods and design lack rigour (Corlett, 2011). And hence, there are limited opportunities for academics and practitioners to compare competing hypotheses and collect valuable data (Montjouridès & Liu, 2019). There is also limited theorization on 'what works' in emergency settings.

Dilemma

One of the dilemmas around education in emergencies is the problem with its academic location: there is a push-pull. Inherently, education in emergencies is an interdisciplinary subject crossing the traditional subject boundary. It draws upon principles and practices from various academic and practical domains to ensure the continuity of education during and after crises. It integrates

aspects of emergency management, public health, child protection, psychology, sociology, political science, and, centrally, humanitarianism (UNICEF, 2024; INEE, 2024, Tarricone, Mestan, & Teo, 2021). Thus, it takes from education proper, sociology, psychology, social work, and many others. So, its academic location is complex to that extent. Unfortunately, interdisciplinary approaches are not so well developed, at least in institutions of Sub-Saharan Africa, if I take the case of Ethiopian universities.

Another dilemma is the incompatibility of 'the idea of research' with emergencies, which is related to the tension between service orientation and knowledge creation (EnterCulturas, 2020). Research is about the future: knowledge for the future, improving future practice, and so on. The observation that most writings on education in emergencies are organisational reports developed from the perspectives of interest organisations themselves is one indicator of this incompatibility. Emergency, on the other hand, is about responding to the crisis prevailing today. Reconciliation of these concepts in people's minds (and in the allocation of resources) is a very important issue.

Another sort of dilemma connected to research on education in emergency is the need to learn from elsewhere or from others' experiences versus the critical importance of context (in emergency settings). We must learn from others' track records. On the other hand, every emergency setting has its own unique features (Smiley, 2020), which sets it apart from other settings. Therefore, balancing these two would constitute an important dilemma.

Conducting ethical research in emergency settings involves dilemmas. For example, researchers may need to follow ethical standards but cannot always obtain informed consent. This problem is linked to low literacy levels among participants, mistrust of signing documents (common in parts of sub-Saharan Africa), and the absence of primary caregivers for minors due to sudden conflict (Smiley, 2020; Wright, 2012). As a result, many researchers rely on oral assent or seek consent from camp authorities as a temporary solution.

Given these and other dilemmas as well as the challenges of doing research in emergency settings (to be discussed below), it is essential that research on education in emergencies is tightly connected to educational practices. For that, an important step could be creating a mechanism through which practitioners and university-based researchers collaborate and co-engage.

Challenges

One of the challenges is the misconception that synonymises issues of educational reform in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Kobeissi *et al*, 2022; Montjouridès & Liu, 2019) – that all educational failures/problems can be explained using the same theoretical framework. People holding such a misconception often say a separate set of research may not be important for education in emergencies because research on other forms of education may give an adequate explanation. The other challenge is the security situation because most of the settlement camps where displaced populations settle is in relatively insecure areas in most of the countries of the Global South. Related to this is the fact that academics are often not prepared to take risks to get

evidence, a look for safer ground. Difficulty of entry to the research site is the other obstacle due to excessive permission or approval requirements. Once entered, the language of communication tends to be the other problem. As mentioned above, limited funding opportunities at home and weak grant writing skills are equally important factors that constrain research in emergency settings.

Research fatigue can also be the other constraint as the refugees are literally a captive (Martin & Umubyeyi, 2019) – i.e., the audience is over researched. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, several data points are collected both internally and in response to donor requirements. National governments also ask for data in their effort to oversee what goes on within their jurisdiction.

Research sometimes tends to be erroneously perceived as benefiting the researcher. This could partly result from the research fatigue mentioned above – that multiple bodies collect data (Montjouridès and Liu, 2019) and nothing comes out that improves the situation of the researched. Therefore, there is no way that the researched sense any value of the research and take it as purely done for the interest of the researcher. Thus, no value attached to it, no commitment displayed. In a highly deprived situation (e.g., limited funding cut for education in emergencies), research sometimes tends to be perceived as a luxury because what matters most for the researched is their basic needs. At the same time, researchers may be targeted by warring parties because they are seen as collaborating with ‘occupiers.’

Missing and/or poor-quality data in conflict-affected areas (Taka, 2023; Martin & Umubyeyi, 2019; Montjouridès and Liu, 2019) – in a situation where there is active conflict, it is very difficult to get quality data with the required quantity. Other constraints to research on education in emergencies may include problems with building rapport with interviewees (e.g., language/cultural gap); self-reporting bias, analytic bias, funders' pressure; problems with the physical safety of researchers and participants; and the complexities of getting research approvals.

One of the truisms of humanitarian work is that every context is different, and therefore generalizations across contexts are of limited utility (Smiley, Moussa & Smith-Sreen, 2020). Therefore, researchers need to take caution in talking about and using research findings from one context to another.

Given these challenges, research on the impact of education in the prevention of, response to, and recovery from disaster risks and complex emergencies are limited.

Promises

There are important opportunities that can be utilized to promote research on education in emergency, including, the INEE-initiated minimum standards for education in emergency and the contextualization guideline; the INEE agenda for research; UN member states commitment to the sustainable development goals (SDG, especially Goal 4); growing recognition of research to address the puzzlement with failure of educational reform initiatives – e.g., in many SSA

countries; and growing technological infrastructure that may be mobilized to support data matters. The recognition of Education in Emergencies as a field of study by several universities in SSA—such as Addis Ababa University and Kotebe University of Education in Ethiopia, and the University of Nairobi in Kenya—alongside the establishment of peer-reviewed journals including the Journal on Education in Emergencies (JEiE), the Journal of Internal Displacement (JID), and the Journal of Refugee Studies, as well as other education journals with an interest in this area, represents significant opportunities for advancing scholarship and research in Education in Emergencies.

Implications

There is a need for consensus within the education in emergencies community on the role of research in identifying effective practices in emergency education in specific contexts. This process should begin with an acknowledgement of the unique characteristics of research in emergency education. It is also essential to consider incorporating educational theories into the research design process to gain a critical understanding of educational problems. Therefore, there is a need for long-term, critical, and ethically sound university-based research projects, moving away from the quick-fix approach.

Since issues in emergency education are generally interdisciplinary, it is commendable that interdisciplinary research is being promoted in this field. I was unable to determine the disciplinary backgrounds of the researchers who conducted the reviewed studies. However, I noted a general tendency to conduct research within the field of education rather than conceptualizing the matter as an interdisciplinary issue.

Another facet of emergency education research is collaboration. As presented, there were research projects in which scholars from the Global North and the Global South have collaborated. However, the agency of scholars from the fund-receiving country is open to question. Therefore, it is crucial to carefully check the balance of power regarding the design of the research and the role of those undertaking it. Furthermore, genuine partnerships must be promoted among academics, practitioners, and policymakers in the field of education in emergencies research.

Efforts need to be made to develop local capacities in terms of the contextual understanding of international research agendas in education in emergencies, grant-writing skills, and data management. For example, the INEE research agenda may need to be interpreted in the local context to serve as a local research agenda. It is also essential to evaluate the usability of data before collecting it.

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