CURRENT ISSUES IN COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

Volume 28 (2) Special Issue 2026 • ISSN 1523-1615 •
https://cice.library.columbia.edu/

Special Issue 2026

Articles

© 2026, Current Issues in Comparative Education, Teachers College, Columbia University. CC BY 4.0. *Current Issues in Comparative Education 28*(2).

CURRENT ISSUES IN COMPARATIVE EDUCATION
Volume 28, Issue 2 (Special Issue 2026)

Editor-in-Chief: Camille Fabo
Senior Editors: Tiffany Tryon, Skylar Kaat & Nina Yacher
Editors: Athaya Hafiezha, Leslie Hernandez & Joe Kim
Copyeditors: Maja Dahms, Lena Kim, Kendal Peterman, Ashleigh Sable & Junyi Zhu
Digital Engagement Team: Zhijiao Gao

Faculty Advisor: Garnett Russell
International Advisory Board: Michelle Bellino, Regina Cortina, Radhika Iyengar, tavis d. jules, Paula Louzano, Oren Pizmony-Levy & Keita Takayama

Copyright
CICE provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge. Users are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles in this journal without asking prior permission from the publisher or the author.

Authors retain their copyright and agree to license their articles with a Creative Commons "Attribution" (CC-BY) license. Articles published before 2020 are not subject to a Creative Commons license; to request permission for these articles, please contact the author directly. You can read more about Creative Commons licenses at creativecommons.org.

CICE reserves the right to amend or change this copyright policy. For the most current version of this copyright policy, please contact cice@tc.columbia.edu. Questions about the journal's copyright policy should be directed to the Editorial Board.

Disclaimer
The opinions and ideas expressed in the CICE are solely those held by the authors and are not necessarily shared by the editors of the Journal. Teachers College, Columbia University (CU), as a publisher, makes no warranty of any kind, either expressed or implied, for information on its CICE website or in any issue of CICE, which are provided on an "as is" basis. Teachers College, CU does not assume and hereby disclaims any liability to any party for any loss or damage resulting from the use of information on its CICE website or in any issue of CICE.

Editorial Introduction

Education, Value-system and Global (Dis)orders

Camille Fabo
Teachers College, Columbia University

This special issue responds to an escalation of perceived turbulence in the global order (Bromley et al., 2020; Mundy et al., 2025) and explores how education reflects these changes worldwide. Liberal norms are being called into question across the political spectrum (Furuta et al., 2023); international organizations face growing backlash and major membership withdrawals (Salajan & Jules, 2025); and forced displacement due to crises and conflicts has intensified (Sugarman, 2023). Against this backdrop, one may wonder whether the post-1945 liberal values diffusing through school systems and curricula across countries (Meyer, 1977), simultaneously tasked with shaping national loyalty and producing international citizens committed to peace (Fabo, 2026), still hold. While existing scholarship has demonstrated that local crises and tensions can hinder the enactment of liberal values in education reforms and curricula (Russell, 2018; Fabo and Russell, 2025), it is worth questioning how global crises reshape national contexts. This question becomes especially pressing amid the political instrumentalization of immigration in public discourse worldwide (Wimmer et al., 2025), heightened tension in education aid through funding cuts (UNICEF USA, 2025), and schooling interruptions amid wars and crises (Burde et al., 2019).

This volume was intended to gather contributions that reflect, empirically or theoretically, on the role of education in contexts of a contested global order, encompassing displacement, conflict, and challenges to liberal values. The pertinence of this special issue lies in the complementarity of its articles. Authors, mostly emerging scholars, often in collaboration with more established researchers and practitioners, bring together reflections on the role of education in contexts of immigration, emergencies, and national-identity building, examining how schools navigate international frameworks, national boundaries of belonging, and cultural embeddedness. These pieces pose questions at philosophical, ethical, and practical levels, allowing us to interrogate the core purpose of education at the moments of its greatest challenge.

While authors are mostly affiliated with universities in the United States — a potential scope limitation worth acknowledging — the regions covered and their varied research interests offer a unique glimpse into diverse educational and value systems. These regions include the Czech Republic, North and South Korea, Sweden, Jordan, Kenya, and Ukraine. This rich regional coverage is crucial to the issues we raise, as the contributions reflect different national approaches to global disruptions and evolving civic and ethical paradigms.

© 2026, Fabo. CC BY 4.0.

In the Czech Republic, **Pavel Flekač** and **Antonín Staněk** (**article 1**) critically examine the evolving role of teachers as "relational and reflective professionals" amidst contestation over civic values, revealing a shift toward constructivist pedagogical frameworks. They find that teachers are expected to serve as "reflective, relational, ethically accountable and embodied professionals", yet observe a significant gap between the shift in policy ambition and the avenue for implementation in practice. **Noël Um-Lo's (article 2)** ethnographic work in North Korea reveals how ethnic nationalism blends with neoliberal values to shape unification ideals. Youngbeen Ahn (**article 3**) uses critical document analysis to compare Jordan and Kenya's transformation of humanitarian aid. The author argues that "algorithmic morality" — governance driven by digital systems — is profoundly transforming the sector, raising ethical and practical concerns about accountability and values. **Mary Allison Steel (article 4)** uses Sweden as a case study to explore how human rights frameworks and human capital logics together shape refugee education reform, analyzing the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s policy documents. Finally, **Joshua DeVincenzo and colleagues** (**article 5**) provide early results of trauma-informed education programs in conflict-affected Ukraine, drawing on mixed-methods evaluation to reveal promising, if still consolidating, outcomes of online programs that support teachers in emergency settings.

We purposefully put into conversation articles that each carry empirical data and conceptual considerations, alongside practitioner-grounded field accounts, striking the balance between theory and practice that remains essential to our field. The selected contributions are further embedded in diverse ontological, methodological, and disciplinary traditions, enriching debate and understanding of how international and comparative education mobilizes ambitious and varied perspectives through cross-national dialogue. Taken together, these contributions reveal education as a contested terrain where power dynamics continuously shape who belongs, who is excluded, and how teachers, intergovernmental organizations, and governments serve as vectors toward which collective futures. In doing so, they foreground the political responsibility assigned to teachers and carried by institutions, domestic and international, in realizing, constraining, and potentially transforming these projects. If anything, these pressures make the work gathered here more urgent, and its pursuit more courageous.

Acknowledgments
I wish to thank the CICE international advisory board for their support and Garnett Russell for her feedback on the editorial note.

Camille Fabo *is a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University, where her dissertation explores education, nationalism, and conflict. Her work has appeared in Comparative Education Review, Social Sciences, and Prospects, as well as a chapter in a Palgrave Macmillan volume, and a forthcoming piece in a UNESCO IdeasLAB volume.*

References

Bromley, P., Schofer, E., & Longhofer, W. (2020). Contentions over world culture: The rise of legal restrictions on foreign funding to NGOs, 1994–2015. *Social Forces*, *99*(1), 281–304.

Burde, D., Lahmann, H., & Thompson, N. (2019). Education in emergencies: 'What works' revisited. *Education and Conflict Review, 2*, 81–88.

Fabo, C., & Russell, S. G. (2025). Bilingualism, conflicts, and language ideologies in education policies: The case of Cameroon. *Comparative Education Review, 69*(2), 311–337.

Fabo, C. (2026). Portraying nation-states and the international community: Shaping or reforming citizenship education? A cross-national study (1933–1969). *Prospects*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-026-09766-y

Furuta, J., Meyer, J. W., & Bromley, P. (2023). Education in a post-liberal world society. In [Editor(s) needed] (Eds.), *Oxford handbook on education and globalization* (pp. 96–118). Oxford University Press.

Meyer, J. W. (1977). The effects of education as an institution. *American Journal of Sociology, 83*(1), 55–77.

Mundy, K., Menashy, F., Jules, T. D., & Salajan, F. D. (2025). Debates and disruptions in the global governance of education: Taking stock in tumultuous times. *Comparative Education Review, 69*(3), 504–518.

Russell, S. G. (2018). Global discourses and local practices: Teaching citizenship and human rights in postgenocide Rwanda. *Comparative Education Review, 62*(3), 385–408.

Salajan, F. D., & Jules, T. D. (2025). The United States' repudiation of multilateral educational agreements: An inauspicious moment for comparative and international education. *Comparative Education Review, 69*(4), 545–558.

Sugarman, J. (2023). *Recent immigrant children: A profile of new arrivals to U.S. schools*. Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/recent-immigrant-children

UNICEF USA. (2025). *Education aid cuts: A broken promise to the world's children*. UNICEF USA. https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/education-aid-cuts-broken-promise-worlds-children

Wimmer, A., Bonikowski, B., Crabtree, C., Fu, Z., Golder, M., & Tsutsui, K. (2025). Geo-political rivalry and anti-immigrant sentiment: A conjoint experiment in 22 countries. *American Political Science Review, 119*(2), 1018–1035.

From Transmission to Constructivism in a Changing Civic Landscape: Competence Frameworks through Dialogic and Embodied Lenses

Pavel Flekač
Palacký University Olomouc
Antonín Staněk
Palacký University Olomouc

This paper examines how Czech reforms in initial teacher education (2020–2025) reframe the teacher's role from a transmitter of knowledge to a relational and reflective professional. This agenda gains urgency as schooling is increasingly tasked with navigating contested values and civic life. The study combines a purposive analysis of key policy and curriculum documents with a dialogic and embodied lens informed by Buber's I–Thou/I–It distinction and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment. The analysis shows how competence frameworks and related reform texts promote constructivist orientations that foreground learner agency, teacher self-reflection, dialogic interaction, and professional identity formation, alongside cooperative and project-based learning and formative, criterion-referenced assessment. At the same time, persistent implementation frictions are identified, including fragmented early-career learning, mismatched expectations between graduates and employers, uneven treatment of media and civic education, and challenges in assessing relational and embodied competences without resorting to reductive checklists. The paper concludes by outlining implications for aligning programme outcomes, learning environments, practicum, and induction with dialogic and embodied competences in civic/social science teacher preparation.

Keywords: civic education, initial teacher education, teacher competence frameworks, constructivist pedagogy, dialogic teaching

Introduction

Contemporary education is increasingly shaped by societal, cultural, and geopolitical dynamics. Value conflicts, overlapping crises, and shifts in the global order have made public reasoning, trust, and democratic participation more contested in everyday life. In such contexts, schooling is not only an instrument of cultural reproduction or economic acceleration; it is also a key site for the formation of civil society and civic identity (Vašutová, 2004, 2007). This expands the teacher's role beyond the transmission of knowledge. Teachers co-construct educational reality, support personal development, and guide processes of socialisation and civic maturation (Nezvalová, 2003).

Recent Czech reform tendencies in initial teacher education (ITE), such as revisions of framework educational programmes, efforts to standardise the teaching profession, and the publication of the Competence Framework for Teacher Education Graduates (MŠMT, 2023), and related reform documents (MŠMT, 2024, 2025), signal

© 2026, Flekač & Staněk. CC BY 4.0.

a need for deeper professionalisation of teacher education. As the Competence Framework itself states, it provides a "shared overarching vision for the quality of teacher education in the Czech Republic" and "supports further professionalization of teacher profession" (MŠMT, 2023, pp. 5–6, author's translation). At the same time, these reforms reframe the teacher not primarily as a transmitter of content but as a reflective, relational, and responsive professional. This article argues that recent Czech competence-based reforms in ITE mark a shift from transmissive to constructivist orientations, but also reveal a persistent tension: relational, reflective, and embodied competences are strongly emphasised in policy yet remain difficult to implement consistently and assess meaningfully in practice.

This tension is particularly important in the preparation of teachers of Civic Education. In a period marked by informational uncertainty and contested public issues, civic education is increasingly expected to foster critical judgment, informed participation, and democratic responsibility (UNESCO, 2015; MŠMT, 2020). If civic competence is formed through intentional education rather than acquired automatically (Staněk, 2024), then the ways in which future teachers are prepared for this task deserve close scholarly attention, especially as work is currently underway on field-specific competence frameworks (MŠMT, 2025, NPI, 2025). Recent research suggests that early professional learning is often fragmented rather than linear (Vlček & Sedová, 2025), which further raises questions about how competence frameworks are interpreted and implemented in practice.

The current reform agenda places particular emphasis on the development of professional competences, systematic self-reflection, and responsiveness to changing social needs, reflecting a broader shift from transmissive instruction toward constructivist approaches (Maňák & Švec, 2003; Zormanová, 2012). The reform discourse is explicitly linked to the development of competences needed for an "active civic, professional and personal life in a changing world" (MŠMT, 2023, p. 5, author's translation).

In Czech ITE, this orientation is expressed most visibly in the Competence Framework, which delineates 18 key competences across six domains for teacher education graduates, beginning teachers, and experienced teachers (MŠMT, 2023; Labischová & Hubálek, 2025). Yet questions remain about how these competences are prioritised, how they relate to broader civic and ethical aims, and whether they sufficiently capture the relational and embodied dimensions of teaching. Concerns also persist regarding the balance between professional and transversal competences and between institutional expectations and the lived realities of beginning teachers (Berková & Holečková, 2022).

Against this background, this article offers a conceptual interpretation of selected Czech ITE reform texts published between 2020 and 2025. It combines purposeful theory synthesis with a purposive corpus of policy and curriculum documents to examine how competence is framed in current reform discourse. The analysis is guided by a dialogic and embodied lens informed by Buber's distinction between I–Thou and I–It and by Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment. In this article, a dialogic lens refers to an analytical focus on mutuality, ethical address, and

reciprocity in teacher–student relations. An embodied lens refers to attention to teaching as a lived and situated practice in which voice, gesture, spatial arrangement, and bodily presence shape pedagogical meaning. These perspectives are used here as sensitising interpretive categories for reading policy texts.

The article makes two contributions. First, it offers a conceptual clarification of competence discourse in contemporary Czech ITE reform. Second, it identifies implications for the design of civic and social science teacher education across coursework, practicum, and induction, including the challenge of how relational and embodied competences can be cultivated and assessed without reducing them to procedural checklists.

Accordingly, the article addresses the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. How is the transmissive-to-constructivist shift reflected in Czech competence frameworks and in selected international civic-education curriculum reference points?

RQ2. How do Buber's dialogic concepts and Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment illuminate the teacher–student relationship and classroom interaction implied by these frameworks?

RQ3. What practical implications follow for the design of teacher-preparation curricula?

Research Design

This article adopts a conceptual and interpretive research design, drawing on purposeful theory synthesis (Jaakkola, 2020). Following Jaakkola (2020), purposeful theory synthesis is understood here as a form of conceptual inquiry that selectively integrates theory and relevant literature in order to clarify a conceptual problem, structure a fragmented field, and derive implications, rather than to test hypotheses empirically. In this study, the approach is used to clarify how competence is framed in recent Czech ITE reform and to develop implications for civic and social science teacher education through dialogic and embodied perspectives.

In the first step, we defined selection criteria for policy and curriculum documents as well as for supporting scholarship. Document selection was guided by: (a) publication date (the Czech reform cycle 2020–2025), (b) relevance and influence on curricular and teacher-education transformations, (c) institutional status (national documents and selected materials used for international reference points), and (d) relevance to civic and social science education.

Consistent with theory-synthesis designs (Jaakkola, 2020), the study does not aim to provide exhaustive coverage or a formal coding of documents. Rather, it seeks to delineate the conceptual domain of competence-based ITE reform and to structure a fragmented field through a clearly specified theoretical lens grounded in dialogic and embodied approaches.

Document Corpus

The document corpus consists of five Czech policy and curriculum texts from the 2020–2025 reform cycle. Documents were selected for their national status, recency, and direct relevance to teacher competence frameworks and civic education. The corpus includes:

- MŠMT. (2020). *Strategie vzdělávací politiky České republiky do roku 2030+* [Education policy strategy of the Czech Republic until 2030+].
- MŠMT. (2023). *Kompetenční rámec absolventa a absolventky učitelství* [Competency framework for teacher-education graduates].
- MŠMT. (2024). *Revize rámcového vzdělávacího programu pro základní vzdělávání – hlavní směry revize* [Key directions of the revision of the Framework Educational Programme for Primary Education].
- MŠMT. (2025). *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání* [Framework educational programme for primary education].
- NPI. (2025). *Metodická podpora k vzdělávací oblasti Člověk a společnost – Výchova k občanství* [Methodological support for the educational area Human and Society – Civic education].

To articulate the dialogic and embodied lens used in the analysis, we also draw on two foundational philosophical works, which are subsequently extended through relevant research literature:

- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2013). *Fenomenologie vnímání* [Phenomenology of perception]. (Original work published 1945)
- Buber, M. (2016). *Já a Ty* [I and Thou]. (Original work published 1923)

Analytical Procedure

This study purposively drew on peer-reviewed scholarship to situate the Czech case within international debates on the constructivist shift in ITE, competence frameworks, dialogic teaching, and embodiment. These international references serve as contextual and interpretive reference points rather than as co-equal objects of analysis. The document corpus was read interpretively, with attention to: (a) how competence is framed, (b) what forms of teacher–student relationship and classroom interaction are implied, and (c) where implementation tensions are likely to emerge. The analysis interpreted the resulting themes through dialogic and embodied perspectives and translated into implications for programme design across coursework, practicum, and induction in civic/social science teacher education.

From Transmission to Constructivism in Czech Competence Frameworks

Within contemporary educational discourse, two broad approaches to teaching are often contrasted: the transmissive and the constructivist. The transmissive approach positions the teacher as the primary bearer of knowledge and emphasises sequential delivery, reproduction, and the efficient introduction of subject matter (Kalhous & Obst, 2009; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). By contrast, constructivist approaches understand learning as an active process in which students build meaning on the

basis of prior knowledge, while the teacher guides inquiry, reflection, and conceptual change (von Glasersfeld, 1995; Zormanová, 2012). This distinction is analytically useful for the present article because recent Czech curricular and competence reforms increasingly align with constructivist assumptions about teaching, learning, and teacher professionalism.

The transmissive approach, often described as traditional or teacher-centred, positions the teacher as the main source of information and authority in the classroom. Content is delivered sequentially, often through frontal instruction, with the expectation that learners will reproduce and retain it as accurately as possible (Kalhous & Obst, 2009; Maňák & Švec, 2003; Zormanová, 2012). By contrast, the constructivist approach assumes that learners do not enter education as blank slates; rather, they bring prior knowledge, experience, and interpretive frameworks that shape how new information is understood (von Glasersfeld, 1995).

In constructivist teaching, the teacher acts less as a transmitter of ready-made knowledge and more as a guide who helps learners work with existing understandings, identify misconceptions, and develop new interpretations through inquiry and reflection (Shapiro, 1994; Bertrand, 1998). Prior and new knowledge are compared and restructured, with emphasis on learner activation, critical thinking, and reflection (Zormanová, 2012). Typical methods include group work, individual work, discussion, and other forms of active learning (Maňák & Švec, 2003). In this respect, the broader reform agenda also supports a more learner-centred orientation. Strategy 2030+ places "a greater emphasis on the individualisation of education in order to develop the potential of each individual" (MŠMT, 2020, p. 8). In this sense, the teacher's role is not only instructional but also relational, as it involves knowing pupils, responding to their needs, and modelling democratic conduct in and beyond the classroom (Kasper & Kasperová, 2025).

On this basis, Table 1 summarises the main differences between transmissive and constructivist approaches and provides a framework for interpreting recent developments in Czech competence-based teacher education.

Table 1

Comparison of the Transmissive and Constructivist Approaches

Dimension	Transmissive Approach	Constructivist Approach
Bearer of information	The teacher as the main source of information and the authority of knowledge.	The student as an active maker of meaning. The teacher as the compass and guide of education.
Teacher-student relationship	Asymmetry of the relationship. The teacher delivers information and the student receives it.	Partnership relationship. Joint creation of instruction where the teacher moderates and facilitates the curriculum.
Information transfer	One-way transmission and exposition of content in sequential steps.	Two-way interaction, discovery, reflection, and work with preconceptions.
Teaching methods	Predominance of frontal exposition, demonstration, guided practice, drill.	Problem-solving instruction, project and cooperative learning, discussion, case studies, portfolio creation, flipped classroom.

Dimension	Transmissive Approach	Constructivist Approach
Organisational forms	Predominantly whole-class work with minimal differences in pace.	Group and individual work conditioned by the specifics of groups and individuals.
Student activity	Predominantly receptive listening, notetaking, reproduction, etc.	The student as an active constructor of knowledge through inquiry, hypothesis testing, collaboration, and reflection.
Main aim of learning	Memorisation and reproduction of facts, procedures, and presented information.	Deep understanding where the student can critically reflect on attained knowledge and information, express connections, and place knowledge in a cross-cutting context.
Assessment	Summative and normative, with emphasis on performance and positive test results.	Formative and criterion-referenced, with emphasis on self-assessment, reflection on work and activity, and peer feedback.
Work with error	Error perceived as a deviation from the norm that must be minimised.	Error perceived as a source of learning that must be analysed preferably with the teacher or with a peer and then corrected.
Risks of the approach	Student passivity during instruction. Illusion of mastered knowledge on the part of the student. Low activation.	Greater time demands on teacher preparation and on student work. Complex and demanding management of instruction.
Strengths	Clarity, efficiency when introducing foundations, suitability for large groups, usefulness for beginning teachers.	Development of critical thinking, creativity, independence, collaboration.

The Czech reform context can be understood as reflecting this broader shift toward constructivist and competence-based approaches. Across recent reform documents, the teacher is increasingly framed not merely as a transmitter of curriculum but as a guide, partner, and reflective professional who responds to student diversity and supports active learning. This shift also implies greater emphasis on dialogic relationships, formative support, and the co-construction of educational meaning.

In summary, the transmissive approach centres on one-way transfer from teacher to learners and locates knowledge primarily in the teacher, the subject matter, or the system. Although this model has certain strengths, especially in the structured introduction of foundational knowledge, current Czech curricular reform signals a move away from it toward more constructivist assumptions. Reform texts also connect curricular change with the learning environment, calling for the creation of educational environments that are "safe, fair, stimulating and sufficiently challenging for all" (MŠMT, 2020, p. 8). Within this orientation, teaching is expected to create conditions in which learners actively interpret, connect, and apply knowledge rather than merely reproduce it.

From a constructivist perspective, deeper understanding emerges through interaction between teacher guidance and student meaning-making. When students' perspectives are systematically elicited and reflected upon, they can provide important formative feedback for both teacher and learner. The teacher builds on

learners' preconceptions, creates space for reflection, and supports further intellectual and personal development (Cocca et al., 2025). Learners do not construct new understanding in isolation; rather, this process is shaped by pedagogical guidance, reflective practice, and, where appropriate, constructive peer interaction. In this sense, the teacher acts as a guide who helps learners orient themselves within educational reality and participate in it more fully.

The Current Curricular Reform and Trajectory of Civic Education in the Czech Republic and International Experience

The ongoing curricular reform represents one of the most significant steps in the Czech education system since the introduction of the Framework Educational Programmes more than two decades ago. It responds to profound societal transformations linked to digitalisation, globalisation, and shifting value orientations among the younger generation (MŠMT, 2024). Particular attention is devoted to civic education, which in a democratic society plays a vital role in shaping active, informed, and responsible citizens (MŠMT, 2025). This broader reform direction is already explicit in Strategy 2030+, whose first strategic objective is to "focus education more on the acquisition of competences needed for an active civic, professional and personal life" (MŠMT, 2020, p. 16).

The reform aims to strengthen a competence- and literacy-based conception of teaching, replacing the previous emphasis on factual knowledge (MŠMT, 2020). Within the educational area "Man and Society," new emphasis is placed on the development of civic, media, digital, and financial literacies. The reform underscores the need for active learning, critical thinking, empathy, and collaborative ability. A key starting point is the connection of school with the community and with the lived realities of pupils (NPI, 2025).

In the revised conception, civic education is oriented toward cultivating democratic culture through experiential learning, project work, and pupil participation. A fundamental principle is learning through citizenship: pupils are to learn civic responsibility not only by studying theory but also through their own experience with decision-making, discussion, and participation in the public life of the school or municipality (Šeďová et al., 2012). This conception presupposes activating pedagogies, formative assessment, and linkage with the local community, which is consistent with international recommendations for civic education. In comparison with foreign examples, reform trends in the Czech Republic mirror several key elements found in the Nordic and Baltic countries as well as the United Kingdom (cf. Bîrzéa, 2005; UNESCO, 2015).

Finland has long advanced a competence-based approach and a high degree of school autonomy. Its national curriculum has been revised and updated in recent years with an emphasis on teacher professionalism and integrated media and ethics education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2024).

Estonia updated its national curriculum with implementation in 2024, placing stress on digital competences and aligning the curriculum with the national strategy

Estonia 2035. Estonia's reform efforts are documented in official texts and Eurydice overviews (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, 2024).

Scotland's approach ("Curriculum for Excellence") develops the concept of the responsible citizen as one of the core aims of education, which corresponds to the new focus of the Scottish reform of civic education through the values of democracy, equality, and sustainability (Scottish Government, 2011).

From an implementation perspective, several decisive factors are repeatedly highlighted by international experience: systematic support for teachers (pre-service preparation and continuing professional development), sufficient time and material resources for piloting, clear and usable tools for competence assessment, and the creation of communities of practice among schools (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2024). Without these elements, reforms risk remaining formal gestures without real impact on teaching and on pupils' competences. The quality of the teaching profession thus emerges as a key success factor, namely pre-service preparation, mentoring, and the sharing of good practice. In this area, Czech schools have considerable room for further development. The reform simultaneously raises the question of how to assess pupil performance. Formative assessment and pupil self-assessment are tools that can significantly contribute to the development of civic and social competences. These approaches foster pupil autonomy, responsibility, and reflection on the learning process.

The current curricular reform of civic education represents a major opportunity to transform Czech schooling toward greater openness, democratization, and the development of civic skills. Its success, however, will depend not only on the quality of the curriculum itself but above all on the manner of its implementation, on support for teachers, and on systematic evaluation of the reform's effects.

Dialogic Relationships in Teacher Education (Buber)

This section focuses on the relationship between educator and learner and emphasises the preparation of the learner who, within formal education and over time, becomes an educator and teacher. We build on the existentialist philosophy of Martin Buber, which gives this relationship precise theoretical anchoring.

Buber's theory distinguishes two types of relations, *Ich–Du* (I–Thou) and *Ich–Es* (I–It), which can be applied to the teacher and pupil relationship. In the context of current curricular reality, and with reference to the preceding text, we attend to the transformation of the educational process from a transmissive to a constructivist mode, which corresponds to a shift from *Ich–Es* to *Ich–Du* (Buber, 1923/2016). Read in relation to the Czech competence framework, this distinction helps clarify whether teaching competence is understood primarily as technical performance or as the capacity to sustain dialogic, respectful, and ethically responsive relationships in educational practice. This relational orientation is explicit in the Competence Framework, which states that the future teacher "communicates with pupils in an open and partnership-oriented way," "offers each pupil dialogue and cooperation," and "respects their self-concept and need for autonomy" (MŠMT, 2023, p. 68, author's translation).

As the centre of education shifts, the relational focus shifts with it. Positive interactions during crises further foreground the *Ich–Du* relation in ITE: attention to voice, ethical address, and co-presence cultivates the relational climate and diminishes *Ich–Es* tendencies (Slaná Reissmannová, 2021).

The *Ich–Du* relation is grounded in mutuality, present openness, authenticity, and dialogue, which support the growth of both learner and educator (Guilherme & Morgan, 2009). This relationship rests on equality and mutual respect rather than hierarchy. Buber (1923/2016) also notes that *Ich–Du* is not confined to human relations; it may also pertain to nature, to God, or to knowledge.

By contrast, the *Ich–Es* relation is characterised by alienation: one actor perceives the other as an object or as a tool for the attainment of an aim. Equal dialogue is absent and the relation becomes dehumanised (Guilherme & Morgan, 2009). Such as in the transmissive model, the student/pupil is seen as a passive recipient, while the teacher is the authority who passes on knowledge (Bradshaw, 2017).

From the student's/pupil's perspective, *Ich–Es* may also be interpreted as viewing the teacher as an instrument for individual goals such as grades or a degree. Mutual objectification arises and the authenticity of the relation is lost (Morgan & Guilherme, 2012). Buber (1923/2016) does not employ the term *Es–Es* for a mutual objectifying stance, yet he warns against reducing the relation to a purely utilitarian interaction.

In pedagogical contexts, the relationship should be based on mutual dialogue, respect, and equality. Furthermore, collective dialogic decision-making within groups with diverse preferences may reduce an *Ich–Es* stance and affirm the plurality of meaning-making observed in current higher-education samples.

If both actors are able to perceive the other as an equal being, the principles of competence development formulated in recent educational documents can be realised in practice (cf. Buber, 1923/2016; MŠMT, 2023). As competence demands increase, embodied teacher presence and an *Ich–Du* relational climate become necessary. In parallel, anxiety rises, which makes systematic attention to it indispensable (Králová et al., 2024).

Embodiment and Pedagogical Interaction (Merleau-Ponty)

Similar aspects of the educational relation are emphasised by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who foregrounds embodiment as a key element of educational interaction. When such embodied awareness is deliberately cultivated, it may contribute to practical outcomes: improved classroom management, prevention of conflicts and crises, enhanced student motivation, a positive educational climate, and related benefits (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013).

Beyond classroom practice, recent European mapping of physical literacy, understood as a holistic embodied competence construct with existential and phenomenological underpinnings, shows momentum but uneven uptake. Causes include conceptual and linguistic frictions and limited assessment infrastructure. This comparison is relevant for the Czech case because it shows that embodied dimensions of competence are not difficult only in national reform discourse; they

also pose wider challenges of conceptualisation, implementation, and assessment across European teacher-education contexts (Carl et al., 2023).

Besides awareness of one's own body, awareness of the corporeality of the other also matters, because it enables meaningful dialogue (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013; He & Ejgil, 2017). The teacher communicates not only content but also posture, voice, and gesture; the student reacts actively. The relation is chiasmatic: meaning is co-created within it, and both actors are transformed through it (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2004).

On the basis of the foregoing, we regard attention to embodiment in educational spaces as crucial. We observe how the student who becomes a teacher perceives the transformation of educational reality and the relationships within it. We consider the following dimensions:

1. corporeality (body) in space, where the teacher communicates through nonverbal means, for example, gesture, facial expression, proxemics, kinesics, haptics, posture;
2. temporality (time) in instruction, which has a given rhythm, continuity, and expectations that follow conception and structure;
3. relationality (others), in which a climate of trust or of tension arises;
4. spatiality (external world) in the arrangement of the classroom and the participation shaped by the seating plan (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2004, 1945/2013; Sohn et al., 2017).

Although Buber and Merleau-Ponty proceed from different philosophical traditions, existentialism and phenomenology, their approaches overlap in pedagogical contexts. Table 2 presents their shared premises.

Table 2

Dialogic and Embodied Dimensions in the Teacher-Student Relationship

Aspect	**Martin Buber**	**Maurice Merleau-Ponty**	**Intersection of the Authors**
Fundamental premise of the relation	An existential decision to perceive the other as Thou.	Perceiving the other as bodily presence in a pre-linguistic phase.	Rejection of abstraction and emphasis on concrete encounters in the world.
Approach to the Other	The other as a subjective being equal in value.	The other as an embodied subject, at once perceiving and perceived.	The other is an active participant in the world rather than a passive object.
Dynamics of interaction	Dialogue, openness, presence, relational tension.	Bodily interaction, dialogical meaning, situatedness.	A reciprocal relation co-created by both actors.
Inauthentic dehumanised relation	Ich–Es (I–It) where the other becomes a means or a tool.	Reduction of subjectivity, body treated as instrument, relation as mere transfer.	A shared critique of depersonalisation, isolation, and reductionism in relations.
Apex of the relation	Ich–Du (I–Thou) entry into a reciprocal present	Chiasm a bodily lived reciprocal co-presence	The relation is transformative and enables new

Aspect	Martin Buber	Maurice Merleau-Ponty	Intersection of the Authors
	responsible and transcendent relation touch of eternity.	and mutual transformation.	understanding of self and other.
Pedagogical implication	Teacher and pupil in a living dialogue and responsibility toward the pupil as Thou.	Learning as a bodily grounded experience with transformation of both participants.	The pedagogical relationship is not one-way. It is a space of co-existence growth and mutual sensitivity.

Source: Adapted from Buber (1923/2016) and Merleau-Ponty (1964/2004)

The table illustrates that the key to a high-quality pedagogical relation is the capacity to perceive the other as a whole person. Viewed in this way, the Czech competence framework can be read not only as a list of expected skills, but also as an implicit account of what kind of pedagogical relationship teacher education is meant to cultivate. We underscore the importance of building dialogic relationships in all phases of education within the curricular reality of the Czech Republic. The most significant contribution of the comparison lies in viewing participants as co-creators of educational reality. Teacher and pupil co-create the structure of instruction, and their relationship becomes a space for mutual growth and development.

Across the parts of Table 2 it is evident that the authors share common starting points presented in the column "Intersection of the authors." In line with the earlier discussion of the constructivist approach, we likewise presuppose the uniqueness of the human being, that is, the pupil, within the educational system. Both authors agree that an abstract curriculum, conceived as something passively received by pupils rather than actively lived and co-created, is unacceptable for education. Emphasis is placed on an active, embodied, bilateral reality in which pupils and the teacher alike realise themselves.

This article also discusses the depersonalised and dehumanised relation in which the pupil perceives the teacher instrumentally, as a means of attaining a good grade, while the teacher perceives the pupil as an object for attaining higher evaluation, greater status, respect, or a good reputation. Such a relation is purely instrumental and therefore stands in direct opposition to the theories presented. We regard it as essential that the curriculum and the educational institution function as a space of acceptance and discovery, grounded in respect, relational reciprocity, and mindful awareness of the other in space and time. The approaches of the cited authors provide guidance in this respect.

Discussion

Our analysis indicates a sustained and system-level shift in Czech teacher preparation from transmissive to constructivist orientations, reflected in strategic documents and competence frameworks issued over the 2020–2025 reform cycle (RQ1). Read against the backdrop of current value conflicts and epistemic uncertainty, this shift is not merely pedagogical; it is a policy attempt to redefine what counts as civic professionalism in schooling. These policy moves consistently

elevate relational, reflective, and ethically grounded competences alongside domain knowledge and didactics.

Interpreted through dialogic and embodied lenses (RQ2), the frameworks' aspirations become conceptually legible: Buber's I–Thou relation specifies the quality of pedagogical encounter envisaged, and Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment clarifies why presence, gesture, voice, and spatial arrangements matter for learning and co-creation. Together, these lenses articulate the shift from "teacher as sole transmitter" toward "teacher as relational, ethical, and embodied facilitator."

Finally, implications for curriculum design (RQ3) concern aligning programme outcomes with relational and embodied competences; making dialogic and reflective practices structurally visible in coursework and practicum; and ensuring assessment systems recognise growth in these areas rather than privileging only summative performance. The analysis also highlights areas of progress, persistent tensions, and practical priorities for further development.

Areas of Progress and Persistent Tensions

- **Policy and system level.** The frameworks and revised curricular documents signal clear intent and provide common language for competence development. Yet early professional learning remains fragmented, and alignment between graduate self-perceptions and employer expectations is uneven. Moreover, fields differ in uptake and assessment readiness, i.e. resistance of simple measurement in embodied or relational constructs.
- **Programme design (ITE).** Many programmes now emphasise critical thinking and misinformation literacy, but media education remains inconsistent, with gaps around media economics and agenda-setting. Similarly, dialogic and embodied pedagogies are present but often underspecified at the level of concrete learning designs, assessment rubrics, and mentoring routines. These gaps can create dehumanising "I–It" dynamics (e.g., instrumental views of grades or evaluation) precisely where relational quality is meant to be central. Heightened competency expectations can also raise anxiety among pre-service teachers without commensurate supports.
- **Classroom practice.** At the practicum and early-career stages, time for high-activation lesson design and reflective follow-up is scarce; access to spaces and equipment that enable dialogic and embodied work (e.g., flexible seating, audio-visual tools, outdoor or studio environments) is uneven; and channels for student voice in co-shaping the enacted curriculum are not consistently established. These constraints risk reverting to transmissive routines even when programme rhetoric favours constructivism.

These frictions mirror five recurring "growth blockers" observed in Czech induction: perceived pre-service mastery (overconfidence), lack of understanding (of why methods matter), limiting beliefs, low agency, and external barriers (Vlček & Sedová, 2025). Addressing them requires coordinated action across policy, programmes, and schools.

Implications for Programme Design in Civic/Social Science Teacher Education

The analysis suggests several implications for programme design in civic and social science teacher education. At the level of system architecture, a more diagnostic approach is warranted. Programmes should use qualitative discussions between mentors and trainees to identify specific aggravating mechanisms, such as misunderstandings, limiting beliefs, low agency, or external constraints. Each mechanism can then be paired with a tailored intervention and tracked within continuous improvement cycles (Vlček & Sedová, 2025). In the same vein, establishing an advisory board composed of school leaders, mentor teachers, NGOs, municipalities, and employers may help ensure that curricula are co-shaped with regard to societal needs and the competences expected in graduate profiles.

Within ITE delivery, the use of a validated learner-perception tool at the start and end of practicum to capture relational and embodied competences can strengthen curriculum quality, provided that the results are discussed in structured dialogic debriefs (Cocca et al., 2025; Buber, 1923/2016). Alignment of outcomes, learning tasks, and assessments should be made explicit through course-embedded micro-teaching with self-reflection protocols aligned to the framework, together with deliberate planning for gesture, embodied presence, and the use of space (Bertrand, 1998; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013).

Another priority is to close persistent gaps in media literacy, alongside critical thinking and misinformation, through targeted gap identification, curricular adjustment, and reflection (Mackenzie, 2023). As digital development accelerates, adopting a metaliteracy stance is essential. Courses for pre-service teachers should cultivate civic-minded, open, and collaborative orientations that align with practicum expectations and current societal contexts (Mackey & Aird, 2021). To protect the relational climate while raising expectations, programmes should combine coaching, peer-feedback cycles, micro-teaching for crisis communication, low-stakes rehearsal, and video-based reflection. These routines can build competence and reduce performance anxiety (Vlček & Sedová, 2025; Králová et al., 2024; Slaná Reissmannová, 2021).

More broadly, these implications point to the need for systemic support for the development of high-quality pedagogical competencies across teacher education. Social change makes such a transformation unavoidable. The growth of pedagogical skills, as a pillar of complex pedagogical competence, must be supported not only in higher education but also from the earliest years of schooling (Flekač, 2024).

Conclusion

This paper analysed how the current Czech ITE defines teacher professionalism and what this requires from programmes and assessment. Recent competence frameworks no longer cast the teacher mainly as a transmitter of curriculum, but as a reflective, relational, ethically accountable and embodied professional. Read through Buber's I–Thou relation and Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment, this framing treats teaching as an encounter between subjects, mediated by voice, gesture, attention and ethical responsibility rather than one-way delivery.

Yet we find a persistent implementation gap. While the policy documents clearly foreground dialogic, embodied, and civic competences, they leave open important questions about how these competences are operationalised, supported, and assessed in practice.

Three programme priorities follow. First, interactional work must become visible and coachable through structured observation, guided video analysis and supported microteaching in psychologically safe feedback conditions. Second, competence descriptors in accreditation, syllabi, practicum and induction must align with what student teachers actually plan, rehearse, enact and are graded on; otherwise relational and embodied competences remain rhetorically central but procedurally optional. Third, civic and media competences should be treated as part of professional identity and ethical responsibility in the classroom, not as detachable add-ons.

Two lines of research are particularly urgent. Methodologically, the field needs valid, developmentally sensitive indicators of dialogic and embodied competence that allow formative feedback without reducing teaching to a checklist. Longitudinally, graduates should be followed into the early career years to see which competences are sustained, adapted or abandoned under real school conditions. Overall, the Czech trajectory points toward a constructivist, dialogic and embodied model of professionalism; its stability will depend on whether programmes and schools can assess it fairly and support beginning teachers to inhabit it in everyday practice.

As global value contests intensify, the credibility of competence-based reforms will depend less on declarative frameworks and more on whether teacher education can sustain dialogic, embodied, and ethically grounded practice in everyday school life.

Pavel Flekač *is a PhD candidate at Palacký University Olomouc. His research focuses on the development of pedagogical and professional competences in institutional and national curricula, particularly in initial teacher education. He also examines international curricula in the context of didactics and educational development, with a view to how they respond to societal change. ORCID: 0009-0001-9663-3878*

Antonín Staněk *is an Associate Professor at Palacký University Olomouc. Trained in pedagogy, his research focuses on the didactics of social sciences, civic education and the European dimension in education at the level of basic and secondary schooling. He also studies educational paradoxes in social science teaching, curriculum frameworks and the role of social sciences in fostering citizenship education. ORCID: 0000-0002-7643-7183*

References

Berková, K., & Holečková, L. (2022). Attitudes of employers and university students to the requirements for accountants in the Czech Republic. *Journal on Efficiency and Responsibility in Education and Science, 15*(1), 53–62. https://doi.org/10.7160/eriesj.2022.150106

Bertrand, Y. (1998). *Soudobé teorie vzdělávání*. Portál.

Bîrzéa, C. (2005). *All-European study on education for democratic citizenship policies*. Council of Europe Publishing. https://rm.coe.int/16802f7040

Bradshaw, A. (2017). *Critical pedagogy and educational technology*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315681689-2

Buber, M. (2016). *Já a Ty* (J. Navrátil & P. Babka, Trans.; 4th rev. & expanded ed.). Portál. (Original work published 1923)

Carl, J., Bryant, A. S., Edwards, L. C., Bartle, G., Birch, J. E., Christodoulides, E., Emeljanovas, A., Fröberg, A., Gandrieau, J., Gilic, B., van Hilvoorde, I., Holler, P., Iconomescu, T. M., Jaunig, J., Laudańska-Krzemińska, I., Lundvall, S., De Martelaer, K., Martins, J., Mieziene, B., … Elsborg, P. (2023). Physical literacy in Europe: The current state of implementation in research, practice, and policy. *Journal of Exercise Science & Fitness, 21*(1), 165–176. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesf.2022.12.003

Cocca, A., Ciesralová, M., Cocca, M., Greier, K., Uchytil, J., & Ruedl, G. (2025). Validation of the teachers' personal and professional skills questionnaire in the Czech physical education setting. *Journal on Efficiency and Responsibility in Education and Science, 18*(1), 58–63. https://www.eriesjournal.com/index.php/eries/article/view/1751

Estonian Ministry of Education and Research. (2024). *National curriculum for basic schools (consolidated text).* Riigi Teataja. https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/529042024002/consolide/

Finnish National Agency for Education. (2024). *National core curriculum for basic education 2016 (updated 2024).* https://www.oph.fi/en/education-and-qualifications/national-core-curriculum-primary-and-lower-secondary-basic-education/

Flekač, P. (2024). From basic skills to pedagogical competence: Is the terminology of competence clearly defined? *Civilia, 15*(1), 4–15. https://doi.org/10.5507/civ.2025.002

Guilherme, A., & Morgan, W. J. (2009). Martin Buber's philosophy of education and its implications for adult non-formal education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 28*(5), 565–581. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370903189989

He, J., & Ejgil, J. (2017). Habitual learning as being-in-the-world: On Merleau-Ponty and the experience of learning. *Frontiers of Philosophy in China, 12*(2), 306–321. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44630949

Jaakkola, E. (2020). Designing conceptual articles: Four approaches. *AMS Review, 10*, 18–26. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13162-020-00161-0

Kalhous, Z., & Obst, O. (2009). *Školní didaktika*. Portál. https://ndk.cz/uuid/uuid:3ef41f10-29be-11e6-a7c4-005056825209

Kasper, T., & Kasperová, D. (2025). Civic learning in Czech educational debate: Changes of the concept in the 20th century between educational sciences and school practice. *Journal of Social Science Education, 24*(2). https://doi.org/10.11576/jsse-7832

Kráľová, M., Farkačová, L., & Zelendová, E. (2024). Math anxiety, skills, and work-related competencies: A study on Czech university students. *Mathematics Teaching-Research Journal, 15*(6), 20–38. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1417762.pdf

Labischová, D., & Hubálek, T. (2025). Civic and social science learning in the Czech Republic: Current state, challenges and prospects. *Journal of Social Science Education, 24*(1). https://www.jsse.org/index.php/jsse/article/view/7830

Mackenzie, K. (2023). Pre-service training on media education for teachers at Czech universities. *Journal of Media Literacy Education, 15*(3), 66–78. https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2023-15-3-6

Mackey, T. P., & Aird, S. M. (2021). Integrating metaliteracy into the design of a collaborative online international learning (COIL) course in digital storytelling. *Open Praxis, 13*(4), 397–403. https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.13.4.442

Maňák, J., & Švec, V. (2003). *Výukové metody*. Paido.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2004). *Viditelné a neviditelné* (M. Petříček, Trans.; 2nd ed.). OIKOYMENH. (Original work published 1964)

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2013). *Fenomenologie vnímání* (J. Čapek, Trans.). OIKOYMENH. (Original work published 1945)

Morgan, W. J., & Guilherme, A. (2012). I and Thou: The educational lessons of Martin Buber's dialogue with the conflicts of his times. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 44*(9), 979–996. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00681.x

MŠMT. (2020). *Strategie vzdělávací politiky České republiky do roku 2030+.* https://msmt.gov.cz/vzdelavani/skolstvi-v-cr/strategie-2030

MŠMT. (2023). *Kompetenční rámec absolventa a absolventky učitelství.* https://www.msmt.cz/vzdelavani/kompetencni-ramecabsolventa-ucitelstvi

MŠMT. (2024). *Revize rámcového vzdělávacího programu pro základní vzdělávání – hlavní směry revize.* https://revize.rvp.cz/

MŠMT. (2025). *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání.* https://prohlednout.rvp.cz/

National Center on Education and the Economy. (2024). *Building world-class learning systems: Estonia and Finland.* https://ncee.org/building-world-class-learning-systems-estonia-and-finland/

Nezvalová, D. (2003). Pedagogické kompetence, standardy a kvalita v pregraduální přípravě učitele. *Pedagogická orientace, 13*(4).

NPI. (2025). *Metodická podpora k vzdělávací oblasti Člověk a společnost – Výchova k občanství.*

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Scottish Government. (2011). *Curriculum for Excellence: Building the Curriculum 5 – A framework for assessment.* Scottish Government. https://auth.education.gov.scot/curriculum-for-excellence/building-the-curriculum/

Shapiro, B. L. (1994). *What children bring to light*. Teachers College Press.

Slaná Reissmannová, J. (2021). Education in the area of human protection in emergency and crisis situations in the context of health education in the Czech Republic. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal, 11*(4), 109–134. https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.1176

Sohn, B. K., Thomas, S. P., Greenberg, K. H., & Pollio, H. R. (2017). Hearing the voices of students and teachers: A phenomenological approach to educational research. *Qualitative Research in Education, 6*(2), 121–148. https://doi.org/10.17583/qre.2017.2374

Staněk, A. (2024). K problematice pedagogického výzkumu v oborové didaktice společenských věd. *Civilia, 15*(2), 42–49. https://doi.org/10.5507/civ.2025.010

Šeďová, K., Švaříček, R., & Šalamounová, Z. (2012). *Komunikace ve školní třídě*. Portál.

UNESCO. (2015). *Global citizenship education: Topics and learning objectives.* https://doi.org/10.54675/DRHC3544

Vašutová, J. (2004). *Profese učitele v českém vzdělávacím kontextu*. Paido.

Vašutová, J. (2007). *Být učitelem: Co by měl učitel vědět o své profesi* (2nd rev. ed.). Univerzita Karlova, Pedagogická fakulta.

Vlček, J., & Sedová, K. (2025). What hinders professional growth of novice teachers? An analysis of perceived competency development during the first two years of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 165*, 105176. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2025.105176

von Glasersfeld, E. (1995). *Radical constructivism: A way of knowing and learning*. Falmer Press.

Zormanová, L. (2012). *Výukové metody v pedagogice: Tradiční a inovativní metody, transmisivní a konstruktivistické pojetí výuky, klasifikace výukových metod*. Grada.

From North Korean Migrant to "Unification Talent:" Neoliberalism and Future-Making in South Korea

Noël Um-Lo
Teachers College, Columbia University

Visions of Korean unification draw not only on historical imaginaries of ethnic nationalism (Grinker, 1998) but continue to be shaped by South Korea's neoliberal values and aspirations for deeper integration into global market orders (Park, 2015). Despite projections that neoliberalism may be waning (Gerstle, 2022; Vallely, 2024), neoliberal logics continue to organize South Korean state technologies of governance that emphasize self-management. These late capitalist rationalities shape both how North Korean migrants are incorporated into South Korean society and the forms of recognition made available to them. Drawing on human capital theory (HCT), this paper examines how North Korean migrant youth are positioned through neoliberal frameworks of value, productivity, and future-oriented investment. Through interviews with North Korean migrants and analysis of state media and discursive artifacts, this paper argues that South Korean neoliberalism shapes the way state and civil society actors frame North Korean migrants as human capital to be cultivated for the anticipated project of national unification.

Keywords: South Korea, North Korea, unification, human capital theory, neoliberalism, migration

Introduction

Anthropologists of education have long shown that schools function as sites of cultural production, where models of the "educated person" reflect the subjectivities of dominant groups (Levinson and Holland, 1996, p. 24). Education, in this sense, is centrally concerned with the "production of futures" (Varenne, 2011), as pedagogic work reproduces cultural and political orders over time (Bourdieu, 1977). In contexts of migration and displacement, these future-making processes take on additional significance, as educational institutions play a key role in managing migrant incorporation and shaping projects of nation-building (UNHCR, 2017; Anderson, 1991; Green, 2013). Globally, schools increasingly operate as policy instruments for migrant governance through language acquisition, social and emotional learning, vocational training, and the cultivation of "academic and social resilience" (OECD, 2019; UN Migration Agency, 2018). Even in contexts where formal integration into the host state is not a primary objective, schools remain central sites where displaced youth develop a sense of belonging and imagine possible futures (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019).

In South Korea, these dynamics are particularly visible in alternative schools serving North Korean-background youth (*bukan ital cheongsonyeoneul wihan daeanhakgyo*),

© 2026, Um-Lo. CC BY 4.0.

where education is closely tied to the state-making project of unification (*tongil*). Broadly defined, South Korean alternative schools are facilities, corporations, or other organizations that offer a curriculum that meets the different values, abilities, or aptitudes of their students (Lee et al., 2023). These may include youth from vulnerable families, youth with severe disabilities, or youth who left school (Korea Youth Policy Institute, 2025). Alternative schools for North Korean-background students[1]offer specialized instruction and support to address the particular social and emotional needs of migrant youth. These programs often include experiential learning opportunities, career exploration initiatives, seasonal English and reading camps, Korean language classes, financial advising, and a unification education curriculum.

These schools not only provide support for resettlement and integration but are also sites where migrant youth are socialized into the national imaginary of Korean unification. Visions of Korean unification draw on both the myth of an ethnically homogeneous and sovereign kingdom (Grinker, 1998) while being shaped by South Korea's neoliberal values and aspirations for deeper integration into global market orders (Park, 2015). Despite projections that neoliberalism may be waning (Gerstle, 2022; Vallely, 2024), neoliberal logics continue to organize South Korean state technologies of governance that emphasize self-management. These late capitalist rationalities shape both how North Korean migrants are incorporated into South Korean society and the forms of recognition made available to them.

Within this broader context, alternative schools emerge as key sites where state values are enacted. As institutions that are often the first sustained points of contact for North Korean-background migrant youth,[2] alternative schools play a central role in mediating incorporation. Arriving with few social ties, youth come to rely heavily on relationships forged with teachers and peers in these settings, which play a significant role in shaping their resettlement experiences, sense of social belonging, and imagined futures (Yoon, 2018).

Several scholars have conducted qualitative and quantitative research in South Korean alternative schools for North Korean youth on student satisfaction (Jones, Whitehead and Bang, 2023), multicultural education (Kim and Kim, 2023), and teacher perceptions of North Korean students (Kim and Yoo, 2018). While these studies have provided important insights into student well-being through clinical psychology or social work frameworks, they have tended not to foreground broader questions about how schooling is entangled with national futures, such as unification. Similarly, scholarship on Korean unification has largely focused on national identity and public opinion (Grinker, 1998), political economy (McKibbin et

[1] I use the term "North Korean-background students" to refer broadly to young people with a parent born in North Korea, including both North Korean-born and Chinese-born children. English-language scholars have yet to reach a consensus on how to refer to the North Korean-background community, partly due to South Korea's own constantly shifting set of terms to describe this population.

[2] Most migration trajectories out of North Korea occur through China, where migrants may live for years or even decades as undocumented migrants under constant threat of arrest and repatriation. Many make multiple escape attempts before reaching commonly reaching countries such as Mongolia or Thailand, where they can seek asylum before resettlement in South Korea (Um-Lo and Jang, 2025).

al., 2017), ethnic nationalism (Shin, 2006), and capitalist integration (Park, 2015), with comparatively less attention paid to how North Korean migrants are framed as the actors through which unification imaginaries are enacted. As a result, the relationship between alternative schools as sites for North Korean migrant integration and South Korea's unification agenda remains underexplored.

However, this relationship warrants scholarly attention, given that all government-funded and accredited alternative schools for North Korean youth explicitly articulate some vision of "preparing for Korean unification" through the education of North Korean youth. One school, for example, defines its mission as "training North Korean defectors[3] to become workers for the restoration of free, democratic unification" and enabling "North Korean youth to advance and prepare for the unification of people." This study combines discourse analysis of state media and interviews with North Korean-background migrants to ask: *To what extent are North Korean-background migrants incorporated into the South Korean state project of unification, and how do these forms of recognition and governance reflect neoliberal logics?*

In the sections that follow, I introduce the conceptual framework of the study, the historical background, and an overview of my methods. I then analyze discursive artifacts, including presidential speeches, state labels, campaign slogans, and school visions and mottos, to show how North Korean migrants are framed in political terms as contributors to an anticipated state future of unification. Next, I examine how neoliberalism is entrenched in the discourse used to describe North Korean-background populations as "talents," "leaders," and forms of human capital for a future unified Korea. This article argues that South Korean neoliberal values shape the way North Korean migrants are framed by state and civil society actors as resources to be cultivated for the future state project of unification.

Conceptual Framework

This paper uses human capital theory (HCT) to analyze the ways alternative schools position North Korean migrant youth through neoliberal logics of value, productivity, and future-oriented investments. Human capital theorists conceptualize individuals as capital goods, managed not through direct exploitation but through the accumulation of knowledge and skills deemed economically valuable (Schultz 1961). Within this framework, education is understood as an investment in human capacities that can yield returns in the form of increased productivity and earnings.

Scholars have also critiqued human capital approaches to education, arguing they privilege economic productivity while obscuring structural inequalities. As Tan (2014, p. 430) argues, HCT is often used as an instrument to "deflect attention from the need for economic and social reform" while providing a "pretext for… justify[ing] education and social policies." Similarly, Klees (2016) critiques the

[3]According to South Korea's North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act of 1997, a "defector" is defined as a person born in the DPRK who did not acquire another foreign nationality prior to migrating to South Korea (Act No. 5259, 1997).

dominance of HCT in international and comparative education, noting its role in reducing education to measurable outputs such as attainment, skills, and market labor outcomes. These critiques highlight how HCT operates not only as an economic theory but also as a governing rationality that shapes how educational subjects are imagined and valued.

Building on these insights, this paper treats HCT as a lens for examining how North Korean migrant youth are constructed as future economic assets within South Korea's imagined future unified state. I analyze how discourses of "talent" and "leadership" position these youth as investments for a future unified Korea, framing their assimilation into a capitalist, neoliberal society as a civic duty and emphasizing their potential future utility in easing social integration of the two states. This framing illuminates how alternative schools participate in broader neoliberal projects that link education to national development and future state-building.

Historical Background

In 1945, at the end of WWII, the U.S. divided the previously Japanese colony of Korea into two occupation zones at the 38th parallel, which separated the Korean peninsula into a Soviet-occupied North and a U.S.-occupied South (McCune, 1947; Cumings, 1997). After a 1950 attack by the North Korean People's Army (KPA) on Seoul, the Korean War began, and though an armistice was declared in 1953, the two Koreas technically remain at war (Cumings, 2011). It is within this historical context that scholars have largely characterized unification (*tongil*) as the completion of the Korean War and the end of national division (Cha, 2012).

In 1969, the ROK established the Ministry of Unification (then, referred to as the National Unification Board), a state bureau dedicated solely to the preparation for unification. In the first decade, the state agency was tasked with conducting research, centralizing policy, facilitating inter-Korean dialogue, cooperation, and exchange with North Korea, all of which varied widely depending on the party in power (Ministry of Unification, 2025). At that time, defections were exceedingly rare (Um-Lo and Jang, 2025). After the fortification of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in 1954, migration between North and South all but ceased. Fewer than a thousand North Koreans defected between 1953 and 1998. In 1998, however, with a growing wave of survival migration following the famine (1995-1998), the work of the Ministry turned toward management of North Korean migrants, distributing aid, facilitating social services, and improving public perception of North Koreans. Since then, migrant governance and unification have been entangled pursuits. As referenced in a statement from the Ministry of Unification in 2001: "the settlement…of defectors from North Korea would be the touchstone that shows the government's will and capability for unification of Korea" (Ministry of Unification 2001, 157). By this logic, defectors' integration into South Korean society is converted into a measurable that the government leverages to demonstrate its readiness and capability for unification.

Methods

Data Collection

This study is part of a broader research project conducted from 2022 to 2025, which included 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork with North Korean-background youth, educators, non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, and community leaders across three alternative schools, two international NGOs, and a Protestant church community in the Seoul metropolitan area. In this project, I combined participant observation, open-ended and semi-structured interviews, narrative inquiry, document and media analysis, and ongoing informal conversations in a methodological design that approached unification as an embodied, relational, and future-oriented project. This paper draws only on a subset of the data collected for the project, focusing primarily on state discourse and media, as well as relevant interviews from the larger study.

From August to November 2024, I concentrated my fieldwork at my primary field site, which I call Saebit School, where I taught a morning elective English conversation class and participated in daily school life by attending classes and spending time with students outside of class. Building on convenience sampling from a virtual phase of fieldwork and snowball sampling through school-based networks, I conducted 27 in-depth life-history and open-ended interviews with North Korean-background youth, primarily in Korean and English, depending on interviewee preference. Of these interviewees, 12 were born in North Korea, and 15 were born in China. I also conducted 11 semi-structured interviews with teachers across the three school sites, four interviews with alternative school principals, and four interviews with NGO workers. All names of the individuals and organizations used in this study are pseudonyms, and identifying details and backgrounds have been altered where necessary to protect interlocutors and safeguard family members who remain in China or North Korea.

In addition to interviews and participant observation, I collected a corpus of educational materials, including school textbooks, Ministry documents, curricular plans, student assignments, student artwork, and promotional materials. This triangulation ensured that insights generated through interviews and participant observation were supported across data sources. Documents, speeches, and media materials were collected through government websites, media databases, and ethnographic encounters, including school ceremonies and public events.

Data Analysis

Throughout the research period, I maintained detailed fieldnotes and produced bi-weekly analytic memos to identify and catalogue recurring themes and guide follow-up questions over time (Lareau, 2011; Birks et. al., 2025). Following participants across multiple settings allowed me to ask episodic questions in addition to the semantic ones posed in formal interviews, and to conduct follow-up interviews over intervals of at least one month. Although teaching one extracurricular class at the school allowed me to develop deeper relationships with the students, I recruited the bulk of my research participants outside of my course.

Furthermore, my class, which was an ungraded elective, only met one hour per week, and I spent an additional 30 hours per week at the school. Thus, my role as a teacher was secondary to my role as a researcher. I co-constructed informed consent with my interlocutors, personal relationships, and valuing them as collaborators in my research process (Shannon, 2007).

All materials were imported into NVivo for iterative coding. I first conducted open coding across interviews, fieldnotes, and institutional materials to open up the inquiry, stimulate thinking, and sort and order the data (Bazeley, 2013). I developed descriptive codes, attended to patterns of repetition across texts, and analyzed speakers' deictic and evaluative language in relation to their participant status and media type (Wortham and Reyes, 2015). Throughout the analytic process, I traced recurring idioms, narrative structures, and framings across schools, visual media, news articles, state ceremonies, and interviews. After this period, I organized my initial codebook, identified recurring patterns, and differentiated the descriptive codes from overarching analytic themes (Bazeley, 2013). In further microanalysis of the data, I focused on in vivo codes or emic terms, which emerged specifically in how interlocutors spoke of individual and national futures around unification.

I subjected the data to discourse analysis to interpret discursive artifacts, including speeches, ceremonies, policy memos, media reports, school promotional materials, as well as classroom and interview recordings. I chose this mode of analysis because of its emphasis on the "unexpected patterns and actions that emerge despite sociocultural expectations" (Wortham and Reyes, 2015, p. 180). In transcripts, I paid close attention to reported speech of earlier events, reference to a particular topic, and use of deictics (context-dependent speech such as here, there, I, you) that defined the subject in terms of their social positions through relationships with peers and others (Wortham and Reyes, 2015). With media, I used speech and spectacle events, and presented it back to participants for interpretation as an elicitation method that generated further data and aided in the analytic process (Galman, 2016). By inviting interlocutors into a collaborative analysis and interpretive process, I was able to pay closer attention to how discursive artifacts such as presidential speeches or campaign slogans are used and what they mean in a local context (Wortham and Reyes, 2015; Hull, 2008). Discourse analysis of multiple data forms allowed me to track change across events and account for the emergence of unexpected practices and behaviors.

Time-Making and Future-Making

In 2024, from a stage in a ballroom adorned in gold appliqué in South Korea's presidential Blue House, Yoon Seok Yul was inaugurated on July 14 as a national day for North Korean Defectors. "We are certain that the first North Korean Defector's Day will bring the 'Day of Freedom' and 'Day of Unification' closer," the former president declared to a room of 200 North Korean-background people, settlement support workers, local and state officials, and other unification apparatus[4] workers

[4] I use the term "unification apparatus" to refer to the wide, disaggregated body of South Korean state, quasi-state, non-governmental and international institutions and actors that manage, support, and govern North Korean migrants through "preparing" for unification.

(Ministry of Unification, 2024). At first, it struck me as odd that the creation of a new national day could somehow advance time. How would celebrating "North Korean Defector's Day" tangibly "bring the 'Day of Unification' closer"? Yoon's language suturing North Korean defectors to unification, however, was consistent with an ongoing assumption I had encountered throughout my fieldwork: that to support and educate North Koreans was to inherently prepare for unification, and thus accelerate it.

Perplexed by this assumed connection between humanitarian work and a contested national imaginary, I asked one educator how the two were related. She replied, matter-of-factly: "Well these students, who understand both North and South… They are the best ones who can lead unification in the future" (Interview, October 6, 2023). Similarly, the Vice Principal at Saebit School said in an interview, for North Korean-born students, the school initially did not do much around unification education "because [unification] was an obvious task for them" (Interview, October 24, 2024). Ministry of Unification Vice Minister Kim Sookyung echoed this same sentiment, positioning North Korean-background students as future national leaders at a Saebit School anniversary ceremony. Kim said, "Saebit strives to cultivate humble, honest, and courageous talents who will lead reunification and social integration as unified leaders of the future" (September 27, 2024). South Korean actor and director Cha In-Pyo added later in the ceremony, "Even if we desperately wish for it, unification won't happen tomorrow. And while we can't physically go to North Korea to help our brothers and sisters, there is something we can do now. There are many North Korean defectors right here, trying to settle and integrate into our society… Supporting and embracing them is what we can do today. Taking care of the 100 students at Saebit is like taking care of the 20 million people in North Korea" (September 27, 2024). Though the latter two statements occurred in the formal, performative context of a school ceremony, they reflect how North Korean-background youth are politicized in temporal terms ("*will lead* reunification," "leaders of the *future*," "something we can do *now*"), and how investment in their human capital in the present is framed as preparation for the state project of unification. Over the course of my fieldwork, I came to understand this indexical work – positioning North Korean-background youth as political and temporal agents whose labor will be utilized in the future – as a central organizing logic of the unification apparatus.

Though slightly broader, the discourse of state campaigns also advances this association between North Korean migrants and state futures. In 2024, Minister of Unification Kim Young-ho urged widespread public adoption of the Ministry slogan, *talbungmineun meonjeo on tongil* "North Korean Defectors, First to Come of Unification" (Park, 2024). This slogan *meonjo on tongil* is translated literally as "first to come of unification," but sometimes rendered in English as a "unification that has arrived" is commonly used to describe North Korean migrants. Translations of this phrase illustrate how North Korean migrants are positioned as embodied contributors to a state project actively unfolding and already underway. "First to

come," in particular, situates North Korean migrants and their adaptation to South Korean society within a teleological timeline that presumes the inevitability of the "rest" of the North Korean population following.

The idiom emerged alongside related labels used throughout the Ministry's history (1969–), including *tongil seongujadeul* (pioneers of unification), "harbingers of unification" (Lankov 2012), and *seonguja* (spiritual forerunners) (Kim 2023), that cemented the assumed politicization of North Korean defectors as national vanguards. Circulating through speeches, documents, and media [see Figure 1], the phrase *meonjeo on tongil* has acquired, as Das (2004) puts it, "a life in the practices of the community" (p. 234). Over time, the slogan has become both a policy idiom and a social fact, conflating North Koreans with unification. As Hirschkind (2006) notes, the circulation of such discourse aims to secure a "uniform model of moral behavior" (p. 105) — in this case, a particular South Korean vision for unification.

Figure 1. State, media, and civic uses of the phrase *meonjeo on tongil* (unification that is already here) in reference to North Korean migrants.[5]

Yet, in recent years, amid nuclear weapons testing, monument smashing, and other markers of intensifying North Korean hostility, a growing number of South Koreans regard unification as a stymied political project (Lee, 2020). Public perception, then,

[5] Top left: Marketing material from a YouTube series created by NambukHana Foundation that uses the entire phrase "meonjeo on jageun tongil iyagi" – conversation with the small unification to come first. (Source: NambukHana Foundation 2020); Top right: Minister of Unification Kim Young-ho delivering a speech at a state event at the Westin Chosun Seoul Hotel on November 27, 2023, discussing policy and economic activities for North Korean defectors. Source: Yonhap News 2023; Bottom left: Banner reads "First to Come Unification Family" behind Director of Public Administration and Security Bureau Bang Ju-mun, Secretary-General Tae Young-ho, Gyeongbuk Hana Center, Gyeongbuk Police Agency, Gumi City Hall, Gyeongbuk Governor, city and regional council representatives at the Unification Festival on November 16, 2024. Source: Saemul Library Daegu Branch; Bottom right: Still from a news report on the "first to come of unification." Source: Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), November 11, 2023.

stands at odds with state discourse that claims it is "already here." One response to this paradox has been to locate unification in the present lives of North Korean migrants by framing their assimilation into South Korean late capitalist society as evidence that unification is actively underway.

"Ordinary Lives" of North Korean Migrants in South Korea's Neoliberal State

② Social Adaptation Training for North Korean Defectors

Number of Participants (Unit: People)

Class.	Number of Participants											
	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19	'20	'21	'22	'23
Female	1,002	843	1,018	785	904	807	726	788	260	38	15	74
Male	361	254	262	168	198	150	116	165	97	31	21	37
Total	**1,363**	**1,097**	**1,280**	**953**	**1,102**	**957**	**842**	**953**	**357**	**69**	**36**	**111**

Advanced training and vocational training (Unit: People)

Class.	Advanced Training			Vocational Training	
	Number of programs	Completed	Acquired License	Number of programs	Completed
'14	5	103	85	11	440
'15	6	117	72	10	521
'16	8	247	206	8	315
'17	7	291	251	7	290
'18	7	335	292	8	305
'19	7	385	314	8	247
'20	3	18	18	4	28
'21	6	42	40	4	128
'22	8	49	40	10	189
'23	23	195	177	5	130

Figure 2. Source: South Korea's Ministry of Unification White Paper 2024.

While neoliberalism is often understood as the promotion of individualism, free markets, free trade, and a strong state, I draw on Aiwha Ong's (2006) theorization of neoliberalism as a reconfiguration of governance and knowledge in which political problems are recast as technical ones. Writing on neoliberalism in the South Korean context, Dongjin Seo (2010) defines the expectations for self-management in the Korean economic arena to include the "mundane practices of consumption by individuals of a wide range of knowledge, techniques, commodities, agents, and experts in order to manage themselves through the mobilization of their own freedom, responsibility and autonomy" (84). Seo further demonstrates how post-IMF crisis reforms used the language of self-advancement and self-improvement. Education, as Byung-Chul Han (2018) argues, has also been cloaked by capitalist imperatives in a "language of freedom," shifting the responsibility for success onto individuals who must demonstrate *chagi kwalli* (self-management) and *chagi kyebal* (self-cultivation) to meet state-defined productivity norms (Song, 2009).

North Korean migrants in South Korea's neoliberal state are directly called on by state actors to self-manage and self-cultivate through enrolling in school, getting a

job, and becoming self-reliant subjects. These acts of self-management, as Secretary-General Thae Young-ho put it, are the way North Korean migrants can fulfill their civic duty and contribute to unification.

In May 2025, Thae told a group of North Korean-born university students at a Ministry of Unification summit that as the "first generation to achieve unification," their civic duty was to "promote reconciliation between the two Koreas" by "understand[ing] and overcom[ing] cultural and social differences" and "adapt[ing] well to South Korean society" (Han, 2025). At the same summit, Kim Dong-soo, the Secretary of Human Rights and Defectors Support Subcommittee, added, "Settling down well here is the way to contribute to unification." In these renderings, *jeongchakhada* (adapting well) and *anjeongjeong iju* (settling down) are cast as the "way [North Korean migrants] contribute" to the political project of unification.

When state actors say, "adapt well" and "settle down," what do they mean? One answer to this question lies in what the Ministry's annual white papers define "successful" settlement to be, through metrics such as job placement rates, school enrollment, vocational training completion, social adaptation training completion, and average wage increases [See Figure 2]. The Ministry of Unification's reliance on statistical data sets as performance indicators converts unification from a speculative horizon into a measurable, monitorable, and auditable entity (Ministry of Unification, 2024). Such practices reflect the late liberal audit cultures now standard across bureaucracies of global core states that govern populations through performance indicators.

Another answer can be found through analyzing how the Ministry prepares North Korean migrants for integration through its mandatory 12-week social adaptation program at Hanawon. Numerous scholars have described Hanawon's curriculum as totalizing, emphasizing migrants' moral obligation to become self-reliant and responsible citizens (Won, 2020; Yoon, 2022; Chung, 2009). Won's study (2020) demonstrates that the Ministry's disciplinary power is evident in the use of neoliberal keywords such as "resilience," "improvement" and "overcoming" within Hanawon curricula – terms that normalize meritocratic expectations while erasing the structural barriers and ethnolinguistic discrimination migrants encounter in South Korea's stratified society. These analyses of state curriculum for North Korean migrants reflect South Korea's broader neoliberal values of making self-responsible, self-managing citizens (Seo 2010). One way North Korean migrants have internalized this expectation for self-management is through a desire for "blending into the average" or living an "ordinary life" in South Korea (Cho 2023).

As defector Cho Kyung-il writes in *Reality and Unity* (2023), "North Korean defectors are fiercely determined to live an ordinary life. It's a yearning to be…'average' in every aspect – in their studies, their livelihood, their employment." In order to understand state expectations for North Korean migrants' self-management to "settle down" and "adapt well," we must first look at North Korean migrants' experience with pursuing an "ordinary life" in South Korea. Of course, what counts as "settling down well" into an "ordinary life" varies by generation. As I observed throughout

my fieldwork, older arrivals who have aged out of pursuing higher education often assimilate into working-class sectors such as construction or service labor, while younger migrants who attend university may enter middle-class professions like teaching or office work.

In a promotional video for Saebit School, the school pursues the "average" by documenting a day in the life of alumna and current Saebit teacher Lee Shimil, a North Korean migrant who spent years begging for food as a *kkotjebi* (homeless child in North Korea) before crossing the Tumen River into China at 15. Nine undocumented years in China kept him from school until, at 25, he arrived in South Korea and entered Saebit as a middle school student. Today, seventeen years later, he lives in a cramped suburban apartment with his wife and two daughters. The video follows him on a typical morning, brushing his teeth and drying his hair quietly in his office so as not to wake his children, before commuting to work through the early morning haze. Captions read: "17th year living in Seoul. 6:20 AM. An ordinary office worker who goes to work early." In the video, Shimil reflects, "I want to express gratitude for the ordinary life I have now, which I longed for so deeply during my long time in North Korea and China." When I spoke to him after the video was released, he explained that his hope for his students is that they similarly lead "ordinary lives" (Interview, October 25, 2024).

Though an ordinary life for younger migrants entails office work, many North Korean migrants I met complained of the hypercompetitive nature of South Korean office work culture. South Korea's *hangnyeokjuui* (credentialism) and, by extension, *seupeng ssaki* ("spec" accumulation) culture that favors quantification of skills reflect neoliberal values of self-management and contribute to a hypercompetitive and hierarchical work culture (Choi, 2021). One North Korean-born university student, Yoonmi, who was studying for a life insurance licensure examination, lamented: "Even after you get the job it's a competition. Because, say one person gets an 80% on their exam, then your supervisor compares you to someone else and says, 'Well this employee got a 90%, why can't you be more like them?'" (Interview, September 10, 2023). Inherent in the reported speech of Yoonmi's supervisor is the *chagi kwalli* self-management expectation that, as Han (2018) and Seo (2010) argue, normalizes a logic of constant self-improvement and measures it against performance indicators like assessments. Although these cultural norms are a part of a middle-class "ordinary life" in South Korea, they are also shaped by South Korea's position in the global hierarchy– an arbitrary metric produced through multiple international indices that claim to measure development, gender equality, and human progress.[6]

[6] With the world's twelfth largest economy, South Korea appears highly developed. Yet, as Nora H-J. Kim (2015) notes, its global position as a "middle country" has long shaped its developmental strategy and foreign policy approaches. Globalization initiatives under the Kim Young Sam administration (1993-1998), for example, exemplify Korean leaders' fixation on elevating the nation's standing in the international community commensurate with its economic status.

Producing "Unification Talents" (*Tongil Injae*) as Human Capital for the Future

The biopolitical terms used in state and civil society discourse to describe youth–*injae* (talents) and *tongil injae* (unification talents)--reveal how the unification apparatus figures them as investable instruments of its nationalist project. Within an HCT framework, individuals are understood as forms of capital whose value lies in their skills, knowledge, and capacities to generate economic returns (Becker, 1964). The Korean term *injae*, translated as "talents" or "human resources," reflects this logic by framing subjects' productive capacity as discipline, competitiveness, and achievement. This is evident in phrases commonly used in Korean educational policy and university mission statements, such as *gukka injae yangseong*, "cultivating national talent/human resources" (Ministry of Education, 2022). Cultivating "talent" in these framings is tied to producing labor market-relevant skills and thus contributing to South Korea's economic transformation.

Neoliberal logics are so deeply embedded in South Korean society that even actors positioned at its margins reproduce them. One alternative school principal, Choi Ok, herself a North Korean migrant, articulated this orientation in an interview with Radio Free Asia, describing her primary goal as cultivating "talent for unification:"[7]

> North Korean defectors and youth are invaluable in preparing for unification. They have experienced both the South Korean and North Korean systems, so when unification occurs, they will be able to go to North Korea and clearly tell what is right and what is wrong. They will be able to explain why North Koreans are poor and starving. These students are the future of unification. That's why we need to produce many talented individuals among North Korean defector students. While we've focused on supporting North Korean defectors in difficult circumstances so far, I believe we also need to focus more on nurturing talent for unification… I have mentored many excellent students in North Korea, and my dream is to see many of them enter prestigious universities in South Korea. (Yang 2009)

Here, Principal Choi's emphasis on "nurturing talent" reflects a human capital logic in which investment is directed toward those whose capacities can be developed into high-value assets for a future unified Korea. This value is indexed through elite educational attainment, particularly admission to prestigious South Korean universities, which function as sites for the accumulation and certification of human capital. In this context, education is less a social good than a mechanism for producing competitive subjects capable of generating returns within an imagined post-unification educational and labor market.

[7] The development of "talent" for society is a distinctly South Korean value not unique to alternative schools – present in other South Korean public and private high school's educational missions. For example, one public school has as its mission: "To educate creative talents who can contribute to the world." By contrast, international schools in Seoul with British or American curricula have more individualistic-oriented educational philosophies. For further reading on South Korean neoliberalism and education, see Abelmann, Park, & Kim (2009); J.S.-Y. Park (2010); Song 2009; Park & Abelmann (2004).

As John Patrick Leary (2019) argues, "talent" functions as a positivist catchall that collapses labor, education, and health into a single metric of value, deeply entrenched in late capitalist constructions of individualism and human capital. From an HCT perspective, investments in migrants' "knowledge, skills, health, and habits" render them legible as future economic actors whose worth is tied to their anticipated productivity and contribution in a post-unification economy (Leary, 2019, p. 111). The category of "unification talent" thus functions as a technology of valuation that aligns individual development with national economic futures.

So central is this idea of developing "unification talents" that the Ministry of Unification launched a "Unification Talent Academy" in 2020. The program recruits North Korean migrants to participate in a series of lectures and community service activities framed as preparation for future unification leadership roles (UniKorea, 2021). Early cohorts attended lectures by South Korean university professors on international relations, diplomacy, philosophy, and life in North Korea. By 2024, participation in the Unification Talent Academy conferred formal credentials, including "Research Member" status at the Institute for North Korean Studies and opportunities to serve as guest reporters. Similarly, the Hana Foundation has hosted a "Future Unification Talent Day" since 2023, awarding North Korean university students identified as having "excellent capacity-building" and strong performance in online English education programs as "unification talents" (Kim 2025). At the same time, these neoliberal state vocabularies of "unification talent" and "ordinary lives" frame social and cultural assimilation into South Korean capitalist society as both civic duty and economic necessity. In doing so, they obscure the extent to which North Korean migrants' futures are structured through an HCT logic that ties their potential labor to the state's unification project.

Alternative schools for North Korean youth are particularly concentrated sites where this logic becomes visible, as educational success is translated into both economic promise and political worth. Nearly every school references unification in its mission statement, explicitly positioning North Korean youth in both neoliberal terms as human capital for unification and in temporal terms as laboring bodies toward a future national condition. Across school mission statements, students are repeatedly described as future workers, talents, leaders, and builders: "*workers* for the restoration of free, democratic unification," "*leaders* for the unification era," "*talents* who *will achieve* unification of the world," "*talents* who *will lead* the change of the times," "*leaders* who *will contribute* to Korea's future as a unified nation," "person who is *used to build* a unified Korea," "*leaders* who *will play* central roles in the future of a unified Korea," "*future leaders* for unification," "*future leaders* who *will inherit* the destiny of a unified nation, joining North and South together." The recurrence of terms such as *lead, talent, cultivate, adapt, achieve, next generation, grow,* and *future* reflects what Leary (2019) identifies as "the moral vocabulary of late capitalism," which celebrates self-investment and human capital while cloaking labor extraction in moral and religious language (p. 6). This, I argue, is a distinctly human capital approach, which Klees (2016) argues "turns education into… an investment that makes one more productive," (2016, p. 659).

Such solution-oriented approaches to education pivot on technocratic questions: How will unification be funded? How can it be made economically viable? How will North Koreans adapt to South Korean society? These questions rest on the assumption that complex social problems can be resolved through technical solutions, and particularly through education (Leary, 2019). In this framing, unification becomes a manageable scenario, addressed through the production of adaptable and productive North Korean-background subjects. Phrases in the future tense, such as "*will* achieve," "*will* lead," "*will* play a central role," "*future* leaders," and "*will* inherit" directly tether students' worth to a deferred state horizon. Within this logic, the language of human capital relies on North Korean-background students' capacity to articulate their future contribution to the unification project.

Settlement policies and alternative schools thus operate through a shared logic that elevates a select few students as "unification talents," making recognition contingent on conformity to South Korea's neoliberal norms of achievement and productivity, and to legibility within a future-oriented temporal order. In drawing these boundaries, the state produces migrants simultaneously as emblems of unification and as governable forms of human capital.

Relevance and Further Research

This article has shown how South Korean state and civil society actors frame North Korean-background youth as forms of human capital to be cultivated for a future unified Korea. Through analysis of interviews and discursive artifacts, including state speeches, policy discourse, media, campaign slogans, and school visions, I demonstrate how categories such as "unification talent" and "first to come of unification" position North Korean migrants as investments whose value lies in their anticipated contributions to national development. In this way, alternative schooling spaces participate in broader neoliberal projects that link education to economic productivity and future state-building.

By foregrounding HCT, this study contributes to comparative and international education by illustrating how education systems function as sites where migrant youth are differentially valued. The case of North Korean migrants extends existing critiques of human capital approaches by showing how they function not only in labor market policy but also in projects of state-building in conditions of protracted conflict. The findings from this study are relevant to global contexts of migration, displacement, and crisis, where states frame marginalized populations as potential human capital to be developed for national and global economies (Spring, 2015). Such framings can cloud ongoing inequalities by shifting attention toward future-oriented state projects rather than present conditions of exclusion. By attending to how social adaptation initiatives—particularly those that emphasize self-management, "talent" and "leadership-- function as technologies of governance, this paper offers a critical lens for examining how migrant populations can be valued and recognized beyond human capital terms.

This analysis has focused primarily on state and institutional framings of North Korean migrants within policy discourse, media, and schools. Future research might

complement this state-centered perspective by centering migrant youth's own temporal imaginaries and aspirations, including how they negotiate, resist, or reconfigure these state-imposed futures. Longitudinal research following North Korean-background youth beyond institutional settings would further illuminate how forms of conditional citizenship shift as migrants pursue transnational futures over time. More broadly, extending this analytic framework to other contexts marked by stalled political futures, unresolved conflict, or migration crises may reveal how states' positionality within global orders governs the everyday experiences of migrants in the present. Attending to time as a political technology invites renewed attention to how states govern not only populations, but also the futures toward which people are expected to orient themselves, even when those futures remain uncertain or unrealized.

Noël Um-Lo *earned her Ph.D. in Applied Anthropology at Teachers College, Columbia University. She holds an M.A. in Anthropology from Columbia University, and a B.A. in History from Carnegie Mellon University. Her research has been funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6714-3650.*

References

Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised edition. Verso.

Bazeley, P. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis: Practical strategies*. Sage.

Becker, G. S. (1983). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education* (2nd ed). Midway reprint.

Birks, M., Chapman, Y., & Francis, K. (2025). Memoing in qualitative research: Two decades on. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 17449871251386323. https://doi.org/10.1177/17449871251386323

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507

Cho, Y. H., Palmer, J. D., & Jung, J. Y. (2016). Becoming Global Citizens in the Enemy State: Young North Korean Resettlers in South Korean Secondary Schools. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *29*(4), 607–629. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/few022

Choi, M. (2021). *Unification Preparation" in South Korea: The Professional Labor of Preparing for a Future Scenario* [Doctoral dissertation]. Harvard University.

Cho, Kyungil. (2023). *Reality and Unity: Report on the Issues and Vision of North Korean Defectors* (리얼리티와 유니티*).*

Chung, B.-H. (2009). Between Defector and Migrant: Identities and Strategies of North Koreans in South Korea. *Korean Studies*, *32*(1), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.0.0002

Cumings, B. (2002). *The origins of the Korean War. 1: Liberation and the emergence of separate regimes: 1945 - 1947* (4. printing). Yuksabipyungsa.

Das, V., & Poole, D. (Eds.). (2009). *Anthropology in the margins of the state* (2nd print). School of American Research Press.

Dryden-Peterson, S., Adelman, E., Bellino, M. J., & Chopra, V. (2019). The Purposes of Refugee Education: Policy and Practice of Including Refugees in National Education Systems. *Sociology of Education*, *92*(4), 346–366.

Green, A. (2013). *Education and State Formation: Europe, East Asia and the USA*. 2nd

edition. Education, Economy and Society. Palgrave Macmillan.

Gupta, A., & Ferguson, J. (1992). Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference. *Cultural Anthropology*, *7*(1), 6–23. https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1992.7.1.02a00020

Guyer, J. I. (2007). Prophecy and the near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time. *American Ethnologist*, *34*(3), 409–421.

Han, B.-C. (2017). *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and new technologies of power* (E. Butler, Trans.). Verso.

Hirschkind, C. (Ed.). (2006). *The ethical soundscape: Cassette sermons and Islamic counterpublics*. Columbia University Press.

Hull, M. S. (2008). Ruled by records: The expropriation of land and the misappropriation of lists in Islamabad. *American Ethnologist*, *35*(4), 501–518. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2008.00095.x

Leary, J.P. (2019). *Keywords: The New Language of Capitalism*. Haymarket Press.

Jones, A. G., Whitehead, G. E. K., & Bang, H. (2023). Exploring the impacts of a South Korean alternative school on North Korean refugees' educational attitudes, satisfaction, and behavior. *Current Psychology*, *42*(15), 12795–12813. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02518-5

Kim, J. A., & Yoo, S.-S. (2018). The Concerns and Potential of North Korean Defector Students' Education: Teachers' Perceptions at "An Alternative School." *North Korean Review*, *14*(2), 5–25.

Kim, K., & Kim, S. C. H. (Eds.). (2014). Evangelism, Patriotism and Revivalism, 1876–1910. In *A History of Korean Christianity* (pp. 54–106). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139048071.004

Kim, M., & Kim, I. (2025). The second generation's perceptions of South Korea's public support programs for multicultural families. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *48*(6), 1218–1236. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2436071

Kim, N. H.-J. (2015). The Retreat of Multiculturalism? Explaining the South Korean Exception. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *59*(6), 727–746. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764214566497

Kim, Y. (2023). "민족복음화" 사상과 1970년대 한국교회 전도대회들의 의의 The Idea of "National Evangelization" and the Significance of Evangelism Conferences in the 1970s Korean Church. *Journal of Historical Theology*, *43*, 152–185. https://doi.org/10.26427/JHT.43.5

Kim, Y. Y. (2016). Negotiating Cultures and Identities: Education and Adaptation Among Young North Korean Settlers in South Korea. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, *17*(4), 1015–1029. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-015-0450-0

Klees, S. J. (2016). Human Capital and Rates of Return: Brilliant Ideas or Ideological Dead Ends? *Comparative Education Review*, *60*(4), 644–672. https://doi.org/10.1086/688063

Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life* (2nd ed., with an update a decade later). University of California Press.

Lee, M. (2020). Landscape of the minds of South and North Koreans: Unification perception, mutual recognition and the possibility of cultural integration. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *21*(3), 465–475. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2020.1796355

Levinson, B. A. U. (with Foley, D. E., Holland, D. C., & Weis, L.). (1996). *Cultural Production of the Educated Person: Critical Ethnographies of Schooling and Local Practice*. State University of New York Press.

McCune, G. M. (1947). Korea: The First Year of Liberation. *Pacific Affairs*, *20*(1), 3. https://doi.org/10.2307/2752411

McKibbin, W. J., Lee, J.-W., Liu, W., & Song, C. J. (2017). Modelling the Economic Impacts of Korean Unification. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2954337

Ministry of Education. (2022, August 29). *Announcement of Comprehensive Plan for Digital Talent Development.* https://www.korea.kr/news/policyNewsView.do?newsId=148905386

Ministry of Unification. (2025). About MOU: Brief History. https://unikorea.go.kr/web/eng_unikorea/contents/aboutmou_history.

Ministry of Unification. (2024). White paper on Korean Unification. https://unikorea.go.kr/web/eng_unikorea/contents/Publications_whitepaper.

Ministry of Unification. (2001). White paper on Korean Unification. https://unikorea.go.kr/web/eng_unikorea/contents/Publications_whitepaper.

Munn, N. D. (1992). The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *21*(1), 93–123. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.21.100192.000521

Ong, A. (Ed.). (2004). *Global assemblages: Technology, politics, and ethics as anthropological problems* (7. [Nachdr.]). Blackwell Publishing.

Ong, A. (2006). *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality* (5th printing). Duke Univ. Press.

Park, Hyeonju. (2024, February 21). "North Korean Defectors Are Unification That Arrived First"… Government Pushes to Establish July 14 as 'North Korean Defector Day.'" *Joongang Ilbo*. https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25230123

Poole, A., & Riggan, J. (2020). Time with/out Telos: Eritrean Refugees' Precarious Choice of Im/possible Futures in Ethiopia and Beyond. *Anthropological Quarterly*, *93*(3), 401–428. https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2020.0052

Saemaeul Library, Daegu City Branch. (2024, November 16). "Unification Festival with the Unification Family Who Came First." Retrieved February 3, 2026, from https://blog.naver.com/chilgokgunfree/223663338329.

Schultz, T. W. (1961). Investment in Human Capital. *The American Economic Review*, *51*(1), 1–17.

Shannon, J. (2007). Informed Consent: Documenting the Intersection of Bureaucratic Regulation and Ethnographic Practice. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, *30*(2), 229–248. https://doi.org/10.1525/pol.2007.30.2.229

Shin, G. (2006). *Ethnic nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, politics, and legacy*. Stanford University Press.

Shore, C., & Wright, S. (2025). *Audit culture: How indicators and rankings are reshaping the world*. Pluto press.

Song, J. (2009). Between Flexible Life and Flexible Labor: The Inadvertent Convergence of Socialism and Neoliberalism in South Korea. *Critique of Anthropology*, *29*(2), 139–159. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X09104083

Spring, J. (2015). *Economization Of Education: Human Capital, Global Corporations, Skills-Based Schooling* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315730233

Tan, E. (2014). Human Capital Theory: A Holistic Criticism. *Review of Educational Research*, *84*(3), 411–445. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654314532696

Taussig, M. T. (1997). *The magic of the state*. Routledge.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2017). *Left Behind: Refugee Education in Crisis*. Retrieved from https://www.unhcr.org/left-behind/

Varenne, H., & Koyama, J. (2011). Education, Cultural Production, and Figuring Out What to Do Next. In *A Companion to the Anthropology of Education* (pp. 50–64). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444396713.ch4

Won, J. (2020). The Making of Post-Socialist Citizens in South Korea?: The Case of Border Crossers from North Korea. *Pacific Affairs*, *93*(3), 519–542. https://doi.org/10.5509/2020933519

Wortham, S., & Reyes, A. (2015). *Discourse analysis beyond the speech event*. Routledge.

Yoon, I.-J. (2022). Social integration and well-being of North Korean migrants in South Korea. *Journal of Social Issues*, *78*(3), 627–644. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12475

From Meaning to Metrics: How Algorithmic Morality Reorders Educational Values in Humanitarian Education Governance

Youngbeen Ahn
University of Toronto

Abstract
As humanitarian education becomes increasingly reliant on digital infrastructures, moral values governing access, protection, and recognition are now mediated through data and algorithmic decision-making. This paper develops the concept of algorithmic morality to analyze how digital governance systems reorder educational values in humanitarian settings. Employing critical document analysis of policy texts, technical specifications, and documented cases, the paper maps how humanitarian ideals move across the three analytical sites of articulation, encoding, and encounter. Three patterns emerge: relational dimensions of educational value compress into individual metrics, procedural flexibility hardens into algorithmic thresholds, and ethical imperatives transform into severity rankings. Cases from Jordan and Kenya illustrate the functioning and the limits of this logic. The paper makes two contributions. First, it conceptualizes algorithmic morality as a field-level logic that actively constitutes moral worth rather than operationalizing pre-existing values. Second, it introduces a moral-technical analytic for examining digital systems as moral infrastructures. As global disorder intensifies and digital humanitarianism expands, the central challenge is not a shortage of data but a crisis of meaning: the marginalization of relational and contextual dimensions of humanitarian education that resist computational reduction.

Keywords: *algorithmic morality, education in emergencies, digital humanitarianism, moral infrastructure, surveillance-care nexus*

Introduction

In today's humanitarian governance, a child's access to schooling may depend on biometric enrollment, where a verified digital identity becomes a prerequisite for service eligibility (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2016; Khan, 2023). A family's food assistance can hinge on compliance with such systems (Jacobsen, 2017). The visibility of a crisis to donors often rests on algorithmic severity rankings (Poljanšek et al., 2026). While these dependencies are now commonplace in refugee settlements worldwide (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021, 2025), they are far from incidental. Instead, these are the direct expression of a new moral logic that this paper terms algorithmic morality: a system of moral valuation in which computational legibility dictates humanitarian recognition, care becomes conditional on data production, and educational value is determined by measurability. This paper approaches these developments conceptually, analyzing how such systems encode moral valuations into humanitarian education governance, rather than evaluating their operational effectiveness or outcomes.

© 2026, Ahn. CC BY 4.0.

Digital systems including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)'s Population Registration and Identity Management Ecosystem (PRIMES), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)-Microsoft's Learning Passport, and global coordination tools like the Index for Risk Management (INFORM) Severity Index do more than manage information (Poljanšek et al., 2026; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2024a, 2024b; UNHCR, n.d.-b). These systems serve as governance technologies that determine which learners become visible, how vulnerability is classified, which crises receive funding, and what counts as learning progress. To be recognized within these systems requires becoming legible in specific forms, such as iris scans, enrollment databases, and algorithmic verification.

As international agencies and private actors promote digital infrastructures for their promise of transparency and efficiency, humanitarian education is undergoing a profound technocratic turn (Menashy & Zakharia, 2020). Where moral judgement has traditionally been a social practice (Sayer, 2011), algorithmic morality relocates evaluation to computational infrastructure. This paper addresses two research questions: (1) How does algorithmic morality emerge as a field-level ordering logic in humanitarian education governance through the encoding of educational values into digital governance infrastructures? (2) How does this logic shape educational encounters in humanitarian settings?

Scholars have examined humanitarian technology and datafication (Firoz, 2024; Sandvik et al., 2014), EdTech governance (Komljenovic, 2021; Williamson, 2022), and colonial dimensions of data practices (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Madianou, 2019). This paper extends this scholarship by developing algorithmic morality as a conceptual framework for theorizing how digital systems actively constitute moral worth. It traces this logic across three analytical sites: articulation, encoding, and encounter. Within these sites, the surveillance-care nexus emerges as a governing principle of humanitarian education governance. The paper makes two contributions: theorizing algorithmic morality as a field-level logic and introducing a moral-technical analytic for examining policy-infrastructure relations. The Jordan and Kenya cases illustrate both the scope of algorithmic morality and its limits.

Global Disorder and the Digital Transformation of Humanitarian Education Governance

Education has mediated between ethical aspiration and institutional structure (Tröhler, 2016). Today, this mediation increasingly operates through data. Institutional legitimacy becomes contingent on measurable outcomes, and moral vocabularies are encoded into algorithmic systems.

The Technocratic Turn and Legitimacy Deficit

The UNESCO Constitution of 1945 established the education of humanity for justice, liberty, and peace as fundamental to human dignity (UNESCO, 1945), framing learning as a moral basis for collective life. As development paradigms progressed, these principles were converted into measurable objectives, initially via Education for All (EFA), and subsequently through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Kuroda & Nakasato, 2023). The moral objective of education was then

institutionalized as a worldwide accountability framework (Meyer et al., 1997), manifested in indicators such as literacy rates, access ratios, and standardized achievement metrics (Sellar & Lingard, 2013). This quantitative shift has altered educational governance, leading to what Shore and Wright (2015) describe as audit culture, a notion that links responsibility with virtue and redefines moral legitimacy through verification rather than solidarity-based relationships. International organizations are progressively dependent on statistics and quantification to assert authority in education governance (Grek, 2020; Williamson & Piattoeva, 2019).

This technocratic turn emerged in response to a deepening legitimacy deficit (Auld & Elfert, 2024). The moral consensus established after World War II that fostered global authority has disintegrated due to increasing nationalism and geopolitical divisions (Coulibaly & Qureshi, 2025; United Nations, 2018). Conventional sources of institutional legitimacy no longer suffice to secure trust and coordination among major international organizations in education governance. This deficit permeates international organizations, whose legitimacy has increasingly depended on the strategic production and dissemination of scientific knowledge (Edwards et al., 2018; Zapp, 2020).

Datafication as Strategic Response

Facing a legitimacy deficit, humanitarian agencies adopted data-driven and technological governance (Jacobsen, 2017; Read et al., 2016). Unable to rely on moral authority alone, institutions grounded their legitimacy in quantifiable demonstrations of impact, with digital database technologies functioning as policy instruments across governance domains (Williamson, 2016), a pattern similarly evident in humanitarian governance (Sandvik et al., 2014). Organizations prove their worthiness to govern by making data a new type of currency (Madianou, 2019). The language of moral obligation becomes managed through key performance indicators, results frameworks, and evidence-based interventions (Fiori et al., 2016). As a result, institutional authority increasingly derives from the capacity to collect, manage, and deploy data about populations (Jacobsen, 2017; Madianou, 2019). This transformation involves both a shift from face-to-face humanitarian relationships to remote, technology-mediated distance (Donini & Maxwell, 2013) and the displacement of political and ethical judgment by behavioral optimization and quantifiable metrics (Duffield, 2019).

The convergence of humanitarian governance and digital technologies has given rise to digital humanitarianism, in which care, protection, and eligibility are increasingly organized and authorized through digital systems and code (Jacobsen, 2015; Madianou, 2019). Value, once grounded in physical presence or empathy, comes to depend on visibility within data infrastructures (Taylor, 2017), with authority shifting from ethical judgment to automated behavioral prediction and control (Zuboff, 2015). The moral imperative to provide care is influenced by a technical imperative to measure. Data practices that perpetuate imbalances in power (Madianou, 2019) may reconstitute displaced learners as metrics through which organizations establish legitimacy.

Education as a Site of Moral-Technical Transformation

Education is the primary site where belonging, recognition, and futurity are constituted (Dryden-Peterson, 2017; McIntyre & Neuhaus, 2021). Unlike humanitarian interventions focused on material provision, education makes claims about who counts as a learner, what knowledge is legitimate, and which futures are possible. When these determinations translate into algorithmic systems, education becomes the testing ground for how data infrastructures reshape the relationship between care and control, recognition and surveillance. Education has served a dual purpose: as a moral ideal of human unity and as a means of reproducing hierarchy and control. This duality reappears in digital form. Humanitarian education systems deploy data standards as instruments of universal, objective governance. This supposed objectivity is constructed through practices of standardization and quantification (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2019). These practices mediate whose knowledge is considered valid, which groups are regarded as governable, and what needs are eligible for intervention. While professing neutrality, they can reinforce selection and hierarchy, reconfiguring normative judgment into a calculative form.

Conceptual Framework

Education within humanitarian governance is both a moral and epistemic project. As a moral project, it involves normative judgements about who deserves care and which futures are possible (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). As an epistemic project, it defines whose knowledge is legitimate and which curriculum and pedagogical forms are recognized (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017). With global education governance increasingly relying on digital infrastructures, moral definitions become embedded in data systems and algorithmic processes, shaping who and what counts as deserving of recognition, care and resources. Algorithmic morality in these systems operates across three analytical sites. At the macro site of articulation (discursive), moral vocabularies are articulated through policy discourse, building normative commitments and institutional legitimacy. At the meso site of encoding (infrastructural), these requirements become embedded in coordination infrastructures, platform architectures, and classification systems. At the micro site of encounter (operational), educational actors experience, adapt to, and contest these encoded systems.

These sites theorize governance as a process of moral translation in which values are articulated, encoded, and enacted across discourse, infrastructure, and lived experience. The term sites, rather than levels, stages, or phases, underscores that these dimensions coexist and simultaneously structure humanitarian education governance. Algorithmic morality does not reside in any single policy, technology, or interaction but operates as a field-level logic across governance contexts, a practice-connected configuration that structures collective identity, power, classification, and attention (Cai & Mountford, 2022; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Unlike organizational policies that can be traced back to specific decisions, field-level logics work through distributed evaluative criteria that are encoded across multiple actors and systems.

Datafication and Reformation of Moral Worth

Algorithmic morality is conceptually distinct from the broader process of datafication. While datafication refers to the rendering of social and natural worlds in machine-readable digital format (Williamson et al., 2020), algorithmic morality denotes a specific field-level logic through which datafied systems actively constitute moral worth. Datafication is the technical infrastructure; algorithmic morality is its moral effect. This logic emerges from the convergence of data-driven surveillance and humanitarian governance. As Zuboff (2015) contends, contemporary governance increasingly treats human experience as extractable data, generating novel forms of institutional power. Daily conduct is rendered computationally observable and actionable. In humanitarian education, this rationale has expanded through partnerships with private sector entities, reinforcing data-driven oversight. Biometric databases, learning platforms, and performance dashboards convert educational encounters into legible, trackable data traces. Here, unlike in commercial contexts where profit motives remain visible, datafication can operate behind a moral shield: efficient care legitimizes data collection, making critique or resistance appear as opposition to assistance.

Algorithmic governance not only assesses existing moral values but can also determine worthiness. Crisis evaluation in humanitarian governance involves decisions presented as apolitical but rooted in political judgment, determining which populations are considered deserving. According to Sayer (2011), humans are inherently evaluative, as our relationship with the world is characterized by concern. In digital humanitarian education governance, this evaluative relationship is increasingly mediated by data. Care often requires visibility via iris scans, enrollment databases, and algorithmic authentication. Legibility, defined as the rendering of populations comprehensible through conventional classifications (Scott, 1998), increasingly functions as a prerequisite for recognition. Data visibility can shape moral worth.

Infrastructure as Moral Actor

As Amoore (2020) demonstrates, algorithms generate judgments through probabilistic inference, shifting the evaluative question from *Is this person vulnerable?* to *What is the probability that this person will be classified as vulnerable given these data inputs?* This shift embeds normative assumptions about risk and deservingness in operations that appear as objective analysis, presenting political determinations as technical operations. Consequently, infrastructure can be understood as assuming the role of a moral actor, making consequential decisions about human lives while distributing responsibility in its coded operations. Bowker and Star (1999) show that classification systems are never neutral, as the categories embedded in them determine what becomes visible, comparable, and actionable. In the same way, within the humanitarian education systems, identity registration systems, learning platforms, and severity indices collectively define who a learner is, what constitutes educational progress, and which crises need attention. Care thus becomes increasingly dependent on data. To receive assistance, students must leave

appropriate traces. To receive funding, crises must score high, and programs must demonstrate measurable results.

As scholars demonstrate, care and control form "entangled interests," driving monitoring practices (Peacock et al., 2023, p. 6). In humanitarian education, protection increasingly depends on datafication, and eligibility tends to become ongoing performance as learners and teachers are expected to repeatedly generate data to remain visible. Unlike conventional bureaucratic gatekeeping that allows discretion, this algorithmic conditionality operates through fixed protocols that cannot accommodate exceptions. Moral judgment risks being displaced from deliberative practice to automated routine (Andrejevic, 2020). Responsibility may become diffused across coded operations, yet no single actor can be held accountable.

Differential Legibility and the Limits of Algorithmic Governance

Algorithmic morality produces differential legibility, or the uneven capacity of individuals and communities to become visible and recognizable within data systems. In doing so, technical systems can reproduce inequality while claiming neutrality, favoring those already embedded within existing infrastructures. This dynamic aligns with post-humanitarianism, in which humanitarian practice shifts from needs-based protection toward the behavioral optimization of beneficiaries through data-driven compliance (Duffield, 2019). This behavioral logic is further entangled with technocolonial data practices, in which the extraction of value from refugee data reproduces colonial relationships of dependency (Madianou, 2019). As a result, invisibility can become a moral failure rather than a technical limitation, as those who are unable or unwilling to provide the required data risk exclusion from access to humanitarian assistance.

Yet sites of non-compliance could show contradictions in the system. If learners decline biometric registration despite consequences, or if refugee communities establish schools outside donor-facing, platform-mediated infrastructures, such responses would expose what algorithmic morality requires: all moral worth must be computationally legible. These practices function alongside digital humanitarian systems, establishing parallel structures of legitimacy founded on relational accountability and community acknowledgment. Differential legibility does not necessarily result in exclusion. Communities can generate educational values through non-algorithmic methods despite the prevalence of data-driven governance.

Methodology

Research Purpose and Design

This study employs critical document analysis to investigate how digital infrastructures encode moral values in humanitarian education. Guided by a critical encoding lens, the approach treats policy and technical documents as moral artifacts, texts that both describe and perform institutional values and commitments (Ball, 1993; Yanow, 2015). By interpretively reading 21 documents across three analytical sites (see Table 1), this paper analyzes how organizations articulate normative vocabularies through policy texts, how these vocabularies are embedded in digital

infrastructures, and how they are enacted and contested in operational contexts. The primary contribution is conceptual: the framework illustrates governance mechanisms rather than providing empirical or causal generalizations. It synthesizes conceptual resources from algorithmic governance and critical humanitarianism to theorize a phenomenon that current scholarship has recognized but not yet systematically defined as moral infrastructure.

Jordan and Kenya are selected as instrumental cases (Stake, 1995) in that they are used to enhance understanding of algorithmic morality by illuminating its distinct dimensions rather than focusing on the cases themselves. The cases are not assessed against one another to determine relative degrees of algorithmic morality, nor are they used to test the framework's applicability across contexts. Jordan serves as a paradigmatic case (Flyvbjerg, 2006), allowing for close examination of humanitarian educational governance in contexts where digital infrastructures and data-driven coordination are fully embedded. Kenya has a distinct analytical purpose by clarifying the limits of algorithmic morality. The case enables analysis of how educational legitimacy is produced where algorithmic infrastructures are partial or bypassed, and where alternative moral and institutional orders remain operative. Kenya thus functions as an analytical case that reveals algorithmic morality as dominant yet incomplete.

The Critical Encoding Lens

The critical encoding lens is an interpretive framework informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and grounded in Critical Data Studies (CDS). CDA examines how language and texts reproduce power relations (Fairclough, 1989). CDS interrogates how data infrastructures embed social and political values (Dalton & Thatcher, 2014; Kitchin & Lauriault, 2018). Combining these approaches enables analysis of how normative claims in policy texts become materialized in technical systems. The lens traces how moral values articulated in humanitarian policies are encoded in digital systems like learning platforms, biometric systems, and funding algorithms. Encoding in this process is both technical and ethical as it not only turns values into infrastructure but also redefines what qualifies as moral legitimacy. Seemingly neutral technical choices about categories and standards are moral-political decisions that valorize certain worldviews while obscuring others (Bowker & Star, 1999). Here, algorithms serve as cultural artifacts whose meanings emerge through organizational practices, not code alone (Seaver, 2017).

This study approaches global education policies as normative texts that prescribe legitimate forms of action and evaluation. When encoded into digital systems, these normative prescriptions take on a moral function through technical specifications that actively determine worth, inclusion, and deservingness. It is through this encoding that normative texts become moral infrastructures. The critical encoding lens thus constitutes a moral-technical analytic by tracing how normative commitments in policy become moral judgments enacted through technical systems.

Corpus of Documents

This study analyzes documents purposively selected (Bowen, 2009) to represent the three analytical sites at which algorithmic morality operates. Document selection followed three criteria: centrality to global humanitarian education coordination, public accessibility enabling textual analysis, and analytical coverage across macro, meso, and micro sites.

A total of 21 documents were selected (see Table 1). Macro-site documents (n=3) express normative vocabularies through global policy frameworks: UNESCO's *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (2021), UNHCR's *Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion* (2019), and Education Cannot Wait's (ECW) *Achieving Results: A New Way of Working. Strategic Plan 2023-2026* (2022). Meso-site documents (n=7) operationalize these commitments through technical infrastructures: UNICEF's Learning Passport annual reports (2024a; 2024b), UNHCR's registration and identity management guidance (UNHCR, n.d.-b, n.d.-c, n.d.-d), the *INFORM Severity Index Concept and Methodology* (Poljanšek et al., 2026), and its empirical assessment (Lopez et al., 2023). Micro-site documents (n=11) capture how algorithmic governance is enacted and experienced at sites of encounter in Jordan and Kenya, drawing on UNHCR operational reports, Human Rights Watch (HRW) monitoring documents, and field-based research (Aden, 2024; HRW, 2016, 2020, 2023; Khan, 2023; Norwegian Refugee Council [NRC], 2016; UNHCR, n.d.-a, 2024, 2026a, 2026b; Vodafone Foundation, 2014). In Jordan, these materials show how registration systems, documentation prerequisites, and data-driven methodologies shape educational access. In Kenya, the sources delineate digital learning platforms and monitoring systems while examining refugee-led educational initiatives.

Selection prioritized sources from multiple vantage points to represent institutional and community-level perspectives, including official organizational communications, independent advocacy reports, and ethnographic research. Where documents presented contrasting accounts, both perspectives were treated as analytically meaningful rather than a methodological limitation. This was the case with UNHCR operational reports and HRW monitoring documents on Jordan, which reflect the contested nature of algorithmic morality. Analytical credibility was strengthened by triangulating across document types, cross-checking interpretations against policy frameworks, technical specifications, and advocacy reports. Together, these materials illuminate both the scope of algorithmic morality and its limits.

Table 1

Documents by Analytical Site

Analytical Site	Documents	Analytical Focus
Macro: Articulation (Discursive)	ECW (2022); UNESCO (2021); UNHCR (2019)	Normative vocabularies of moral ordering
Meso: Encoding (Infrastructural)	Lopez et al. (2023); Poljanšek et al. (2026); UNICEF (2024a, 2024b); UNHCR (n.d.-b, n.d.-c, n.d.-d)	Technical encoding and operationalization of values

Analytical Site	Documents	Analytical Focus
Micro: Encounter (Operational)	Aden (2024); HRW (2016, 2020, 2023); Khan (2023); NRC (2016); UNHCR (n.d.-a, 2024, 2026a, 2026b) Vodafone Foundation (2014)	Operational effects and alternative legitimacy structures

Note. n=number of documents per site. Macro (n=3), Meso (n=7), Micro (n=11); Total: N=21.

Analytical Procedures

This analysis examines three analytical sites: articulation (discursive), encoding (infrastructural), and encounter (operational). These represent coexisting dimensions of a single governance process, though values crystallize differently at each site.

Stage 1 traced normative vocabularies through iterative readings of macro-site documents informed by existing scholarship on humanitarian governance. Inclusion, protection, and urgency were identified as dominant, as each reflects the primary moral mandate of its policy framework. Vocabularies were organized by distinguishing whether they appeared as aspirational ideals or auditable outcomes, attending to how values were framed as relational processes, rights-based claims, or moral imperatives. Stage 2 examined how each normative vocabulary was technically operationalized in meso-site documents, analyzing how ethical commitments transform into data requirements, metrics, and performance indicators. Three interpretive questions guided the analysis: *What data are required to enact expressed values? How is compliance measured or verified? What perspectives become actionable through these design choices?* Stage 3 analyzed documented effects through published reports and secondary ethnographic research, examining who is rendered visible, whose needs register as actionable, and which forms of educational legitimacy gain recognition, including parallel legitimacy structures and alternative accountability mechanisms operating outside algorithmic frameworks. The three stages are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of Analytical Stages

Stage	Analytical Site	Focus	Key Questions
1	Macro: Articulation (Discursive)	Normative vocabularies	How are educational values framed?
2	Meso: Encoding (Infrastructural)	Technical operationalization	How are educational values translated into data requirements?
3	Micro: Encounter (Operational)	Documented effects and responses	Who is rendered visible? Which forms of legitimacy gain recognition?

Methodological Scope and Limitations

The strength of this approach lies in its systemic examination of how moral values become encoded across organizational scales. Its primary limitation, however, is distance from lived experience. While this analysis draws on an existing

ethnographic study and implementation reports, it lacks the comprehensive descriptive detail, participant perspectives, and contextual nuances that direct fieldwork would offer. The documents selected for this study represent specific organizational perspectives and may not capture the full range of humanitarian education governance practices. Accordingly, the cases in the following section illustrate how algorithmic morality operates rather than capture experiential complexity.

Document Analysis: Illustrating Algorithmic Morality

This section examines how algorithmic morality operates from policy to practice, tracing how inclusion, protection, and urgency are encoded into digital infrastructures, with Jordan and Kenya illustrating its scope and limits.

From Policy to Infrastructure: The Encoding of Algorithmic Morality

Inclusion: From Relational Belonging to Platform Metrics

UNESCO's *Reimagining Our Futures Together* (2021) constructs inclusion through profoundly relational vocabularies, positioning it not as individual access but as "common belonging to the same humanity and the same planet, while valuing our differences and diversity" (UNESCO, 2021, p. 13). Schools should be "protected educational sites because of the inclusion, equity and individual and collective well-being they support" (UNESCO, 2021, p. 103). This framing establishes inclusion as inherently social: being seen, valued, and participating meaningfully in educational communities.

When inclusion translates into UNICEF-Microsoft's Learning Passport, it undergoes transformation. The platform enables learners to "begin taking lessons, reviewing formal, nonformal or supplementary curriculum and completing assessments to earn certificates, all while their progress is recorded in an individual record unique to them" (UNICEF, 2024b, p. 36). The system collects "data on user engagement and outcomes" (UNICEF, 2024a, p. 18). The meaning of inclusion is reduced to generating measurable data traces, such as registered users, course enrollments, and completion counts. The Learning Passport's architecture determines inclusion through algorithmic legibility. Learners become visible when they possess digital identities and demonstrate platform engagement. Those without devices, connectivity, or families unwilling to enroll in data-driven systems remain outside what counts as included. Relational belonging becomes platform behavior; inclusion now requires datafication.

This compression reveals a systematic mechanism. Relational dimensions resist algorithmic encoding not because they are immeasurable in principle, but because measurability itself selects for what can be individualized, standardized, and automatically tracked. The macro site's belonging requires recognizing learners within pedagogical relationships, communities, and histories, dimensions that cannot be reduced to individual user behaviors without fundamentally altering their meaning. The platform can count login frequency but cannot computationally verify whether a learner feels valued or experiences reciprocal recognition from peers and teachers. With this translation challenge, the technical architecture defaults to what

can be measured: individual platform engagement. The system captures relational belonging; however, it systematically excludes precisely what makes belonging relational. What survives encoding is not a simplified version of UNESCO's vision but a fundamentally different moral claim: inclusion as individual digital presence, not as collective recognition.

Protection: From Negotiable to Non-negotiable Conditionality

At the macro site, UNHCR's *Refugee Education 2030* (UNHCR, 2019) articulates protection as an enabling safeguard produced through legal, institutional, and educational systems. Education is positioned as "an enabling right" that provides a "foundation for protection in current and future situations" (UNHCR, 2019, p. 14). The strategy commits to fostering "safe, enabling environments that support learning for all students, regardless of legal status" (UNHCR, 2019, p. 16). It also emphasizes the need for "documentation that provides equal access to school and examinations" while calling for mechanisms that accommodate learners "when documentation is missing" (UNHCR, 2019, p. 22). This framing positions protection as procedural accommodation: administrative flexibility that allows education systems to function despite incomplete records.

At the meso site, UNHCR's PRIMES puts protection into action. This includes biometric verification through its Biometric Identity Management System (BIMS), which is "comprised of several repositories for personal data (biographic and biometric) [...] to deliver targeted protection, assistance, and solutions to refugees" (UNHCR, n.d.-b). The system collects "individual photographs and biometric data [...] ensuring that identities registered in UNHCR's system are globally unique" (UNHCR, n.d.-c), with interoperability enabling data sharing with the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF systems (UNHCR, n.d.-d). While framed as a protection mechanism, PRIMES exemplifies the surveillance-care nexus: protection becomes inseparable from comprehensive monitoring. The technical architecture establishes one identity verified biometrically across agencies, creating total visibility regimes. To be protected requires submitting to being tracked and rendered algorithmically knowable. The macro-site vision of protection through adaptive legibility, flexible systems capable of accommodating displacement's documentary uncertainty, compresses into meso-site requirements for a single biometric verification.

The mechanism underlying this transformation operates through the foreclosure of administrative flexibility. The macro-site framework already positions protection within bureaucratic order but preserves space for adaptive accommodation. Meso-site infrastructures eliminate this flexibility. The architecture structurally requires verification before service delivery. It cannot recognize equivalencies, as the system demands unique biometric identifiers, nor can it allow exceptions because algorithms execute protocols without exercising discretion. The macro site's protection is conditional on legibility, but it remains a negotiable conditionality, mediated through administrative discretion and human judgment. The meso site's biometric systems transform this into non-negotiable conditionality: verification or exclusion.

Urgency: From Moral Imperative to Algorithmic Ranking

ECW's *Achieving Results* (2022) constructs urgency through moral vocabularies, emphasizing immediate action for those "left furthest behind" (p. 8) and "most in need" (p. 7), framing educational exclusion as a moral emergency. Delay becomes moral failure; displaced children cannot wait for education. This vocabulary mobilizes humanitarian action through claims about justice and the fundamental wrongness of educational exclusion.

Yet when urgency is operationalized through the INFORM Severity Index, the moral claim is transformed into an algorithmic ranking. The system converts suffering into composite scores on a scale of 1 to 5, where higher values represent more severe crises, requiring humanitarian response. This aligns with the formula "INFORM Severity Index = Impact of the crisis × Conditions of people affected + Complexity of the crisis" (Poljanšek et al., 2026, p. 28). A crisis enters the index only when both conditions are met: the number of people affected reaches at least 30,000 (or 1% of the country's population), and the number of people in need reaches at least 10,000. However, Lopez et al. (2023) observe that the index's strongest predictor is societal governance, with direct impact on people showing weaker predictive power. This indicator reflects implicit moral judgments embedded in technical architecture while appearing objective.

The transformation reveals what survives translation and what is lost through three systematic compressions. First, protracted crises become invisible after three months without new data, privileging acute emergencies over chronic educational collapse. Second, populations below 30,000 affected or 10,000 in need do not register at all, regardless of the intensity of need or the extent of educational disruption experienced by smaller displaced communities. Third, crisis complexity reduces to composite scores, erasing the specific conditions through which displacement disrupts learning. These are not technical limitations but design choices reflecting embedded assumptions about what constitutes actionable urgency. The macro site's normative urgency becomes the meso site's algorithmic threshold and temporal eligibility windows that determine which crises become visible and which remain outside measurement. Compassionate response to suffering transforms into a comparative ranking where crises compete for algorithmic visibility. Urgency no longer names an ethical demand; it designates a quantitative position within a ranking system. Table 3 summarizes these transformation mechanisms across the three moral vocabularies.

Table 3

Summary of Encoding Transformations

Moral Vocabulary	Macro-site: Articulation (Discursive)	Meso-site: Encoding (Infrastructural)	Transformation Mechanism
Inclusion	Relational belonging and collective recognition	Platform engagement metrics	Relational belonging → individual metrics

Moral Vocabulary	Macro-site: Articulation (Discursive)	Meso-site: Encoding (Infrastructural)	Transformation Mechanism
Protection	Procedural accommodation regardless of legal status	Biometric verification as a prerequisite for access	Procedural flexibility → non-negotiable verification
Urgency	Moral imperative to act for those most in need	Composite severity scores and eligibility thresholds	Ethical imperative → algorithmic ranking

Algorithmic Morality at Sites of Encounter

Jordan

At the infrastructural dimension, Jordan became one of the first sites worldwide to implement a comprehensive biometric system for refugees in 2013, enabling continuous registration of key life events, including marriage, education, and death (UNHCR, n.d.-a; UNHCR, 2026a). UNHCR frames this as a technical necessity: "continuous registration functions to strengthen identity data over time, verifying information and updating data changes throughout the period during which the individual is of concern to UNHCR" (UNHCR, n.d.-a). By 2020, 86% of Syrian refugees in Jordan had been processed through biometrics, with 9.2 million refugees registered through BIMS into PRIMES globally (UNHCR, 2020, 2021). This sits in direct tension with the discursive commitment of *Refugee Education 2030* (UNHCR, 2019) to learning environments "regardless of legal status" (p. 16) and mechanisms accommodating learners "when documentation is missing" (p. 22).

At the operational dimension, Ministry of Interior Service Cards "allow access to public services, including education," (Khan, 2023) functioning as a biometric prerequisite that translates PRIMES's requirement for continuous identity verification into a daily condition of eligibility. The cards are spatially bounded to the district where issued. Since each card is "valid only if the Syrian remains living in the district where the card was issued" (NRC, 2016, p. 8), mobility, the defining condition of displacement, renders existing documentation invalid and requires families to re-register in the new district before regaining access to services, including education. HRW (2020) records that the service card requirement "was re-introduced in 2019," such that refugees who had previously enrolled could no longer do so consistently. The consequences are significant. During the 2015-2016 school year, more than 80,000 of 226,000 school-aged Syrian children registered with UNHCR were not in formal education (HRW, 2016). By late 2020, approximately 51,000 remained out of school (HRW, 2023).

These operational realities reveal the full arc of moral translation across the three dimensions. The discursive commitment to flexibility "when documentation is missing" (UNHCR, 2019, p. 22) is foreclosed by an infrastructure that cannot accommodate exceptions, a foreclosure experienced as cascading exclusion, as families who cannot maintain continuous registration can lose access to education, food assistance, and protection simultaneously. Jordan thus illustrates how protection framed as universal access at the site of articulation becomes

non-negotiable conditionality through encoding, experienced as exclusion at the site of encounter.

Kenya

Kenya demonstrates extensive humanitarian investment in digital educational infrastructure. In 2013, UNHCR and the Vodafone Foundation launched the Instant Network Schools (INS) program, establishing 13 digital learning centers targeting 18,000 students (Vodafone Foundation, 2014). The program expanded to 19 centers by January 2026 across Kenya within a global network serving over 382,000 students (UNHCR, 2026b). UNHCR maintains the Education Management Information System (EMIS) to track administrative data from education facilities serving refugees and host communities (UNHCR, 2024). "Daily logs of INS use are recorded and uploaded to a global platform; which helps to track utilization, flag challenges, and identify areas for re-design or capacity building" (UNHCR, 2026b), rendering classroom activity visible through global monitoring systems.

Yet this monitoring infrastructure does not represent the full scope of humanitarian educational legitimacy in Kenya. In the 2021 national examination, refugee-led secondary schools achieved 78% university entry rates compared to 3% in UNHCR-funded schools (Aden, 2024). This stark disparity illustrates a key limit of algorithmic morality: that computational legibility does not determine educational quality or community legitimacy. At the operational dimension, the contrast reflects a different accountability structure. Where platform-mediated systems track utilization and completion rates, refugee-led schools establish legitimacy through "strict administrative oversight, which promotes effective service delivery" (p. 398), with direct accountability to parents rather than to donor-facing dashboards. As Aden (2024) observes, "INGO-run systems frequently prioritise upward accountability to donors, whose priorities, and perspectives on areas of need may differ, often at the expense of downward accountability to aid beneficiaries" (p. 403). At the infrastructural dimension, the "daily logs" uploaded to global platforms (UNHCR, 2026b) can exemplify this upward accountability logic. Families' choice to pay tuition fees, even in the face of tuition-free UNHCR-funded alternatives, forms an independent legitimacy pathway that humanitarian platforms do not control and cannot condition.

This alternative order is not simply a practical workaround. Refugee communities in Dadaab understand education as "a pathway to prosperity, more freedom, and as an 'exit license' out of camps," reflecting "'active citizenship' despite their lack of legal citizenship status" (Aden, 2024, p. 397). The student government further "serves as a system of support for students in relation to their learning and general wellbeing," with members "emotionally support[ing] their peers in difficult times" (p. 401). These resonate with the relational and civic dimensions of inclusion that UNESCO (2021) articulates at the discursive dimension yet are produced outside the digital systems designed to deliver them. Kenya thus reveals how algorithmic morality coexists at the site of encounter with alternative legitimacy structures that operate outside encoded systems.

Algorithmic Morality: Scope and Limits

Taken together, the cases show algorithmic morality as a dominant but not fully determining field-level logic in humanitarian education governance. The contrast can be understood through three structural dimensions analytically derived from the cases (see Table 4).

Table 4

Algorithmic Morality Across Cases: Structural Dimensions

Dimension	Jordan	Kenya
Infrastructural Integration	Tight integration of UNHCR, state systems, and partner platforms; cascading exclusion across systems	Digital humanitarian systems and national education infrastructure operating in non-integrated layers; structural separation enabling alternative legitimacy pathways
Institutional Coupling	State reinforcement of algorithmic conditionality; biometric card requirement for public school enrollment	National examination system independent of humanitarian registration requirements; parallel legitimacy pathways
Temporality	Continuous compliance requirement; mobility and documentation loss producing structural exclusion	Event-based validation without ongoing compliance; credentials not contingent on continuous verification of presence

These dimensions are not intended to be exhaustive but rather identify the conditions under which algorithmic morality intensifies or remains partial. It intensifies toward fuller determination when infrastructures are tightly integrated, when national systems reinforce rather than counterbalance data requirements, and when legitimacy depends on continuous compliance that displacement itself makes difficult to sustain. It remains partial and contested when infrastructures are loosely coupled, when national systems provide independent evaluative anchors, and when legitimacy can be established through event-based rather than continuous validation. Additionally, the three dimensions do not operate independently. In Jordan, tight infrastructural integration, strong state coupling, and continuous compliance requirements converge, leaving no structural space for alternative legitimacy. In Kenya, by contrast, the absence of such convergence means each loose coupling creates spaces that remain beyond the full reach of algorithmic governance.

Among these dimensions, temporality may be the most revealing analytically. Infrastructural integration and institutional coupling are features of system design. Continuous compliance requirements, however, directly interact with the conditions of displacement, where mobility, disruption, and documentation loss are common. In this context, algorithmic morality does not simply regulate access but risks translating the structural conditions of displacement into forms of moral and administrative failure. Consequently, these observations reveal the governance contexts in which algorithmic morality becomes morally binding and those in which alternative moral orders of educational recognition can be sustained.

Discussion

From Data Crisis to Meaning Crisis

The preceding analysis points to a deeper implication: global disorder does not primarily generate a crisis of data, but a reorganization of moral meaning, as algorithmic systems increasingly mediate how educational worth and legitimacy are evaluated in humanitarian contexts. Displaced learners are now documentable, trackable, and algorithmically legible at scale. When access necessitates datafication and surveillance-based care, the capacity to maintain dignity, belonging, and educational purposes can be compromised. What is lost here is not information but meaning, the relational and contextual dimensions of education that resist algorithmic reduction. This erosion does not happen through clear exclusionary policies but through technical architectures that quietly shape whose needs are actionable.

The meaning crisis unfolds along three dimensions corresponding to the moral vocabularies examined in this analysis. First, relational understandings of inclusion contract into individual engagement metrics: belonging is operationalized as platform behaviors that can be logged, aggregated, and reported to donors. What cannot be measured—whether a learner feels welcomed or community bonds strengthen—falls outside the evaluative frame. Second, procedural flexibility in protection hardens into algorithmic thresholds: access promised in policy, irrespective of legal status, becomes conditional on biometric verification. Third, moral imperatives of urgency transform into severity rankings with calculations that position crises in a competitive relationship. Across these dimensions, what disappears is not data but the thick, relational meanings that humanitarian education has historically claimed to serve.

This crisis of meaning directly addresses how global disorder reshapes the value systems of education. The reordering is not merely geopolitical but axiological, entailing a reorganization of the moral foundations through which education claims significance. When computational legibility becomes the condition of recognition, disorder operates through infrastructure, not despite it. Digital systems encode resolutions to global disorder, determining which moral claims become actionable and which remain outside institutional view. The humanitarian field's turn toward datafication thus represents not a technical adaptation to crisis but a transformation in what education means under conditions of displacement.

Engaging Counterarguments: Rationales for Datafication

Humanitarian organizations adopt datafication for reasons that deserve serious consideration, including efficiency, accuracy, and fraud prevention (Jacobsen, 2017). Digital platforms enable curriculum delivery at scale, impossible through traditional methods, providing educational continuity on the move. Biometric identity systems enable refugees to prove educational achievements when documentation is lost. Digital infrastructures can support undertrained teachers in resource-scarce contexts with structured lesson plans and assessment tools. Real-time monitoring can identify children at risk of dropout, and interoperable digital infrastructures allow refugees to access services across agencies without repeated registration. From this

perspective, datafication rationalizes chaos, making visible and actionable what would otherwise remain unknown in contexts of extreme institutional fragility. This study acknowledges these rationales yet argues that the benefits they promise come at the cost of systematic meaning loss. Relational and contextual educational values are translated into computational forms and the tensions within the surveillance-care nexus remain unresolved.

Contributions and Future Directions

This study makes two primary contributions to scholarship on digital governance and humanitarian education. First, it conceptualizes algorithmic morality as a field-level logic. Unlike organizational policies that can be attributed to identifiable decisions and actors, algorithmic morality operates through distributed evaluative criteria embedded across multiple actors and infrastructures, diffusing accountability. The analysis demonstrates how this logic structures recognition (who becomes visible as deserving), conditionality (what makes care accessible), and hierarchy (which crises merit attention). Building on scholarship examining datafication in humanitarian contexts (Firoz, 2024; Madianou, 2019; Sandvik et al., 2014) and EdTech governance (Komljenovic, 2021; Williamson, 2022), this framework theorizes how digital systems actively constitute moral worth through humanitarian education governance. Algorithmic morality does not merely reflect or implement pre-existing values but fundamentally transforms them through technical encoding.

Second, it presents a moral-technical analytic for examining policy-infrastructure relations as sites of moral encoding. This interpretive approach reads policy commitments as moral texts and digital platforms as technical specifications, refusing to separate technical design from ethical judgment. Applied to the moral vocabularies of inclusion, protection, and urgency, the analysis reveals systematic patterns: relational dimensions compress into individual metrics, procedural flexibility hardens into algorithmic thresholds, and ethical imperatives transform into severity rankings. The method demonstrates encoding not as a neutral translation but as a selective amplification of what fits with computational logic.

Taken together, this study shows that alternative accountability structures can coexist with datafied governance. Where Jordan demonstrates algorithmic morality's coercive power through highly coordinated datafication, Kenya shows its limits, as educational legitimacy can be produced through community-based accountability independent of platform metrics. Algorithmic legibility constitutes one, but not the only, path to institutional recognition. This finding challenges the assumption that datafication can govern all moral evaluation in humanitarian education, opening an inquiry into the conditions that enable alternative moral orders to persist.

Future research could pursue several directions. First, comparative analysis could examine how the dimensions identified in this study operate in other humanitarian education contexts, and how humanitarian agencies and state actors respond to the limits of algorithmic governance. Second, longitudinal research could assess whether the coexistence of accountability structures represents stable pluralism or a transitional moment as humanitarian data infrastructures expand and integrate.

Finally, ethnographic investigation could examine how displaced learners and educators experience and contest algorithmic governance in daily practice, revealing resistance strategies, workarounds, and meaning-making processes.

Conclusion

This paper has developed algorithmic morality as a conceptual framework for understanding how digital infrastructures reorder moral valuation in humanitarian education. The framework illuminates a systematic pattern: confronted with legitimacy deficits, humanitarian agencies adopt datafication as a strategic response, translating moral commitments into computational operations that govern recognition, care, and access. The cases of Jordan and Kenya illustrate these dynamics while showing variations in mechanisms and consequences. The coexistence of algorithmic and alternative forms of legitimacy indicates that datafied accountability, despite its hegemonic tendencies, does not preclude alternative bases for educational recognition. Multiple accountability structures can coexist within the same governance field.

This analysis offers implications for humanitarian education governance. It suggests that agencies, policymakers, and donors might develop accountability frameworks that recognize relational dimensions of care alongside quantitative metrics and require assessments of surveillance-care entanglements prior to scaling digital systems. Educators and community leaders could document alternative legitimacy practices as evidence of educational value beyond platform indicators. Researchers can extend this work through ethnographic investigation of how displaced communities navigate algorithmic governance and sustain meaning within and beyond datafied infrastructures.

As global disorder intensifies (Coulibaly & Qureshi, 2025; United Nations, 2018) and digital humanitarianism expands, the moral stakes grow more urgent. Education systems shape not only knowledge but also recognition, belonging, and futurity. When access to these values becomes conditional on computational legibility, we must ask: whose morality do algorithms encode, whose flourishing do data systems enable, and whose worlds remain unsayable within digital infrastructures that increasingly govern humanitarian life?

Youngbeen Ahn *is a doctoral researcher at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. Her research focuses on global education governance and policy, education in displacement contexts, and comparative and international education. Her current work examines algorithmic governance and datafication in humanitarian education.*
https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8714-0507

References

Aden, H. (2024). Localised refugee education: Understanding nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Kenya's Dadaab camps. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, *18*(3), 388–407. https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2024.2377425

Amoore, L. (2020). *Cloud ethics: Algorithms and the attributes of ourselves and others*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478009276

Andrejevic, M. (2020). *Automated media*. Routledge.

Auld, E., & Elfert, M. (2024). The waning legitimacy of international organisations and their promissory visions. *Comparative Education, 60*(3), 377-400. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2024.2371271

Bajaj, M., & Bartlett, L. (2017). Critical transnational curriculum for immigrant and refugee students. *Curriculum Inquiry, 47*(1), 25-35. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2016.1254499

Ball, S. J. (1993). What is policy? Texts, trajectories and toolboxes. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 13*(2), 10–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/0159630930130203

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27–40. https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027

Bowker, G. C., & Star, S. L. (1999). *Sorting things out: Classification and its consequences*. The MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/6352.001.0001

Cai, Y., & Mountford, N. (2022). Institutional logics analysis in higher education research. *Studies in Higher Education, 47*(8), 1627–1651. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.1946032

Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). Data colonialism: Rethinking big data's relation to the contemporary subject. *Television & New Media, 20*(4), 336–349. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476418796632

Coulibaly, B. S., & Qureshi, Z. (2025, October 14). *The world is changing, multilateralism must too.* Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-world-is-changing-multilateralism-must-too/

Dalton, C. M., & Thatcher, J. (2014, May 12). *What does a critical data studies look like, and why do we care?* Society & Space. https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/what-does-a-critical-data-studies-look-like-and-why-do-we-care

Donini, A., & Maxwell, D. (2013). From face-to-face to face-to-screen: Remote management, effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian action in

insecure environments. *International Review of the Red Cross, 95*(890), 383–413. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383114000265

Dryden-Peterson, S. (2017). Refugee education: Education for an unknowable future. *Curriculum Inquiry, 47*(1), 14-24. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2016.1255935

Duffield, M. (2019). Post-humanitarianism: Governing precarity through adaptive design. *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs, 1*(1), 15-27. https://doi.org/10.7227/JHA.003

Education Cannot Wait. (2022). *Achieving results: A new way of working. Strategic plan 2023-2026*. https://www.educationcannotwait.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/f_ecw1016_strategic_report.pdf

Edwards, D. B., Okitsu, T., Da Costa, R., & Kitamura, Y. (2018). Organizational legitimacy in the global education policy field: Learning from UNESCO and the global monitoring report. *Comparative Education Review, 61*(1), 31-63. https://doi.org/10.1086/695440

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. Longman.

Fiori, J., Espada, F., Field, J., & Dicker, S. (2016). *The echo chamber: Results, management and the humanitarian effectiveness agenda*. Humanitarian Affairs Team & Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, Save the Children.

Firoz, M. (2024). Quantifying vulnerability: Humanitarian datafication and the neophilia of integrated power. *Cultural Anthropology, 39*(3), 348-373. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca39.3.02

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12*(2), 219–245. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363

Grek, S. (2020). Prophets, saviours and saints: Symbolic governance and the rise of a transnational metrological field. *International Review of Education*, *66*(2–3), 139–166. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-020-09844-z

Human Rights Watch. (2016, August 16). *"We're afraid for their future": Barriers to education for Syrian refugee children in Jordan.* https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/08/16/were-afraid-their-future/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children-jordan

Human Rights Watch. (2020, June 26). *"I want to continue to study": Barriers to secondary education for Syrian refugee children in Jordan.* https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/06/26/i-want-continue-study/barriers-secondary-education-syrian-refugee-children-jordan

Human Rights Watch. (2023, December 13). *Refugee forum: Drop bureaucratic barriers to education.*

https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/13/refugee-forum-drop-bureaucratic-barriers-education

Jacobsen, K. L. (2015). Experimentation in humanitarian locations: UNHCR and biometric registration of Afghan refugees. *Security Dialogue*, *46*(2), 144–164. https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614552545

Jacobsen, K. L. (2017). On humanitarian refugee biometrics and new forms of intervention. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, *11*(4), 529–551. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2017.1347856

Khan, A. (2023). *Understanding trajectories of refugee inclusion in national education systems: Policy and data perspectives from Jordan (Background paper).* United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387704

Kitchin, R., & Lauriault, T. P. (2018). Toward critical data studies: Charting and unpacking data assemblages and their work. In J. Thatcher, J. Eckert, & A. Shears (Eds.), *Thinking big data in geography: New regimes, new research* (pp. 12–24). University of Nebraska Press.

Komljenovic, J. (2021). The rise of education rentiers: Digital platforms, digital data and rents. *Learning, Media and Technology, 46*(3), 320–332. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2021.1891422

Kuroda, K., & Nakasato, L. (2023). The historical development of SDG4: Evolution of the global governance of education. In S. Urata, K. Kuroda, & Y. Tonegawa (Eds.), *Sustainable development disciplines for humanity: Breaking down the 5Ps—people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnerships* (pp. 37-53). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-4859-6_3

Lopez, V. K., Nika, A., Blanton, C., Talley, L., & Garfield, R. (2023). Can severity of a humanitarian crisis be quantified? Assessment of the INFORM severity index. *Globalization and Health, 19*, Article 7. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-023-00907-y

Madianou, M. (2019). Technocolonialism: Digital innovation and data practices in the humanitarian response to refugee crises. *Social Media + Society, 5*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119863146

McIntyre, J., & Neuhaus, S. (2021). Theorising policy and practice in refugee education: Conceptualising 'safety', 'belonging', 'success' and 'participatory parity' in England and Sweden. *British Educational Research Journal, 47*(4), 796-816. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3701

Menashy, F., & Zakharia, Z. (2020). Private engagement in refugee education and the promise of digital humanitarianism. *Oxford Review of Education, 46*(3), 313–330. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2019.1682536

Meyer, J. W., Boli, J., Thomas, G. M., & Ramirez, F. O. (1997). World society and the nation-state. *American Journal of Sociology, 103*(1), 144–181. https://doi.org/10.1086/231174

Norwegian Refugee Council. (2016). *Securing status: Syrian refugees and the documentation of legal status, identity, and family relationships in Jordan*. https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/securing-status-syrian-refugees-and-the-documentation-of-legal-status-identity-and-family-relationships-in-jordan

Peacock, V., Bruun, M. K., Dungey, C. E., & Shapiro, M. (2023, December 5). Surveillance. In H. Nieber (Ed.), *The open encyclopedia of anthropology*. https://doi.org/10.29164/23surveillance

Poljanšek, K., Papadimitriou, E., Marzi, S., Dalla Valle, D., Kozma, R., Salvi, A., Valli, I., Singer, O., Jaber, F., & Mukhaye, E. (2026). *INFORM Severity Index: Concept and methodology, version 2026*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/2266313

Read, R., Taithe, B., & Mac Ginty, R. (2016). Data hubris? Humanitarian information systems and the mirage of technology. *Third World Quarterly, 37*(8), 1314-1331. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1136208

Sandvik, K. B., Gabrielsen Jumbert, M., Karlsrud, J., & Kaufmann, M. (2014). Humanitarian technology: A critical research agenda. *International Review of the Red Cross, 96*(893), 219–242. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383114000344

Sayer, A. (2011). *Why things matter to people: Social science, values and ethical life*. Cambridge University Press.

Scott, J. C. (1998). *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. Yale University Press.

Seaver, N. (2017). Algorithms as culture: Some tactics for the ethnography of algorithmic systems. *Big Data & Society, 4*(2), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951717738104

Sellar, S., & Lingard, B. (2013). The OECD and global governance in education. *Journal of Education Policy, 28*(5), 710–725. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2013.779791

Shore, C., & Wright, S. (2015). Audit culture revisited: Rankings, ratings, and the reassembling of society. *Current Anthropology, 56*(3), 421–444. https://doi.org/10.1086/681534

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research.* SAGE Publications.

Taylor, L. (2017). What is data justice? The case for connecting digital rights and freedoms globally. *Big Data & Society, 4*(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951717736335

Thornton, P. H., & Ocasio, W. (2008). Institutional logics. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, R. Suddaby, & K. Sahlin (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 99–129). SAGE Publications.

Tröhler, D. (2016). Curriculum history or the educational construction of Europe in the long nineteenth century. *European Educational Research Journal, 15*(3), 279–297. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904116645111

United Nations. (2018, November 9). *Rising nationalism threatens multilateralism's 70-year 'proven track record' of saving lives, preventing wars, speakers tell Security Council*. https://press.un.org/en/2018/sc13570.doc.htm

United Nations Children's Fund. (2024a). *Learning Passport 2023 annual report*. https://www.learningpassport.org/reports/learning-passport-2023-annual-report

United Nations Children's Fund. (2024b). *Learning Passport 2024 annual report*. https://www.learningpassport.org/reports/2024-annual-report

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (1945). *Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.* https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/constitution

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. https://doi.org/10.54675/ASRB4722

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (n.d.-a). Continuous registration in UNHCR operations. In *Guidance on registration and identity management*. https://www.unhcr.org/registration-guidance/chapter8/continuous-registration-in-unhcr-operations/

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (n.d.-b). *Registration and identity management*. https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/protect-human-rights/protection/registration-and-identity-management

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (n.d.-c). Registration as an identity management process. In *Guidance on registration and identity management*. https://www.unhcr.org/registration-guidance/chapter5/registration/

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (n.d.-d). Registration tools. In *Guidance on registration and identity management*. https://www.unhcr.org/registration-guidance/chapter3/registration-tools/

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2019). *Refugee education 2030: A strategy for refugee inclusion*. https://www.unhcr.org/media/education-2030-strategy-refugee-education

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2020, March 2). *Jordan: Statistics for Registered Syrian Refugees (as of 29 February 2020)*. https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/74320

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2021). *Global report 2020*. https://reliefweb.int/report/world/unhcr-global-report-2020

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2024, December 13). *Education as a catalyst for refugee and host community integration in Kenya*. https://www.unhcr.org/blogs/education-as-a-catalyst-for-refugee-and-host-community-integration-in-kenya/

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2025). *Global Report 2024*. https://www.unhcr.org/publications/global-report-2024

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2026, February 25). *Jordan: Country factsheet (January 2026)*. https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/121262

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2026). *Vodafone Foundation.* https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/our-partners/private-sector/vodafone-foundation

Vodafone Foundation. (2014, October 4). *UNHCR & Vodafone Foundation bring tablet learning to refugees.* https://foundation.vodafone.com/news/vodafone-foundation/unhcr

Williamson, B. (2016). Digital education governance: Data visualization, predictive analytics, and 'real-time' policy instruments. *Journal of Education Policy, 31*(2), 123–141. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2015.1035758

Williamson, B. (2022). Big EdTech. *Learning, Media and Technology, 47*(2), 157–162. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2022.2063888

Williamson, B., Bayne, S., & Shay, S. (2020). The datafication of teaching in higher education: Critical issues and perspectives. *Teaching in Higher Education, 25*(4), 351-365. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1748811

Williamson, B., & Piattoeva, N. (2019). Objectivity as standardization in data-scientific education policy, technology and governance. *Learning, Media and Technology, 44*(1), 64–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2018.1556215

Yanow, D. (2015). Making sense of policy practices: Interpretation and meaning. In F. Fischer, D. Torgerson, A. Durnová, & M. Orsini (Eds.), *Handbook of critical policy studies* (pp. 401–421). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781783472352.00031

Zapp, M. (2020). The authority of science and the legitimacy of international organisations: OECD, UNESCO and World Bank in global education

governance. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, *51*(7), 1022-1041. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2019.1702503

Zuboff, S. (2015). Big other: Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization. *Journal of Information Technology*, *30*(1), 75–89. https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2015.5

Human Rights and Human Capital: The Influence of the UNHCR and the OECD on the Swedish Refugee Education Reform

Mary Allison Steel
Stanford University

This study analyzes differences between the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) global scripts and how they influence Sweden's refugee education reform. This study examines human rights-based policies as recommended in the UNHCR's Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion (2023) and human capital-based policies in the OECD's Strength Through Diversity: Spotlight Report for Sweden (2019). I compare these recommendations to the enacted policies outlined in the Swedish Ministry of Education's legal framework, the School Act. I argue that tensions between human rights and human capital in Sweden's refugee education reform are exacerbated by global pressures, supporting world society theory. The findings reveal the degree of alignment between each international governmental organization's policy recommendations and Sweden's refugee education reforms, contributing to the literature on refugee education both globally and in Sweden.

Keywords: International Governmental Organizations, human rights, human capital, refugee education, education reform, Sweden

Introduction

Human rights in education emphasize fundamental freedoms that all individuals are entitled to access education (Suarez & Ramirez, 2007). In contrast, human capital in education analyzes the economic value and rate of return in schooling, and strongly suggests that schooling is a good investment in propelling a country's economy (Hanushek, 2012). Worldwide educational systems rely heavily on human rights and human capital rationales to justify why education reform is important and why change is necessary (Choi, 2024). Refugee education reforms in Sweden serve as a quintessential landscape where both human rights and human capital frameworks have significantly shaped education policy, as the Swedish education system simultaneously guarantees refugee children legal rights to education and yet policy is explicitly referenced towards their integration and future labor market participation (Olsson et al., 2023) Yet, there is limited research on how policymakers reconcile the potential tensions between rights-based inclusion and economically-driven integration goals within Swedish refugee and global refugee education reform. This study is a qualitative comparison between the human

© 2026, Steel. CC BY 4.0.

rights-based policies as recommended in the UNHCR's 2023 *Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion* and the human capital-based policies in the OECD's 2019 *Strength Through Diversity: Spotlight Report for Sweden* to ascertain the differences between the UNHCR's and OECD's global scripts and how they both influence Sweden's refugee education reform landscape.

Background

The Global Rise of Human Rights in Refugee Education

The rise of human rights-oriented education reforms is linked closely to processes of globalization following World War II. In this era, advocacy for human rights became a worldwide movement (Ramirez et al., 2007). After its formation in 1945, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which established education as a fundamental human right in Article 26 (UNESCO, 2021). Article 26 increased global awareness of education as a human right and pressured governments to ensure access for all (Ramirez et al., 2007; UNICEF, 2023). Shortly after, the UNHCR was established in 1950 to support the millions of individuals who were displaced in the aftermath of World War II (Goodwin-Gill et al., 2021). The UNHCR's 1951 *Convention of a Refugee* became the first legal document to define refugees and their rights, enshrining educational access as a fundamental right through Article 22. Ongoing conflict, human rights violations, and persecution have led to 117.4 million people being forcibly displaced worldwide, (UNHCR, 2025). As of 2025, the UNHCR recognizes over 42.5 million individuals as refugees, with 40% of that population being identified as children under the age of eighteen. Over the last 10 years, the number of refugee minors has more than doubled (Friedrich, 2016). Currently, nearly half of refugee children worldwide are without access to education (UNHCR, 2025). In response to the growing number of refugee children and the ongoing challenges to educational access in their host countries, UNHCR developed education briefs outlining human rights-based policy recommendations to improve access. The UNHCR's (2023) *Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion*[1], now serves as their most comprehensive publication. It builds upon the momentum of all published strategies of refugee education that precede it, with a set of policy recommendations and goals aimed at improving refugee education by 2030.

The Global Rise of Human Capital in Refugee Education

Human capital theory was quickly embraced by economists in the 1950s as a new way of thinking about education as a significant contributor to economic growth (Holden & Biddle, 2017). Research using the human capital framework examines the "rates of return" to education, which refers to the proportional increase in earnings associated with years of schooling, and theorizes how increased knowledge can bolster economic outcomes in modern societies (Crocker, 2006; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2012; Klees, 2016). Human capital ideology encourages educational

[1] Henceforth referred to as the "UNHCR document"

investment, and the OECD has been central in measuring the skills and competencies that give modern human capital its value (Cardoso, 2020). Created in 1961, the OECD was founded during the political and economic reconstruction following World War II (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Wolfe, 2008). In the 1960s, improving education quality became a key focus of global reforms. Soon after, OECD-influenced education policy became closely aligned with economic priorities (Papadopoulos, 1994; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). One of the ways in which the OECD claims to promote quality education as a means to ensure human capital development is through their international large-scale assessment, the Program for International Student Assessment, commonly known as the PISA. In the OECD's global prominence, PISA has played a vital role in driving, supporting, and shaping education policy and reform efforts worldwide (Fischman et al., 2018). Rising global refugee populations have created considerable pressure on OECD countries to provide accommodation and support integration (Cerna, 2019). The OECD's research on refugee education fulfills a vital need, as PISA scores have historically demonstrated how refugees continually yield lower results in comparison to their native peers (Cerna, 2019).

Recently, the OECD has begun to apply human capital-based reform pressure on the sector of refugee education, as outlined in their numerous *OECD Working Papers* publications, such as *Refugee Education: Integration Models and Practices in OECD Countries* (Cerna et al., 2019), or their country-based *Strength Through Diversity Spotlight* reports. The OECD's (Cerna et al., 2019) *Strength Through Diversity: Spotlight Report for Sweden*[2] provides policy recommendations to improve the quality of refugee education in a country with a substantial refugee population. These policy recommendations focus on future labor market integration, utilizing education as a key investment in human capital to support refugees' sustained economic integration in Sweden.

The Rise of Refugee Education in Sweden

Historically, Sweden has received more refugees per capita than any other European country (Jahan, 2016). As Swedish immigration policies expanded to offer asylum to individuals escaping conflict, refugee population rates have steadily risen in Sweden following World War II (Åmark, 2013; Sellström, 1999). In 2015, almost one in three students in Sweden had a refugee background (Cerna et al., 2019). Swedish educational policy reformation began to focus on long-term integration for refugees through education (Browder, 2018). Although Sweden holds strong policies for providing educational access for refugees, managing their refugee population is vital, as it can affect future labor markets. As refugees face ongoing difficulties in establishing a school-to-work "pay-off" in the labor market, the socioeconomic integration of refugees is a top priority in Swedish migration policy (Hélio et al., 2019; Wiesbrock, 2011).

[2] Henceforth referred to as the "OECD document"

The Swedish Ministry of Education's *School Act*, otherwise known as *Skollagen*, is the governing legal framework for Swedish education, representing all levels of education and servicing all individuals who are entitled to the education system, including refugees (Sveriges Riksdag, 2024). Sweden's large influx of asylum seekers has strained its educational systems, highlighting a number of educational challenges, such as long-term integration for refugees into the community (Cerna et al., 2019). However, the 2015 increase of refugee arrivals in Sweden also created a window of opportunity for path-breaking policy reformation on refugee education, enabling the Swedish government to introduce new approaches for market integration (Hagelund, 2020). Refugee education reform in Sweden can be observed as both human rights and human capital-oriented by promoting both educational access and quality for refugees, as outlined and enacted within the Swedish Ministry of Education's legal educational framework.

Critical Literature Review

The current emphasis on human rights education reflects a growing understanding of the individual person as a member of a global society rather than just a national citizen, and many studies have examined how human rights as a world culture have shaped educational curricula (Bromley & Andina, 2010; Choi, 2024; Meyer et al., 1997; Ramirez et al., 2007). Much of the literature regarding ideals of human rights within refugee education focuses heavily on the notion of access, and the specific global obligations to the educational rights that refugees hold is outlined by the 1951 Refugee Conventions (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Willems & Vernimmen, 2018). Extensive research suggests that the global commitment of "education for all" for refugees is dependent upon how individual nation-states interpret their responsibilities within these international declarations and treaties (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; McIntyre & Neuhaus, 2021; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

The United Nations' focus on education as a human right and the OECD's reliance on human capital lead to different emphases on education (Cardoso, 2020; Choi, 2024). Literature on human capital-based educational policies often refers to the OECD as a mechanism for contributing those ideologies into the globalization of education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Wiseman & Taylor, 2017). Research on the quality of education for refugees argues that in the midst of conflict and war, many children are not able to attend school, and for those who can or are in a host country where they have access to education, the quality of that education is often poor (Bromley & Andina, 2010; Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Kirk & Winthrop, 2007). While the human rights approach is often positioned against the human capital approach in their conflicting implications for educational policies and practices, some authors suggest that they are more closely aligned than perceived (Choi, 2024; Meyer et al., 1992; Robeyns, 2006). This reinforces the applicability of world society theory as the theoretical framework guiding this study, specifically in

examining how global human rights and human capital frameworks shape refugee education reform in Sweden. The literature on educational access for refugees in Sweden underscores Sweden's efforts to uphold human rights while providing legal access to free and public education for all (Berhanu, 2011; Hélio et al., 2019; McIntyre & Neuhaus, 2021). Other comparative studies that examine Sweden's refugee education policies in comparison to other countries demonstrate that Swedish refugee education policies are often positively evaluated. These studies underscore the influence that Sweden holds in setting policy standards for refugee education, which other countries then borrow (Abdelhady & Al Ariss, 2022; Bevelander & Irastorza, 2020; Bucken-Knapp et al., 2020; Niemeyer, 2015; Nordgren, 2017;;). Although refugee education literature in Sweden continually refers to access and human rights, quality of education for refugees has become a new central theme in Swedish education policy, especially in the wake of Sweden's declining performance on international assessments, like the OECD's PISA (Bergh, 2020; Dhawan et al., 2023; Edmark et al., 2023). There is substantial literature that examines the effect of refugee education and their labor outputs as explored through human capital (Abdelhady & Al Ariss, 2022; Bevelander, 2011; Bevelander & Lundh, 2007; Rooth, 1999).

In addition to the lack of literature on Intergovernmental Organization's (IGO) influence on refugee education reform, the significance of this study is underscored by Sweden's historical acceptance of refugees, Sweden's extensive research output on refugee education, and Sweden's prominent relationships with both the UNHCR and the OECD (Crul et al., 2016; Jahan, 2016). As IGOs are an essential backbone in world culture, many scholars in the field argue that a culturally informed analysis of IGOs are necessary to understand key aspects of global development (Boli & Thomas, 1999; Lechner & Boli, 2008). Sweden is a critical site for examining how two major IGOs influence policy frameworks in refugee education reform, as their policies are shaped by strong commitments to both human rights and human capital market integration. Although existing literature addresses human rights and human capital in the global education reform landscape, there is a scarcity of research that comparatively examines their combined respective influence on the global and Swedish refugee education reform landscape. By applying world society theory, this study addresses this gap by examining how global human rights and human capital frameworks are transmitted through IGOs and reflected in Sweden's refugee education policies.

Conceptual Framework

World society theory offers a sociological perspective that explains the relationships among a globalized set of values and the institutions that influence those values (Meyer et al., 1997). While world society scholarship has continuously examined the process of global diffusion in educational norms, country-level analyses remain underdeveloped, and furthermore, the analyses on refugee education are vastly

limited. Focusing on Sweden allows the observation of how IGO-driven norms are interpreted and institutionalized within refugee education policy. World society theory suggests that these global frameworks become embedded in national policies through processes of diffusion, standardization, and legitimation, which this study seeks to identify in the Swedish context of refugee education reform. This framework guides the central research question by examining how global human rights and human capital norms are transmitted through IGOs and reflected in Sweden's refugee education policies. Here, we can understand how influential IGOs are as an essential contributor to global educational development, a medium of influence in world society theory (Boli & Thomas, 1999; Lechner & Boli, 2008).

The United Nations has continuously facilitated convergence in educational policies among nation-states, starting with its stance on access to education as a fundamental human right and continuing with its ongoing global influence on education policy (Meyer et al., 1997). As the OECD explicitly aims to measure the educational advancements of a country and how they correlate to that country's future economy in comparison to other nations, the OECD itself is now a significant contributor to these global norms. Through this lens, the OECD's emphasis on measurement and quality can be understood as part of a broader global script that shapes how nations evaluate and structure their educational reforms.

Conversely, this research also underscores Sweden's reciprocal role in legitimizing both IGOs as pivotal actors in the global refugee education reform landscape. By comparing IGO policy recommendations to enacted policies within Sweden's School Act, this study applies world society theory to assess how global norms are interpreted, adapted, and institutionalized at the national level. This analytical comparison can underscore the influence that IGOs have on refugee educational policy, amplifying principles of educational access and quality for refugee children both in the nation-state of Sweden and on a global scale. This approach allows for a clearer understanding of how alignment between global frameworks and national policy reflects broader processes of globalization in education.

Methods and Data

Data Selection

This paper uses a qualitative case study to compare two policy documents produced by the UNHCR, OECD, and the Swedish Ministry of Education's School Act. The OECD's (2019) *Strength Through Diversity: Spotlight Report for Sweden* reflects the OECD's human capital approach, and the UNHCR's (2023) *Refugee Education 2030* advances a human rights-based framework. The contrasting documents both amplify the competing global logics which are largely articulated and debated within education reform. The OECD's document represents the most comprehensive set of refugee education policy recommendations specifically directed at Sweden, and is grounded in a human capital-based framework of future economic participation and

acclimation. In contrast, the UNHCR's document provides a set of global policy objectives on refugee education with articulated goals to be fulfilled globally by 2030 and reflect a human rights-based agenda. Sweden's refugee education reform was selected as the case study due to its substantial refugee population.

Documents represent an alternative source of data for a qualitative study and offer the advantage of language that has been given thoughtful attention (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Additionally, documents will allow interpretation of the meaning that IGOs assign to specific ideas or happenings (Creswell 2014; Merriam 2002). The 2023 UNHCR document includes a total of 9 policy recommendations for refugee education. The 2019 OECD document for Sweden includes a total of 20 policy recommendations for Swedish refugee education. The strength of published policy documents as a data source are the insights and clues within the phenomena of research, as it can reveal details about goals and decisions that may not be properly articulated by observation or through an interview (Merriam, 1998; Merriam, 2002).

Data Analysis

This study employs a deductive qualitative content analysis across two IGO documents, compromising a total of 29 policy recommendations between the UNHCR and the OECD. The aim of this analysis is to ascertain and compare dominant "global scripts" of human rights versus human capital embedded within policy language, to determine the degree of alignment in Sweden's national education policy for refugee education.

First, both documents were read in full to establish contextual familiarity and identify recurrent thematic patterns. Drawing on recurring conceptualization between the UNHCR and the OECD, a codebook was developed deductively based on theoretically informed categories to systematically examine language in policy framing across organizations. The use of language and specific words are advantageous in deriving meaning from the analysis (Creswell, 2014). Human rights literature from the UNHCR emphasized policy language of "*Access"* and the right to education. "*Quality*" was defined in policy language from the OECD that uplifted human capital, focusing on educational outcomes, instructional effectiveness, assessments, and performance. Following this, each of the total 29 policy recommendations between both documents were line-by-line coded into an assigned category of access of quality. The coding scheme was applied repeatedly to the dataset of policies to enhance analytical consistency, alongside analytic memos of each policy to strengthen validation. Finally, I then used the coded dataset of "*Access*" versus "*Quality*" driven policy to comparatively analyze how Sweden's School Act aligns with each policy recommendation, to discover the degree of alignment between each IGO and Sweden's enacted educational policy for refugees. This allowed me to assess whether Sweden's refugee education policy reflects more

of a human rights-based access framework in alignment with the UNHCR or a human capital-based framework, which is more closely aligned with the OECD.

Findings

This study compares the 2023 UNHCR and the 2019 OECD documents to examine how each IGO frames refugee education policy. Table 1 presents the refugee education policies globally recommended by the UNHCR in *Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion*. Here, we can clearly see the Refugee Education 2030 objectives with 9 total policy recommendations as expressed in the *Expected Results* section. In contrast, Table 2 presents the refugee education policies specifically prescribed to Sweden by the OECD in its 2019 document, the *OECD Strength Through Diversity's Spotlight Report for Sweden.* There are a total of 20 total policy recommendations as expressed in the *Policy Pointer* section.

Table 1

Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion: Objectives and Expected Results

UNHCR REFUGEE EDUCATION 2030: OBJECTIVE 1: Promote equitable and sustainable inclusion in national education systems for refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, stateless and internationally displaced persons.
Expected Result 1: National policy and emergency preparedness create the conditions to include forcibly displaced and stateless children and youth in schools and programs registered with the ministry of education.
Expected Result 2: Approaches to education in the humanitarian and development sectors are harmonized for inclusion.
Expected Result 3: Children and youth have access to all levels of formal and nonformal education within national education systems and under the same conditions as nationals.
Expected Result 4: Alternative pathways to education will be accessible in situations where formal academic education within national systems does not meet the learning needs of displaced or stateless out-of-school and/or over-age children and youth and their host communities, including those with disabilities.

UNHCR REFUGEE EDUCATION 2030: OBJECTIVE 2: Foster safe enabling environments that support learning for all students, regardless of legal status, gender, or disability.
Expected Result 1: Children and youth are prepared to learn and succeed in national education systems.
Expected Result 2: Learning environments are safe.
Expected Result 3: Learning environments are accessible to all.

UNHCR REFUGEE EDUCATION 2030: OBJECTIVE 3: Enable all learners to use their education towards sustainable futures.
Expected Result 1: Children and youth complete their education with relevant skills, knowledge, and competencies.
Expected Result 2: Girls and women have equitable opportunities for and access to education, work, community representation and leadership.

Source: (UNHCR, 2023)

Table 2

OECD Strength Through Diversity's Spotlight Report for Sweden: Priority Areas and Policy Pointers

SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 1: Facilitating the access of immigrants to school choice
Policy Pointer 3.7.1: Provide quality information and support for an active school choice so that all parents and guardians can choose schools that best respond to the needs of their children.
Policy Pointer 3.7.2: Promote lightly controlled freedom of choice to balance providing an equitable education and freedom of choice.
Policy Pointer 3.7.3: Establish concrete, robust and comprehensive definitions of disadvantage that go beyond migration status.
Policy Pointer 3.7.4: Introduce clear goals and criteria in a weighted funding program to ensure equity and consistency in school funding that supports disadvantaged students.

SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 2: Building teaching capacity
Policy Pointer 4.7.1: Increase teacher salary alongside other incentives to attract and retain teachers in disadvantaged schools.
Policy Pointer 4.7.2: Revise recruitment and teaching programs for teachers with an immigrant background to offer financial support and language training.
Policy Pointer 4.7.3: Prepare teachers for diverse classrooms through comprehensive training programs in diversity including a language component.
Policy Pointer 4.7.4: Provide continuing professional development for diversity training and facilitate networks for training and exchange.
Policy Pointer 4.7.5: Offer extra support to teachers through comprehensive mentorships and expert teams to respond to additional needs of immigrant and refugee students.

SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 3: Providing language training

Policy Pointer 5.8.1: Promote an individualized learning plan in the early assessment model to better support all newly arrived students and follow up on their language progress and needs.
Policy Pointer 5.8.2: Integrate specialized language courses, particularly Swedish as a Second Language, in the curriculum and focus on newly arrived students.
Policy Pointer 5.8.3: Increase mother tongue tuition and study guidance so that all immigrant students can access them.
Policy Pointer 5.8.4: Promote plurilingualism in schools and develop guidelines to enable a systematic implementation across all schools.
Policy Pointer 5.8.5: Offer language camps and access to leisure centers to all students irrespective of their family's situation.
Policy Pointer 5.8.6: Engage immigrant families in language learning so that they are able to support the language skills and integration of their children.

SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 4: Strengthening the management of diversity
Policy Pointer 6.7.1: Implement a diversity-conscious curriculum consistently across schools.
Policy Pointer 6.7.2: Promote inclusive education in schools so that all students can benefit from a good quality education.
Policy Pointer 6.7.3: Develop active citizenship education in schools that can help students develop democratic values and skills.
Policy Pointer 6.7.4: Offer training for administrative leadership in diversity management to prepare school leaders for increasingly diverse schools and to be able to support teachers, staff, and students.
Policy Pointer 6.7.5: Reinforce a whole school approach to foster an inclusive school climate and culture in order to welcome and integrate all students.

Source: (OECD, 2019)

The deductive coding process as illustrated in Table 3 shows the comparison between the UNHCR's document and their policy recommendation towards refugee education and the OECD's document and their refugee education policy recommendations specifically prescribed for Sweden. The UNHCR document holds a total of 9 policy recommendations, with about 78% of their policies towards refugee education being categorized as being access-oriented and only 22% being categorized as quality-driven. The UNHCR's document Objective 1, Expected Result 3 states: "*children and youth have access to all levels of formal and nonformal education within national education systems and under the same conditions as nationals.*" This demonstrates that there is a strong emphasis on access to schooling and this aligns with their human-rights approach towards refugee education. The OECD's document holds a total of twenty policy recommendations, with 65% of their policy

recommendations being categorized as quality-driven, and 35% categorized as access-driven. The OECD's document Priority Area 3, Policy Pointer 5.8.6 explicitly says "*engage immigrant families in language learning so that they are able to support the language skills and integration of their children*," and Priority Area 4, Policy Pointer 6.7.3 recommends to "*develop active citizenship education in schools that can help students develop democratic values and skills.*" Key words like "*integration"* and "*active citizenship,*" coupled with a priority on educational quality reflect the human capital-approach and long-term market integration embedded within the OECD's policy recommendations. Table 3 further summarizes the key differences between the refugee education policies recommended by the 2023 UNHCR and 2019 OECD documents.

Table 3

Differences Between Policies: UNHCR Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion and the OECD Strength Through Diversity: A Spotlight Report on Sweden

CODE	UNHCR	OECD
ACCESS	OBJECTIVE 1: Expected Result 1: National policy and emergency preparedness create the conditions to **include** forcibly displaced and stateless children and youth **in schools** and programs registered with the ministry of education.	PRIORITY AREA 1: Policy Pointer 3.7.1: Provide quality information and support for an active **school choice** so that all parents and guardians can **choose schools** that best respond to the needs of their children.
	OBJECTIVE 1: Expected Result 2: Approaches to education in the humanitarian and development sectors are harmonized for **inclusion**.	PRIORITY AREA 1: Policy Pointer 3.7.2: Promote lightly controlled freedom of **choice** to balance providing an **equitable education** and freedom of choice.
	OBJECTIVE 1: Expected Result 3: Children and youth have **access** to all levels of formal and nonformal education within national education systems and under the same conditions as nationals.	PRIORITY AREA 1: Policy Pointer 3.7.3: Establish concrete, robust and comprehensive **definitions of disadvantage** that go **beyond migration status.**

CODE	**UNHCR**	**OECD**
	OBJECTIVE 1: Expected Result 4: Alternative pathways to education will be **accessible** in situations where formal academic education within national systems does not meet the learning needs of displaced or stateless out-of-school and/or over-age children and youth and their host communities, including those with disabilities.	PRIORITY AREA 3: Policy Pointer 5.8.3: **Increase mother tongue** tuition and study guidance so that all immigrant students can access them.
		PRIORITY AREA 3: Policy Pointer 5.8.5: Offer language camps and access to leisure centers to all students irrespective of their family's situation.
	OBJECTIVE 2: Expected Result 2: Learning environments are **safe**.	PRIORITY AREA 4: Policy Pointer 6.7.1: Implement a **diversity-conscious curriculum** consistently across schools.
	OBJECTIVE 2: Expected Result 3: Learning environments are **accessible** to all.	
	OBJECTIVE 3: Expected Result 2: Girls and women have equitable opportunities for and **access** to education, work, community representation and leadership.	
		PRIORITY AREA 4: Policy Pointer 6.7.5: Reinforce a whole school approach to **foster an inclusive school climate and culture** in order to welcome and integrate all students.
CODE	UNHCR	OECD
QUALITY	OBJECTIVE 2: Expected Result 1: Children and youth are prepared to learn and **succeed** in national education systems.	PRIORITY AREA 1: Policy Pointer 3.7.4: **Introduce clear goals and criteria** in a weighted funding programs to ensure equity and consistency in school funding that **supports** disadvantaged students.
		PRIORITY AREA 2: Policy Pointer 4.7.1: **Increase teacher salary** alongside other

CODE	UNHCR	OECD
		incentives to **attract and retain** teachers in **disadvantaged** schools.
	OBJECTIVE 3: Expected Result 1: Children and youth complete their education with relevant **skills, knowledge, and competencies.**	PRIORITY AREA 2: Policy Pointer 4.7.2: Revise recruitment and teaching programs for **teachers with an immigrant background** to offer financial support and language training.
		PRIORITY AREA 2: Policy Pointer 4.7.3: **Prepare teachers for diverse classrooms** through comprehensive training programs in diversity including a language component.
		PRIORITY AREA 2: Policy Pointer 4.7.4: Provide continuing **professional development for diversity training** and facilitate networks for training and exchange.
		PRIORITY AREA 2: Policy Pointer 4.7.5: Offer **extra support to teachers** through comprehensive mentorships and expert teams to respond to additional **needs of immigrant and refugee students.**
		PRIORITY AREA 3: Policy Pointer 5.8.1: Promote an **individualized learning plan** in the early assessment model to **better support** all newly arrived students and follow up on their language progress and needs.
		PRIORITY AREA 3: Policy Pointer 5.8.2: Integrate specialized language courses, particularly **Swedish as a Second Language**, in the curriculum and focus on **newly arrived students.**

CODE	UNHCR	OECD
		PRIORITY AREA 3: Policy Pointer 5.8.4: Promote **plurilingualism** in schools and develop guidelines to enable a **systematic implementation** across all schools.
		PRIORITY AREA 3: Policy Pointer 5.8.6: Engage immigrant families in **language learning** so that they are able to support the language skills and **integration of their children.**
		PRIORITY AREA 4: Policy Pointer 6.7.2: Promote **inclusive education** in schools so that all students can benefit from a good quality education.
		PRIORITY AREA 4: Policy Pointer 6.7.3: Develop active citizenship education in schools that can **help students develop** democratic values and skills.
		PRIORITY AREA 4: Policy Pointer 6.7.4: **Offer training for administrative leadership in diversity management** to prepare school leaders for increasingly diverse schools and to be able to support teachers, staff, and students.

Source: (OECD, 2019; UNHCR, 2023)

A qualitative analysis of the School Act reveals a clear historical transition from access-based refugee education policies toward policies emphasizing educational quality. Table 4 compares the 2023 UNHCR recommendations with refugee education policies enacted through the School Act. The findings demonstrate that all UNHCR policy recommendations are already fulfilled within Swedish law, reflecting Sweden's long-standing commitment to human rights-based educational access.

Table 4

Swedish Laws that fulfill the Recommended Policies in UNHCR Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion

UNHCR REFUGEE EDUCATION 2030		**SWEDISH LAW**
OBJECTIVE 1: Promote equitable and sustainable inclusion in national education systems for refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, stateless and internationally displaced persons.	Expected Result 1: National policy and emergency preparedness create the conditions to include forcibly displaced and stateless children and youth in schools and programs registered with the ministry of education.	(School Act Law 2017:1115)
	Expected Result 2: Approaches to education in the humanitarian and development sectors are harmonized for inclusion.	(School Act Law 2015:246) (School Act Law 2018:1303) (School Act 2010:800)
	Expected Result 3: Children and youth have access to all levels of formal and nonformal education within national education systems and under the same conditions as nationals.	(School Act Law 2014:960) (School Act Law 2008:567) (School Act Law 2023:951) (Child Guarantee 2022)
	Expected Result 4: Alternative pathways to education will be accessible in situations where formal academic education within national systems does not meet the learning needs of displaced or stateless out-of-school and/or over-age children and youth and their host communities, including those with disabilities.	(School Act Law 2022:1315) (School Act Law 2018:1303) (School Act Law 2022:833) (School Act Law 2015:246)

UNHCR REFUGEE EDUCATION 2030		**SWEDISH LAW**
OBJECTIVE 2: Foster safe enabling environments that support learning for all students, regardless of legal status, gender, or disability.	Expected Result 1: Children and youth are prepared to learn and succeed in national education systems.	(School Act Law 2022:1315) (School Act Law 2023:951)
	Expected Result 2: Learning environments are safe.	(Discrimination Act Law 2008:567) (School Act Law 2018:1303)
	Expected Result 3: Learning environments are accessible to all.	(Discrimination Act Law 2008:567) (School Act Law 2014:960)
OBJECTIVE 3: Enable all learners to use their education towards sustainable futures.	Expected Result 1: Children and youth complete their education with relevant skills, knowledge, and competencies.	(School Act Law 2018:1303) (School Act Law 2022:1315)
	Expected Result 2: Girls and women have equitable opportunities for and access to education, work, community representation and leadership.	(Discrimination Act Law 2008:567) (School Act Law 2014:960)

Source: (UNHCR, 2023)

The findings show that Sweden's most recent refugee education reforms align more closely with OECD policy guidance, particularly in their focus on quality and human capital development. While some OECD recommendations—such as increasing teacher salaries or fostering democratic skills—are not explicitly codified in the School Act, they are addressed through adjacent governing documents, including the national curriculum, *Läroplan för Grundskolan*, which is enforced through the School Act. The timing of legislative changes further highlights this shift. Many refugee education laws were introduced in 2015 following a significant influx of refugees into Sweden and have since been revised to enhance quality. These developments illustrate a broader transition in Sweden's refugee education framework: while early policies prioritized access through human rights-based language, more recent policy reforms between 2019 and 2023, especially following the publication of the OECD's

document in 2019, emphasize quality and labor market integration, reflecting human capital-oriented pressures and policies in alignment with the OECD.

Table 5

Swedish Laws that fulfill the Recommended Policies in the OECD's Strength Through Diversity's Spotlight Report for Sweden

OECD STRENGTH THROUGH DIVERSITY'S SPOTLIGHT REPORT FOR SWEDEN		**SWEDISH LAW**
PRIORITY AREA 1: Facilitating the access of immigrants to school choice	Policy Pointer 3.7.1: Provide quality information and support for an active school choice so that all parents and guardians can choose schools that best respond to the needs of their children.	(School Act Law 2023:943) (School Act 2022:1315)
	Policy Pointer 3.7.2: Promote lightly controlled freedom of choice to balance providing an equitable education and freedom of choice.	(School Act Law 2022:1315) (School Act Law 2022:1315) (School Act Law 2022:1315) (School Act Law 2023:943)
	Policy Pointer 3.7.3: Establish concrete, robust and comprehensive definitions of disadvantage that go beyond migration status.	(Discrimination Act 2008:567), (2014:960), Law (2022:146) (Child Guarantee 2022:01667)
	Policy Pointer 3.7.4: Introduce clear goals and criteria in a weighted funding programs to ensure equity and consistency in school funding that supports disadvantaged students.	N/A
SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 2: Building teaching capacity	Policy Pointer 4.7.1: Increase teacher salary alongside other incentives to attract and retain teachers in disadvantaged schools.	N/A
	Policy Pointer 4.7.2: Revise recruitment and teaching programs for teachers with an immigrant background to offer financial support and language training.	(2021:452) (2022:1315)

	Policy Pointer 4.7.3: Prepare teachers for diverse classrooms through comprehensive training programs in diversity including a language component.	(2021:452)
	Policy Pointer 4.7.4: Provide continuing professional development for diversity training and facilitate networks for training and exchange.	Law (2017:620)
	Policy Pointer 4.7.5: Offer extra support to teachers through comprehensive mentorships and expert teams to respond to additional needs of immigrant and refugee students.	(2018:1098)
SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 3: Providing language training	Policy Pointer 5.8.1: Promote an individualized learning plan in the early assessment model to better support all newly arrived students and follow up on their language progress and needs.	(2015:246), (2018:1303) Law (2022:146)
	Policy Pointer 5.8.2: Integrate specialized language courses, particularly Swedish as a Second Language, in the curriculum and focus on newly arrived students.	Law (2022:1315) (Child Guarantee 2022:01667)
	Policy Pointer 5.8.3: Increase mother tongue tuition and study guidance so that all immigrant students can access them.	Law (2022:1315) (Child Guarantee 2022:01667)
	Policy Pointer 5.8.4: Promote plurilingualism in schools and develop guidelines to enable a systematic implementation across all schools.	Law (2017:620) Law (2022:1315) (Child Guarantee 2022:01667)
	Policy Pointer 5.8.5: Offer language camps and access to leisure centers to all students irrespective of their family's situation.	Law (2022:1315)
	Policy Pointer 5.8.6: Engage immigrant families in language learning so that they are able to support the language skills and integration of their children.	Law (2022:1315)

SPOTLIGHT REPORT PRIORITY AREA 4: Strengthening the management of diversity	Policy Pointer 6.7.1: Implement a diversity-conscious curriculum consistently across schools.	(Child Guarantee 2022:01667)
	Policy Pointer 6.7.2: Promote inclusive education in schools so that all students can benefit from a good quality education.	(Discrimination Act 2008:567)
	Policy Pointer 6.7.3: Develop active citizenship education in schools that can help students develop democratic values and skills.	N/A
	Policy Pointer 6.7.4: Offer training for administrative leadership in diversity management to prepare school leaders for increasingly diverse schools and to be able to support teachers, staff, and students.	(Child Guarantee 2022:01667) Law (2021:452)
	Policy Pointer 6.7.5: Reinforce a whole school approach to foster an inclusive school climate and culture in order to welcome and integrate all students.	N/A

Source: (OECD, 2019)

Discussion

Existing literature supports the distinction between the UNHCR's human rights-based global script and the OECD's human capital-based approach to education. Scholars note that limited policy-relevant research on refugee education has constrained global understanding of effective reforms (Cerna, 2019; Fransen & De Haas, 2022). By applying world society theory, this study contributes to scholarship by examining how competing IGOs shape refugee education reform in Sweden. As IGOs are foundational to world culture, culturally informed analyses are critical for understanding global development processes (Boli & Thomas, 1999; Lechner & Boli, 2008). Sweden provides a compelling case due to its high refugee intake per capita, strong research output on refugee education, and close ties with both the UNHCR and the OECD (Crul et al., 2016; Jahan, 2016).

The findings demonstrate that while Sweden has fully institutionalized the UNHCR's access-oriented, human rights-based recommendations, as reflected in the School Act and the Discrimination Act (Sveriges Riksdag, 2008; Sveriges Riksdag, 2024), its most recent refugee education reforms increasingly align with the OECD's emphasis on quality and human capital development. This suggests that although the UNHCR remains influential globally, the OECD is emerging as a competitive and increasingly prominent IGO in shaping refugee education policy in Sweden and

beyond. This shift from access towards quality raises tensions, as emphasizing educational performance metrics may inadvertently disregard the foundational goal of educational access to refugees, and be particularly demanding towards newly arrived refugee students with language barriers. While access ensures education as a human right, an increased priority on quality and academic tracking through standardized assessments may induce academic stress for students, amplifying issues of acclimation and inclusion. However, these dynamics suggest a potential trade-off, as these policies aimed at increasing educational quality in refugee education could improve overall dynamics and long-term integration. There is also a surprising reoccurring mention of teachers within the OECD's policy recommendations, especially in regard to professional development for teachers of diverse students, reducing teacher turn-over rates, and increasing teacher salary, all inherently contributing to quality of education.

Taken together, these findings are valuable to the existing literature as they extend the idea that human rights and human capital ideologies are not oppositional, but are increasingly coexisting. In line with Choi's (2024) global ideology of this phenomena, this study demonstrates the nation-state of Sweden's alignment to both human rights and human capital ideologies are enabled by institutional and cultural conditions that frame education concurrently as a human right and as an investment in future market integration and participation.

Conclusion

In ascertaining if the UNHCR or the OECD exerts greater influence on the refugee education reform landscape of Sweden, the findings demonstrate a clear shift toward prioritizing refugee educational quality over access. In recognition of the long-term economic potential of refugee integration, and in conjunction with these findings, the Swedish Ministry of Education has enacted a majority of the proposed policies in the OECD's 2019 document to support refugee education assimilation in Sweden (Browder, 2018). This shift reflects a global transformation in how refugee education has moved beyond rights and access, towards a strategic investment in national economic development. By examining the timelines of these laws and how they have transitioned and changed, we can see a clear shift of focus from access to quality in Swedish refugee education policies. These new refugee education laws as modified and enforced by the Swedish Ministry of Education emphasize how enhancing quality is now of paramount concern, as long-term refugee educational policies are emphasized as a way to foster a smooth transition from education into the future labor market. Coupled with the Swedish Ministry of Education's direct collaboration with the OECD in developing these policy recommendations, the timing of these reforms and enactment of the OECD's suggested policies, especially following the date of the publication in 2019 to 2023, implies Sweden's deepening alignment towards the OECD's global script of a human capital approach towards refugee education. The timing of Sweden's refugee education reform is significant. These

reforms emerged after Sweden's peak refugee intake in 2015, when access to education for refugees had already been largely institutionalized. This further reflects the transition from immediate human rights-approach to education towards long-term market integration and economic participation. This suggests that the prioritization of quality could be a second-phase policy response shaped by the changing national needs of the nation-state.

This is significant because it underscores how nation-state alignment between human rights-based and human capital-based educational frameworks is largely context dependent. Unlike Sweden, in the context of lower-income nation-states, the UNHCR's access-oriented and human rights-approach remains essential, as ensuring basic rights to education could be a primary policy challenge. As Sweden is a globally engaged and institutionally developed nation-state, their refugee education reform illustrates how advanced educational systems are increasingly integrating refugees through policies that prioritize economic integration, which may suggest that quality oriented frameworks may be emerging across other developed contexts as a national economic strategy.

Scholars and researchers alike have continuously observed human rights and human capital discourses in education reforms, as worldwide educational systems rely heavily on their rationales to justify why education reform is important, and why change is necessary (Choi, 2024). However, in line with Choi (2024), this study demonstrates that these frameworks are not mutually exclusive in Sweden, but rather their influence can coincide together, and this can inform other similar contexts in the refugee education reform landscape. Future studies could comparatively explore refugee education reforms across countries with diverse financial resources and governance structures in order to assess the varying influence of different IGOs. This is fascinating, as the OECD is seen primarily influencing economically affluent countries such as Sweden, and the UNHCR is more influential to countries with limited fiscal resources. Taken together, these findings have broader implications for global education policy reform and suggest that as nations expand their access to education for refugees, policy attention may shift toward quality and economic outcomes. This study contributes to the limited research on Sweden's refugee education reform landscape and underscores the influence of both the UNHCR and the OECD in worldwide refugee education. Despite refugee migration remaining central to global political debates, there remains a poor global understanding of effective refugee education policies (Fransen & De Haas, 2022). In the prominent roles of Sweden, the UNHCR, and the OECD in the refugee education reform sector, this study offers the potential to illuminate how future reforms may be shaped across different educational landscapes.

Mary Allison Steel *holds a Master of Arts in International Education Policy Analysis from Stanford University. With eight years of teaching experience, she taught refugee students in Sweden and later worked with displaced and refugee communities on the Canary Islands as a Fulbright scholar. This paper honors the resilience and experiences of the refugee students that she has served.*

References

Abdelhady, D., & Al Ariss, A. (2023). How capital shapes refugees' access to the labour market: The case of Syrians in Sweden. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *34*, 3144–3168. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2022.2110845

Åmark, K. (2013). Sweden and the refugees, 1933–1945. In M. Byström & P. Frohnert (Eds.), *Reaching a state of hope: Refugees, immigrants and the Swedish welfare state*. Nordic Academic Press.

Berhanu, G. (2011). Inclusive education in Sweden: Responses, challenges and prospects. *International Journal of Special Education*, *26*(2), 128–148.

Bergh, H. (2020). *Securitization of migration: A discourse analysis of the Swedish migration policy during the Syrian refugee crisis* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Gothenburg].

Bevelander, P. (2011). The employment integration of resettled refugees, asylum claimants, and family reunion migrants in Sweden. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, *30*(1), 22–43. https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdq041

Bevelander, P., & Irastorza, N. (2020). The labour market integration of humanitarian migrants in OECD countries: An overview. In K. Kourtit, B. Newbold, P. Nijkamp, & M. Partridge (Eds.), *The economic geography of cross-border migration*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-48291-6_8

Bevelander, P., & Lundh, C. (2007). *Employment integration of refugees: The influence of local factors on refugee job opportunities in Sweden* (IZA Discussion Paper No. 2551). IZA. https://urn:nbn:de:101:1-20080425450

Boli, J., & Thomas, G. M. (1999). INGOs and the organization of world culture. In J. Boli & G. M. Thomas (Eds.), *Constructing world culture: International nongovernmental organizations since 1875* (pp. 3–44). Stanford University Press.

Bromley, P., & Andina, M. (2010). Standardizing chaos: A neo-institutional analysis of the INEE minimum standards. *Compare*, *40*(5), 575–588. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057920903254972

Browder, C. T. (2018). Recently resettled refugee students learning English in U.S. high schools. In S. Shapiro, R. Farrelly, & M. J. Curry (Eds.), *Educating refugee-background students* (pp. 17–32). Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783099986-006

Bucken-Knapp, G., Omanovic, V., & Spehar, A. (Eds.). (2020). *Institutions and organizations of refugee integration: Global diversities*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27249-4

Cardoso, M. E. (2020). Policy evidence by design. *Comparative Education Review*, *64*(4), 598–618. https://doi.org/10.1086/710777

Cerna, L. (2019). *Refugee education: Integration models and practices in OECD countries* (OECD Education Working Paper No. 203). OECD. https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/a3251a00-en

Cerna, L., Andersson, H., Bannon, M., & Borgonovi, F. (2019). *Strength through diversity: Spotlight report for Sweden* (OECD Education Working Paper No. 194). OECD. https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/059ce467-en

Choi, M. (2024). Human rights and human capital discourse in national education reforms. *Comparative Education Review*, *68*(1), 15–40. https://doi.org/10.1086/728394

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design*. SAGE.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, D. J. (2017). *Research design*. SAGE.

Crocker, R. (2006). *Human capital development and education*. Canadian Policy Research Networks.

Crul, M., Keskiner, E., Schneider, J., Lelie, F., & Ghaeminia, S. (2016). *No lost generation?* European University Institute.

Dhawan, S. M., Wilson, K., & Zademach, H.-M. (2023). From financial inclusion to financial health of refugees. *Third World Quarterly*, *45*(5), 926–945. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2264780

Dryden-Peterson, S. (2016). Refugee education: The crossroads of globalization. *Educational Researcher*, *45*(9), 473–482. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16683398

Dryden-Peterson, S. (2017). Refugee education. *Curriculum Inquiry*, *47*(1), 14–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2016.1255935

Dryden-Peterson, S., Adelman, E., Bellino, M. J., & Chopra, V. (2019). The purposes of refugee education. *Sociology of Education*, *92*(4), 346–366. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040719863054

Edmark, K., Hussain, I., & Haelermans, C. (2023). *Unpacking the impact of voucher schools*. SSRN. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4610413

Fischman, G., Topper, A., Silova, I., Goebel, J., & Holloway, J. L. (2018). Examining the influence of international assessments. *Journal of Education Policy*, *34*(4), 470–499. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2018.1460493

Friedrich, M. J. (2016). Growing numbers of refugees worldwide are children. *JAMA*, *316*(19), 1956–1957. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2016.16533

Fransen, S., & De Haas, H. (2022). Trends and patterns of global refugee migration. *Population and Development Review*, *48*(1), 97–128. https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12456

Goodwin-Gill, G., McAdam, J., & Dunlop, E. (2021). *The refugee in international law*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/law/9780198808565.001.0001

Hanushek, E. (2012). The economic value of education. In G. Sykes, B. Schneider, & D. N. Plank (Eds.), *Handbook of education policy research*. Routledge.

Hanushek, E. A., & Woessmann, L. (2012). Schooling, educational achievement, and the Latin American growth puzzle. *Journal of Development Economics*, *99*(2), 497–512. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2012.06.004

Hagelund, A. (2020). After the refugee crisis. *Comparative Migration Studies*, *8*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0169-8

Hélio, M., Berg, L., Almquist, Y., Rostila, M., & Hjern, A. (2019). Labour market participation among young refugees. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *22*(4), 533–550. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1521952

Holden, L., & Biddle, J. (2017). The introduction of human capital theory. *History of Political Economy*, *49*(4), 537–574. https://doi.org/10.1215/00182702-4296305

Jahan, S. (2016). *Human development report 2016*. United Nations.

Kirk, J., & Winthrop, R. (2007). Promoting quality education in refugee contexts. *International Review of Education*, *53*(5–6), 715–723. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-007-9061-0

Klees, S. J. (2016). Human capital and rates of return. *Comparative Education Review*, *60*(4), 644–672. https://doi.org/10.1086/688063

Lechner, F. J., & Boli, J. (2008). *World culture*. Wiley Blackwell.

McIntyre, J., & Neuhaus, S. (2021). Theorising policy and practice in refugee education. *British Educational Research Journal*, *47*(4), 796–816. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3701

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Introduction to qualitative research: Qualitative research in practice*. Jossey-Bass.

Meyer, J. W., Ramirez, F. O., & Soysal, Y. (1992). World expansion of mass education. *Sociology of Education*, *65*(2), 128–149. https://doi.org/10.2307/2112679

Meyer, J. W., Boli, J., Thomas, G. M., & Ramirez, F. O. (1997). World society and the nation-state. *American Journal of Sociology*, *103*(1), 144–181. https://doi.org/10.1086/231174

Niemeyer, M. (2015). *The cultural and social capital of unaccompanied refugee children: A policy study of the education of unaccompanied refugee children in Sweden and Germany* [Doctoral dissertation, Stockholm University].

Nordgren, R. D. (2017). Cultural competence and relational closeness: Examining refugee education. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, *10*(1), 79–92. https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIT-08-2016-0001

Olsson, F., Bradley, L., & Abughalioun, M. (2023). Refugees' aspirations, attitudes, and experiences of higher education and professional life in Sweden. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, *7*(1), 100386. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2022.100386

Papadopoulos, G. (1994). *Education 1960–1990: The OECD perspective*. OECD.

Ramirez, F. O., Suárez, D., & Meyer, J. W. (2007). The worldwide rise of human rights in education. In A. Benavot, C. Braslavsky, & N. Truong (Eds.), *School knowledge in comparative and historical perspective: Changing curricula in primary and secondary education*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-5736-6_3

Rizvi, F., & Lingard, B. (2009). The OECD and global shifts in education policy. In R. Cowen & A. M. Kazamias (Eds.), *International handbook of comparative education*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6403-6_28

Robeyns, I. (2006). Three models of education: Rights, capabilities, and human capital. *Theory and Research in Education*, *4*(1), 69–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878506060683

Rönnström, N., & Roth, K. (2024). Welcoming refugee children with a moral, rather than merely legal, right to education: Ideas for a cosmopolitan design of education. *Policy Futures in Education*, *22*(5), 724–740. https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103231185621

Rooth, D. O. (1999). *Refugee immigrants in Sweden: Educational investments and labour market integration* [Doctoral dissertation, Lund University].

Sellström, T. (Ed.). (1999). *Sweden and national liberation in Southern Africa: Solidarity and assistance, 1970–1994*. Nordic Africa Institute.

Suarez, D., & Ramirez, F. O. (2007). Human rights and citizenship: The emergence of human rights education. In C. A. Torres & A. Teodoro (Eds.), *Critique and utopia: New developments in the sociology of education* (pp. 43–64). Rowman & Littlefield.

Sveriges Riksdag. (2008). *The Discrimination Act*. Sveriges Riksdag Database.

Sveriges Riksdag. (2024). *The School Act*. Sveriges Riksdag Database.

Taylor, S., & Sidhu, R. K. (2012). Supporting refugee students in schools: What constitutes inclusive education? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *16*(1), 39–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110903560085

UNHCR. (2023). *Refugee education 2030: A strategy for refugee inclusion*. UNHCR.

UNHCR. (2025). *Global report 2025*. UNHCR.

UNESCO. (2021). *Revisiting Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. UNESCO.

UNICEF. (2023). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. UNICEF.

Wiesbrock, A. (2011). The integration of immigrants in Sweden: A model for the European Union? *International Migration*, *49*(4), 48–66. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2010.00662.x

Willems, K., & Vernimmen, J. (2018). The fundamental human right to education for refugees: Some legal remarks. *European Educational Research Journal*, *17*(2), 219–232. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904117709386

Wiseman, A. W., & Taylor, C. S. (2017). The impact of the OECD on education worldwide. *International Perspectives on Education and Society*, *31*, 1–277. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2020.1712057

Wolfe, R. (2008). From reconstructing Europe to constructing globalization: The OECD in historical perspective. In R. Mahon & S. McBride (Eds.), *The OECD and transnational governance*. University of British Columbia Press. https://doi.org/10.59962/9780774815567-003

Scaling Training on Trauma-Informed Education in Ukraine During Crisis

Joshua L. DeVincenzo
Columbia University
Shuyang Huang
Columbia University
Sumana Palle
Columbia University
Syeda Kainaat Jah
Columbia University
Linfan Gan
Columbia University
Michelle Rozenfeld
Rutgers University
Chloe Chung
University of Pennsylvania

This descriptive implementation case study examines how trauma-informed education was operationalized and scaled through an online learning modality during the ongoing war in Ukraine. The course was developed through a critical collaboration between the National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP) at Columbia University, the Ukraine Children's Action Project (UCAP), and educational stakeholders in Ukraine and Poland. The course was designed to equip educators with practical, relational strategies to support children as they navigate education amid war, displacement, and prolonged crisis. Grounded in the dual frameworks of Trauma-Informed Education (TIE) and Education in Emergencies (EiE), the curriculum development process emphasized localization, accessibility, and learner engagement through an iterative approach with expert teachers, psychologists, trauma specialists, and instructional designers from Ukraine, Poland, and the United States. Early evaluation findings from 172 teacher respondents indicated high levels of perceived value and satisfaction. Qualitative analysis further identified ongoing professional development needs related to child-centered trauma recovery, teacher well-being and burnout prevention, inclusive education, and sustaining human connection among teachers, students, and families. These findings suggest that online learning serves as an effective, scalable modality for trauma-informed education during active conflict, while highlighting the broader, long-term support needs educators face in navigating crisis environments.

Keywords: Trauma-Informed Education, Ukraine, Crisis Context, Mental Health and Well-Being, Online Learning/E-Learning

© 2026, DeVincenzo et al. CC BY 4.0.

Introduction

Trauma-informed education, understood as the application of trauma-informed care principles to educational practice, offers a framework for providing educators with information and tools to address the needs of children who have experienced potentially traumatic events (Carello & Butler, 2015). Operationalizing it at scale during an active crisis, however, requires careful attention to delivery modality, cultural and linguistic localization, and design choices that sustain learner engagement across geographically dispersed and emotionally taxed audiences.

This report describes findings from the critical collaboration between the National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP) at Columbia University, the Ukraine Children's Action Project (UCAP), and educational stakeholders in Lviv, Ukraine, and Warsaw, Poland, to produce a web-based course providing educators across Ukraine with training on the effects of trauma faced by thousands of students who are navigating education in wartime. The year-long partnership resulted in *The Impact of Trauma and How It Affects Behavior and Learning: What Teachers Should Know*, a web-based, interactive course offered in both Ukrainian and Polish. Within the first month of the course launch, in time for the Fall 2023 school year, the online modality enabled trauma-informed classroom training to reach 1,921 teachers, who completed it for a certificate.

The purpose of this article is to contribute a descriptive implementation case study of how trauma-informed education was operationalized and scaled through an online modality during active conflict in Ukraine, to analyze and interrogate the design decisions and affordances that made rapid scaling possible, and to report early implementation evidence on the course's reach from its initial delivery, perceived value, and the ongoing training needs identified by participating teachers operating in these conditions.

Context

Children in Ukraine have lived with the direct impact of war with Russia since 2014, when Russia invaded Crimea and pro-Russian separatists began seizing territory in eastern Ukraine. The full-scale Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, sharply escalated violence, destruction, forced evacuation, injury, and death across the country and triggered the largest forced migration of refugees in Europe since World War II (International Rescue Committee, 2024). Women and children began to escape from the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine to the west of the country as internally displaced persons (IDPs) or left the country altogether as refugees. At the start of this project in Fall 2022, there were 6.9 million IDPs within Ukraine and 7 million Ukrainian refugees located in more than 20 countries (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023). As of 2026, more than a third of Ukraine's children, estimated at 2,589,900, continue to be displaced as the war in Ukraine enters its fifth year. More than 791,000 children are displaced inside Ukraine, and nearly 1,798,900 children are living as refugees outside the country.

Schools themselves have become targets of violence and sites of military occupation, with artillery strikes and the use of school buildings as encampments disrupting children's education (Gorbunova, 2023; UNICEF, 2026). For children who have left Ukraine, access to education has not been straightforward. The International Rescue Committee (2024) reports that nearly half of school-aged Ukrainian refugee children were not enrolled in schools in their host countries during the 2022 to 2023 academic year. Children inside Ukraine and across the diaspora are therefore experiencing varied but consistently disrupted educational pathways shaped by sustained exposure to violence, dislocation, and loss.

The cumulative trauma of war exposure affects children's cognitive and non-cognitive development, including their capacity to learn, engage, and form relationships within school environments (Samara et al., 2020). These effects extend to long-term educational aspirations and outcomes (Zakharchenko et al., 2025). Teachers in Ukraine, Poland, and other host countries have been positioned as frontline witnesses to these challenges, often without formal preparation in trauma-informed pedagogy. The project team weighed and drew from insights on the academic debates on trauma-informed education, such as risks associated with deficit model approaches in which trauma-informed education can potentially perpetuate marginalization of students by labeling based on their identities (Venet, 2021), lack of consensus, lack of empirical work informing trauma-informed teaching and teacher education, and lack of clear operational guidance on the terminology (Thomas et al., 2019). The course described in this article was developed firstly in response to an urgent challenge in practice and secondly to address these gaps and inform future practice.

Theoretical Foundation

The term "Trauma-Informed Education" (TIE) has gained popularity since 2015 to refer to the application of components of trauma-informed care (TIC) to educational contexts (Carello & Butler, 2015). Trauma-Informed Educational practices are important in addressing the impacts of trauma, not only on individual students but also on the entire school community, including teachers, administrators, family members, and caregivers. By recognizing and responding to the effects of trauma, educators can create supportive environments that promote healing, resilience, and academic success. For supportive educational environments to be effective for all students, regardless of backgrounds or experiences, social justice and equity should be key concerns in the design process (Venet, 2021). While Trauma-Informed Education allows teachers to provide key support, Bastian (n.d.) notes it is not intended to be therapeutic in a clinical sense and should not require instructors to take on more than their typical roles and responsibilities. In this paper, the concept of Trauma-Informed Education provides information and tools to address the needs of children who have experienced potentially traumatic events.

In addition to TIE, Education in Emergencies (EiE) is a critical and growing discipline and set of guidelines for understanding the nuances of school and

learning systems under emergency conditions (INEE, 2018). EiE has evolved since the mid- to late 1900s, with origins advocating for educational aid to be recognized as a fundamental humanitarian need (Burde et al., 2017). EiE now supports the emergency planning phases that examine education as physical, psychosocial, and intellectual welfare, with the aim of a better life for millions of students learning in emergencies (Akkari & Radhouane, 2023). Teacher well-being is central to educational quality in crisis settings, demonstrating that teacher-student relationships function as a bidirectional resource that shapes both student well-being and the well-being of teachers who are themselves living through the same crisis (Falk et al., 2022). At the same time, EiE implies imperial entanglements, and external actors designing interventions in crisis contexts must remain reflexive about how programs are framed and on whose terms (Novelli & Kutan, 2024). This project contributes to a foundational goal of EiE: enabling quality, safe, and relevant education for all in emergencies and crisis contexts through prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery, with an emphasis on the thematic area of mental health and well-being (INEE, 2018). It also offers implementation evidence on how trauma-informed education can be operationalized and scaled through an online modality during active armed conflict, extending the EiE evidence base, which has largely been generated in post-conflict recovery and protracted displacement settings.

As the urgency of educational services for populations affected by crisis and emergencies grows, applied implementation case studies that combine TIE and EiE components offer key lessons and considerations for scholarship and practice. Both the TIE and EiE frameworks were critical in approaching the project's curriculum development process. With this theoretical framework and understanding, the project objective was to examine how a trauma-informed curriculum could be implemented and scaled through an online modality to support educators operating in crisis-impacted educational contexts during the war in Ukraine.

Curriculum Development Process

The Impact of Trauma and How It Affects Behavior and Learning: What Teachers Should Know is a web-based, self-paced, and interactive course. The course carries a TIE approach into an online learning environment. The course teaches educators how to develop trauma-informed practices and interventions in their classrooms to support and assist students who have experienced traumatic events, especially trauma related to war and displacement. Teachers are presented with content, knowledge checks, interactive activities, and a curated list of resources in an Educators' Resource slide. The course consists of four self-paced modules as described in Table 1.

Table 1

Overview of Training Modules: Titles, Descriptions, and Theoretical Foundations

Module	Title	Description	Theoretical Foundation
1	Introduction to Trauma	Introduces foundational concepts of trauma, including definitions, types of potentially traumatic events, and the prevalence of trauma exposure among children in crisis-affected contexts. Establishes shared vocabulary and frames why educators are positioned to recognize and respond to trauma in the classroom.	Trauma-informed care principles applied to education (Carello & Butler, 2015); education in emergencies thematic area of mental health and well-being (INEE, 2018)
2	What Are the Symptoms of a Traumatized Child?	Examines how trauma manifests in children's behavior, learning, and relationships across developmental stages, with attention to symptoms that may present in preschool, elementary, middle, and high school students. Uses age-specific scenarios and illustrations to support recognition in real classroom contexts.	Trauma-informed education and child developmental responses to potentially traumatic events (Carello & Butler, 2015; Samara et al., 2020)
3	How Educators Can Support Children Who Have Experienced Trauma	Equips teachers with practical, relational strategies for responding to students affected by trauma, with emphasis on the role of student-teacher relationships in supporting recovery. Includes interactive scenarios and reflection journal prompts grounded in classroom realities.	Trauma-informed education as a relational, non-clinical practice (Bastian, n.d.; Venet, 2021); teacher-student relationships as a resource for student well-being in crisis contexts (Shephard et al., 2024)
4	What Can Be Done in the Classroom and School to Incorporate Trauma-Informed Practices and Policies?	Moves from individual student support to classroom- and school-level integration of trauma-informed practices, including policies, environmental design, and links to broader school community support. Includes a curated Educators' Resource slide for continued learning.	Equity-centered trauma-informed education at the school and system level (Venet, 2021); education in emergencies goals of quality, safe, and relevant education through prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery (INEE, 2018)

Note. EiE = Education in Emergencies; INEE = Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies.

To create this project, NCDP and UCAP worked in tandem to understand teachers' needs and to scaffold content on trauma in ways that are practical and relevant to the realities of Ukrainian and Polish classrooms. In practice, it is common to observe tiered approaches to trauma-informed education. For example, the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) utilize the following

intervention tiers: Tier 1 includes trauma training for all school staff, Tier 2 involves consultation between educators and internal mental health staff, and Tier 3 involves consultation with professionals externally (Berger, 2019; Gee et al., 2020). The priority for scaffolding content in this project fell within Tier 1 of the MTSS. In addition to the tiered approach, the team also scaffolded conceptually and technically alongside local experts. For example, even the word "trauma" was discussed at length with the project translators on the exact translation to use in each native language.

The course required an iterative development approach that relied on rounds of feedback from expert teachers, psychologists, trauma specialists, and researchers from the U.S., Poland, and Ukraine.

Affordances of the Online Modality

The decision to deliver training online was initially met with skepticism from some key school decision-makers, as online learning is often perceived as a lower-quality, limited alternative to in-person, real-time instruction. However, given the project's scope of delivering training at scale in a wartime setting, a self-paced eLearning approach was the only modality that could provide trauma-informed training to large numbers of educators in a short period during active conflict. Three challenges shaped the design: 1) introducing the pedagogical approach of trauma-informed education, 2) localizing content for Ukrainian and Polish contexts, languages, and school structures, and 3) sustaining learner engagement throughout the course.

In developing this web-based course, interaction design strategies were identified early to effectively enhance learner motivation and accommodate diverse learning styles. Firstly, given that the course content includes complex psychological terminology and emotionally charged scenarios, it was essential to create a precise visual presentation and interactive elements that serve as effective training tools. The incorporation of targeted illustrations and imagery to depict emotions, body language, and mood was critical for conveying concepts such as trauma and its symptoms, particularly in children. Additionally, the implementation of clickable interactions enabled learners to navigate the course at their own pace, allowing them to revisit specific slides or content as needed. By introducing layered information on each slide, the course effectively broke down complex knowledge into manageable segments, with the goal of enabling learners to absorb the material more thoroughly.

Secondly, as the course emphasized practical application in classroom settings, realistic scenarios and corresponding solutions were tailored to different age groups, specifically preschool, elementary, middle, and high school students (using the local Ukrainian and Polish grade level equivalents). Interactive elements were designed around these age-specific contexts, allowing educators to select relevant situations that align with their real-life experiences. This was especially important to the design considerations of the modules, given insights

from the literature and project experts that the impact of trauma on the developing brain is critical and manifests differently across developmental stages (Plumb et al., 2016). Upon choosing an age group, learners engaged with distinct storylines and detailed analyses, prompting them to reflect on relevant issues and apply appropriate approaches in their own practice.

Lastly, the course incorporated multiple module learning checks and case studies, both of which are essential components of web-based training design in practice. The module learning checks enhanced assessment, engagement, and overall learner success while providing critical feedback for continuous improvement. Furthermore, the case studies included a reflection journal activity that fostered self-awareness, critical thinking, and personal growth, contributing to a more meaningful and effective learning experience.

The project took approximately a year to develop, with several trips to Warsaw, a team of instructional designers, translators, and narrators, and collaboration with leading educational institutions and technical experts in Ukraine and Poland. In Fall 2023, when the course was finally published on partner sites in Ukraine, nearly 2,000 teachers completed the course within its first month. This reach within three weeks of the start of a new school year would have been impossible under the operational conditions of wartime Ukraine without an online modality. The modality also efficiently supports updating content in a rapidly changing crisis landscape by publishing new versions of the course as needed on each partner's website or learning management system.

Early Evaluation Data

Evaluation data were collected as part of a descriptive program evaluation embedded within the implementation of the online course. The primary purpose of the evaluation was to understand participants' immediate perceptions of the course, their self-reported knowledge, skills, and abilities related to trauma-informed education, and their continued training needs. Evaluations were first translated using translation software and then confirmed with a native Ukrainian speaker.

Study Design

This evaluation used a post-training questionnaire administered to teachers who completed the online course and received a certificate. The questionnaire included closed-ended and open-ended items. Closed-ended responses were analyzed quantitatively, while open-ended responses were analyzed qualitatively. The two sets of findings were then interpreted together to understand both the course's early perceived value and the continuing needs of teachers working in crisis-affected classrooms.

Evaluation Instrument

The questionnaire functioned as a course satisfaction and feedback instrument. It asked teachers to report their perceived knowledge, skills, and abilities before and after the training using four response categories: high, average, basic, and

low. It also asked whether the course enriched their knowledge and helped develop skills to support students, whether they would recommend the course to colleagues, and whether they felt able to apply the skills acquired in practice. The open-ended question asked the teachers to identify their perceived ongoing professional development needs in the context of trauma-informed education and crisis-affected schooling.

Participants and Sampling Methods

A total of 1,921 teachers completed the online course during the first month of implementation. Of these completions, 172 Ukrainian teachers submitted evaluation questionnaires, representing an approximate response rate of 9.0%. Teachers were invited to complete the questionnaire at the end of the course. Participation in the evaluation was voluntary.

Analytical Methods

Closed-ended survey items were analyzed descriptively using frequencies and percentages. These results were used to summarize teachers' self-reported knowledge, skills, and abilities before and after the course, as well as their satisfaction with the course and perceived ability to apply course content.

For the final open-ended question, NCDP conducted a qualitative analysis to identify teachers' perceived needs for future training and support. Of the 172 questionnaire responses, 126 were included in the qualitative coding process. Forty-six responses were excluded because they did not identify a specific training need or were too general to support thematic analysis. The excluded responses included answers such as "All," "I don't know," and "N/A." Excluding these responses allowed the analysis to focus on comments that provided interpretable information about future training priorities.

The coding process used an inductive qualitative coding framework, in which responses were reviewed, and recurring topics were identified and organized into broader categories linked to the evaluation question (Thomas, 2006). Recurring topics that appeared during the review process included teacher needs, student support, classroom practice, and education in crisis contexts. Codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories. The final code system organized valid responses into three primary categories: Child-Centered Training and Support; Teacher Well-being, Skills, and Professional Development; and Sustaining Human Connection in Education During Crisis. Each primary category included subcodes that captured more specific areas of need, such as psychological trauma recovery among children, inclusive education, teacher burnout, classroom management, and teacher-parent communication.

Ethical Considerations

The evaluation was conducted with adult teachers as part of routine post-course feedback. Responses were analyzed in aggregate and used to understand course implementation and future training needs. No student-level data were collected. Given the crisis-affected context in which the training took place, protecting

participant confidentiality and avoiding overinterpretation of individual experiences were important considerations in the analysis and reporting of findings.

Limitations

This evaluation has several methodological limitations. First, the findings are based on voluntary responses from 172 teachers out of 1,921 course completers. As a result, the respondents may not be representative of all teachers who completed the course. Teachers who chose to complete the questionnaire may have been more engaged or more satisfied with the course than those who did not respond. Second, the evaluation relied on self-reported data collected after course completion. The reported changes in knowledge, skills, and abilities, therefore, reflect teachers' perceptions of learning rather than objectively measured gains in knowledge or demonstrated changes in classroom practice. The evaluation did not include a pre-course baseline survey administered before the training. Third, demographic data were not collected, which limits the ability to examine whether teachers experienced the course differently across regions, school types, grade levels, years of experience, or prior exposure to trauma-informed education. In addition, the qualitative findings are based only on open-ended responses that provided interpretable training needs. Finally, the findings are not broadly generalizable to all Ukrainian teachers or to all education-in-emergencies contexts. On the contrary, they provide early evidence of implementation from a subset of teachers who completed the course and chose to provide feedback. Future evaluation could strengthen the evidence base by collecting follow-up data, assessing changes in classroom practice, and examining teacher well-being over time.

Positionality Statement

The authors approach this work from positions that are both proximate to and distanced from the Ukrainian wartime education context. The author team is based at the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University in New York and brings expertise across instructional design, disaster preparedness, public health, and program evaluation. None of the authors were physically present in Ukraine during the period of implementation, and none experienced the war as residents of Ukraine or Poland. The course was developed in close partnership with the Ukraine Children's Action Project and with Ukrainian and Polish educators, psychologists, and trauma specialists who provided lived knowledge of classroom realities, language, and cultural context that the authors could not directly provide. The authors served primarily as designers, facilitators, and evaluators of a training program whose grounding in the Ukrainian and Polish contexts was provided by local collaborators. The evaluation reported here was conducted in Ukrainian and translated for analysis, which introduces interpretive limitations that the authors acknowledge. The authors recognize that writing about a population experiencing active conflict from a position of relative safety entails an obligation to represent participants' perspectives accurately,

avoid overinterpreting individual experiences, and credit the expertise of local partners whose work made this project possible.

Findings

Quantitative Results: Course Reach, Teacher Satisfaction, and Self-Reported Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

The course reached 1,921 teachers during its first month of implementation. Among the 172 teachers who completed the evaluation questionnaire, respondents reported substantial perceived gains in knowledge, skills, and abilities related to trauma-informed education.

Before taking the course, teachers reported their knowledge, skills, and abilities to navigate trauma in their classroom in the following categories: high (12.2%), average (51.7%), base (31.4%), and low (4.7%). After completing the course, the self-reported knowledge, skills, and abilities shifted significantly, with 81.4% of respondents reporting high knowledge, skills, and abilities (an increase of 69.2 percentage points), 15% at an average level, 3.5% at the base level, and importantly, 0% reporting low levels. The results of the comparison of knowledge and skills before and after taking the course are presented in Figure 1.

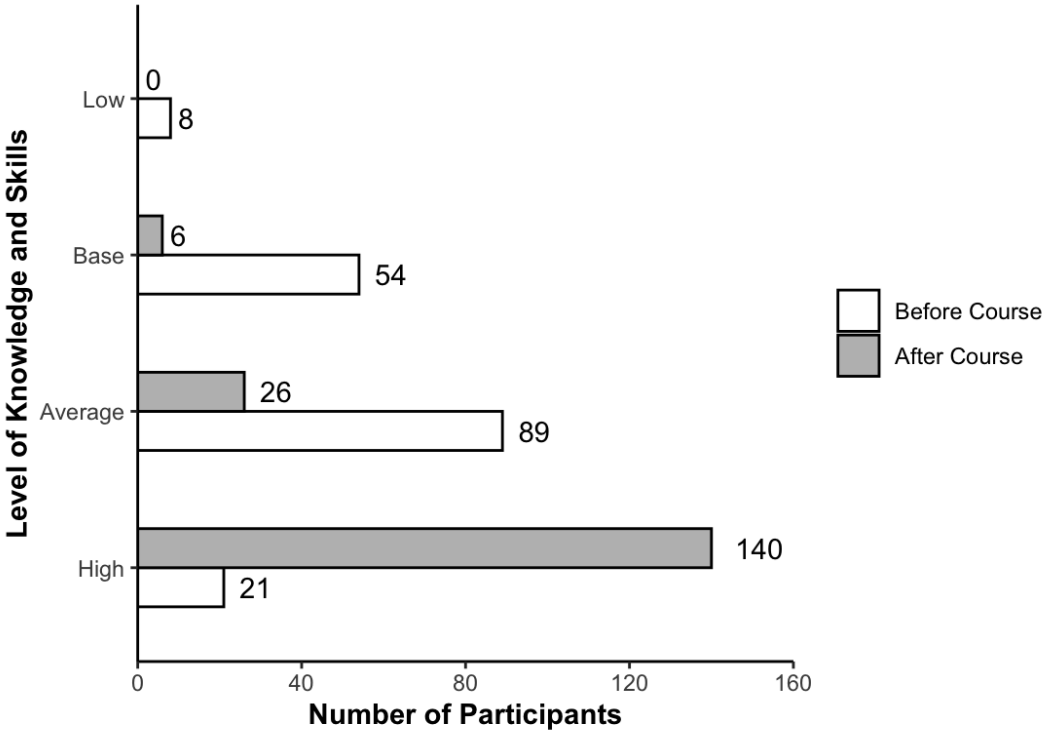
In practice, this shift suggests that respondents felt more prepared to recognize and respond to trauma-related needs in the classroom after completing the course. This is important in a crisis context because many teachers may be expected to support students affected by trauma without having received formal preparation in trauma-informed education.

At the same time, these results should be interpreted as perceived learning rather than verified competency. The evaluation did not include an objective knowledge test or student outcome data. Therefore, the findings indicate that teachers believed the course improved their preparedness, but they do not demonstrate whether teachers changed their classroom practices or whether students experienced improved educational or psychosocial outcomes.

Respondents also reported very high satisfaction with the course. 99.4% (171 out of 172) of respondents agreed that taking the course enriched their knowledge and developed skills to support their students in the classroom. The same proportion (99.4%) reported that they would recommend the course to their colleagues. Finally, 98.8% (170 out of 172) of respondents reported that, after completing the online training, they felt fully able to apply the skills acquired during the course in practice.

Figure 1

Comparison of Knowledge and Skills Before and After the Course



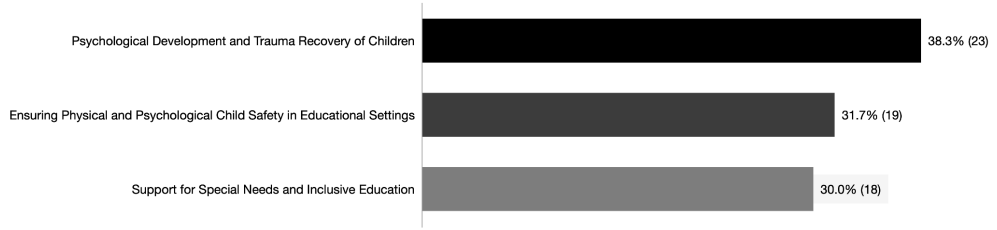
Qualitative Perspectives: Teacher-Identified Training Needs

The open-ended responses provided insight into teachers' needs after completing the course. The 126 valid responses were organized into three primary categories: 1) Child-Centered Training and Support, 2) Teacher Well-being, Skills, and Professional Development, and 3) Sustaining Human Connection in Education During Crisis. These categories show that teachers viewed trauma-informed education as more than a set of individual classroom strategies. Respondents described a broader need for support across three connected levels: students' safety and recovery, teachers' own well-being and professional capacity, and the relationships among students, teachers, and families.

Category I: Child-Centered Training and Support. This category encompasses training and support mechanisms focused on children's physical and psychological well-being, especially in times of crisis. A total of 60 responses were categorized under this code, divided into three main subcodes: Psychological Development and Trauma Recovery of Children, Ensuring Physical and Psychological Child Safety in Educational Settings, and Support for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. Figure 2 shows the distribution of responses across the subcodes.

Figure 2

Subcode Statistics for Child-Centered Training and Support



Psychological Development and Trauma Recovery of Children. Teachers recognized the need to identify and address the psychological trauma of students. They highlighted the need for psychological support for students during crises such as air alerts and war, including providing crisis psychological assistance, understanding psychological injuries, and fostering both spiritual and emotional development. They also emphasized the role of self-esteem in trauma recovery, helping students understand their feelings while addressing behavioral aspects and the psychological development of high school students.

Teachers encountered challenges in motivating children who have lost interest in learning. Respondents emphasized the need to adapt learning approaches after crises, such as reimagining summer breaks. Participants also want to explore strategies for working with children who are reluctant to learn, as well as specific techniques to rebuild students' interest and engagement in their education.

Ensuring Physical and Psychological Child Safety in Educational Settings. Strategies are needed to enhance physical safety in schools. Teachers reported the need to address critical issues such as managing trauma from physical and sexual abuse and ensuring general child safety in educational settings. In addition, it was noted that there is a need for First-aid training for handling common injuries among students. Teachers emphasized the importance of equipping educators with the skills to manage common student injuries, which include providing pre-hospital care and addressing specific injuries such as fractures, fainting, and frostbite. Participants expressed a desire for practical training in diagnostic techniques and injury management during physical education lessons. It was noted that enhancing physical safety in schools requires addressing bullying by equipping teachers with strategies to recognize and prevent it, a critical need.

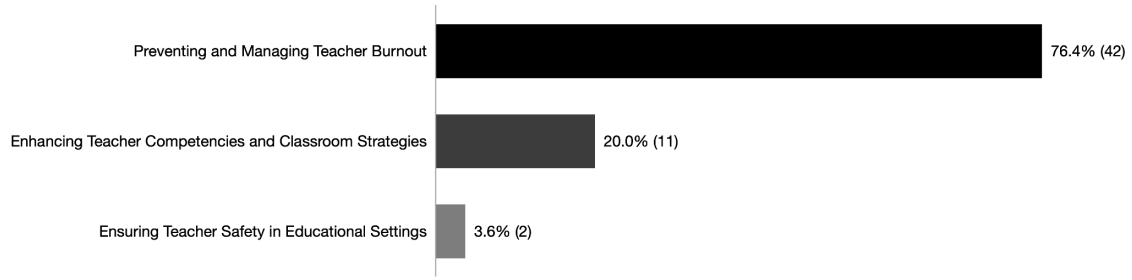
Support for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. Teachers seek additional support for special needs and inclusive education. Respondents noted wanting training on how to support children with special needs, including students in vocational schools, elementary schools, and those classified as OOP (Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children) and IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons). Of the 18 responses in this category, 10 specifically mentioned the importance of ensuring "inclusive education practices."

Category II: Teacher Well-being, Skills, and Professional Development. This category centers on the well-being and professional development of teachers,

focusing on the stresses and challenges they encounter in crisis environments. A total of 55 responses were classified under this code, divided into three main subcodes: Preventing and Managing Teacher Burnout, Enhancing Teacher Competencies and Classroom Strategies, and Ensuring Teacher Safety in Educational Settings. Figure 3 shows how the responses are distributed across these subcodes.

Figure 3

Subcode Statistics for Teacher Well-being, Skills, and Professional Development



Preventing and Managing Teacher Burnout. Schools must recognize and prevent teacher burnout. Teachers noted the importance of recognizing the signs of emotional, professional, and psychological exhaustion among teachers, particularly during times of crisis such as war. The responses emphasize the importance of providing support systems to prevent burnout and offer strategies for managing stress, maintaining motivation, and balancing professional responsibilities with personal well-being.

One participant explained:

> "How to stop professional burnout. Now all the attention of children, and teachers are depleted emotionally no less. Teachers also live during the war. And they have children, men who are fighting... And very little attention is paid to it. In order for us to lift the student, we have to have the strength..."

This response shows that teachers saw their own well-being as necessary for supporting students. In this view, preventing burnout is part of what allows teachers to provide stable classroom environments. Teachers also requested training in emotional and psychological support to help them manage their mental health and create an environment where they can recharge emotionally.

Teachers want to know how to build emotional self-regulation techniques. Respondents highlighted the need for training to help teachers manage stress and build self-control, especially during crises. Participants emphasized techniques such as relaxation exercises, meditation, and personal development methods, all aimed at enhancing emotional resilience.

Enhancing Teacher Competencies and Classroom Strategies. Additional professional development in practical skills for teachers (e.g., classroom

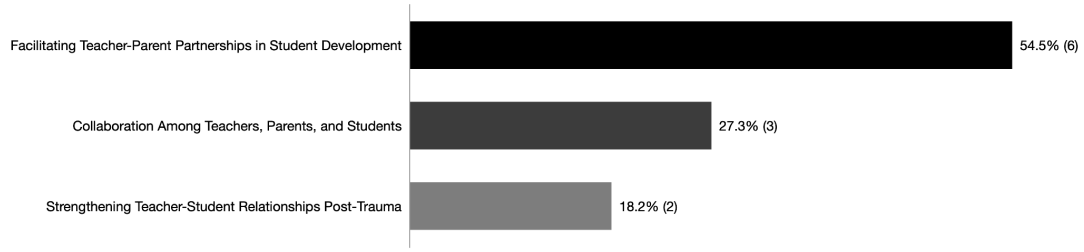
management, emotional resilience) remains appealing. Teachers noted the importance of hands-on training and development of practical skills to help teachers effectively manage their classrooms while building emotional resilience. Participants also highlighted the need to incorporate artificial intelligence into the classroom and implement effective time-management strategies to help teachers manage their workloads efficiently.

Ensuring Teacher Safety in Educational Settings. Ensuring teacher safety in educational settings is a requirement. Teachers noted the importance of feeling protected and of valuing teachers' well-being in the workplace, and the need for strategies to prevent harassment and methods to manage or prevent deviant behavior among students.

Category III: Sustaining Human Connection in Education During Crisis. This category emphasizes the importance of maintaining strong relationships among teachers, students, and parents in challenging environments, particularly during or after crises. A total of 11 responses were categorized under this code, divided into three main subcodes: Facilitating Teacher-Parent Partnerships in Student Development, Collaboration Among Teachers, Parents, and Students, and Strengthening Teacher-Student Relationships Post-Trauma. Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of responses across these subcodes.

Figure 4

Subcode Statistics for Sustaining Human Connection in Education During Crisis



Facilitating Teacher-Parent Partnerships in Student Development. Teachers want to facilitate teacher-parent partnerships to support student development. Highlighting the importance of guiding teachers on how to communicate with parents of children who have experienced trauma, handle challenging interactions, and foster collaboration.

Collaboration Among Teachers, Parents, and Students. Teachers recognize the importance of developing collaboration among teachers, parents, and students. Respondents noted a desire for new strategies for working with children whose parents are involved in challenging circumstances, such as fighting in wars, and for nurturing mutual respect for schools. Effective collaboration among these stakeholders contributes to the development of a child's personality, ensuring a supportive, cohesive environment that promotes both academic and personal growth.

Strengthening Teacher-Student Relationships Post-Trauma. Techniques are sought for building trust and emotional bonds with students recovering from trauma. Teachers noted that providing training to equip teachers with the skills to maintain students' dignity while fostering positive classroom dynamics that enhance the healing and learning environment is critical. Participants also emphasized the need for training to prepare teachers to effectively manage and resolve student conflicts, thereby promoting a harmonious and respectful classroom atmosphere. One participant noted the following:

> "Given the context of the course of children's injuries for teachers, in my opinion, it would also be useful to undergo training with 'communication skills in working with children who have experienced trauma.' The ability to communicate properly and tactfully with such students is a key to their successful adaptation and recovery. Such a training would give the teacher to support the child, while maintaining its dignity and contributing to positive dynamics in the classroom."

This response shows that teachers understood trauma-informed education as a relational practice. It suggests that teachers need practical guidance on how to interact with students in ways that support recovery while avoiding further harm or stigma.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, early evaluation suggests that the *Impact of Trauma and How It Affects Behavior and Learning: What Teachers Should Know* course achieved several important implementation outcomes. First, the course quickly reached a large number of teachers during a crisis period, underscoring the value of online learning as a scalable modality for trauma-informed education. Second, respondents reported high satisfaction and substantial perceived gains in knowledge, skills, and abilities. Third, teachers identified clear areas where additional training is needed, particularly in child-centered trauma support, teacher well-being, inclusive education, classroom management, and communication with students and families.

These findings directly align with the goal and project objective of scaling trauma-informed education in Ukraine and address the EiE thematic focus of Mental Health and Well-being (INEE, 2018). The course appears to have filled an immediate training gap by providing accessible introductory content for educators working in crisis-affected environments. At the same time, the open-ended responses show that access to introductory training is only one part of the broader need. Teachers also want deeper and more specialized support to apply trauma-informed practices in complex classroom conditions.

The findings should therefore be interpreted as evidence of reach, acceptability, and perceived usefulness. In particular, the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) approach (Berger, 2019; Gee et al., 2020) proved valuable in initiating a trajectory of continued support and learning for teachers in Ukraine. The reliance

on survey data enabled rapid, at-scale feedback from teachers, which was appropriate for an implementation effort during an active crisis as well as for planning subsequent tiers of support. The *Impact of Trauma and How It Affects Behavior and Learning: What Teachers Should Know* course was developed and implemented at a critical time, during the first eighteen months of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when millions of children were newly displaced, and teachers were being asked to support traumatized students without formal trauma-informed preparation (UNHCR, 2023). The outcomes of the program are difficult to bound, as the situation in Ukraine is dynamic and the long-term implications remain largely unknown. However, the value of the co-design of modules and localization was clear; the curriculum sought to avoid deficit-oriented framings that can emerge within trauma-informed educational approaches (Venet, 2021). By approaching trauma-informed education in this manner, the project fully embraced local collaboration to address known critiques of externally led interventions in trauma-informed education (Novelli & Kutan, 2024).

As an applied implementation case study combining TIE and EiE components, this work contributes lessons for scholarship and practice on how the two frameworks can be operationalized together at scale during active conflict, and on the teacher-identified needs that extend beyond initial trauma awareness. Such outcomes of the project contribute to the evidence gaps of the lack of empirical work informing trauma-informed teaching and teacher education and lack of clear operational guidance (Thomas et al., 2019). From the early implementation of the online course, it is evident that the online modality achieved scale and reach in ways a traditional in-person modality could not, given the time parameters. Importantly, these findings indicate that participating educators conceptualized trauma-informed education as a relational, non-clinical practice grounded in a system of mutual trust, dignity, communication, and psychological safety, as opposed to a purely behavioral or instructional framework.

Recommendations

The authors' recommendation is to begin exploring ways to enhance learning on themes of trauma-informed classrooms alongside the emergent themes teachers reported as needing to address in continued training, employing multiple modalities such as online, hybrid, and face-to-face learning to increase depth and breadth of learning. In addition to the need to address trauma in the classroom focused on students, the preliminary data indicate that significant attention is required to develop training that also supports teachers in navigating burnout and the stress of being an educator in a wartime environment. The findings reinforce scholarship demonstrating that teacher well-being is fundamentally linked to student recovery and educational continuity in crisis settings (Falk et al., 2022). The characteristics of this project were unique and highly complex; however, by adopting an interdisciplinary, cooperative, innovative, and iterative approach, training and education served as a high-impact support function in

both crisis response and recovery. These recommendations also point to a broader need for continued applied case studies that combine TIE and EiE components, as such cases provide the implementation evidence required to refine both frameworks for use in active crisis contexts and to translate them into training and policy decisions that respond to teacher-identified priorities.

Joshua L. DeVincenzo, EdD, *is Assistant Director of Applied Research, Education, and Training at the National Center for Disaster Preparedness and Adjunct Assistant Professor at Columbia Climate School. His research advances adult learning theory and cognitive science in disaster contexts, with published work on school disaster preparedness, instructional design, and professional capacity-building across international settings.*

Shuyang Huang, MS, MArch*, is a Staff Associate II at the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University. Her work integrates AI, GIS, spatial design, and data science to support socially and environmentally resilient communities, with a focus on disaster preparedness, public safety, and equitable service delivery.*

Sumana Palle, MS, *is a researcher and practitioner at the intersection of climate, conflict, and human rights, with a focus on post-conflict recovery and community resilience in crisis-affected contexts. She holds a Master of Science in Sustainability Management from Columbia University and a dual Bachelor's in Business Administration and International Affairs from the University of Michigan.*

Syeda Kainaat Jah, MA, *is a researcher and educator focused on climate resilience, mental health, and literacy practices in marginalized communities. With a background in anthropology and education, her work explores the intersections of discourse, culture, well-being, and social change, particularly in Pakistan, through ethnographic, community-centered, and interdisciplinary approaches.*

Linfan Gan, MA, *holds a master's degree from Columbia University. She is a learning experience designer and program manager with expertise in AI-powered content development, instructional design, and cross-functional enablement. She is currently consulting with Workato, where she builds scalable training programs for technical audiences.*

Michelle Rozenfeld *is a rising sophomore at Rutgers University Honors College, majoring in Environmental Policy with a minor in Science Communication. She is a self-published author and is entering her 4th year of conducting research, spanning the social sciences, AI, soil microbiology, and policy analysis.*

Chloe Chung *is a rising freshman at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, majoring in ESG and finance. She is an economics research intern at Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness, where she studies climate resilience and disaster risk.*

References

Akkari, A., & Radhouane, M. (2023). Learning in emergency contexts: From the building of the concept to multifaceted actions in the field. *Prospects, 53*(1–2), 15–28. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-023-09639-8

Bastian, L. (n.d.). *Trauma-informed pedagogy (TIP)*. Teaching Support and Innovation, University of Oregon. https://teaching.uoregon.edu/resources/trauma-informed-pedagogy-tip

Berger, E. (2019). Multi-tiered approaches to trauma-informed care in schools: A systematic review. *School Mental Health*, *11*(4), 650-664.

Burde, D., Kapit, A., Wahl, R. L., Guven, O., & Skarpeteig, M. I. (2017). Education in emergencies: A review of theory and research. *Review of Educational Research, 87*(3), 619–658.

Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2015). Practicing what we teach: Trauma-informed educational practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 35*(3), 262–278.

Falk, D., Shephard, D., & Mendenhall, M. (2022). "I always take their problem as mine"–understanding the relationship between teacher-student relationships and teacher well-being in crisis contexts. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 95, 102670.

Gee, K. A., Murdoch, C., Vang, T., Quetzally, C., & Prim, J. (2020). Multi-tiered system of supports to address childhood trauma: Evidence and implications. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Gorbunova, Y. (2023, November 9). *"Tanks on the playground": Attacks on schools and military use of schools in Ukraine*. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/11/09/tanks-playground/attacks-schools-and-military-use-schools-ukraine

Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies. (2018). *INEE strategic framework 2018–2023*. https://inee.org/resources/inee-strategic-framework-2018-2023

International Rescue Committee. (2024, April 15). *IRC report: Ukraine, 10 years on*. https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/IRC%20Report%20-%20Ukraine%2C%2010%20Years%20On.pdf

Novelli, M., & Kutan, B. (2024). The imperial entanglements of 'Education in Emergencies': from saving souls to saving schools?. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 22(3), 405-419.

Plumb, J. L., Bush, K. A., & Kersevich, S. E. (2016). Trauma-sensitive schools: An evidence-based approach. *School Social Work Journal*, *40*(2), 37-60.

Samara, M., Hammuda, S., Vostanis, P., El-Khodary, B., & Al-Dewik, N. (2020). Children's prolonged exposure to the toxic stress of war trauma in the Middle East. *BMJ, 371*, m3155.

Shephard, D., Falk, D., & Mendenhall, M. (2024). 'My teachers make me feel alive': the contribution of student-teacher relationships to student well-being in accelerated education programmes in South Sudan and Uganda. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, *54*(6), 1021-1039.

Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, *27*(2), 237-246. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748

Thomas, M. S., Crosby, S., & Vanderhaar, J. (2019). Trauma-informed practices in schools across two decades: An interdisciplinary review of research. *Review of research in education*, *43*(1), 422-452.

UNICEF. (2026, February 17). *More than a third of Ukraine's children remain displaced four years into war*. https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/more-third-ukraines-children-remain-displaced-four-years-war-unicef

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2023). *Ukraine situation: UNHCR operational data portal*. https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine

Venet, A. S. (2021). *Equity-centered trauma-informed education*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Zakharchenko, T., Bell, A., Drushchak, N., Konopatska, O., Arif Khan, F., & Stoyanovich, J. (2025). Estimating the impact of the Russian invasion on the displacement of graduating high school students in Ukraine. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *12*(1), 1–10.