WORKING PAPER

EVIDENCE GAP AND LITERATURE REVIEW FINDINGS: NORTHWEST SYRIA

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ABSTRACT

The devastating and ongoing conflict in Syria which erupted in 2011 urgently necessitates research on education to assess and inform de facto policies, humanitarian and development initiatives that children's rights to quality education, and mitigating the negative impact of conflict on the young generation. Through the conflict, the northwestern region of Syria transitioned away from the Syrian government. Turkish-backed non-state actors stepped in to govern areas of the northwestern region – referred to as opposition areas – striving to fill the gap left by the absent central government (henceforth, the regime). Amidst armed and political conflicts, children have become chronically vulnerable to the violation of their rights to protection and quality educational provisions. To promote evidence-based educational policies, interventions and directions for education aid, and development in Northwest Syria (NW Syria), the ERICC programme focuses on gathering, analysing and producing contextually relevant education research. In this initial phase, we review the existing research evidence published in academic journals and reports produced by organisations and research centres that examine the policy and local levels of the education system in NW Syria.

Through this evidence review, we identify research gaps that help us formulate a research agenda that stakeholders in NW Syria can critically review and prioritise. We have found that the existing body of research studies has primarily focused on assessment of the status quo of school infrastructure, teacher workforce and children's access to schooling. These studies were mostly designed to provide information to aid and development initiatives. However, they fall short in producing evidence on how to improve access to, quality and continuity of education, a lack of which undermines intervention programmes. The major gaps in research include further studies into improving governance, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; producing and using data systems; reducing vulnerabilities and marginalisation, as well as an increased focus on caregivers and school-based practitioners and infrastructure and materials. Hence, this paper highlights the need for further research in NW Syria that focuses on how to develop human capacities to strengthen education systems, develop pedagogical approaches, and train/ support teachers and parents to enable more effective delivery of quality education to all children. At the same time it must address the inevitable violence in this context in children's everyday lives.

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ACRONYMS

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
ERICC	Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crises
FCDO	UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
FTS	Financial Tracking System (OCHA)
GNI	Gross national income
GOS	Government of Syria
HTS	Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham
IDP	Internally displaced person
IRC	International Rescue Committee
IS	Islamic State
JENA	Joint Education Needs Assessment
LMIC	Low- to middle-income country
MHPSS	Mental health and psychosocial support
NA	National Army
SIG	Syrian Interim Government
SSG	Syrian Salvation Government
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

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I. INTRODUCTION

This evidence review examines the research-produced knowledge available on the education systems in Northwest Syria (NW Syria) and identifies the gaps in research knowledge, as part of the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) programme. The review forms the initial phase in the ERICC programme to identify existing knowledge in relation to access, quality, continuity and cohesion in education for NW Syria. Moreover, it highlights the gaps in knowledge that will go on to inform the development of a research agenda in education for children in the region. NW Syria is an area controlled by authorities opposing the current Syrian regime and ranges across two of Syria's 14 governorates: Idlib and rural, north Aleppo.

Figure 1. Map of Syria showing regime and opposition-held areas
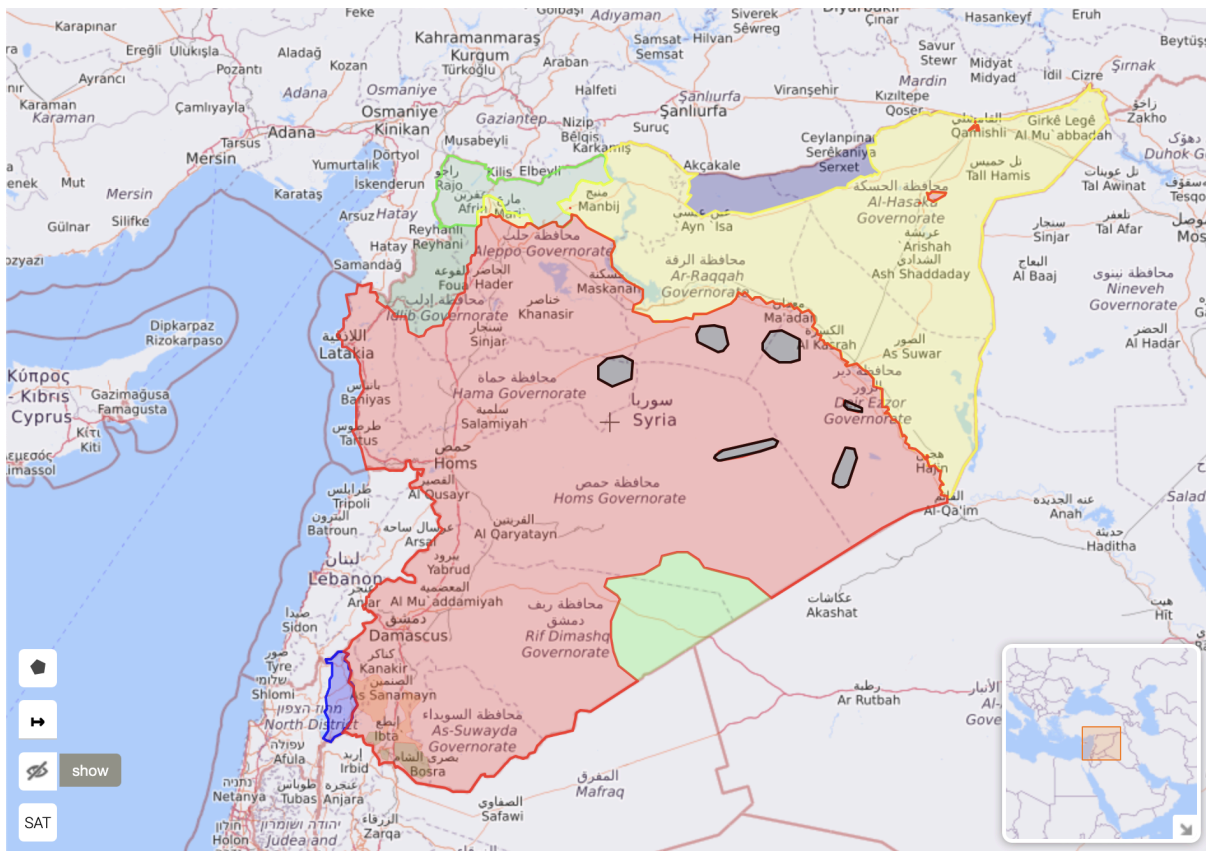
Source: syria.liveuamap.com/March 2024

Key: Shaded green area in northern region - NW Syria
Darker green area in western NW Syria - governed by opposition group *Hay'at Tahrir el-Sham* (HTS) or the Salvation Government
Yellow - northeast Syria
Red - Regime-controlled areas

In 2011, as Syrians peacefully demonstrated against the long rule of the Assad Regime demanding justice, freedom and dignity, the popular protest movement was met with violent repression. During the previous 13 years, Syria has been engulfed in an armed conflict. This was characterised by the systematic violation of international human rights law, including indiscriminate attacks in the form of aerial bombardments, the use of indiscriminate – for example chemical – weapons, and the infliction of collective punishment strategies

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such as sieges. This protracted conflict progressively led to the political and geographical fragmentation of the country which has carved different areas of control and governance.

In the last four years conflict frontlines seemed to have stabilised in a status quo. But Syria has experienced an escalation of violence in the last few months of 2023, with multiple parties attacking civilians and infrastructure, in what the Commission of Inquiry deems possible war crimes. The economic consequences of the prolonged conflict have been significant. By the end of 2020, economic loss as a result of it exceeded $600 billion. This was exacerbated by international sanctions, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the Lebanese economic crisis. The depreciation of the Syrian pound contributed to high inflation rates and soaring prices, resulting in the deterioration of the livelihoods of Syrians. The overall poverty rate reached 96% of the population in 2020 (SCPR, 2022).

The effects of the conflict on the Syrian people have been significant. Half of the Syrian population have been forced to leave their homes, and there are 6.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), 3.2 million of which are children (UNICEF, 2022). The Syrian people experience injustice daily, including mobility restrictions, disempowerment and a lack of voice and representation. (SCPR, 2022). The pre-tertiary formal education system in Syria is grade 1 to grade 12 and provided for free by the Syrian government. The basic education programme is compulsory and comprises two cycles: cycle 1 for grades 1-4 and cycle 2 for grades 5-9. The secondary education programme consists of grades 10, 11 and 12. Pre-schools (kindergarten) are available for children ages three to five but as fee-paying provisions. Education services for children with disabilities fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.

The conflict in Syria has had a devastating effect on education. UNICEF estimates that 2.45 million Syrian children are out of school, representing nearly half of school-age children. Another 1.6 million children are at risk of dropping out. Of displaced children living in camps, 36% are not receiving any form of education (Save the Children, 2021). In NW Syria, a staggering 60% of school-age children are estimated to be deprived of an education (UNICEF, 2021). School infrastructure and personnel have been a regular target during the conflict with attacks perpetrated on schools, and schools used for military purposes.

In eastern Aleppo and formerly besieged areas, between 2012 and 2018, many schools had to move into basements due to airstrikes and shelling (Save the Children, 2022). In 2019, the UN stated that one in three schools across Syria were not being used for educational purposes due to damage or destruction, sheltering IDPs, or their use for military purposes (OCHA, 2020). Unsafe and overcrowded schools, the lack of adequate learning material, the lack of experienced teachers due to low compensations and large emigration rates, are among factors that have negatively impacted the quality of education.

The increased politicisation of education across Syria has led to the introduction of various education curricula developed by the various governing actors. Seven different school curricula are being taught in schools and millions of children are now engaged in education systems which are not formally accredited, posing questions around quality and continuity of education. The politicisation has been a disincentivizing factor in children attending school, driving many families to take children out of school to help financially support their household instead.

The purpose of the evidence review on NW Syria is to identify what we know about the conditions of access, quality, continuity and system coherence and evidence of effective approaches to address educational needs for all children. Drawing on the evidence available, we identify existing gaps in education research on NW Syria and identify emerging research priorities. The suggested research priorities will inform the development of a research agenda that will be co-constructed with stakeholders in Syria for critical discussion, validation and consensus.

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Producing a research agenda for the education sector in NW Syria is critical during this time of political and social fragility and ongoing violent conflict. Not only are opposition areas attempting to transition from a regime-led education system to a more inclusive and equitable one, but the conflict in Syria since 2011 has left millions of children in opposition areas out of school. Developing policies and practices for a resilient, sustainable and equitable education system requires an active, inclusive and robust research culture producing quality evidence-informed knowledge.

However, there is a severe paucity of research-based knowledge of conditions of education policies and practices and approaches needed for reform. Hence, supporting educational actors in NW Syria across different levels of the education to formulate and execute an agenda for education is instrumental for the sustainable development of an evidence-informed education system.

A. Education Research in Conflict and Crisis Programme (ERICC) and the ERICC conceptual framework

Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) is a research programme that aims to produce new evidence on effective approaches to ensure quality provisions of education for all children in conflict-affected contexts. The ERICC Research Programme Consortium is co-led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with Academic Lead IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, and expert partners include the Centre for Lebanese Studies, Common Heritage Foundation, Forcier Consulting, ODI, Osman Consulting, and Queen Rania Foundation. It is supported by UK aid. These research institutions are leading the research programme activities from December 2021 to December 2024 in seven countries: Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Nigeria, South Sudan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. To date, a first cohort of country case studies has been completed in Jordan, Nigeria, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Currently, studies in the second cohort countries of Syria, South Sudan and Lebanon are underway.

This evidence review attempts to identify evidence gaps around policies, rates of access, quality of learning, systems of educational governance, and status of teachers, that impact on the alignment, accountability and adaptability of education systems in NW Syria. To present and analyse this knowledge field, we draw on two conceptual frameworks, each providing a specific dimension. The first is drawn from the conceptual framework developed by Kim et al. (2022) for the ERICC project. The second presented afterwards is provided by the IRC.

A1. Drivers of learning and development

The ERICC conceptual framework (Kim et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2024) identifies four key variables as essential drivers to ensure and enhance "equity and achievement in holistic learning and development" (ibid, p. 5). These four variables – access, quality, continuity, coherence – are referred to as drivers of learning and development.

Access: Extending beyond the common measure of quantifying enrolment or participation figures, access is also an "awareness of, and the opportunity and capacity to participate" in learning and other education-related activities (Kim et al., 2022, p. 6). This includes accessing educational experiences at school, home or in the community, and whether through classrooms or distant education.

Quality: Kim et al. (2022) define the quality of education through two facets: (1) resources and support; (2) relationships, norms, practices and interactions. The quality of resources and support includes the readiness and approaches of human resources (e.g. teachers, caregivers), approaches to instructional and social-emotional support, and the physical resources used in classrooms and for remote distant education. The second facet includes the nature of interactions among learners, caregivers and teachers.

Continuity: This variable identifies the continuous access or "sustained exposure" to quality education as an essential driver in conflict-affected areas (Kim et al., 2022, p. 6). Within contexts of crises, the rapid changes in security and economy can suddenly interrupt or cease provisions of education resulting in school closures, dropping out of school, retention and even the attrition of school-based practitioners.

Coherence for access, quality and continuity: An education that provides learning and holistic development for children requires coordination and alignment at a systems level. This includes finances that ensure provisions of human and physical resources and sustainable governance mechanisms for the development and administration of policies.

The ERICC framework draws on established theories of social ecology, such as Bronfenbrenner (1979), to present a systems level view of education. This comprises two levels of how drivers of learning and development are designed and operate. Education policy and governance makes up the policy systems level, or macro level. The homes, schools, communities and other settings where "children's educational experiences and interactions occur" makes up the local systems level (Kim et al., 2002, p. 7).

Figure 2 below illustrates how influences on drivers of learning represent the pathways that change outcomes at policy and local systems levels. While the outcomes of both levels are determined by drivers of learning, the variables for the drivers of learning vary slightly. The drivers of learning at the policy systems level comprise issues of coherence among systems level actors to support access, quality and continuity of education; meanwhile at the local systems level, we observe access, quality and continuity.

Figure 2. ERICC conceptual framework[1]

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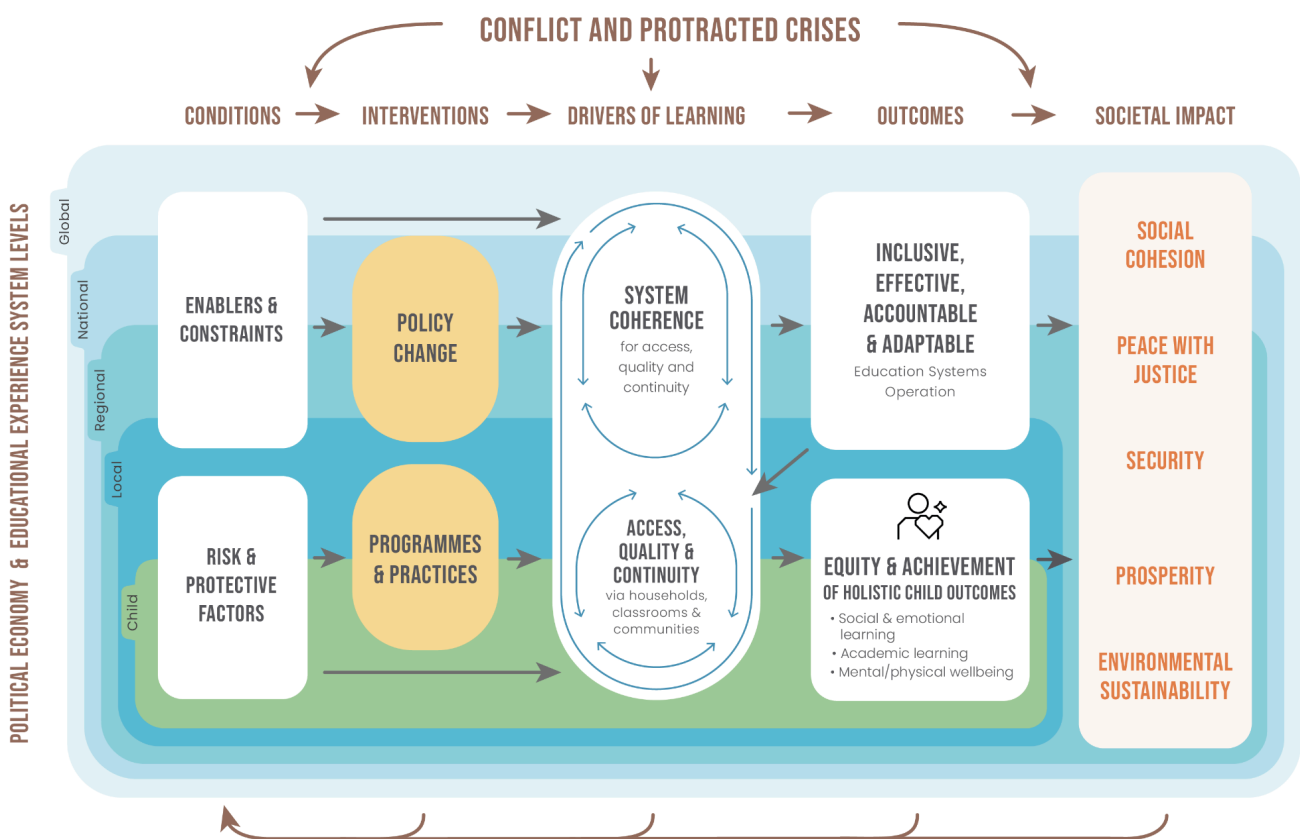
[1] Kim, H. Y., Tubbs Dolan, C., Aber, J. L., Diazgranados, S., Pherali, T., & the ERICC Consortium. (September 2024) A Conceptual Framework for Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC): Systematic, holistic approaches to Education Research, Policy and Practice. ERICC Technical Brief.

A2. ERICC methods approach: progression of knowledge production

A "methods approach" developed by the IRC describes different stages of research for action in areas affected by crises (see Figure 3). We draw on these stages to ascertain the state of the evidence and, subsequently, identify research gaps according to the phases of evidence production. The first stage is described as formative research, where researchers aim to identify or develop studies that document existing needs, and scan or examine the status quo of existing policies, practices, experiences, conceptualisations and reflections.

After pinpointing challenges and understanding associated underlying factors and best practices, researchers carry out "design research" studies where they engage local stakeholders in the development of new feasible, desirable and potentially cost-effective approaches, practices and policies to address existing needs. Once they have found or developed solutions, researchers engage in implementation research, where studies report on the processes and results of interventions, assessing whether they are being implemented as intended and in cost-efficient ways.

Finally, researchers engage in "effectiveness research", using rigorous methods to examine the impact of an intervention on outcomes across various beneficiaries, and critically weighing observed changes in outcomes against costs. As a final stage, "scale research" explores interventions that have been built on evidence of trials and small-scale sample groups and henceforth designed to be carried out at a far larger scale; typically, across a regional or national level.

Across these different stages, we can find "costing and measurement research" that analyses feasibility and sustainable scale-up according to financial costs. Measurement research includes the development of scales, instruments and even epistemological approaches to qualitative and quantitative inquiries.

Figure 3. Methods approach illustration of stages of research for action
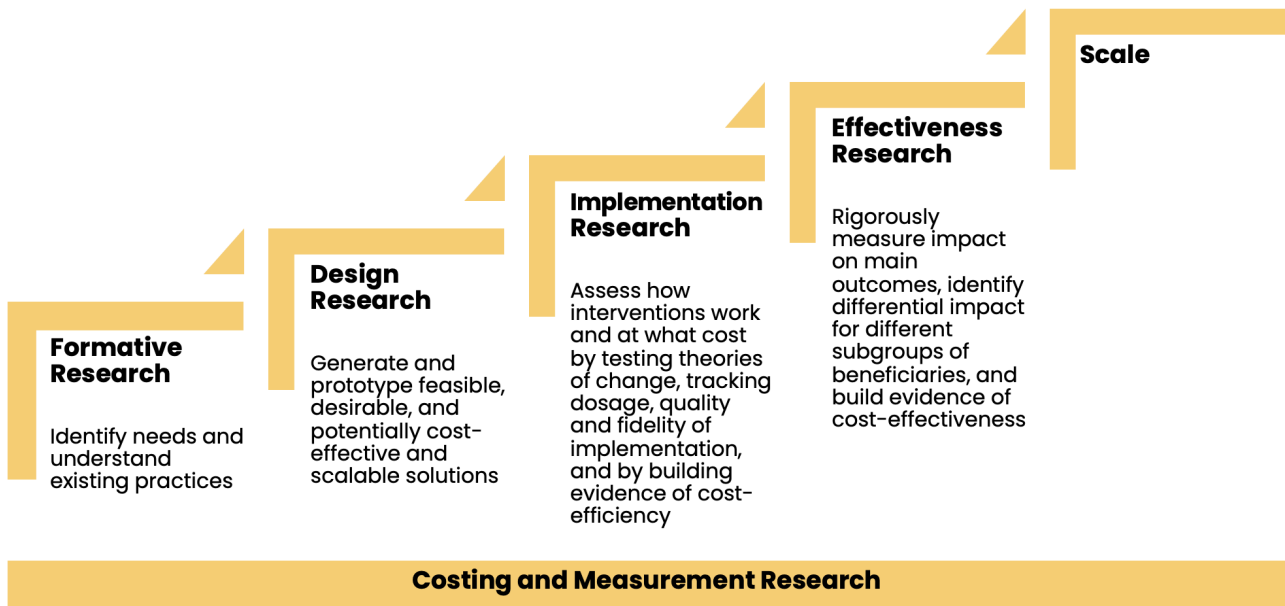
Source: ERICC

B. The present study

The purpose of this review is to identify the state of the evidence and existing research evidence gaps around education policies, planning and practice in NW Syria. As described above, the evidence and evidence gaps will then inform the development of a research agenda that will be co-created with local stakeholders in NW Syria. To this end, we reviewed the existing body of research and other resources on two levels of the education system: policy systems level (or macro level) and the local systems level (or meso and micro levels). The policy systems level constitutes governance and administration approaches to: (1) policy-making; (2) budget and financing; (3) data and accountability mechanisms. At the local systems level, education practitioners, caregivers and community members engage with children and, through these practices, determine children's access to and the quality and continuity of education. Within each of these levels, we examine four variables:

- Drivers of learning
- Education outcomes
- Disabling and enabling factors
- Interventions

In addition to examining what drivers of learning have been studied under each education system level, we also identify at what stage of research the evidence has been produced.

We present the results of the evidence review under the two systems levels: policy and local. Within each level, we analyse the four variables listed above through the following questions, which we also use as subheadings in the results section:

B1. Policy systems level (macro):
- Drivers of learning: What is the status of education system coherence for children's learning and development and in what ways do political economy factors affect education system operations in Syria?
- Outcomes: What is the state of policies, budgets and data systems in the education sector responding to crises, in alignment, accountability, and adaptability?
- Dis/enabling factors: What enables and constrains policy decisions?
- Interventions: What interventions, if any, affect access, quality and continuity of education and improve coherence?

B2. At the local systems level (meso-micro):
- Drivers of learning: What are the conditions of children's access to and quality and continuity of education at schools, community, household?
- Factors that determine or influence drivers of learning: What are the school, community, household and personal risk and protective factors that affect access, quality and continuity?
- Outcomes: What is the state of children's academic, social and emotional, and physical and mental health and well-being, in their level of achievement and equity? How do these vary for different groups by gender and displacement status?
- Interventions: What interventions, if any, affect children's learning, social-emotional learning and mental health?

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II. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

A. Education evidence in conflict and crises settings

Education research in conflict and crises settings in low- to middle-income countries (LMICs) is instrumental to ensuring children maintain or receive their provision of education as mandated in the legally binding UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Many of these conflict-affected contexts, however, struggle to access, use and produce education research necessary for developing new policy frameworks and pioneering inclusive approaches to learning in schools. Nevertheless, the empirical field continues to dissect challenges, identify pockets of promise and build conceptual frameworks through comparative studies.

Among the key modern influencers of education research in crises-affected contexts are Bush and Saltarelli (2000) who unpacked the destructive "face" of education showing how education can also serve as a medium for fuelling violence or reproducing conflict drivers. Comparative education studies in LMIC contexts riddled with crises built empirical fields that informed conceptual understandings of education for either harm or peacebuilding; these include schooling as sites and practices of violence (Harber, 2004), approaches to curricular reform for social cohesion in divided societies (Tawil & Harley, 2004), pedagogies that prevent critical thinking and co-construction of knowledge (Weinstein et al., 2007), political economies of education that determine degrees of peacebuilding through schooling (Novelli & Smith, 2011) and the global impact of armed conflict on children (UNESCO, 2011).

Whilst vulnerable children, such as girls, refugees and children with disabilities, are highly vulnerable to marginalisation because of poor infrastructure, unavailable resources and school closures, provisions of non-formal education programmes and psychosocial support, can benefit the most vulnerable children (Burde et al, 2017). Recent international comparative research has also found that fragile education systems struggle to build resilience when facing adversities (Heaner et al., 2021). This has argued for the urgent need to incorporate child protection strategies in provisions of learning for highly vulnerable children (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2022).

Within the empirical field of education in emergency and compounded crises settings, we still find a paucity of research on innovative approaches where practitioners pioneer practices that enhance equitable learning experiences. Despite long-established curriculum development theories where teachers engage as co-researchers to advance disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge in the UK (Fordham, 2016; Stenhouse, 1975), teachers in education research in North Africa and West Asia participate more as research subjects than co-producers of evidence (Akar, 2022). Indeed, the political nature of LMIC conflict-affected areas are attributed with authoritarian forms of governance that threaten degrees of criticality and inclusion in the production of evidence on education policies and practices.

This evidence review aims to inform a research agenda that not only builds the empirical field of education policies and practices in an under-researched area of NW Syria, but also strives to engage its stakeholders on the co-construction of evidence and further advance conceptual understandings of building equitable and accountable education systems.

B. An education emergency in Syria

In Syria, an armed conflict has been ongoing since 2011. It started in 2011 with a large-scale uprising against the authoritarian regime demanding freedom, justice, and dignity. The brutal suppression of protests by the regime and the absence of political transformation channels triggered the militarisation of the uprising. Opposition groups were able to make quick gains and control various pockets of territories, developing a

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larger stronghold in northern Syria where local governance gradually became organised in the shape of local councils and an umbrella identified as the Syrian Opposition. Resorting to large-scale human rights violations to fight opposition groups (Human Rights Watch, 2013), the Syrian government requested a direct military intervention by Russia in September 2015 in order to retake territories, including Aleppo. Opposition forces, backed by direct military intervention by Turkey, maintained control in Idlib and NW Syria.

In northeast Syria, Kurdish militias de facto took control of territories populated by a majority of Kurdish populations. Having suffered for decades from identity-based discrimination at the hands of the authoritarian regime, Syrian Kurds grasped the opportunity to experience self-determination by developing their own alternative governance model named the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES) (Jongerden, 2018). The deepening chaos, the fragmentation of the Syrian state and fragile legitimacy of new governing authorities across Syria facilitated the emergence of extremist groups and the rapid expansion of the Islamic State (IS). Partnering with the US-led coalition to successfully fight IS, Syrian Kurds expanded their territorial control which now includes large swathes of territories in the East of Syria that are historically populated by Arab-majority populations. However, Turkey and opposition armed groups conducted several military assaults against the AANES, as Turkey considers the Kurdish actors in Syria as a threat to its national security (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Syria has been divided between four warring state and non-state actors supported by the direct military presence of regional and global actors such as Russia and Iran (supporting the Syrian government), and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and the US-led coalition (supporting opposition groups). These have played crucial political, economic, military roles in the conflict. The political division is associated with social polarisation among the population, in addition to severe losses in human capital and economic resources and activities (Center for Preventive Action, 2024).

The consequences of the conflict extend beyond the immediate violence, significantly impacting communities in terms of their lives, essential services, and livelihoods. The ongoing conflict has led to displacement, loss of life, and the destruction of infrastructure, disrupting the daily lives of individuals and straining the capacity of local services. Seven out of ten Syrians need humanitarian assistance as the country's humanitarian crisis worsens. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (2023) has estimated that over 600,000 people have died since the conflict began. The protracted crisis in Syria is resulting in 203 sub-districts (out of 270) now classified as being under severe, extreme or catastrophic conditions (OCHA, 2022). This has created a humanitarian crisis, with communities facing challenges in accessing basic necessities, health care, and education. After 11 years of crisis during which the country has dropped 42 places on the Human Development Index (HDI), most Syrians face a future of continuing humanitarian decline.

The material costs of this complex violence are evident in the physical destruction of schools and educational facilities. Displacement and insecurity further exacerbate the challenges in maintaining a stable and consistent educational environment. The emotional toll on individuals, especially children, is significant, with exposure to violence, loss of family members, and the disruption of their educational routines, all contributing to long-term psychological trauma.

Education becomes a casualty in this conflict, facing multiple threats. The destruction of schools, the displacement of students and teachers, and the disruption of educational processes, undermine the region's educational system. Limited resources and an unstable security environment hamper efforts to rebuild and sustain a functional education system. The disruption of education not only constrains individual development but also jeopardises the overall socioeconomic and intellectual progress of the region. A lack of education can perpetuate cycles of poverty and limit opportunities for future generations, hindering the potential for post-conflict recovery and rebuilding.

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Northwest Syria is the last remaining stronghold where Syrian armed opposition groups are based and is governed by several non-state actors. It spans the districts of Idlib, Afrin and northern Aleppo. Between 2016 and 2018, the authoritarian regime determined to regain control of Syrian territory over the opposition, conducted large-scale military operations including daily bombardments and imposed long-term sieges (PAX, 2020), before enforcing surrender agreements on communities living in former key opposition strongholds such as Eastern Ghouta and Deraa (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022). Surrender agreements resulted in the forced transfer of thousands of people from these formerly besieged communities to northern provinces, including Idlib.

In early 2018, Turkey launched a military offensive in Afrin in order to expel Kurdish militias which resulted in the large displacement of Kurdish communities towards northeastern Syria. The carrying out of human rights violations, abuses and seizure of properties (Human Rights Watch, 2024), and the fact that many forcibly displaced persons from Eastern Ghouta and Qalamoun were resettled in properties originally owned by Kurdish owners, exacerbated community tensions (McGee, 2019). Islamist armed groups have gained considerable power over time and in 2019, *Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham* (HTS) expanded its influence to a large part of Idlib (Solomon, 2022). HTS established its political wing, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), to govern the area.

Today, governance in NW Syria is shared between the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) which controls areas in northern Aleppo and the SSG which controls Idlib and parts of Afrin. The SIG and SSG, both of which are backed by Turkey, have been involved in violent power struggles that have had a devastating impact on human and material resources (Human Rights Watch, 2023). NW Syria is faced with a number of difficulties that include demographic and economic challenges and an increasing influence of Islamic groups that restrict the lives of civilians. First, NW Syria has witnessed rapid population growth, hosting nearly 4.5 million people (Tokmajyan, 2023), causing pressure on resources and competition between host communities and IDPs. Two million people live in camps or self-settled sites and among them 800.000 continue to live in tents (OCHA, 2023).

Meanwhile the COVID-19 pandemic greatly exacerbated the suffering of Syrians due to pressure on the health system and a deterioration of economic activities (OCHA, 2021), and the earthquake that hit Turkey and NW Syria in February 2023 caused serious human loss and material damages and continue to have lasting effects until this day.

NW Syria has become increasingly economically dependent on Turkey (Tokmajyan, 2023) with whom it shares its main border, which results in the flooding of Turkish goods in local markets, the prevalent use of the Turkish currency in economic transactions, and Turkey running local infrastructure and services such as communications, banks or post offices. The region is also highly dependent on humanitarian assistance led by cross-border UN mechanisms alongside the essential role of civil society. The continuation of significant challenges to deliver aid caused hindrances for the renewal of the cross-border mechanism which was replaced by ad hoc arrangements.

However, in January 2024, OCHA reported that the cross-border assistance arrangement was extended by six months for NW Syria through the Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing. According to OCHA, 5,000 trucks delivering relief had crossed into NW Syria from Turkey through the Bab al-Hawa, Bab al-Salam, and al-Ra'ie crossings since February 2023, as of the time of the extension announcement (OCHA, 2024).

Finally, as Islamist groups have progressively taken over local governance in some areas, local communities have become more vulnerable to the influence of these groups which manage the delivery of basic services and offer employment opportunities. A gradual gender backlash has attempted to restrain the role of women in the public sphere (STJ, 2024), severely endangering the work of women activists in the field of gender equality (Syria Direct, 2024). A rise in the persecution of minority groups has been reported in the

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form of arrest and confiscation of properties (NWS Protection Cluster, 2024) which has led to many fleeing the area.

B1. Impact of war on education in Syria

Prior to the war that erupted in 2011, we have limited evidence-informed knowledge published in English on pedagogical practices, approaches to curricular reform, policy frameworks and governance mechanisms. The few studies in English (e.g. Anyaegbu et al., 2022; Boyle Espinosa & Ronin, 2022); Paul, 2023) were authored by researchers in institutions outside of Syria. Some highlighted outdated learning and teaching resources and risks associated with not engaging education practitioners in decision-making.

For example, a study (Cardinal, 2009) that examined the teaching and curricula of Christian and Muslim religious education noted that the Syrian Ministry of Education published all textbooks used in public schools; while some were revised in 2004, others dated back to the 1960s. Also, Albirini (2006) found that while teachers who were surveyed had positive attitudes towards the new digital technologies provided by the government in 2000, they expressed limited capacity and even interest in using computers. In Arabic, the majority of studies carried out prior to 2011 focused on higher education, use of technology in schools, and the inclusion of children with disabilities.

The conflict in Syria that erupted in 2011 has devastated the education sector. As of 2021, an estimated 2.4 million children, or almost half the children in Syria, were out of school (Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2022)[2]. Approximately 18% of school-age children in Syria do not attend any form of learning; among the population who do not attend formal education, 51% have dropped out while 45% have never enrolled (ibid, 2022). Other factors have also impacted education in Syria. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated education challenges, including school closures and lack of alternatives, health concerns, and preventive measures (OCHA, 2023). The earthquake in February 2023 also significantly impacted education in the affected areas, mainly in NW Syria. Education was suspended in 208 schools in areas controlled by the Syrian government, according to the directorates of education in the governorates (ibid, 2023).

NW Syria is one of the regions most affected by the armed conflict and has witnessed devastating impacts on children and provisions of education. Schools in this area have been targets of attacks; 1,189 schools have been fully or partly destroyed since 2011 (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2018). By 2018, 39% of schools for basic education and 16% for secondary schooling became dysfunctional because of war-related destruction or closing by governing authorities (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2018). In a 2019 survey on schools in northern Syria camps, the Assistance Coordination Unit and Information Management Unit (2019) found that, across 598 camps, only 136 have schools. In this region, educational human resources and facilities have also been targeted by the regime.

The number of damaged schools in NW Syria reached 392, including 11 destroyed schools, and 48 schools have been converted into shelters. Sixty-eight teachers have died and 79 have been injured.[3] The security situation in NW Syria remains unpredictable and the economic situation in decline as conflict and violence continues. As a consequence the evident impact manifested in increased displacement within the region where as of June 2023, 1.97 million IDPs are living in 1,531 IDPs sites in Northwest Syria (Global Shelter Cluster, 2023). In October 2023, an escalation of conflict occurred, reflecting the instability and uncertain security situation. Targeted attacks on civilians, civilian infrastructure and humanitarian workers across 1,100 locations in Idlib and western Aleppo were witnessed. Education provision was part of the targeted locations, with 10 schools attacked and damaged.

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[2] Humanitarian Needs Overview (2022) cited Muhannad Hadi (Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis) and Ted Chaiban (UNICEF Regional Director for the MENA), 24 January 2021.
[3] Assistance Coordination Unit. (March 13, 2023). Humanitarian Situation in North-West Syria Following the Devastating Earthquake.

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Since 2011, several changes in actors controlling and governing different parts of NW Syria resulted in changes in the provision of education in terms of imposed curricula, educational policies and educational authorities. Post-2011, as opposition groups progressively organised governance in areas they now controlled through operating local city councils, they ensured the continuous provision of education in local schools. With the SIG soon in place, the Syrian curriculum was revised and stripped of information seen as praising the regime and the Assad Dynasty. Over time, the curriculum was updated to include information on the root causes of the 'Syrian Revolution'.

In early 2014, Kurdish parties declared the autonomy of the Afrin region with the creation of AANES and put in place their own education system with the roll-out of a school curriculum delivered in Kurdish language for Kurdish children (STJ & Leylun, 2023). In the same year, northern areas of Aleppo were seized by IS. It imposed its own curriculum aimed at promoting its religious doctrine and extremist views (Arvisais & Guidere, 2020) through religious education and military training. Both school curricula were taught until areas in northern Aleppo were taken over by Turkey-backed armed groups linked to the Syrian opposition in early 2017.

Meanwhile, the "Olive Branch" Turkish military operation in 2018 ousted Kurdish militias from Afrin. Today, schools in Afrin and northern Aleppo are under the supervision of Turkey education directorates in southern Turkey and this has resulted in the introduction of the Turkish language in the curriculum (Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2023) . In HTS-controlled areas in Idlib, schools are supervised by the Ministry of Education of the SSG and teach the revised Syrian curriculum that has been stripped of parts that may contradict the Islamic Sharia (Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2023).

III. METHODS

This literature review includes international peer-reviewed publications in English and Arabic, official documents including education directorate statements and reports, Assistance Coordination Unit data and statistics, Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, and situation analyses carried out by local and international organisations. The review covers the period 2007—2023 to ensure a thorough understanding of the education system before the conflict (2007—2010) and dynamics and outcomes throughout the conflict until the present (2011—2023). While we reviewed evidence on the whole of Syria prior to 2011, we have focused on NW Syria when reviewing studies published after the outbreak of the conflict. We have primarily focused the literature review to align with that of the ERICC Research Agenda on NW Syria because of the complex interactions and relations between different education systems across this area of Syria.

A. Data

When searching for academic publications in English and Arabic, we relied on databases commonly used in these respective languages. For English, we used one university online library and four established databases (see Table 1). For studies in Arabic, we searched through three main databases, "Al-Mandoumah" being the primary and most established database for studies in the Arab region. Also, when searching for studies in Arabic, we found the Midad Center of Educational Studies and Research, which is an education research centre specifically for non-regime areas. The initial search used the terms "Syria" AND "education" NOT "refugee". We excluded "refugee" because of the plethora of studies on Syrian refugees in countries other than Syria. While reading through the titles and abstracts, we found a large number of studies on higher education and studies published decades ago. We then screened the search results for studies that did not research higher education and were published after 2010. The number of academic publications that the search terms and screening yielded in English and Arabic are in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively.

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Reports carried out by organisations were also sources for evidence, so long as they demonstrated a degree of robust methodology in the construction of their research questions and approaches to data collection and analysis. We relied on the Google internet search engine along with humanitarian aid databases such as www.reliefweb.int. In both academic publications and organisation reports, we also found other relevant evidence-based studies through reference snowballing by searching through the publications that were cited. We also accessed the Syrian government's Central Bureau of Statistics to gather information on the nature of their data system and see what evidence could be relevant. A short statistical bulletin on education was available on their website tab for Statistical Indicators. Their latest data was 2006, which provided figures on students enrolled in the different education levels, literacy rates and dropping out of school rates.

Table 1. **Academic publications in English**

Database	Initial search Syria AND Education NOT refugee	Screening "Northwest"; after 2010; NOT "higher education"
University of Birmingham Library	341	11
SCOPUS	626	2
EBSCO	400	1
Taylor & Francis	10,370 (22)	1
ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global	203	1

Table 2. **Academic publications in Arabic**

Database	Initial search Syria AND Education NOT refugee	Screening "Northwest"; after 2010; NOT "higher education"
Al-Mandoumah	1173	1
Shamaa	624	3
Midad Center of Educational Studies and Research	32	10

In the case of NW Syria, the dates of research are likely to determine *some* aspects of relevance of the findings to identifying evidence gaps and a research agenda action plan. Studies prior to the eruption of the war in Syria largely draw on government actors, local policies and the degrees of engagement of families and community organisations in provisions of education. Evidence produced after 2011, however, pertains to specific regions and their governing authorities.

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B. Coding and analysis

When reviewing and examining the literature, we used a "table of studies" spreadsheet to organise the coding of the evidence and details of the publication. In the table of studies, we documented the publication's citation, research question(s), findings, the stage of research according to the IRC "methods approach" and indicated responses to presence of drivers of learning, focus on policy or local systems levels, target populations and intervention type and settings. We also screened each publication's bibliography list and, from some, we found relevant sources that did not appear in the initial search attempts. These sources were also included in the evidence review.

The extraction and coding process followed these steps:

1. Enter citation data into "table of studies" and "endnote reference manager" software
2. Read study and enter relevant evidence into "findings" cell in "table of studies".
3. Copy the "findings" into Word document and allocate evidence according to "macro" and "micro/meso" sections, building on the emerging presentation of results.
4. When possible, add emerging ideas to the "discussion" section of the evidence review.
5. Return to "table of studies" and complete the coding across the remaining indicators.

The total search time for English and Arabic evidence-based sources took approximately five working days. This included searches and screening, downloading citation and literature in PDF, and documenting the methodology.

The evidence and findings under the policy (macro) and local (meso/micro) systems level sections were then examined in relation to the four research questions listed above. When presenting the evidence and findings under each question, we were able to identify evidence gaps by considering the (1) variables or concepts in the ERICC conceptual framework contextualised within the findings; and (2) stage of research (according to the "methods approach"). When analysing interventions, we rated the evidence strength and direction of impact (see Table 3).

Table 3. **Intervention evidence categorisation legend**

Interpreting the evidence strength	Interpreting Study Context	The Direction of Impact
⬤⬤⬤ = **Strong** [2 or more systematic reviews demonstrate impact: whether positive, negative, uncertain or null] ⬤⬤ =Moderate [At least 1 systematic review, at least 1 literature review with predominantly IE-based evidence, or 2 or more IEs demonstrates impact: whether positive, negative, uncertain or null] ⬤ =Promising [At least 1 IE demonstrates impact: whether positive, negative, uncertain, or null] ⬤ =Limited [Only observational or limited evidence from either short close-ended questionnaire or selected testimonials to demonstrate impact including literature	**Stable:** Contexts not experiencing conflicts, disasters, or crisis **Fragile:** Contexts that are very impoverished or rendered vulnerable due to past crises. Will also include contexts that frequently experience a crisis **Humanitarian:** Contexts facing conflicts, disasters, or crisis **Low-income country (LIC):** Calculated by the World Bank to have a gross national income (GNI) of $1,035 or less	+ = positive result ± = mixed result − = Findings indicate a negative result ? = uncertain/ inconclusive Ø = null result For each directional finding, the addition of an asterisk (*) shows there was at least one statistically significant result. The lack of an asterisk means no significant results. Example: +* Means positive, statistically significant results

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reviews of only observational, statistical or qualitative data]		

IV. RESULTS

A. Policy systems level (macro)

At the macro level, we present evidence found for each of the four questions presented above.

1. What is the status of education system coherence for children's learning and development and in what ways do political economy factors affect education system operations in NW Syria?

a. Political drivers have structured a multi-curricular education system whereby each curriculum prioritises agendas of governing authorities over children's learning and development.

The majority of the political regimes in the area have resisted democratisation based on citizenship by embracing nationalist or religious identities. Instead of focusing on creating efficient, just and accountable institutions, they have turned to repression and group cohesion in order to hold onto power (SCPR, 2023). The numerous governing authorities in NW Syria have resulted in numerous curricula and school-based policies that aim to reinforce the socio-political agendas of those governing. Consequently, this plurality and multiple nation-based curricula further "deepen the state of fragmentation and invest in identity politics" where the most fragmented multi-curricular education systems lie in northeastern Syria, Idlib and Aleppo rural areas (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2018). For example:

- the Syrian national curriculum produced by the regime emphasises its political ideologies that restrict critical thinking and dialogues (Abouchedid & Nasser, 2002). In 2014, the Syrian government added Russian as an optional second language following Russia's support in the regime's war against opposition groups. The Syrian government also established Ba'athist student organisations and "continues to force students…to join them" (Lêlûn & Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2023, p. 10)
- the extremist IS enforced a curriculum that focused primarily on teaching religion and prevented girls from accessing schools (SCPR, 2023).

In Idlib, the Islamic extremist political group *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) has imposed strict regulations in schools that segregate boys from girls and banned performance arts and other artistic expressions.[4] In addition, policies driven by HTS and the SSG began objectifying women, manifested in imposing restrictions to control their clothing, freedom of movement and work conditions within the areas controlled by their forces, as well as the ways in which they represented women in public and religious sermons. Such measures also affect people outside the HTS and SSG's areas of control. Overall, this has brought significant changes in the dynamics of women's lives and their societal roles, especially in employment, where they are limited to working in education, organisations, or agricultural work, rather than in administrative offices, engineering, legal, or other fields (SCPR, 2023).

- Within the areas controlled by the SIG and the National Army (NA), these policies are influenced by the Turkish government. Although the region is also subject to the politicisation of gender identity, the effects mostly manifest in different forms. Examples of this include limiting women's employment

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[4] Taken from an online news source: "HTS-linked government gender segregates schools in Northwest Syria". (10 August 2023). The New Arab. https://www.newarab.com/news/syria-hts-linked-govt-gender-segregates-idlib-schools.

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options to aid organisations and education, as well as preventing them from working in engineering offices, human rights agencies, or government agencies. The vice-president of the coalition made an effort to establish a women's commission in the area.[5] This may seek to support the strengthening of women's place in society, combating marginalisation and discrimination through stereotypes, and upholding women's rights. Nonetheless, since many feminist and women's organisations are unlikely to be able to effect institutional change, this makes this issue ever more critical. Moreover, many well-known SIG members also utilise language that is characterised by exclusion, a lack of commitment to women's rights, and a doubt about the value of women's participation (SCPR, 2023).

- In Kurdish-controlled areas, governing authorities use the Kurdish curriculum for their basic education (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2018). This focuses on Kurdish nationalism, language, heritage and values (Boyle Espinosa & Ronan, 2022). The same administration has set Kurdish as the official language of instruction in school with Arabic as a second language. Many classes taught in Kurdish, including maths, focus heavily on teaching about Abdullah Öcalan, the former leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), to generate support from the schoolchildren (Boyle Espinosa & Ronan, 2022). The newly developed curricula instils the idea of 'Greater Kurdistan' which glorifies the image of Abdullah Öcalan as a symbol of Kurdish nationalism (Enabbaladi, 2018). When examining the Kurdish influence on schools in Syria, Dinç (2020) drew on similar practices in Turkey to show how Rojava in AANES also focused on generating a "we" collective narrative through primary education. While the Rojava books recognised linguistic and religious diversity, including Arab and Assyrian communities, they also emphasised Kurdish nationalism through maps, geography, history and culture (Dinç, 2020). Moreover, their setting up of Arabic as a second language risks Arabic speakers becoming more vulnerable to marginalisation and might threaten social cohesion (Boyle Espinosa & Ronan, 2022).

- A case study in Afrin, Aleppo that hosts a Kurdish majority argued that the Turkish governing authorities imposed the Turkish language and culture through Afrin's education curriculum and, thus, this is seen as a Turkish occupation of the area (Lêlûn & Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2023).

- The study conducted by the Assistance Coordination Unit (2023) found that 48% (1,763 schools) of operational schools teach the modified regime curriculum (the opposition curriculum), 38% (1,404 schools) teach the curriculum issued by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), 5% (200 schools) teach the Syrian regime curriculum, and 9% (318 schools) teach the UNICEF curriculum or what is known as the accelerated curriculum.

b. The governing authorities' education curricula, administrative policies and pedagogies appear to marginalise and disempower communities native to the area.

While studies show how governing authorities have produced curricula that mostly serve political agendas, such as nationalism, the research has not yet examined in depth the alignment between the curricula provided, pedagogies and the children's development and learning. The evidence available mostly suggests that the nationalist-based curricula overlook children's development and learning and undermine efforts to foster a democratic and inclusive culture.

In the case of NW Syria, the Turkish government is the primary governing authority over its schools. Lêlûn and Syrians for Truth and Justice (2023) found that in a Kurdish-majority area in Aleppo, the Turkish government and SIG replaced the poorly resourced AANES' education system. Additionally, the Turkish Ministry of National Education declared that it has overseen the creation of the curricula for Afrin, al-Bab, A'zaz, and Jarabulus — all areas where Turkey maintains a military presence (Ahval, 2019).

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[5] Taken from an online news source: " Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) Announces Launch of Syrian Women's Commission". (1 July, 2021). Coalition News. https://en.etilaf.org/all-news/news/soc-announces-launch-of-syrian-womens-commission

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The SIG prioritised Arabic, Turkish and religious education by reducing the weekly instruction of the Kurdish language, turning it into a non-credit subject and removing it from compulsory exams. The Turkish authorities also rejected applications of Kurdish teachers, which further risks the deterioration of the Kurdish culture in that area (North Press Agency, 2022). In Afrin, the alterations took a toll on the stability the region achieved under the AANES's control, as they disrupted the education of tens of thousands of students, obliterated the Kurdish culture that gained prominence at the time, and adversely influenced the coexistence among the region's diverse communities (DW, 2018).

Turkey has delegated the management of the education sector to the three directorates of education in the suburbs and Afrin, which follow and implement Turkish administrative guidelines on public holidays and school days. Turkey was able to impose its will on the curricula taught in schools throughout the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring strips by controlling educators and educational supplies. All grades in Turkey were required to take Turkish as a first language, and any mention of the Turkish State or the Ottoman Empire had to be qualified (Enabbaladi, 2018).

Research suggests similar trends by governing authorities in Kurdish-controlled areas. The governing authorities of AANES put forward a project based on an ethnic-based consociationalism and manifested in production of a new education system where different ethnic groups are divided and raised in isolation due to the politicisation of nationalist identity (SCPR, 2023). Social segments were divided based on ethnicity as a result of the educational policies in the AANES-controlled areas, which imposed a new education system in Kurdish for the Kurds, Arabic for the Arabs, and Syriac for the Syriacs. However, many families chose to continue their children's education in 21 government schools in order to guarantee that their children receive accredited certificates. Since schools that pursue instruction in the Arabic language have become congested and are infrequently found in conveniently accessible places, curriculum changes and the imposition of the Kurdish language have therefore led to the unwillingness of many (boys and girls) to attend school (SCPR, 2023).

Education practitioners in Kurdish governed areas believe that the success of transforming from an authoritarian regime of schooling that enforces capital punishment and instils fear in children, towards a democratic nation depends on the success of:

- democratising national curriculum by removing regime nationalist ideologies
- establishing formal teacher education programmes
- building confidence among community members via outreach and dialogues
- decentralisation by involving teachers and parents in decision-making (Boyle Espinosa & Ronan, 2022).

c. When the production and uptake of data systems is influenced by potential political gains, vulnerable communities become at risk of being further marginalised from aid and participation.

Data produced to inform provisions of education in the form of aid and development have been largely driven by agendas of governing and aid agencies. According to Sonoda (2020), governing authorities including the Government of Syria (GOS), pro-opposition donors and aid agencies create "political, emotional and managerial discourses for their advantage" (p. 194) that "generate methodological bias" in how evidence is generated and used (p. 154). Interviews revealed that some of these actors have been found to "fabricate, reinterpret or selectively deny evidence" in ways that favour education assistance to their partisan groups and exclude others" (ibid, p. 204). Some international (e.g. UN) and local NGOs "are to some extent complicit in the politicisation of humanitarian educational aid practice" (ibid, p. 204). Hence, a portion of data production appears to emerge from selected areas that can benefit political groups.

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Political drivers in the production of data systems for aid and reform have, by and large, resulted in a quantitative-based field of information. This information includes figures that identify the status and needs to provide all children with quality education, such as the number of functionable schools, number of children in and out of school and funds needed for investment. These quantitative figures, according to Sonoda (2020), appear to serve primarily the needs of administrative bodies of governance and aid. Their usage is convenient for setting success indicators in the short term. The primary emphasis on producing and using quantitative data, however, significantly risks overlooking "children's realities and educational needs nearer to what they really are" (ibid, p. 207). The data produced on the status and needs that is mostly quantitative, therefore, gives us little or no information on the experiences of children such as how children are learning and how children are managing war-related traumas (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2018).

The evidence of political drivers for data production is critical because these drivers can increase the risks of excluding the educational data about certain populations of children. Some areas that were not exposed to direct violence ended up hosting populations of children who migrated from directly affected war zones and, through forced migration, have missed years of schooling and are affected by war-related trauma (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2018). Tailored and selective sampling to inform education and aid programmes also marginalises "children in hard-to-reach opposition areas" who "remain unobservable and kept out of the equation of humanitarian aid" (Sonoda, 2020, p. 150). Sonoda (2020), therefore, argues that "children's learning opportunities and their future depend largely on who exerts political and economic control over their residential areas and affiliations" (ibid, p. 204).

d. Evidence on demographics suggests that (1) the education system prior to the conflicts was already in a fragile state; (2) internally displaced people are in areas that may be excluded from data production; (3) illiteracy is far more prevalent among females than males in NW Syria.

The status and ongoing changes in population demographics constantly influence the services, demands and outcomes of education. Prior to the conflicts, the changes in demographics in Syria suggested that the inefficient and insufficient improvements of social services, including education, may have contributed to increasing fertility rates and decreasing the average age of first marriages (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2016). Changes in demographics can also explain how data gathered from emergency areas will likely exclude highly vulnerable people affected by the conflicts. The Syrian Center for Policy Research (2021) found that IDPs in Syria sought refuge in more stable areas or areas less affected by conflict. Hence, the studies carried out by aid agencies in conflict-affected areas to inform the distribution of aid and development support will likely overlook the needs of individuals and communities directly affected by violence.

Research on demographics and illiteracy rates suggests causes and consequences of education-related gender-based violence towards females. Prior to the conflict, illiteracy rates were far more prevalent among females than males; the difference was more than double in NW Syria (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Illiteracy rates improved from 1994 to 2006 and the Syrian Center for Policy Research (2016) found that the rates continued to improve until 2010. Nevertheless, we still observe a significantly higher level of illiteracy among females than males, and particularly in NW Syria. The last published data on illiteracy rates at the GOS Central Bureau of Statistics was in 2006.

The changes in demographics have also affected the availability of qualified human resources for the education sector. After the war erupted in 2011, the population of Syria was estimated at 20,208 million; 6,631 million were internally displaced and 4,275 million were forced to migrate (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2016). War-related death tolls, forced displacement and the reduction in fertility rates have resulted in vacuums of qualified education professionals and child population for schooling while, in the longer term, the return of refugees will "change the number and the structure dramatically" (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2018, p. 48). Evidence of these changes in human capital suggests an impact on the ability or

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capacity to ensure that education is appropriate or relevant. Hence, as the Syrian Center for Policy Research (2018) argued, the years of lost learning and population of out-of-school children that have been compounded with long-term war-related traumas and forced migration patterns will require governing mechanisms that allow for continuous policy reform to ensure that education for social capital is relevant.

Strengthening the education sector requires more consistent and detailed studies addressing the demographic changes of children, families and education practitioners to inform policies and practices that (1) rapidly address the needs, losses and additions of people in the education system; and (2) sustain its relevance or appropriateness during such changes.

e. The shifts and plurality of governing authorities in NW Syria have made it more difficult for children to acquire certificates of completion that are recognised by international authorities.

Prior to the conflicts, the GOS administered official exams that awarded internationally recognised certificates for the completion of basic education after grade 9 and secondary education after grade 12. Following the removal of regime authorities in NW Syria, certificates of completion are now awarded by the opposition Education Directorate (for Idlib) and the Education Office of the local council (for rural north Aleppo) (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023) and they are no longer accredited. The issued certificates are recognised by Turkey and several countries within the European Union (ibid, 2023).

Currently, there are two different sections for examinations and academic certificates in NW Syria:

- The first section is the transitional stages and includes grades 1-8 and grades 10 and 11. The exams of these stages are conducted within the school and, upon passing, the student is awarded a certificate from the school administration (which could even have the Directorate of Education's seal).

Figure 4. **Entities awarding certificates for the transitional stages according to their percentages**
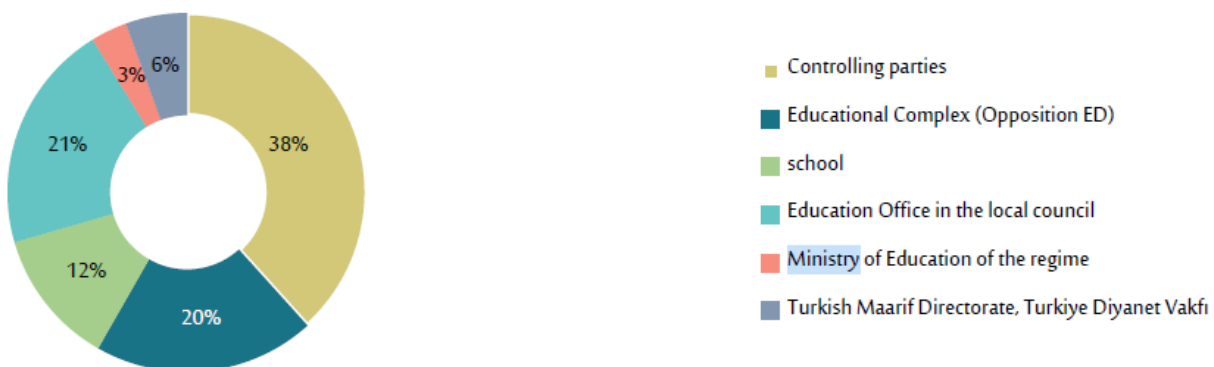
Source: Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023

- The second section deals with Syria's secondary and preparatory certifications for grades 9 and 12. These credentials are granted by the internal ministries of education in NW Syria. It is essential to remember that the appropriate authority in charge of holding the exams must certify and stamp these certificates (ibid, 2023).

Under the Syrian regime, diplomas for preparatory and secondary education were issued by the Ministry of Education before the start of the conflict. "School report cards", stamped by the relevant educational

department of the Syrian regime, would be provided by the school administration. However, after the war, a number of organisations formed and began granting certifications according to the areas controlled by different actors (ibid, 2023). The latest study of the Assistance Coordination Unit (2023) indicates that the entities that award certificates vary per region. After passing examinations administered by the controlling authorities in opposition-held areas, the preparatory and secondary education stage certificates are granted.

Figure 5. **Entities that award preparatory and secondary schools diplomas**
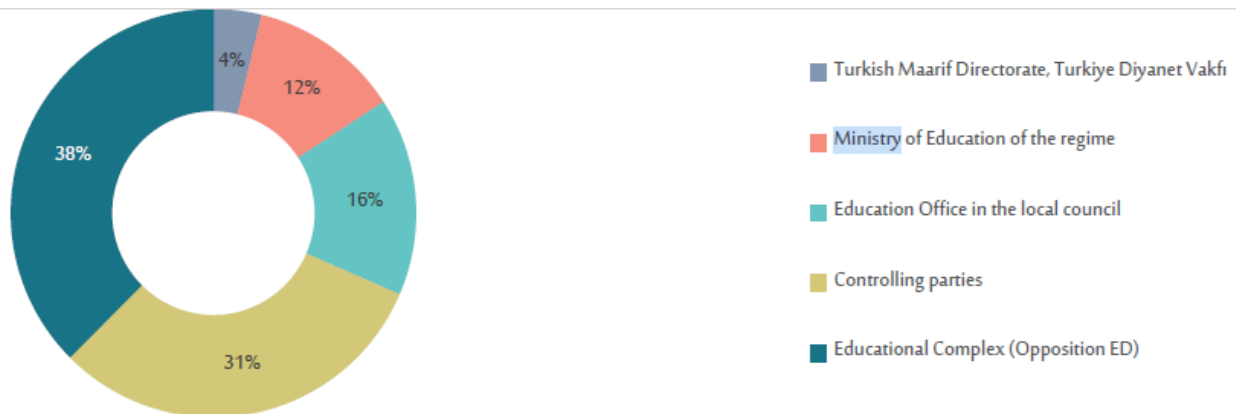
Source: (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023)

Interestingly, it is also noteworthy that the most recent study of the Assistance Coordination Unit (2023) revealed that in 99% of the operational schools studied and included in the assessment, the same curriculum is taught across all school levels. This indicates a consistent approach to education and curriculum implementation. However, in 1% of the operational schools (51 schools), there is a variation in the curriculum, with multiple types of curricula being taught.

Al-Haj (2021) documented the failures and successes of attempts to ensure the Education Directorate, the National Entity for Education in North Syria, gained international recognition for awarding secondary school certificates of completion from 2013—2016. However, the interim government was unsuccessful because of political instabilities, including failure to form a new government (ibid, 2021). Al-Haj did report that Turkey, the United States and some countries in Europe now recognise secondary school certificates awarded by the North Syria Interim Government.

Currently, Students in NW Syria who wish to attain the GOS official certificates must travel to regime areas and take the exams there, which is a safety risk for many (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023). Without an internationally recognised or accredited certificate of secondary education, children and parents are less inclined to prioritise investing time in education as they struggle to meet basic living needs.

2. **What is the state of policies, budgets, and data systems in the education sector responding to crises, in alignment, accountability and adaptability?**

While there is no centralised system of policies, budgets and data for NW Syria, we draw on the limited evidence of how the various governing authorities and donor agencies have produced and used policies, budgets and data systems during the violence and forced displacement.

a. In NW Syria, the plurality of governing authorities has led to various education policies that (1) have adapted a non-regime national curriculum they perceived as quality education; (2) support continuity

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through certifications; (3) administer codes of conduct in teacher contracts; (4) have enabled the growth of parent councils; and (5) create accountability measures to education offices of external actors, which threatens local minorities' representation and social cohesion.
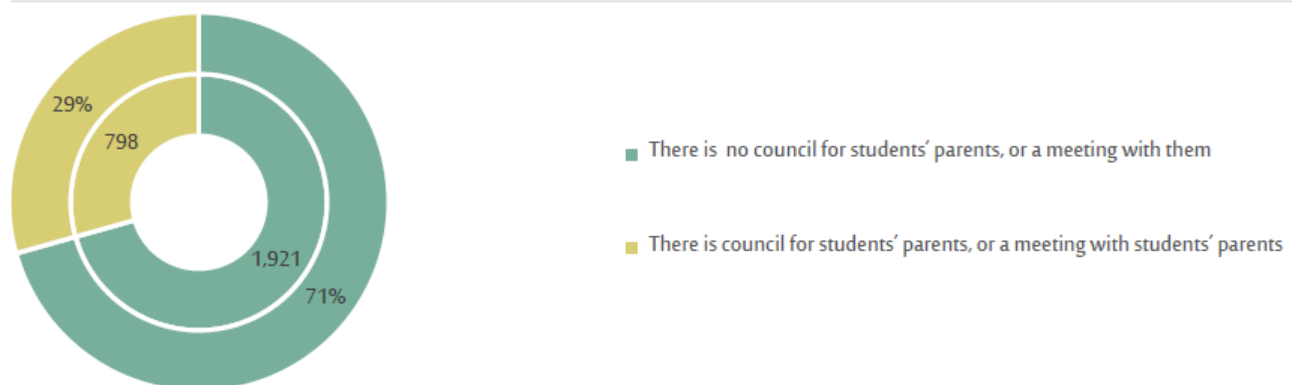
(a1) In addition to the Syrian regime's national curriculum, western and eastern Syria have five other curricula for their schools: the Turkish-affiliated curricula, the Opposition Government Curriculum, Curriculum of the Autonomous Administration, UNICEF Curriculum (or Accelerated Curriculum) and Shari'a Curriculum. In NW Syria, 100% of the schools in Idlib and 99% of the schools in rural northern Aleppo follow the Opposition Government Curriculum (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023), which is the original Syrian national curriculum but edited by removing references to the regime's political party and national education programme.

(a2) Policies for grade level promotion (grades 1—8, 10, 11) and certificates of completing basic education (grade 9) and secondary education (grade 12) have continued in non-regime areas but are no longer issued by the GOS. In NW Syria, the SIG Education Directorate issues grade promotions for 74% of the schools in Idlib and 5% of the schools in rural northern Aleppo and awards certificates at 99% of the schools in Idlib (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023). The SIG Education Office of local councils in West Syria provides most of the certification in rural northern Aleppo, issuing grade promotions for 70% of their schools and certificates for 92% of their schools (ibid, 2023). A quarter of the schools in NW Syria issue their own unofficial grade level promotion certificate (ibid, 2023).

(a3) Prior to the conflicts, the GOS administered teacher exams to appoint qualified teachers to schools. However, in the absence of the GOS in NW Syria, donor agencies require all school-based practitioners to sign a code of conduct. The code of conduct, a document defining the rights and responsibilities of teachers, similar to an employment contract, was reportedly only signed by 71% of teachers in rural northern Aleppo and 80% of teachers in Idlib (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023).

(a4) Parent councils did not exist in Syria before 2011. Recognising the need to meet with parents to "involve them in educational planning and find effective solutions that align with the current circumstances and available resources", 45% of the schools in Idlib and 20% of the schools in rural northern Aleppo established either parent councils or regular meeting groups with parents (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023, p. 166). However, the existing evidence does not specify in what way parent councils contribute to overall education processes in terms of access, quality, continuity. The most recent survey conducted with 2,719 school principals or vice-principals asked whether parent councils or common spaces for regular meetings had been established. The findings revealed that 29% (798 principals) reported the presence of parent councils and regular meetings, while 71% (1,921 principals) stated the absence of parent councils and periodic meetings with parents (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023).

Figure 6. **Number/percentages of surveyed principals based on the presence of a parent council**

- There is no council for students' parents, or a meeting with them
- There is council for students' parents, or a meeting with students' parents

Source: (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023)

(a5) The Turkish government has been instrumental to the development of opposition-led governance and social services in NW Syria. Turkey serves as a focal point that distributes foreign aid and supports the establishment of governing offices. However, research carried out by Kurdish minority groups in NW Syria (Lêlûn & Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2023) describes the Turkish education authorities as an "occupation" (p. 6). They reported that authorities issued a decree signed by the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, under Additional Article 30 of the Higher Education Institutions Regulation Law No. 2809 and Additional Article 39 of the Higher Education Law No. 2547, to establish a Turkish Ministry of Education Office in Afrin, which is a city of Kurdish communities and faculties affiliated with Gaziantep University in Turkey (Lêlûn & Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2023). This study raises further concerns relating to the absence of a faculty for the Kurdish language which is necessary to train teachers for Kurdish instruction in Afrin's schools.

b. The provisions and management of funds for education in NW Syria are, for the most part, vulnerable to the short-term investment schedules of donors and their deprioritisation of NW Syria because of its Turkish backing.

After 2011, international donors and UN agencies became the primary actors in providing and managing funds for education in opposition-held areas in Syria. The UN's OCHA Financial Tracking System (FTS) is currently the most comprehensive and reliable mechanism for documenting funds received and spent. According to the FTS, the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan for Education has consistently remained below 55% funding, except for 2013 when needs were less acute. From 2013 onwards, over $740 million has been spent on education in Syria, as per FTS records, though the actual figures may surpass this amount. In 2021, a mere $60 million was allocated to the education sector, constituting only 19% of the nearly $300 million appeal and a mere 4% of the total humanitarian funds for that year (Qaddour & Husain, 2022).

During interviews for this analysis, aid workers consistently highlighted donors' reluctance to commit to predictable, multi-year funding, despite the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict spanning over a decade. With resources constrained, aid workers lamented the unfortunate consequences of short-term partnerships and sporadic funding. Moreover, aid workers underscored the issue of donor fatigue arising from funding nearly identical yearly response plans across various sectors (ibid, 2022).
According to Qaddour and Husain (2022), the short-term funding commitments are unsustainable because investments take time to lead to change, donors can more easily amend short-term commitments, and funds are mostly spent in targeted areas and NW Syria is not among these areas.

Similar to other reports, schools in Idlib are at risk of closure because of limited or dwindling funds (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023). It remains the case that schooling is not entirely free at the point of access in all areas of NW Syria. In rural north Aleppo, 100% of the students do not pay fees while 24% of the students in Afrin and only 17% of the students in Idlib do not pay an annual fee (ibid, 2023). In relation to IDP camps in NW Syria, there is a lack of evidence on the number of schools where fees have to be paid. Nevertheless, as detailed in their latest report relating to this, the Assistance Coordination Unit states that 13% of the children it surveyed mention that they do not attend school due to the fact that their parents cannot afford the school fees (ibid, 2023).

c. The few data systems available that are produced by different actors are not always inclusive or reliable.

Prior to the conflict, the primary data system for the education sector was the GOS's Central Bureau for Statistics. Since 2011, the data systems have been primarily built by UN agencies. Organisations and research centres use this data and gather their own for assessing progress and challenges of education aid and development; these organisations include Syrians for Truth and Justice, the Assistance Coordination Unit and the Syrian Center for Policy Research. Qaddour and Husain (2022) argued that the data systems on

education in all areas of Syria are not always robust and accurate and so this challenges coordination efforts that rely on such data systems.

3. What enables and constrains policy decisions?

a. The poor levels of legitimacy of local authorities and non-regime education systems among the local community and international actors threatens commitments from donors and acceptance and support from people in the community.

Evidence shows how the lack of legitimacy of local education authorities in opposition areas determined commitments from international actors. The Education Authority in AANES reportedly suffers from not being recognised as a state actor and, thus, does not receive support from international organisations to ensure education resources are available (Dinç, 2020). Moreover, very few countries, including Turkey and some from the European Union, recognise the certificates of basic and secondary education completion issued by the opposition authorities in NW Syria (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023).

While the studies provide little or no evidence on legitimacy as perceived by local communities and families, reports on Afrin in Aleppo suggest that the local Kurdish teachers and families have low levels of trust towards their Turkish-driven education system (Lêlûn & Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2023). To a large extent, a major contributor to this dissatisfaction is reported to be the ethnic identity politics initiated by Turkish authorities that diminishes Kurdish language and culture (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2023).

Following Turkish intervention in NW Syria, particularly in Afrin, there have been significant implications for the Kurdish community, in several areas of public life including education. Turkey is reported to have begun a process of Turkification to alter the region's demographic landscape, renaming streets and settlements with Turkish names, and imposing Turkish language instruction with the introduction of textbooks emphasising Turkish national symbols. This systematic approach is seen to be aimed at eroding Kurdish cultural identity and further isolating the region from the rest of Syria (Lêlûn & Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2023).

This appears to be taking place in the realm of education where humanitarian organisations and Turkey-funded centres, such as the Önder Organization for Cooperation and Development and the Yunus Emre Institute, have been instrumental in promoting Turkification through the delivery of Turkish language courses, particularly targeting youth and educators in Afrin (ibid, 2023). Parents have also expressed dissatisfaction towards the SIG curricula which fails to address the preservation of the Kurdish language and identity, exacerbating fears about the future of Kurdish heritage (ibid, 2023). The ensuing language barrier contributes to feelings of injustice among Kurdish students, who face discrimination for speaking Kurdish, both from teachers and some internally displaced students. This denial of linguistic rights stems from policies devaluing the Kurdish language, perpetuating a cycle of marginalisation and cultural suppression (Ibid, 2023).

Addressing these challenges requires an end to discriminatory linguistic policies, ensuring the preservation of Kurdish cultural and linguistic heritage. Positive measures must be taken by Turkey and de facto authorities to empower all components of the region, including Kurds, to safeguard their identities and provide ample opportunities for linguistic and cultural education (Lêlûn & Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2023).

b. Sustainability of aid and development provisions for education is threatened by significant losses of learning, limited funding, a pandemic of post-trauma stress disorder and unqualified human resources.

Efforts by aid organisations and donors to provide a quality and accessible education for children are also linked to certain factors that appear to threaten their sustainability. These factors include limited funding,

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years of lost learning, heightened vulnerability to protracted armed conflict, chronic absence of food and health care, absence of official certification of school completion, scarcity of qualified school-based practitioners, children's increasing vulnerability to join armed group, and rare prospects to pursue higher education (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2018). Following the recent COVID-19 pandemic that closed schools around the world, the Syrian Center for Policy Research and British Council-Syria (2022) found the following factors as contributors to long-term losses of learning and discontinuity of education:

- lack of qualified teachers
- equipment for distance learning was destroyed during the conflicts
- discrimination policies in schools that prevented access for some groups of children,
- absence of health and safety measures for emergencies, including infectious disease outbreaks
- limited online learning resources in Arabic and limited experience in using digital technology
- limited access to the internet, electricity and digital hardware

c. Evidence suggests that poor accountability measures from aid providers and local authorities threatens the apolitical and non-discriminatory distribution of aid.

In opposition areas, local administrative councils, local coordination committees and the Assistance Coordination Unit manage humanitarian aid. Meininghaus (2016) found, however, that political and military actors choose to co-manage aid to gain more political support among the local population, even when civil society organisations attempt to depoliticise the distribution of aid. More precisely, this is evident in areas held by SIG and AANES where humanitarian assistance is frequently managed through local administrative councils or local coordination committees (Ibid, 2016). The reported practices of poor governance within the Syrian National Coalition raise the risk of (1) influence on the local authorities and their approaches to managing aid (e.g. strengthening political gain); (2) an imbalance in distribution and, thus, the marginalisation of vulnerable groups; and (3) discrediting the integrity and legitimacy of aid providers (Meininghaus, 2016).

In opposition areas, the ongoing priority for security will continue to prioritise funds for military spending over education aid and development. Thus, the opposition authorities are increasingly reliant on donations from international actors. Since 2010, the Syrian government decreased spending on education by 70% as it aligned spending budgets with its gross domestic product (GDP). And it stopped paying teachers' salaries in 2020 in some schools in opposition areas, while the Turkish government and self-administration covered salaries of teachers in opposition reformed schools (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2018).

d. Education research in NW Syria has focused primarily on identifying challenges and needs to inform aid and development initiatives, but the documentation of innovations in enhancing education provisions is rare.

Al-Shbib (2020) reflected on innovative practices employed by Aleppo University and argued that a similar environment that encourages innovation and entrepreneurship should and can be provided through formal schooling, especially in opposition areas. During the ongoing crises, Al-Shbib described how Aleppo University upheld religious principles of helping the most vulnerable by contributing to humanitarian aid and, through support from the administration, faculty members were able to produce a scientific journal that publishes academic studies. This study reflected on a potential alignment between the societal needs of innovative and philanthropic youth and the potential for formal education to support children in learning to be innovative and entrepreneurial.

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4. What interventions, if any, affect access, quality and continuity of education and improve coherence?

a. The curricular policies that regulate education in NW Syria are, by and large, centralised between Idlib and rural northern Aleppo, but the policy framework is driven by Turkish nationalism which risks marginalisation of Kurdish minority groups.

In NW Syria, education policies are developed and regulated by the SIG Directorate of Education under the supervision of the Turkish government, local councils and civil society organisations. Rarely do all schools in NW Syria follow the same education policy. Probably the only common policy framework is the curriculum implemented by the opposition government, which aligns with the national Syrian curriculum but without the curricular content that celebrates the regime. This curriculum is followed by all schools in Idlib and 99% of the schools in rural north Aleppo (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023). Evidence of how this curricular policy affects coherence is limited. Nevertheless, the qualitative-based case study of Afrin demonstrates that curricular policy driven by a Turkish nationalist agenda risks structural marginalisation of the Kurdish community (Lêlûn & Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2023).

b. The empirical field does not appear to include studies on innovative approaches to support the local governing authorities' development of education policy frameworks.

Research on the macro level shows direct non-Syrian influence on the governance of education systems in opposition areas. Nevertheless, Kanaan (2021) outlines an approach for local education authorities to develop emergency response plans for the education sector. This procedural framework includes (1) establishing a crisis management unit inside education institutions; (2) designating a collaborative space as an emergency room for coordination; and (3) periodically reviewing and predicting various crises to enhance response scenarios and resources.

B. Local systems level (meso, micro)

1. What are the conditions of children's access to and the quality and continuity of education at schools, community, household?

Access

Having free and compulsory education in Syria led the country to almost close the access gap. In 2010, the year before the conflict erupted, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) published a review of Syria's national progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (UNDP, 2010). Their review found that the net enrolment ratio in primary education for the age group (6—11 years of age) reached 99% in 2008. However, only 95.3% of pupils reach fifth grade and 76% reach secondary education, suggesting a problem of dropout rate. The girls-to-boys ratio in 2008 reached 92/100 in primary education, 96/100 in both primary and elementary levels, and 112/100 in secondary education.

The UNDP perceived these numbers as promising to achieve Goal 2 (Universal Primary Education) and Goal 3 (Gender Equality and Women Empowerment) by 2015. Nevertheless, dropout rates were alarmingly increasing in the 10 years before the conflict erupted as a result of the increasing cost of education and lack of economic opportunities (UNICEF, 2014). Other reports highlighted that Syria was struggling with underfunding, poor school infrastructure, overcrowding in schools, and a lack of qualified teachers (Rammal, 2018). Moreover, education indicators in Syria were amongst the highest in the Arab world (UNDP, 2010).

a. Despite improvements in the number of out-of-school children in Syria since 2014, 2.5 million children remain without provisions of education.

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The percentage of out-of-school children in basic education was about 45% between 2014 and 2017 and decreased to about 34% between 2018 and 2022 (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2021). The overall loss in basic education as of 2021 reached 24 million schooling years and more than 2.5 million children were deprived from enrolling in schools across Syria (ibid, 2021). Most school dropout occurs in the second cycle of primary education. Higher dropout rates occurred among IDPs when compared with host communities (ibid, 2021). In NW Syria, 44% of the 1,835,450 school-age children are out of school (815,518 school-age children); and among the female school-age children, 45% (416,936 female school-age children) are out of school while 43% of school-age males (398,582 male school-age children) are out of school (Assistance Coordination Unit & Information Management Unit, 2021).

The Joint Education Needs Assessment (JENA) report (2021) finds that "the dropout rates within the camps are consistently higher than the dropout rates in cities and towns". The most important factor driving students—especially girls—to drop out of school has been identified as an inappropriate learning environment. Surveys with children showed that the main causes of children dropping out of school were frequent relocation and the absence of local schools in the relocation areas (ibid, 2021). distance from the communities, absence of schools in communities and camps, lack of education supplies were also noted as other contributors for dropouts (ibid, 2021).

A recent report on schools surveyed students to describe the population of children attending school. It found that 48% of those who responded to the poll were female and 52% were male. About 80% of the children who participated in the study were members of the host community, and 20% were IDPs (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023). According to parent surveys, 4% (23 parents) said their children do not attend school (ibid, 2023). In camps, the study covered over 80,000 students out of which 52% of the total number of students are females.

The survey with parents generated the following findings: 77% (471 parents) reported that all their children (males and females in all education stages) attend school. 9% (54 parents) mentioned that only their children in the early stages of education attend school, while children in the advanced stages do not. Furthermore, 5% (31 parents) stated that only their children in transitional stages attend school, while students in the certificate stages (preparatory and secondary certificates) do not. Three percent (19 parents) reported that only males attend school, and 2% (11 parents) mentioned that only females attend school. Lastly, 4% (23 parents) said their children do not attend school.

b. Children with disabilities are among the most vulnerable and, consequently, marginalised groups of children in Syria.

In a sample of 789 children with disabilities across four governorates, 85% were found never to have received any form of educational service or provision (Syria Relief, 2018). Also, only half the children with a reported health condition attend school (Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2022). Findings from the most recent research led by the Assistance Coordination Unit (2023) indicates that the conflict in Syria has led to a rise in the number of children living with disabilities, often as a result of injuries sustained from shelling or landmine explosions. According to the study, only 23% (862 schools) of the schools assessed cater to children with disabilities, leaving 77% (2,875 schools) without such provisions. This lack of support in schools may result in educational disadvantages for children with disabilities in affected areas (ibid, 2023).

Within the schools assessed, there were a total of 3,855 students identified as having disabilities. Physical disabilities were the most common form of disability reported, comprising 47% (1,812 students) of the total, followed by visual impairment at 10%, intellectual disabilities at 15%, speech difficulties at 17%, and hearing loss at 11% ibid, 2023). Moreover, the report assesses the ability of schools to receive students with disabilities.

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According to the source, a mere 3% (101 schools) of the operational schools assessed are outfitted to accommodate students with mobility disabilities, leaving 97% (3,636 schools) lacking the necessary provisions for such students, despite the presence of 3,855 students with disabilities reported across 23% of the schools evaluated (ibid, 2023).

The study also addressed the availability of specialists for children with disabilities in schools. The findings indicate that only 13 schools out of the total 3,737 schools evaluated had specialists available to support students with disabilities. These specialists were predominantly located in the Idlib province and the northern countryside of Aleppo. However, in the remaining 3,724 schools assessed, there were no specialists available to assist children with disabilities.

In the study conducted across camps, the evidence available is significantly limited. Throughout the data collection process, 725 students with disabilities were identified. The results revealed that the highest percentage among children with disabilities were those with mobility impairments amounting to 45%, whilst 16% had speech impairments, 14% (104 students) had intellectual disabilities, 12% (90 students) had visual impairments, and 12% (90 students) had hearing impairments.

The second edition of the JENA report (2021) which assessed the dropout situation suggests that due to the lack of adaptation facilities within schools, 20% of children with disabilities are unable to access education. In camp settings, diagnosing disabilities is extremely difficult due to lack of specialists who are barely present in the areas of the assessment. The study asserts that there is a likelihood that families are reluctant to seek out specialised specialists to appropriately evaluate their children's disability mainly due to worsening living situations (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023).

c. Most studies that consider access to education consistently report that many schools are either destroyed, dysfunctional or too dangerous to access.

During the conflicts, schools have come under direct attack and, thus, some schools do not exist anymore because they have either been destroyed or closed after families left the area (Save the Children, 2013). In a study in 2022, adolescents explained that their schools lacked either buildings, equipment, water, electricity or bathrooms; especially those in NW Syria who reported their schools were damaged from the conflicts (Syrian Center for Policy Research & British Council-Syria, 2022). By 2018, 39% of schools for basic education and 16% for secondary schooling became dysfunctional because of war-related destruction or had been closed by governing authorities (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2018).

In a 2019 survey on schools in Northern Syria camps, the Assistance Coordination Unit and Information Management Unit (2019) found that only 136 out of the 598 camps studied had schools. They also found that 35% of schools (65 schools) were tents, 4% (7 schools) were neglected buildings (safety, governance), a third did not have access to drinking water, 24% did not have bathrooms, 51% needed heaters and only two-thirds (111 schools) provided basic education (primary and lower secondary) while only 9 schools taught primary, lower and higher secondary level education.

A similar study conducted recently by OCHA (2022) also reported on the unavailability of schooling, limited access to schooling and the percentage of schools that were not functioning. For example, they found that nearly half of the schools in Idlib were not operating; and, those that were functional were operating three to four shifts per day. They also noted that travel times to school can be greater than 45 minutes and children experience the highest rates of attacks. In Dar'a, only 6 of 34 schools were found to be fully functional and over 25% of households reported that no schooling was available to their children at all. (OCHA, 2022).

These studies have highlighted the impact of poverty as well as traditional viewpoints as additional factors, however these have been relatively under-researched when comparing with the impacts of destruction due

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to conflict. The study of the Syria Research Center began to consider these as additional factors, referencing poverty as a common obstacle for adolescents in all areas and from all groups. Also, it referred to push factors for school dropout including changing perceptions of the value of education, growing poverty and insecurity, and range according to sex, rural-urban origin and the economic status of families.

To assess the issues related to access, the Assistance Coordination Unit (2023) regularly reports on schools in camps and non-camp settings. The suitable distance between students' residences and educational institutions varies depending on the communities. Urban areas, particularly larger and well-organised cities, typically feature multiple schools catering to different stages of education. The number of schools correlates with the local student population, facilitating convenient walking distances for students. Typically, the proximity between schools and students' homes does not exceed 500 m.

Beyond this range, public transportation options are available, providing a generally secure means of commuting, given the frequent use by many passengers. Buses, commonly utilised for intra-city transport in populated areas, contribute to the safety of children during their commute, minimising their vulnerability to potential harassment (ibid, 2023). In contrast, rural areas with extensive agricultural land and dispersed housing present different challenges. In such cases, the safety of children using transportation becomes a concern, especially when routes traverse uninhabited regions that may expose them to potential risks.

Overall, there are no universally defined standards for the distance between educational institutions and students' residences. Factors such as the nature of the living environment (urban or rural) and the availability of safe and suitable public transportation influence this distance. Moreover, considerations are given to the affordability of transportation costs, ensuring they align with the students' standard of living without imposing an additional burden on parents (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023).

After the Syria-Turkey earthquakes, additional displacement of populations disrupted access to education and forced families to seek refuge in camps and, therefore, children to join schools in camps (ibid, 2023).

Analysis of camp schools reveals that 64% (54,055 students) of the total student population reside within a distance of less than 500 m from their school. Additionally, 28% (23,322 students) live within a range of 500 m to 1 km, while 8% (7,084 students) reside more than 1 km away from their residences (ibid, 2023). Key Informants (KIs) in camps located in NW Syria, specifically in Aleppo and Idlib governorates, have reported an absence of security risks such as soldiers residing locally, landmines, or dense vegetation. However, concerns arise regarding the overall safety of students on their way to school, given the necessity to navigate narrow roads crowded with vehicles and pedestrians (ibid, 2023).

d. Education became unavailable and inaccessible to children during COVID-19 school closures when classroom learning was taking place online and most children did not have the digital tools to access online platforms.

Three studies reported on the threats to accessing remote learning online. In a study that explored the highly vulnerable population of children with disabilities, Al-Malli (2021) argued that technology for distance education can make learning accessible and even more effective for children with disabilities. A. Nassif (2020) found that distance education was more suitable for some subjects like social studies, Arabic, and English, than scientific subjects like mathematics or physics, because the latter needed guided practice, experimentation and discussions, and these were reportedly more effective in person or through a hybrid model of in-person and online.

In the more fragile areas, namely NW Syria, adolescents explained that they could not access learning online because of the limited access to the internet, electricity, digital hardware, resources in Arabic and their level of experience in using computers (Syrian Center for Policy Research & British Council-Syria, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated problems regarding access to education. The closure of educational facilities and the absence of sufficient digital infrastructure has meant that there have been significant education losses resulting from the pandemic. The report on adolescents (Syrian Center for Policy Research & British Council-Syria, 2022) found that there were reports of a failure to compensate for education loss as well as the unequal access to distance learning.

Quality

a. Despite intentions to transition from an authoritarian to a more inclusive society, classroom pedagogies still reflect an authoritarian approach to knowledge transmission.

Seldom do studies on education in opposition areas gather evidence of classroom learning and teaching practices. In schools run by the Autonomous Administration, Boyle Espinosa and Ronan (2022) found that the dominant pedagogy at school is still the use of lectures to children. (Boyle Espinosa & Ronan, 2022).

b. Schools lack qualified teachers to teach and those who adopt holistic approaches to children's mental health recovery and social and emotional learning

From 2010 to 2018, the mass forced migration of Syrian people, including teachers, reduced the number of teachers engaged in basic education by 31%, from 221,000 to 151,000 (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2018). Furthermore, during the conflict, teachers could not engage in professional learning activities to prepare them to support children who had experienced long periods of absence from learning and were affected by trauma (ibid, 2018). Teachers were found to pose a potential source of harm in some schools in NW Syria. For example, when describing negative aspects of schooling, some parents and adolescents reported that the teachers in their school lacked qualifications to teach, discriminated against students with disabilities or were affected by forced displaced or the effects of war and were apathetic towards teaching and learning activities (Syrian Center for Policy Research & British Council-Syria, 2022).

Teachers were seen to discriminate against children based on their status as urban/rural as well as displaced/resident, and this was seen as being compounded by the lack of accountability in schools (ibid, 2022). In addition, adolescents report on the limited availability of digital tools and also the misuses and dangers of the internet; while they consider the internet useful for learning purposes and work opportunities, some reported on the dangers of being addicted, gaming and exposure to bullying, hate speech, false news and recruitment to terrorist organisations (Syrian Center for Policy Research & British Council-Syria, 2022).

c. Overburdened and underpaid teachers

Since there are several authorities in the NW Syria, teachers in Turkish-controlled areas are being paid by Turkey whereas in Idelb and Aleppo (excluding Efrin, Ezaz, Al Bab and Jarbalous), teachers are being paid by the SIG, SSG and international NGOs (INEE, 2023; Syria TV, 2021). Teacher salaries are around $100, however, because of the lack of funding, pay is unpredictable, and some teachers have not been paid for nearly two years (Achilles et al., 2022; Qaddour & Husain, 2022). This extends to teachers in refugee camps in the northeastern and western Syria (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2022b).

Therefore, many teachers supplement their income to sustain their family's basic needs either with private tutoring or other jobs, which in turn impacts their commitment and performance in schools (Achilles et al., 2022). This (and other reasons) contributes to inequality in the society. Students with more resources hire private teachers whereas poorer students struggle to keep up with their education for a wide range of reasons, including the inability to afford private tutoring (Achilles et al., 2022).

In addition to the low pay, teachers in Syria found themselves dealing with students severely impacted by conflict with very little, if not complete absence, training on conflict-related matters. One study by UNICEF (2015) found that teaching in a crisis environment, teaching traumatised children, and reacting in an emergency situation, are amongst the top training needs cited by teachers. Although this study was conducted in 2015, several recent reports still highlight the lack of teacher training as one of the main challenges facing the education system in Syria (e.g. Achilles et al., 2022; OCHA, 2023).

The poor teachers' conditions sparked several strikes that disrupted education processes. Several reports and news agencies have reported teacher strikes that erupted in the northern part of the country in 2022 (Enab Baladi, 2022; Syria TV, 2022). These strikes demanded better pay, stronger unions, and better teaching conditions. However, they were faced with intimidation and threats of dismissal by the authorities (Enab Baladi, 2022; Syria TV, 2022). This is not the first time teachers have been intimidated in opposition-controlled and AANES areas. Several reports have highlighted that teachers and education personnel have been intimidated and harassed, with incidents of excessive use of force, dismissal and the suspension of work licenses (OCHA, 2023).

Continuity

a. Two-thirds of children in NW Syria have dropped out of school.

While, on average across Syria, 51% of children have dropped out of school (OCHA, 2022). The most significant number of out-of-school children is observed in areas with many displaced people (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023). In NW Syria, the highest percentage of out-of-school children is in Idlib governorate where out-of-school children accounted for 69% of children between 6 and 18 while 63% of children in rural north Aleppo dropped out of school (ibid, 2023).

b. While less than half the children enrol in primary education, only about one quarter reach secondary school.

The graph in Figure 7 shows how a significant percentage of children progressively leave school after primary education; a trend we also observed prior to 2011 .

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Figure 7. Number of out-of-school Children in Syria during 2010-2019.
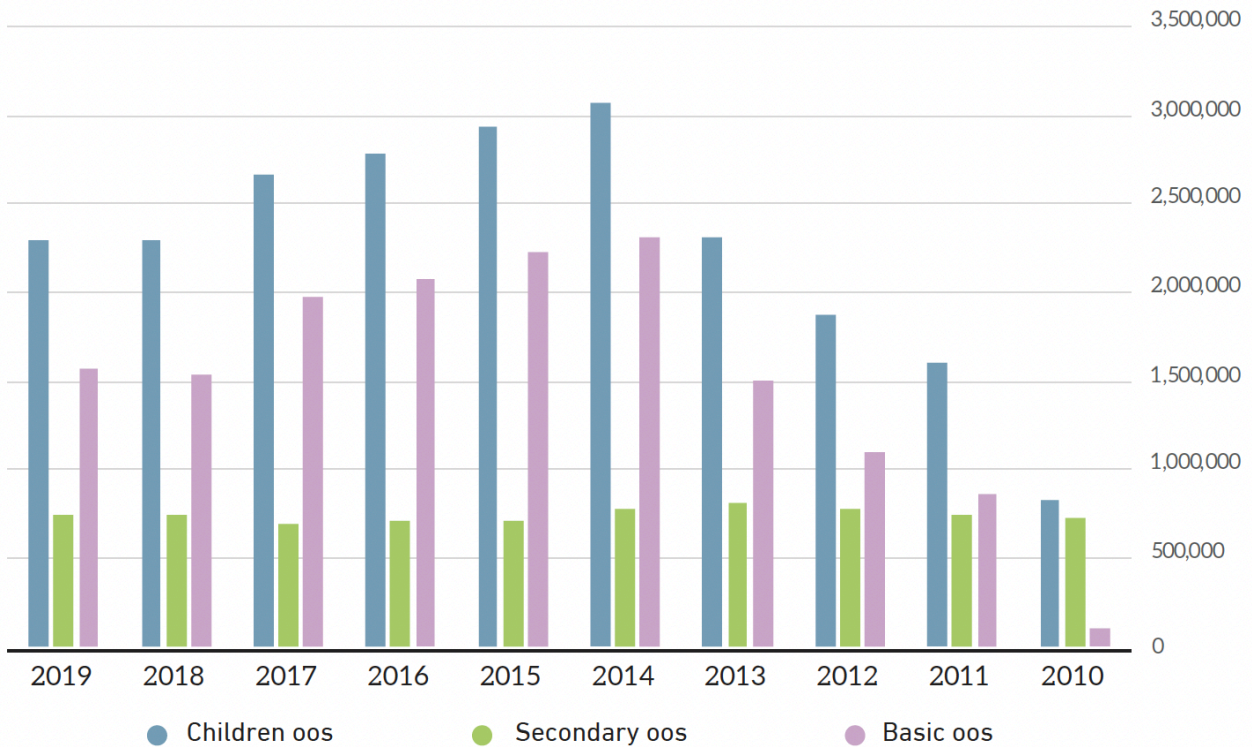
Source: Ministry of education, Central Bureau of Statistics, & SCPR estimations (2019)

c. Reasons for dropping out of school range across various forms of violence and neglect.

When surveying how decisions were made to leave school, 39% of the children in the study reported that they had decided by themselves and 36% reported that their father had made the decision (Assistance Coordination Unit & Information Management Unit, 2021). Within these two trends, males were more likely to have made the decision themselves and females were more likely to have had their fathers decide to take them out of school (ibid, 2021). The same study gathered evidence on the reasons for leaving school and found:

- 36% (295 children): parents do not allow them to attend mixed gender schools; confirmed by 30% of caregivers (436 persons)
- 22% (182 children) of female children: conservative beliefs in the family that females should not learn after primary education; confirmed by 23% of caregivers (335 persons)
- 17% (142 children): parents wanted them to marry; confirmed by 28% of caregivers (414 persons).

In a study which interviewed some of the children in NW Syria, the children attributed leaving school to poor quality teaching, violence and discrimination by teachers, overcrowded classrooms, increases in tuition, and schools looking like prisons (Syrian Center for Policy Research & British Council-Syria, 2022).

2. What are the school, community, household, and personal risk and protective factors that affect access, quality and continuity?

**Factors that undermine or threaten drivers of learning**

a. Majority of children suffer from stress, depression, fear and other emotion-related traumas that negatively interfere with either learning or continuing their schooling.

Save the Children (2017) reported that the majority of children were chronically suffering from fear of bombs, fatigue from nightmares and hunger and, consequently, do not attend school, struggle to learn or leave school to work. OCHA (2022) similarly found that traumas and stress amongst children affected by the conflicts are among the leading factors that determine which children access school, the degree to which they can learn, and the extent to which they continue school. A quarter of the children in Idlib and rural north Aleppo expressed experiencing fear during their journey to school (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023). Interviews with adolescents revealed how environmental degradation, mistrust in governance of public institutions, polarisation of social and political beliefs and the uncertainty of protracted conflict were all factors (Syrian Center for Policy Research & British Council-Syria, 2022).

b. Children with interrupted schooling struggle to access and continue into higher education.

Although consideration of higher education is beyond the focus of this evidence review, we found a study that identifies the *forms and consequences of interrupted schooling* and war-related traumas that threaten access to and continuity of higher education. Abdullah Omaish et al. (2022) identified four main factors that led to learning loss, dropout levels for university education and struggles when working towards a professional education in a higher education institution. They are:

(a) forced displacement and school closures (missed long periods of learning)
(b) lack of access and availability in schooling (qualified school teachers left; important knowledge fields were removed from syllabi)
(c) psychosocial trauma or physical injury (by the time students finish school, they are burdened with traumas that higher education faculty members are not prepared to support)
(d) Chronic poverty among students: students continue working and, so studying is not a priority.

c. The forced displacement and poor levels of mental health of the professional workforce threatens the quality of education provisions and child protection.

The search for safety and the deterioration of resources for basic living needs have pushed a significant number of the education workforce to forcibly migrate out of Syria. By 2018, the teacher workforce had decreased by 22% since 2011, leaving a workforce that comprises teachers with war-related traumas and one largely of volunteer teachers with no written teaching qualifications (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2018). As teachers often contribute to curricular reform, the forced displacement of, and other loss of qualified teachers, has resulted in a lack of expertise available to design curricular content (Chahin, 2023). Furthermore, female teachers are reportedly more prone to burnout as they have to manage between full-time teaching and domestic work (Sharifian et al., 2021). Also, virtually all teachers live under constant threat of and exposure to war-related attacks, deadly respiratory diseases and losses of close friends and family members (Sharifian et al., 2021).

d. Poor levels of parents' abilities, attitudes and well-being prevent children from either enrolling in or continuing their education.

Some have reported the link between illiteracy levels of parents and their capacity to help their children with their homework or studies (Assistance Coordination Unit & Information Management Unit, 2021). Also, children of parents with a disability resulting from the war who can no longer work are at high risk of not going to school because they become primary providers (Save the Children, 2017). Parents, particularly those from rural areas, are concerned about the absence of official certification when children complete

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schooling. Also being a girl in many cases is a risk to not access schooling. Some parents, especially of girls, do not allow their children to go to school in fear of them getting hurt or killed (Save the Children, 2013).

Statistical evidence also shows how a quarter of female children are vulnerable to conservative views from parents who prefer their daughters not to attend mixed schools, and believe they should not continue past primary education or should marry early (Assistance Coordination Unit & Information Management Unit, 2021). Hence, being a daughter of conservative parents who live in a rural area further threatens girls' access to and continuity of schooling.

In a study of adolescents, the authors stressed the importance of support from family and friends. Most boys expressed satisfaction with support from their parents, however most groups of girls described a lack of parental support. Many of these girls mentioned traditions and family values were limiting their mobility, choices and opportunities for work and study (Syrian Center for Policy Research & British Council-Syria, 2022). In the same study, the authors pointed out that some families prefer boys to be sent to work, rather than completing study at school. In addition, there is a prevailing traditional belief of the infeasibility of education for girls, which encourages families to marry them off at an early age.

e. Limited resources for survival, safety and learning prevent children from enrolling in or continuing their education.

The few and reportedly dwindling resources for security, survival and learning are a key barrier to children accessing schools, completing basic education and experiencing quality learning. Protracted attacks on children and schools have turned schools and the journey to school, as a life risk factor (OCHA, 2022). Evidence also shows how the absence of income and food is a factor that prevents children from accessing or continuing school. Indeed, the need for basic living (shelter, food, soap and water) overrides the prioritisation of education (OCHA, 2022).

During COVID-19 school closures, one primary factor for the discontinuation of schooling was the absence of digital tools and high-speed internet (A. Nassif, 2020; Syrian Center for Policy Research & British Council-Syria, 2022). School closures (e.g. during COVID-19 pandemic) compounded by the near absence of resources for online distance education resulted not only in children leaving school and not completing their pre-tertiary education, but also in families deprioritising education in favour of meeting basic survival needs (A. Nassif, 2020). Moreover, forms of poverty have directed children to join armed groups to access regular meals and good pay and have pushed parents to marry off their daughters to relieve the household from dependents to care for (Save the Children, 2017).

Factors that support or enhance drivers of learning

a. Professional learning programmes can provide teachers with opportunities for personal and vocational growth.

An experimental study in northern Syria with a control sample (Al-Awwad et al., 2022) attempted to assess the effectiveness of a teacher professional development programme on inclusion and supporting children with special needs. The 24 teachers who participated in the programme responded to a questionnaire and demonstrated a significant degree of progress in understanding key principles of inclusive schooling, thinking critically and understanding approaches to support learning difficulties. The researchers found that teachers, regardless of gender or previous academic qualifications, benefited from this programme. The researchers also attributed the success of the programme to its activities on personal and vocational growth.

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b. The growing role of social workers and psychology counsellors is being shown to be instrumental to the well-being, retention and effectiveness of teachers and learners.

In a doctoral research study, Karen Paul (2023) studied how social workers and psychology counsellors supported teachers and schools in Syria. Social work to support children focused on suicide prevention and trauma. Also, these social workers were able to mobilise the community to gather donations to compensate for teacher salaries which were usually very low or where teachers had not been paid for their work. The study also found that the roles of social workers at schools included: (1) preventing childhood suicide; (2) providing mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) rehabilitation for children to return to learning functionality; and (3) helping children stay in school by providing support.

Social workers require professional education, which is not readily available. Damascus University has a psychology counselling program that professionalises school-based counsellors to support children's behavioural and academic difficulties. Paul (2023) emphasises that the interventions are to reactivate rather than replace worker skills, as the support mechanisms and actors already exist, but require capacity-building and -strengthening.

Conversely, the study conducted by the Assistance Coordination Unit (2023) reveals a significant lack of psychological counsellors in NW and northeastern Syrian schools, with 94% of evaluated schools lacking such professionals. Historically, schools included counsellors from psychology faculties, but the areas outside government control lack such educational facilities. To address this gap, the recent report suggests training administrative staff to handle students' psychological issues. Only 15% of schools had teachers trained in psychosocial support, which is essential given the widespread psychological trauma among Syrian children.

Following the 2023 earthquake, 8% of schools provided psychosocial support services, emphasising the urgent need for such activities. To alleviate the impact of the war, administrators incorporate entertainment into education, fostering students' confidence and breaking down barriers caused by displacement. The study underscores the critical role of social workers and psychology counsellors in enhancing the well-being, retention and effectiveness of teachers and learners in Syria (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023).

In parallel, another study of the Assistance Coordination Unit was launched to assess the situation in camps in NW Syria. The study highlights that 38% of the assessed camp schools, totalling 78 schools, lack teachers trained in psychosocial support. In contrast, 63% (130 schools) have teachers with such training, although it is not mandatory for all teachers within a school to undergo this training. Given the pervasive psychological shocks experienced by Syrian children due to ongoing events, the study underscores the necessity of training all teachers in handling children during wartime and responding to disasters.

Teachers must exhibit experience, quick response capabilities, and organisational skills to protect children and minimise harm during crises. Addressing widespread symptoms resulting from the ongoing war is also imperative (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023). Moreover, the study reveals that 90% (188 schools) of the camp schools assessed lack specialised psychological counsellors, while only 10% (20 schools) have such professionals. Historically, schools employed psychosocial counsellors who were graduates in psychology or social sciences, offering continuous support and collaborating with parents to address students' psychological issues, particularly during adolescence. The study emphasises the importance of incorporating psychosocial training for teachers and the need for specialised psychological counsellors to support the well-being of students in camp schools (ibid, 2023).

c. Few studies identified innovations from teachers that worked on improving children's access to resources for learning and well-being.

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There have been a small number of studies that have reported on innovations by teachers who were able to deliver their teaching by creatively managing the limited resources available at schools or even working productively in the absence of resources. According to Save the Children (2013), some teachers in poorly resourced schools have demonstrated impressive efforts and resourcefulness to continue teaching without any resources, often relying on their personal knowledge of the curriculum. When technology-related resources for distance education were limited or unavailable, teachers turned to messaging and basic communication platforms, namely WhatsApp (A. Nassif, 2020). What drives teachers living and working in the war zone is their religious faith as the primary motivator to demonstrate excellence in spite of facing daily risks to attending school. Drawing on faith and a moral responsibility to help children have been expressions of resilience that appear to minimise burnout and trauma (Sharifian et al., 2023).

3. What is the state of children's academic, social and emotional, and physical and mental health and well-being in terms of achievement and equity? How do they vary for different groups by gender, displacement status?

There is little evidence showing how physical and mental health, social interactions and academic experiences influence children's learning at school and equitable opportunities to grow and attain basic levels of literacy. Nevertheless, the evidence available illustrates how the destruction of schools, gender-based discrimination, diminished number of qualified education practitioners and the daily struggles to ensure basic survival needs have largely contributed to the following poor levels of achievement and sustained educational inequities.

a. While illiteracy before 2010 had improved across Syria, the illiteracy rates of females were consistently 2.5 times higher than males.

After 2011, children's absence from school has resulted in more concerning levels of illiteracy. The Syrian Center for Policy Research (2019) cited IRC (2017) to illustrate how the policy and practice failures in recovering an education system in opposition areas affected children's learning outcomes. In the IRC assessment, 59% of children in grade 6, 52% of those in grade 7, and 35% of those in grade 8 could not demonstrate reading skills expected for the second grade, while literacy rates of females are more than double than males (IRC, 2017). The Central Bureau of Statistics (2006) disaggregates the rates by gender, showing the illiteracy rate of 35.5% in Aleppo in 1994 as the mean of females at 50.5% and males at 21.3%. The same difference applies to Aleppo's illiteracy rate in 2006: females at 25.5% and males at 10.1%.

Schooling disrupted by war and displacement caused significant knowledge gaps identified during students' experiences in higher education. Consequences of interrupted schooling have resulted in children unable to read or carry out basic maths; these in the longer term pose threats to pursuing higher education as first year students struggle with foundations of knowledge needed (Abdullah Omaish et al., 2022). Abdullah Omaish et al. (2022) reported on university students with weak mastery of languages in native Arabic, and English, and Turkish. They also found that students were lacking in foundational knowledge of equations and terminology in the sciences and, consequently, were more likely to drop out of some classes.

b. A significant number of children in Syria suffer from either cognitive disorders, trauma, addiction, or suicidal tendencies, that cause them to deprioritise education, hinders their learning and/or prevents them from completing their pre-tertiary education.

More than half of children in one study reported having at least one cognitive or psychosocial difficulty; with some up to three or more (Anyaegbu et al., 2022). Anxiety and depression were amongst the common expressions of trauma from children that resulted from displacement and loss (ibid, 2022). Students who are

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stressed because of war or other difficulties are less likely to find online learning beneficial (Shehadi et al., 2021).

Many children suffer from war-related trauma and, thus, their sleep has been affected (some are too afraid to sleep at night) while other children suffer from speech disorders (e.g. losing the ability to speak when needing to express themselves, speech impediments such as stuttering), involuntary urination, loss of empathy, low levels of self-confidence, and increased risks of drug and alcohol use and suicide attempts (Save the Children, 2017). However, the empirical field still has very limited research showing direct causal relations between conflict-related traumas and their learning and schooling experiences.

c. The deterioration of the political and economic conditions in NW Syria have led many families to take their children out of school for paid work opportunities.

People's increasing vulnerability to poverty in NW Syria and other opposition-held areas has pushed families to rely on child labour to support their livelihoods. Discontinuing or not even starting school has increased child labour, and introduced another level of social division comprising those with an education and those who are illiterate, thus entrenching more educational and social inequalities in the community (Weis, 2022).

4.What interventions, if any, affect children's learning, social-emotional learning and mental health?

Published research revealed a paucity of studies on education-related interventions. We found three academic articles; two were published in Arabic and one in English. See Table 4 below where we categorise the strength of the evidence and direction of impact for each intervention below.

Intervention 1: The Manahel Programme

The Manahel Programme is an MHPSS programme for Syrian children grades 1-4 to support learning progress (Anyaegbu et al., 2022). Funded by the FCDO, its first phase (2018--2023) included teacher training, provision of school resources and classroom learning in schools. This was in seven districts across two provinces, including 25 of 26 subdistricts in Idlib (it collected data from 15,506 children, but analysed data for 7,191). While children benefited from the MHPSS programme, those with more than one cognitive or psychosocial difficulty demonstrated less learning progress than peers with only one cognitive or psychosocial difficulty. Use of the Washington Group Questions was helpful in identifying difficulties and attributing them to degrees of learning progress through the intervention (Anyaegbu et al., 2022).

Intervention 2: Mosques providing remedial education

K. Nassif (2020) studied the processes and outcomes of an intervention carried out by local community actors in North Syria, namely mosque clerics. Clerics and teachers provided non-formal education to children during the summer term when schools were closed in two cities in northern Aleppo, Azaz and Al-Bab. They developed a programme based on five principles: (1) participation and action; (2) motivation; (c) cognitive, emotional and physical preparedness; (d) rebuilding and marginalisation; (5) the environment and reality.

The study gathered information from 185 teachers (57 females) from schools the children were attending. These teachers completed a questionnaire comprising 8 three-point Likert scale questions and 14 five-point Likert scale questions. The findings showed that teachers believed the children benefited significantly from this holistic education and development programme. K. Nassif (2020) concluded that education programmes provided through mosques are critical provisions of holistic education, remedial support and distant learning.

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Intervention 3: Mecano programme in northern Syria

Building on the Mecano programme developed for Syrian refugees in Turkey, the Mecano programme was provided to 2,750 children, ages 6 to 15 years in the areas of Idlib, Aleppo and Latakia. These children were identified as marginalised through either a war-related trauma, disability, inability to access a school, or struggles in learning. Rahal and Hasoun (2020) studied the academic, social and emotional impact of this programme by administering a 17-item questionnaire to a sample of 100 children ages 11 to 15 years, their parents (100 parents) and 26 teachers. Results showed that children had opportunities to learn by collaborating with peers, follow a curriculum at a steady pace, and take time to express their views. Among the recommendations were suggestions to engage parents and schools to adopt their approaches.

Research note: Save the Children has developed an intervention programme that provides MHPSS to children, called Healing and Education through the Arts (HEART) for children. This programme was mentioned in Save the Children (2017); however, the empirical field shows no comprehensive study of its processes or outcomes.

Table 4. **Evidence categorisation for interventions**

Intervention Name/Type/Setting/Brief findings	Strength of Confidence	Direction of Impact
MHPSS programme called the Manahel Programme, for Syrian children grades 1-4, to support learning progress (Anyaegbu et al., 2022). Funded by the FCDO, the programme was incorporated into teacher training, school resources and classroom learning in schools in seven districts across two provinces, including 25 of 26 subdistricts in Idleb (collected data from 15,506 children, but analysed data for 7,191). While children benefited from MHPSS programme, those with more than one cognitive or psychosocial difficulty demonstrated less learning progress than peers with one cognitive or psychosocial difficulty.	🟢🟢🟢 Strong	+
A local mosque summer programme (no official programme name) in northern Aleppo provided classes on literacy, numeracy and social and emotional learning. 185 teachers from schools these children attended completed questionnaires. Results showed that teachers believed the children benefited significantly from this holistic education and development programme.	🟡 Limited	+?
The Mecano programme was provided to 2,750 children, ages 6 to 15 years, who are marginalised through either a war-related trauma, disability, inability to access a school, or struggles in learning. Results showed that children had opportunities to learn by collaborating with peers, follow a curriculum at a steady pace, and take time to express their views.	🟡 Limited	+?

V. DISCUSSION

This evidence review examined the available and accessible published research on policy systems level and local systems level of education in NW Syria. We refer to this as available evidence-informed knowledge. Also in the results section above, we outlined possible evidence gaps by identifying the areas that were researched according to the stages in the "methods approach". After identifying what has been researched and possible evidence gaps, we discussed the corroboration of overarching research themes across the

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policy level and local level systems of education. We then categorised the emerging research themes into the following six themes:

- Improving governance
- Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment
- Producing and using data systems
- Reducing vulnerabilities and marginalisation
- Caregivers and school-based practitioners
- Infrastructure and materials

Within each of these six research themes, we present below the available evidence-informed knowledge (or what we know) and the evidence gaps (or what we do not know). The knowledge available and evidence gaps will inform research sub-themes that will be presented to local stakeholders and actors to prioritise research areas that require immediate attention. The priorities will formulate a research agenda for NW Syria.

A. Improving governance

The primary knowledge on governance emerged from studies on policy systems level. Nevertheless, some evidence on the local systems level also helped identify evidence gaps related to governance.

1. Available evidence-informed knowledge

The knowledge on governance that emerged through research provides us with four main understandings of education governance in NW Syria:

a. **Funding mechanisms** indicate an unsustainable flow of funds and a politicisation of distribution of aid for education. Over the past decade in NW Syria, during the course of the armed conflict, two distinct modes of aid emerged in Syria. These are: (a) situations in which aid is intentionally channelled through non-humanitarian actors, sometimes with the stated goal of bolstering local governance; and (b) other cases in which aid is intended to reach recipients directly through humanitarian actors but is diverted by force. Though it has been noted that humanitarian relief is always political, political motivation still constitutes a blatant betrayal of the core values of such aid. Furthermore, the manner in which non-humanitarian actors employ aid indicates that emergency relief is perceived not just as a means of ensuring the survival of people who are in need, but also as an integral part of the establishment and upkeep of normal systems of administration (Meininghaus, 2016).

   The primary sources of funding for education and managing these funds have been international and UN agencies. The UN's OCHA Financial Tracking System (FTS) is regarded as the most accurate mechanism for documenting the funds that are received and spent. However, approaches to financing the education system are vulnerable to **short-term funding commitments**. In addition to the NW, the other regions of Syria are not identified as a priority for many donors, and the nature of funding has been mostly in the form of short-term humanitarian aid rather than long-term development initiatives (Qaddour & Husain, 2022). Moreover, military and political actors **co-determine the distribution of aid for education**. The study by Meininghaus (2016) showed how political and military actors are the primary influencers of how aid for education is distributed and to whom by prioritising areas regarded as beneficial for political gain.

b. **Grade promotion and certificates of completion** have more internal than international value. Local education authorities in NW Syria have been issuing most of the grade promotions and certificates of

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completion. While the SIG Education Directorate issues the grade promotions and certificates for most of the schools in Idlib, the Education Office of local councils governs the promotions and certificates for most of the schools in rural northern Aleppo; a remaining 25% of the schools administer their own certificates and promotions (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023). The same report (ibid, 2023) found that Turkey and a few European Union countries recognise the legitimacy of NW Syria opposition authorities and, thus, recognise the certificates of completion they award.

c. **Gradual increase of accountability** of and through teachers and parents were documented in the Assistance Coordination Unit (2023) report. The report explained that education authorities in NW Syria have not yet developed mechanisms to measure teachers' qualifications. Hence, some donor agencies have required teachers and principals, in the schools they support, to sign a code of conduct. Approximately three-quarters of teachers in rural north Aleppo and Idlib reported to have signed. Also, some initiatives have started engaging parents in school governance. This has emerged as a significant shift towards democratic or inclusive schooling, considering that schools in Syria prior to 2011 did not have parent councils.

d. **Non-Syrian education authorities** are reportedly seen as a threat to sovereignty by minority groups. While the Turkish government has served as the primary actor facilitating the distribution of international aid into NW Syria, Turkish authorities appear to have a significant influence on shaping education policies. Consequently, the Kurdish minority community describes their influence as an occupation because, for example, the Turkish-influenced higher education curricula do not support the professionalisation of Kurdish language teachers.

2. Evidence gaps

When reflecting on the methods of research employed, we observe that virtually all studies showing findings on governance had employed **formative** research approaches. Moreover, the evidence on alignment, accountability and adaptability of fostering drivers of learning through the policy systems level appears to highlight issues related to sustainability of funds, political influence of non-local actors and legitimacy of awarding powers. Furthermore, accountability measures seem to extend to parents but appear short when ensuring the recruitment of qualified teachers. Hence, we gathered the initial evidence gaps presented in the results section above related to governance and consolidated them into the following seven evidence gaps – or possible research initiatives – related to research on improving governance.

a. **On certification:**

- To examine approaches that local governing authorities are taking to receive international recognition (formative research).

b. **On coordinating diversity of education systems:**

- To design with local actors approaches that can help create a more consolidated and resilient education system for the opposition-held areas (design research).
- To identify and examine drivers that threaten and strengthen sovereignty, legitimacy and democratic approaches to governance (design research).

c. **On accountability of teacher workforce:**
- To document existing and desirable policies and practices of teacher recruitment, professional learning and school evaluation (formative research).
- To develop approaches that support the design of school evaluations, appraisals of practitioners and learning assessment that can be institutionalised over time (design research).

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d. **On financing:**
        ● To develop financial model scenarios drawing on available sources of funding, human resources and existing infrastructure (design research).

    e. **On policy-making:**
        ● To gather and examine testimonies of approaches to policy-making, managing funds and other areas of governance (formative research).
        ● To develop processes of policy development, accountability and quality assurance (design research).

B. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment

Published studies related to curriculum and learning practices primarily focused on policy development at the policy systems level and practices at the local systems level.

1. Available evidence-informed knowledge

The published knowledge on curriculum and pedagogy in NW Syria elaborates on the two fields presented below: curriculum and pedagogy. Studies have virtually overlooked the policies and practices of classroom learning assessment. While the majority of studies have examined the political influences and outcomes on curricular reform, the knowledge field has produced little information on practices of learning and teaching in formal schooling. Nevertheless, evidence has emerged documenting promising approaches through intervention programmes for formal and non-formal education.

a. **Curriculum content, design and development** has largely served political agendas with evidence of one intervention supporting vulnerable children. As eastern and western Syria were shifting away from the political system of the GOS, different governing authorities used their curriculum resulting in four non-regime curricula across the region. In NW Syria, the majority of schools follow the Opposition Government Curriculum (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2023), which is the existing Syrian national curriculum but without content on Syrian nationalism related to the regime. Schools in Turkish-controlled areas in the NW (Efrin, Ezaz, Al Bab, Jarablous, Al Ra'ai) follow the Turkish modified curriculum (Lêlûn, & Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2023).

    However, the Kurdish minority community found that Turkish-influenced ideologies and extra-curricular policies have limited the continuity of schooling for Kurdish children and access to instruction in their Kurdish native language (Lêlûn & Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2023). Also, the conservative religious ideologies of the Islamic extremist political group HTS in Idlib disallow activities related to performance arts and other artistic expressions. Despite curricular revisions driven by political agendas, Anyaegbu et al. (2022) reported on an intervention where MHPSS was integrated into a school curriculum to support children with learning difficulties. This implementation research can be further developed in future research.

b. While most children in NW Syria have suffered from an **absence of learning**, rare evidence of an intervention programme showed improvement in children's learning. Armed conflicts, forced migration, poverty and unavailable infrastructure are among several factors that contributed to children performing far lower than their expected age level. An IRC (2017) study found that 59% grade 6, 52% grade 7, 35% grade 8 students cannot read at the grade 2 level. A longer-term consequence was reported by Abdallah Omaish et al. (2022) where students who reached higher education showed a significantly weaker grasp of basic conceptual knowledge. Furthermore, the paucity of research that

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documents existing practices of classroom learning and teaching (e.g. Boyle Espinosa & Ronan, 2022) indicates that children appear to still be memorising or uncritically engaging with information, compromising their quality of learning.

The three documented intervention programmes indicated positive outcomes for the children. The Mecano programme, which was studied by Rahal and Hasoun (2020), showed how highly vulnerable children demonstrated practices of quality learning. This programme facilitated opportunities for children to collaborate with their peers and take time to learn and express their views and for parents to support their children at home. Another intervention was provided through non-formal education at a local mosque (Nassif, 2020), while the Manahel MHPSS programme provided support through formal education venues such as teacher training and formal schools (Anyaegbu et al., 2022).

2. Evidence gaps

While some areas of curriculum and pedagogy still require further formative research, we observe a near total absence of studies on approaches to assess learning. Therefore, the first evidence gap we list below addresses assessment of and for learning, followed by a gap in knowledge on innovative pedagogies. We then list four evidence gaps in knowledge on curriculum and one evidence gap on advancing intervention programmes to implementation and effectiveness research.

a. **On assessment of and for learning:**
   - To document and examine policies and practices of formative and summative approaches to learning assessment (formative research).

b. **On innovative pedagogies:**
   - To explore testimonies of teachers' and students' innovative collaborative, empowering and critical pedagogical activities in non-formal and formal education (formative research).

c. **On curriculum:**
   - To examine approaches taken to review curricula and reform learning and teaching after removing regime-curriculum (formative research).
   - To examine the benefits and harms of the current curriculum (formative research).
   - To document the knowledge, pedagogy and participation that students, parents and teachers see as essential and relevant to learn through educational experiences (formative research).
   - To develop inclusive and informed approaches for authorities and teachers to produce a relevant and adaptable curriculum (design research).

d. **On holistic curricula and pedagogies:**
   - To further develop initial intervention programmes to measure impact while examining sustainability with the limited human and financial resources available (implementation research).

C. Producing and using data systems

Evidence on the production and uptake of data systems emerged primarily from studies on the policy systems level of education. As NW Syria transitions into new forms of political and economic systems, the approaches to developing and using data are fragile and vulnerable to political influence.

1. Available evidence-informed knowledge

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The published research that reveals how data is produced and used shows that, indeed, the education sector has **not yet systematised** data production and uptake. Before 2011, the GOS was primarily managing the data system for education. Currently, NW Syria has relied mainly on **aid agencies and research centres** as sources of data production. The primary production and usage of data for aid has resulted in several threats to the development of sustainable and accessible data systems. For instance, data produced and used by aid agencies emphasise measurable indicators of success; thus, focusing mostly on producing quantitative data, which **overlooks qualitative representations** of realities and needs (Sonoda, 2020).

Studies (e.g. Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2019) also found that aid agencies and governing authorities leading data production **target high-stakes governing areas**. This means that areas not regarded as politically strategic to aid and governing bodies are likely to be excluded from knowledge production on education. The frequency, consistency and reliability of data production also emerges as a concern because of the **ongoing changes in demographics** that also rapidly change social needs and services (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2016). Finally, Qaddour and Husain (2022) **question the robustness and accuracy** of data produced, which limits the effectiveness of coordination efforts among education actors.

2. Evidence gaps

The evidence found mainly suggests that the production and usage of data systems in NW Syria have emerged for the purposes of aid and, at times, longer-term strategic development. Hence, future research initiatives can focus on developing evidence-informed mechanisms of sustainable, inclusive and accessible data gathering and usage.

a. **On purposes of data systems:**
   - To examine current and future objectives for producing and using data in the education sector (formative research).
   - To develop usable methods of gathering and analysing data for situation analyses and education strategy development (design research).

b. **On methods of producing data systems:**
   - To document and analyse experiences and visions of producers and users of data (formative research).
   - To design usable methodologies for gathering human-level demographics: (e.g. mental health, gender, age, disabilities) and education-related status (e.g. out of school, attendance, retention, ") (design research).
   - To explore experiences and visions of current education authorities in trying to institutionalise, update and make accessible their data systems (formative research).

c. **On inclusive data production:**
   - To design usable methodologies that ensure all children and school-based practitioners are included in data systems (design research).

D. Reducing vulnerabilities and marginalisation

Published research on education in NW Syria consistently examined or documented the population of children that have been marginalised or made vulnerable to leaving or not starting education. These studies were mostly designed as formative research to either quantify or identify the population of marginalised children. The vulnerable also includes caregivers and practitioners who are unable to support their children accessing education because of poverty, fatigue and trauma, and poor preparation/knowledge and fatigue, as well as no remuneration for their efforts. Nevertheless, we still observe evidence gaps in personal

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testimonies of how adversities threaten access to and quality of education for children. Moreover, new research initiatives can start examining approaches to providing safety, support or rehabilitation to children excluded or at risk of exclusion from education.

1. Available evidence-informed knowledge

Below, we outline five populations of children whose vulnerabilities have been increased by neglect or violence and, therefore, are either excluded from or at risk of exclusion from starting, continuing or returning to any form of education provision.

a. **Gender-based discrimination** risks marginalising more girls than boys. Drawing on evidence prior to 2011, we observe consistent trends of boys and girls leaving school after basic education. However, the illiteracy rates among girls are often threefold compared to those of boys. Also, when parents discussed the safety of their children travelling to school, they expressed more concern over their daughters' safety than their sons'; thus, stopping their daughters from going to school (StC, 2013). Other parents expressed conservative views and discontinued their daughters' education because they believe that primary education is enough for girls and, instead of continuing, they should marry (Assistance Coordination Unit & Information Management Unit, 2021).

As mentioned above, one of the major factors is the general gender backlash from current religious and political dynamics in NW Syria. However, the economic pressure and conflict posed different realities for boys and girls across Syria. One report that studied the northern part of Syria found that while boys were forced into child labour to support their families and conscription, girls were forced into unpaid care work and early marriage (Orient Policy Center, 2020).

Additionally, girls' education seems to be deprioritised depending on age. According to a 2018 survey, 92% of parents considered that girls should attend primary school, 83% reported that girls should attend secondary schools, and only 51% reported that girls should access higher education (Save the Children, 2022).

b. The adversities of war in Syria have resulted in children **forcibly displaced, with disabilities and orphaned**. Syria Relief (2018) found that 85% of children with disabilities surveyed have never received any form of education. Furthermore, children with disabilities are among the most at risk of not continuing education during school closures because of inaccessible technology. Also, only half the children who have reported a health condition attend school. While the available studies mention children orphaned and forcibly displaced, they do not report on how orphaned children or children who forcibly migrated continued or left their schooling.

c. Most children in NW Syria suffer from some degree of **trauma, toxic stress or chronic fears**. A Save the Children (2017) report found that the majority of children surveyed reported chronic fears of bombs, fatigue from nightmares and even hunger. One relationship between children's traumas and education is that the presence of traumas appears to determine if children start or continue school (OCHA, 2022). These children (and children of parents with disabilities) are also at risk of prioritising paid work for basic living needs (e.g. shelter, food, water) over completing their education.

d. Some institutions **structurally exclude children by discriminatory policies or inflict harm** based on their identity. The political and social conflicts have generated forms of discrimination against children from minority groups in school. This manifests as excluding children from registering in school or exhibiting forms of bullying or violence towards children based on their identity, religion, political affiliation and displacement status (Syrian Center for Policy Research & British Council-Syria, 2022).

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e. While figures of **out-of-school** children have slightly decreased, the total number of children out of school is alarming. The Syrian Center for Policy Research (2021) reported that out-of-school children decreased from 45% in 2014—2017 to 34% in 2018—2022; however, 2.5 million children are still out of school. The evidence reported that children commonly leave school to work. Also, while more than a third of the children reported that they decided to leave school, another third reported that leaving school was their father's decision, which is the case for most female children (Assistance Coordination Unit & Information Management Unit, 2021). Fathers who decide to take their daughters out of school either oppose mixed gender schools, feel that a primary education is enough or want them to be married. Children who decided to leave school gave reasons such as poor quality learning and teaching, violence and discrimination by teachers, overcrowded classrooms, rise in tuition and schools looking like prisons (Syrian Center for Policy Research & British Council-Syria, 2022).

2. Evidence gaps

This research theme suggests a range of studies that could be prioritised based on the following evidence gaps:

a. **On impact of adversity:**
- To document and examine influences of forced displacement, toxic stress, traumas, gender distribution and social trust on learning and continuity of schooling (formative research).

b. **On impact of culture:**
- To examine the influence of cultural norms and traditions that hinder or support children's learning and completion of school (formative research).
- To explore barriers that threaten and opportunities that enhance access, quality and continuity of education within the health sector, food security, employability and social cohesion (formative research).

c. **On recovery and support:**
- To document the presence and absence of health, safety and emergency measures aimed at ensuring security, well-being and continuity in schooling (formative research).
- To develop approaches coordinated between school, home and community to improve school completion, remedial learning, quality of learning and teaching, and access to learning (design research).
- To develop innovative interventions to supporting war-related trauma-affected children improve their mental health (design research).

E. School-based practitioners and caregivers

While teachers stand out as critical influencers of children's drivers of learning, other human resources that directly engage with children and have significant impact on their education include social workers, parents, other caregivers and school principals. Albeit rare, some evidence of innovative practices by social workers and teachers demonstrates capacities to exercise agency within highly unstable and fragile contexts. Further research can build on such motivations and environments that foster agency.

1. Available evidence-informed knowledge

a. While the support from **teachers and parents** is instrumental to children's holistic environment for learning, this group of human resources suffers from limited experiences and qualifications. Firstly, the workforce of qualified teachers has dwindled by nearly a third (221,000 to 151,000) from forced migration.

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Currently, many of the teachers in NW Syria lack qualifications to teach, they discriminate against students with disabilities, and demonstrate apathy towards teaching and learning activities (Syrian Center for Policy Research & British Council-Syria, 2022). Indeed, teachers in NW Syria are affected by forced displacement or the war and, thus, suffer from burnout, chronic stress, respiratory diseases and losses of friends and family (Sharifian et al., 2021). At home, children are unlikely to receive learning support from parents who either did not attend or did not complete schooling (Assistance Coordination Unit & Information Management Unit, 2021).

b. In the rare studies on **innovative initiatives,** we found that social workers initiated fundraising activities to help support teachers' salaries (Paul, 2023). Also, Al-Awwad et al. (2022) found that 24 teachers benefited from a professional development programme on inclusion for children with disabilities. In school contexts where resources are, for the most part, unavailable, some teachers relied on personal knowledge of the curriculum and WhatsApp (Nassif, 2020). When the wider **community** developed initiatives to support children in education and well-being, Nassif (2020) reported on how a non-formal education programme provided by mosque clerics helped children benefit from learning in formal schools.

2. Evidence gaps

In addition to further formative research on the approaches and experiences of school-based practitioners and caregivers, new studies can gather more evidence on innovative approaches. Research on intervention studies mostly reported on the design of the education intervention programme. Very little or no qualitative information was provided on personal experiences, observations and critical reflections on children's learning, teachers' approaches to teaching, and contributions to monitoring, evaluation and assessment of programmes.

a. **On agency:**
   - To document and analyse the practices of school leaders (principals, education programme directors) when working with teachers, parents, learners and community members to improve access to and availability of quality education (formative research).
   - To examine and develop provisions of continuous professional learning activities that result in public dissemination of experiences and direct input into the curriculum and school-based policies (formative and design research).
   - To design approaches that support teachers and children and engage in critical pedagogies despite limited resources and risks to well-being (design research).

b. **On building qualifications:**
   - To study the economics of investments and returns of educationists with higher education who work in formal and non-formal education programmes (formative research).
   - To develop approaches whereby teachers and principals develop a programme to attain written qualifications through a hybrid of taught class studies and in-service professional learning activities (design research).

F. Infrastructure and materials

Research on the conditions of infrastructure and material resources reveals a dire need for rehabilitation in NW Syria. Studies can not only continue to document the availability of infrastructure that is safe and accessible, but they can also assess approaches to using the limited materials available to maintain children's drivers of learning.

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1. Available evidence-informed knowledge

The studies that presented findings on school-related infrastructure and materials reported mostly on three aspects: schools, travel to school, and the digital learning environment.

a. **Schools** across NW Syria, by and large, can lack typical classroom equipment or even the most essential resources such as electricity, water, bathrooms and even buildings. In Idlib, for example, half the schools are non-operational. Camps for forcibly displaced Syrians are also the sites of some schools. The Assistance Coordination Unit and Information Management Unit (2019) found that across 598 camps, only 136 had schools and that 65 were tents, 7 in old buildings, a third did not have drinking water and a quarter did not have bathrooms.

b. **Travel** to school was reported by OCHA (2022) as a **life risk factor** showing limited resources for safety. Indeed, some parents who took their children out of school explained that the journey to school was too dangerous for their children.

c. The **digital learning environment** has emerged as an essential component of schooling after the global pandemic of COVID-19 closed schools around the world. However, in NW Syria, evidence from the Syrian Center for Policy Research and British Council-Syria (2022) shows that children stopped going to school because they did not have access to the internet, electricity and hardware. In the same study, children described how they valued the internet, but expressed concerns over risks to addiction of being online and exposure to bullying, hate speech, false news and terrorist recruitment. Among the most vulnerable to discontinuing learning when education shifts to digital learning are children with disabilities (Al-Malli, 2021).

2. Evidence gaps

New research on infrastructure and materials can focus on the following:

a. **On [un]availability:**
   - To document inventory and needs with indicators of health, safety, availability and access to integrate into a data system that is being institutionalised (formative research)

b. **On innovation:**
   - To explore teachers', students' and caregivers' innovative uses of limited resources in their teaching and learning.
   - To develop strategies that ensure learning and teaching resources are accessible and adaptable through various crises.

VI. CONCLUSION

A. Summary of methods and findings of the Evidence Review

The evidence review of research on education in NW Syria analyses the available literature in English and Arabic to identify evidence gaps for further research. The purpose of the evidence review has been to identify the current evidence on access, quality, continuity, and system coherence in education in NW Syria,

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as well as to identify effective approaches that are being used to address the educational needs for all children in the region. The review identified existing gaps and outlined six emerging research priorities to inform the development of a research agenda. This education research agenda is crucial given the political and social fragility and ongoing conflict in the region, which have left millions of children out of school.

The sources for the evidence review included international peer-reviewed publications, official documents, data and statistics from various sources, and situation analyses by local and international organisations. The review focused primarily on the period from 2007 to 2023 to understand the education system before and throughout the conflict. Academic publications in English and Arabic databases were searched. The coding and analysis process involved organising evidence, examining research questions, findings and methodologies (according to the ERICC "methods approach"), and identifying evidence gaps at the policy (macro) and local (meso, micro) systems levels.

At the policy systems level, political drivers significantly shape various dimensions of policy and practice reflecting political agendas from several governing authorities, including opposition groups and external actors like Turkey. Evidence has shown that this has led to the marginalisation of certain communities and ideologies. Data systems produced for aid and development are similarly influenced by political agendas that target certain geographies and communities that potentially provide political leverage.

Demographic shifts due to forced displacement exacerbate inequalities in education, especially among females. The absence or limited recognition of certification of grade level or school completion hinders children's opportunities for further education and employment even more. Evidence also indicates donor fatigue and wariness to recognise legitimacy of local education authorities, which threatens sustainable funding during times of transformation. Moreover, findings suggest poor accountability measures from aid providers and local authorities that compromise the equitable distribution of aid and threaten the reliability of data sets.

At the local systems level, studies provide mostly formative information on conditions that affect children's access to education in NW Syria. Supporting evidence includes enrolment rates, the impact of conflicts on school infrastructure, and the marginalisation of vulnerable children, including females and children with disabilities. The literature also suggested a concerning (poor) quality of education that has practices of authoritarian teaching and learning methods, and a significant lack of qualified teachers.

The evidence on the continuity of education reveals alarming school dropout rates. Access to and the quality and continuity of education were also determined by the stress and trauma experienced by children, interruptions in schooling due to displacement, and limited resources for learning. The deterioration of economic conditions has directed children towards the labour market to contribute to meeting basic living needs for their family.

The few interventions reported focused on holistic approaches to supporting children's mental health through non-formal education programmes. Regards the research on interventions, there is a paucity of studies on innovative approaches and the impact of such programmes on learning and other areas of child development. While the majority of published literature on education research adopted formative approaches to inquiry, the evidence review suggests gaps for further formative-based studies and the demand for innovative design research.

Six potential research themes emerged from the evidence review. Future studies on Improving Governance can address challenges in establishing sustainable funding, depoliticising data systems, providing accredited certification and coordinating diverse curricula and schooling systems. Research on Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Assessment can examine political influences on curricular content and development and inform holistic approaches to supporting vulnerable children learn, recover and grow. For Producing and

Using Data Systems, research can explore approaches to data systems management that ensure the sustainability and inclusivity of information production and usage. Studies can also focus on Reducing Vulnerabilities and Marginalisation to address causes and consequences of children marginalised or at risk of being marginalised, including girls, children with disabilities, and those affected by trauma.

New research on School-based Practitioners and Caregivers can investigate innovative initiatives to provide teachers and school leaders with quality professional development and support the critical roles of parents in their children's education and well-being. Lastly, studies on Infrastructure and Materials can address challenges in school and the availability of resources, safe travel to school/education, and the digital learning environment by documenting changes in inventory and innovating strategies for use of scarce resources. The collaborative and inclusive production and implementation of a research agenda for NW Syria will help build evidence-informed strategies for the development of an equitable, resilient and sustainable education system.

B. Broadening the research scope

During the process of the evidence review, elements of the education system that were beyond the scope of study emerged as relevant for a research agenda. First, there is a paucity of research on the *return of Syrian refugees* from other countries to Syria. During times of social and political reconstruction, families who were forced to migrate outside of Syria are likely to return. Hence, a developing education system will require considerations to receive, support and even capitalise from returning children and education professionals. Second, the role of *higher education* plays an instrumental role in the capacity-building of the education sector. The university provides the professionalisation of the workforce needed for social reconstruction and sustainable development (Abedtalas et al., 2020).

However, higher education is rarely considered a priority in education aid and development initiatives. Nevertheless, findings from the evidence-based studies reviewed suggest a two-fold dimension to higher education as an instrumental factor that determines the drivers of learning: (1) professionalising teachers, principals, psychology counsellors and social workers; and (2) co-lead innovative education research initiatives in NW Syria. This leads us to *research approaches and capacities* as a third area for research development. The majority of studies that carried out rigorous methods of inquiry and analysis were published in English and produced through institutions outside of Syria. Also, organisation reports tended to focus mostly on reporting data in numerical figures while academic publications tended to include or focus on open-ended conversations of personal experiences, observations and reflections. As studies with epistemological rigour have been primarily carried out by researchers outside Syria, the sustainability of education research in NW Syria largely relies on the building of local research capacities.

C. Reviewing and advancing the conceptual framework

The conceptual framework developed for ERICC (Kim, Tubbs Dolan & Aber, 2022) identifies some of the core variables of equitable education in areas affected by crises. The nature of successful research can be measured by many indicators, including how findings challenge and advance conceptual understandings. Hence, advancing the ERICC framework can juxtapose the indicators of its framework with established conceptual frameworks for education research, aid and development in areas affected by crises. These include the following:

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child articles 13, 17, 28 and 29 (United Nations, 1989).
- Defining the fundamental dimensions to children's rights to education; when education is available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable (Tomaševski, 2001). In this evidence review, we observed recurring issues related access, but also the unavailability of resources or even education

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programmes, interventions that attempt to provide an acceptable programme and policy frameworks that either prevent or ensure adaptability to culturally diverse communities.

- The INEE Minimum Standards for Education (MSE)'s five domains defining 19 minimum standards (INEE, 2010) and the [contextualized MSE](#) for countries, including Bangladesh, Lebanon, Nigeria and South Sudan.

Other developed frameworks of education in crises-affected contexts include the "4Rs" inspired by Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo & Smith, 2015), capacities that determine the resilience of education systems (Shah, 2019) and the nexus of peacebuilding, aid and development in education (Paulson & Shanks, 2023).

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ERICC

ABOUT ERICC

The Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Research Programme Consortium is a global research and learning partnership that strives to transform education policy and practice in conflict and protracted crisis around the world — ultimately to help improve holistic outcomes for children — through building a global hub for a rigorous, context-relevant and actionable evidence base.

ERICC seeks to identify the most effective approaches for improving access, quality, and continuity of education to support sustainable and coherent education systems and holistic learning and development of children in conflict and crisis. ERICC aims to bridge research, practice, and policy with accessible and actionable knowledge — at local, national, regional and global levels — through co-construction of research and collaborative partnerships.

ERICC is led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with Academic Lead IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, and expert partners include Centre for Lebanese Studies, Common Heritage Foundation, Forcier Consulting, ODI, Osman Consulting, Oxford Policy Management and Queen Rania Foundation. During ERICC's inception period, NYU-TIES provided research leadership, developed the original ERICC Conceptual Framework and contributed to early research agenda development. ERICC is supported by UK Aid.

Countries in focus include Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar), Jordan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.