

# Centering the Learner for Greater Transformation



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# Executive summary

The world faces complex and unprecedented global-scale challenges; violence, injustice and inequality, climate change, mass loss of biodiversity, new conflicts and the risks of global pandemics. Education plays a fundamental role in helping children navigate such challenging circumstances; it creates opportunities to boost their wellbeing and promote change at different levels. In particular, quality education equips learners with the necessary skills and sense of purpose to shape their lives and contribute to the lives of others, helping them become citizens capable of exercising agency (OECD, 2018). Quality education also allows children to regain a sense of normalcy in crises by providing them with life-saving food, water, health care, and psychosocial support (UNICEF, n.d.).

This brief explores theory and practice on transformative education approaches and their effects on the wellbeing and learning processes of pre-primary and primary-age children who were affected by crises. It also introduces creativity-based pedagogies and emphasizes creativity's importance in achieving transformative learning. Ultimately, this brief is intended to generate reflections and debate on the concept of inclusive and equitable quality education.

A transformative approach to education practice constitutes a powerful tool, as it promotes meaningful and lasting change on the individual, community, and societal levels (Bridge 47, 2020). Focusing on how learners make meaning of their experiences to interpret and reinterpret their realities, transformative education seeks to support them in moving from reflection to action. It is designed to contextualize teaching and learning and connect these to children's daily lives and community experiences.

Transformative education includes distinctive features, such as action-oriented, inquiry-based, creative, and holistic approaches to learning. These singular characteristics directly affect what happens in learning spaces (Bell, 2016). Such spaces are meant to be inclusive, serving the widest diversity of learners and actively fighting any type of discrimination based on social background, ethnicity and culture, gender, sexual orientation, or disabilities (Calderón, 2020). In addition, encouraging diversity and inclusion should transcend learning spaces since learners act as conduits, carrying ideas outward into their homes and communities (Bivens et al., 2009).

There is a strong link between transformative education and creativity. Creativity plays a significant role in how children interpret their environment and experiences since it helps them construct new, actionable knowledge (Troop, 2017). Creative approaches help activate children's unique potential in constructing knowledge, allowing novel and personally meaningful interpretations of experiences, actions, and events to appear, and impacting these children's ability to foster transformation in their immediate environment.

In emergencies and protracted crises, creativity-based approaches can offer a powerful outlet for trauma and stress responses, improving children's wellbeing and healthy development. In addition, these approaches promote academic persistence and are ways of developing cultural learning, encouraging participation in social development outside of the structural characteristics of crises (Buriel et al., 2019).

Transformative education programs aim to address the educational and socio-emotional needs of children experiencing distress, providing them with creative outlets for stress responses, helping them challenge and reinterpret the set of rules and criteria for making meaning and judgments, and enabling them to develop skills to navigate their complex surroundings. These programs also have a child-centered pedagogical approach aiming to honor and nurture children's interests, knowledge, and competencies. They acknowledge children's perspectives and understandings and help children challenge and reconfigure those while supporting their wellbeing, development, and learning.

Implementers may encounter obstacles to building flexible pedagogical models that can adapt to children's diverse realities. Simultaneously, teachers could have issues contextualizing such models. Transformative education programs foster child-centered approaches that embrace diversity, especially since children of different ages, backgrounds, capabilities, and interests usually access transformative education spaces – a challenge for both the design and the implementation of suitable pedagogical models.

Transformative education has proven successful in supporting crisis-affected children by allowing them to continue their academic learning while fostering their psychosocial wellbeing. Its creativity-based pedagogical approach provides an outlet for distress and trauma responses and assists children in developing a relevant skill set that helps them navigate challenging environments. In addition, it contributes to individual and societal transformation since it encourages a close relationship between learning and learning environments.

# Introduction



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We live in a world that is constantly changing and facing complex global challenges, one in which injustice and inequality are advancing much more rapidly than ever before amid widespread conflict and instability. Simultaneously, the gap between rich and poor is growing, as are the frequency and intensity of climate change-related disasters (OECD, 2018). All these challenges adversely affect much of the world’s population; a growing number of people are impacted by conflict, emergencies, and forced displacement, experiencing an increased sense of uncertainty about the future.

In this context, children face increased vulnerabilities. In emergency situations, they can experience significant personal losses and trauma while being deprived of their basic rights: access to safe drinking water, health care, food, and education (UNICEF, n.d.). This affects their overall wellbeing, hindering their healthy development.

Education plays a fundamental role in helping children navigate such challenging circumstances; it creates opportunities to boost their wellbeing and promote change at different levels. In particular, quality education equips learners with the necessary skills and sense of purpose to shape their lives and contribute to the lives of others – helping them become citizens capable of exercising agency, framing a guiding purpose, and identifying actions to achieve a goal (OECD, 2018). Quality education also allows children to regain a sense of normalcy in crises by providing them with life-saving food, water, health care, and psychosocial support (UNICEF, n.d.).

Despite its enormous benefits, education is often the first service suspended during crises and the last to be restored (UNICEF, n.d.). Therefore, humanitarian actors and other stakeholders must enhance educational preparedness, response, and recovery, and increase access to safe, relevant learning opportunities. The [INEE Minimum Standards](#) are a valuable tool for ensuring quality, coordinated humanitarian responses that meet the rights and needs of children affected by crises through processes that assert their dignity (INEE, 2010).

Within this panorama, a transformative approach to education practice is a powerful tool, as it promotes meaningful and lasting change on the individual, community, and societal levels (Bridge 47, 2020). Focusing on how learners make meaning of their experiences to interpret and reinterpret their realities, transformative education seeks to support them in moving from reflection to action. It is designed to contextualize teaching and learning and connect these to children’s daily lives and community experiences.

As a pedagogy, transformative education is child-centered and attributes great importance to active participation, non-hierarchical interactions – particularly between teachers and children – and creativity. In terms of content, it champions the adoption of gender equality, peace education, sustainability, and responsible global citizenship curriculums. In practical terms, transformative education seeks to prepare learners for the diverse and interrelated environmental, social, political, and economic challenges they will meet as they confront an evolving, demanding world.

This brief explores theory and practice on transformative education approaches' effects on the wellbeing and learning processes of pre-primary and primary-age children who were affected by crises. It is intended to generate reflections and debate on the concept of inclusive and equitable quality education of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 from a holistic and rights-based approach. Highlighting the broader dimension of quality, such as those set out in SDG target 4.7 to:

*Ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development (United Nations, n.d.).*

The brief first presents a conceptual and practical overview of transformative education, it introduces some creativity-based pedagogies and emphasizes creativity's importance in achieving transformative learning. Second, the brief summarizes the main findings from a review of a selection of transformative education interventions in emergency contexts. The final section highlights some key learning on transformative education and offers recommendations for practitioners and policymakers. It calls for expanding the notion of quality education in crisis contexts to include transformative pedagogies that foster psychosocial wellbeing, promote social and emotional learning, and create contextually relevant education.



# Overview of Transformative Pedagogies



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## Conceptualizing Transformative Education

In recent decades, transformative education emerged as a learning theory that analyzes the processes by which learning could lead to both personal and societal transformation (Gouthro, 2018). It shifts away from traditional models – in which teachers unilaterally transfer knowledge to learners – and innovatively seeks to facilitate the acquisition of competencies, essential values, and knowledge to achieve critical reflection and structural changes (Bell, 2016).

Transformative education leads to challenging, interpreting, and reinterpreting mental structures that facilitate learning – understood as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides consequent appreciation and action. From this perspective, making meaning can occur in two ways: through meaning schemes, which are sets of implicit rules for interpreting experiences, and through meaning perspectives, which involve criteria for making value judgments and belief systems (Mezirow, 2002). That is to say, transformative education promotes questioning ideas, assumptions, beliefs, and values that are taken for granted so they become more susceptible to change (Cranton, 2016).

As noted earlier, critical reflection plays a fundamental role in transformative education. However, intuitive, affective, and imaginative learning approaches have also emerged as methods by which transformational learning can be achieved. These approaches move away from traditional models of teacher- and textbook-centered classroom practices, allowing for emotions and imagination to replace purely cognitive, content-focused discussions (Cranton, 2016). From this perspective, learners can creatively question their set of rules for interpreting experiences and their criteria for making value judgments, undergoing sensory, emotional, and physical experiences (Troop, 2017).

In practical terms, transformative education helps learners appreciate and connect differently with their contexts through critical and creative reflection and subsequent action, encouraging them to acknowledge the challenges their communities may face, and to address the roots of such challenges (Bivens et al., 2009). Transformative learning – that is to say, the learning outcomes and transformations fostered by transformative education – is evidenced in how learners understand a concept, perceive themselves and others, and decide to act and enact change. To achieve these outcomes, learners must develop the competencies and confidence to move forward with tackling today's global challenges in innovative and socially conscious ways (Gouthro, 2018).

## Transformative Education in Practice

Transformative education includes distinctive features, such as action-oriented, inquiry-based, creative, and holistic approaches to learning. These singular characteristics directly affect what happens in learning spaces (Bell, 2016). Such spaces are meant to be inclusive, serving the widest diversity of learners and actively fighting any type of discrimination based on social background, ethnicity and culture, gender, sexual orientation, or disabilities (Calderón, 2020). In addition, encouraging diversity and inclusion should transcend learning spaces since learners act as conduits carrying ideas outward into their homes and communities (Bivens et al., 2009).

Promoting transformative education implies a change in conventional classroom dynamics. By moving from a vertical, hierarchical relationship to a horizontal one in which learning processes are bidirectional and enabling dialogue, both learners and teachers can question and reinterpret knowledge, understanding, and perspectives. Consequently, roles are also altered; learners become more actively engaged, and teachers' practice changes from transferring knowledge to supporting learning that is both learner-centered and dialogical. This setting allows learners to develop their voices, which are openly heard, while teachers integrate these voices into the learning process. In a way, teachers relinquish some control to enable learners to interpret what they learn (Arce, 2000).

Additionally, transformative education methodologies encourage a close relationship between learning processes and environments, translating to a strong link between home, community, and classroom. Teachers and learners should identify their social, ecological, and political realities – and how these influence educational processes. Moreover, learners and teachers should be able to recognize their ability to help their communities since including locally relevant knowledge facilitates change and enables learners to put knowledge to use (Bivens et al., 2009).

In terms of outcomes, transformative learning aims to develop a diverse, relevant skill set in order to support and inspire a new generation of active citizens, a central component of SDG 4. It focuses on creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making to foster innovative ways of thinking, encourages communication and collaboration as ways of working, and foment the use of information and communications technologies as tools (Bell, 2016).

# Transformative Pedagogies

Transformative learning can take different forms, and some of these forms go beyond learners' purely rational aspect to explore their intuitive, affective, and emotional dimensions. In this sense, learners can creatively question their beliefs, values, and preconceptions through sensory, emotional, and physical experiences. This section explores different creativity-based approaches often used in transformative education interventions.

## ART-BASED APPROACH

Methods of artistic expression offer children an opportunity to engage in alternative forms of reflection, expression, and action. These nurture imagination and curiosity, allowing children to develop new ways to navigate challenges in their lives and communities. Art-based approaches are highly diverse and can include performing arts (such as music, dance, or theater) or visual arts (like drawing, sculpting, painting, or even storytelling). Transformative learning occurs when children deepen their awareness and connection to themselves, their realities, and others (Miller, 2020). One example of this approach is **Healing and Education Through Art (HEART)**, a Save the Children program that provides psychosocial support for children and youth in high-stress environments, using expressive arts to help them process and communicate complex feelings, experiences, and ideas (Save the Children, n.d.c).

## CONTEMPLATIVE APPROACH

Closely related to creativity is the contemplative approach, which refers to a wide range of practices that span from stillness meditation and creative acts to relational and movement exercises. This variety suggests that practices themselves do not define the contemplative approach. Rather, this approach should be perceived through the lens of two essential features: the cultivation of emotional balance and the development of competencies required for insight and creativity. It aims to create a freeing space where new critical awareness arises (Mah y Busch, 2014). For example, **Creative Climate Action Through Art**, also known as gen eARTh, is a Slam Out Loud course to help learners understand the climate crisis while appreciating mindfulness and art as powerful mediums to advocate for change. It uses meditation exercises to engage children in visualization activities to connect with their bodies and their environments (Slam Out Loud, n.d.).

## EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH

Children learn by doing. The experiential approach supports hands-on, concrete experiences that create opportunities for reflective observation. Acknowledging that practically all experiences lead to learning, transformative education emphasizes the importance of those experiences in bringing about transformation at the individual and community levels (Gallego, 2018). Disaster risk reduction (DRR) learning illustrates the experiential approach well. For example, when primary schools in **Botswana integrated DRR** into their curriculums, teachers designed experiential, interactive lessons that encourage critical thinking, enabling children to engage in experiences that led to observation and reflection. This allowed children to gain experience and knowledge – and, thus, be better prepared – on how to respond to emergencies (Mutasa & Coetzee, 2019).

## PLAY-BASED APPROACH

The learning through play pedagogy combines playful, child-directed activities with teacher- or adult-guided learning objectives; teachers encourage children's exploration and inquiry through interactions that aim to stretch their thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills (Parker & Thomsen, 2019; O'Leary, 2019). In emergencies and protracted crises, this approach increases access to quality learning opportunities, as it supports school readiness and the social and emotional learning needed for successful transitions from emergency situations. One example of this pedagogy is the innovative **Play to Learn program**, which harnesses the power of play to deliver critical early learning opportunities to children and caregivers affected by conflict and forced displacement (LEGO Foundation, n.d.).

All these approaches increase children's wellbeing while helping them acquire the necessary skills to transform their complex realities. Transformative education pedagogies can also potentially disrupt the intergenerational transmission of disempowerment by challenging the set of values, beliefs, and mental structures that brought about this disempowerment. Children are able to reinterpret their experiences and realities, spreading this helpful new perspective to their households and beyond, creating positive spillover effects in their communities (Bivens et al., 2009).

# Importance of Creativity in Transformative Education



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There is a strong link between transformative education and creativity. Creativity plays a significant role in how children interpret their environment and experiences since it helps them construct new, actionable knowledge (Troop, 2017). Creative approaches help activate children's unique potential in constructing knowledge, allowing novel and personally meaningful interpretations of experiences, actions, and events to appear, and impacting these children's ability to foster transformation in their immediate environment.

Since transformative education seeks to engage alternative learning dimensions – namely, the affective dimension of quality education and learning – it presents an advantage in promoting children's wellbeing. It can stimulate the acquisition of socio-emotional skills, such as resilience and emotion management, accompanied by cognitive competencies (Buriel et al., 2019).

Expressions of creativity may help children with communicating complex and emotive issues, which, in turn, can spark empathy in others; they provide a powerful outlet that can bring feelings, emotions, and social or cultural responses to the conscious level for critical reflections. Creative expression is also a tool for empowering children, as children tend to be self-directed and experience a sense of discovery. Thus, art can become a channel for both making meaning and improving children's wellbeing (Miller, 2020).

Given that transformative creative processes require the freedom to explore, express, and take risks, teachers' role in facilitating creative development is fundamental. This task represents an elaborated process, in which it is imperative to find a balance between stimulating the imagination to explore new ideas and new knowledge acquisition (Troop, 2017).

Ultimately, all creativity-based transformative education approaches have something in common: promoting personal, interpersonal, and social transformations through cultivating self-knowledge, emotional management, and critical thinking. These contribute significantly to fomenting responsible citizenship for transforming the world into a place where all individuals can fulfill their potential in dignity and equality (Gallego, 2018).

In emergencies and protracted crises, creativity-based approaches can offer a powerful outlet for trauma and stress responses, improving children's wellbeing and healthy development. In addition, these approaches promote academic persistence and are ways of developing cultural learning, encouraging children's participation in social development outside of the structural characteristics of crises (Buriel et al., 2019).

# Transformative Education Programs



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Emergencies are intensifying worldwide, causing protracted crises and having adverse long-term effects, particularly on the fate of affected populations. Likewise, migratory flows are impacting global structures as more and more people become forcibly displaced due to conflict, instability, or environmental crises (Buriel et al., 2019). This particular context demands responsible citizens capable of fomenting change on the local and global scales, fostering peaceful, just, and inclusive societies free from fear and violence.

Education has an immense responsibility in these situations: promoting learners' wellbeing while cultivating the skills, knowledge, and commitment necessary to transform their lives and realities. In crisis contexts, transformative approaches are becoming more relevant every day since they can provide a way to boost wellbeing, enhance learning, and promote a better understanding of complex realities, enabling fundamental individual and societal transformation.

Although transformative education emerged as a theory analyzing adult education alternatives, it has gained traction and expanded to permeate all educational levels. Nowadays, transformative education programs benefit myriad children worldwide, including those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and face structural barriers to accessing education services.

Transformative education is highly relevant to education in emergency programming for a number of reasons. It is a powerful tool to support children experiencing stress and trauma given its ability to foster socio-emotional skills, resilience, and overall wellbeing. In addition, its distinctive focus on encouraging transformation at the community and societal levels means transformative education interventions are valuable opportunities to address complex challenges.

This section highlights some transformative education interventions that employ an extensive array of creativity pedagogies, implemented in diverse contexts. The majority of these interventions occur in emergency situations (environmental crises, conflict, forced displacement); however, a considerable portion arose in contexts deeply affected by protracted structural problems, such as extreme poverty, inequality, insecurity, and high levels of community violence.

We reviewed a sample of eight transformative education programs implemented in Latin America, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia. Although diverse, these interventions usually share a common goal: to address the educational and

socio-emotional needs of children experiencing distress, providing creative outlets for stress responses, helping them challenge and reinterpret the set of rules and criteria for making meaning and judgments, and enabling them to develop the skills to navigate their complex surroundings.

Table 1. Transformative education programs reviewed

Program	Implementer	Location	Emergency
<b><u>Círculos de Aprendizaje (Learning Circles)</u></b>	Escuela Nueva	Colombia	Forced displacement
<b><u>Awareness and Prevention Through Art (aptART)</u></b>	aptART	Syria	Conflict, forced displacement
<b><u>Aflatot</u></b>	Aflatoun	Global	Complex
<b><u>Arts for All</u></b>	Slam Out Loud	India	Health
<b><u>Healing and Education Through the Arts (HEART)</u></b>	Save the Children	Global	Conflict, forced displacement, environmental, health
<b><u>Right to Play</u></b>	Right to Play, UNRWA*	Palestine	Conflict, forced displacement
<b><u>Satuan Pendidikan Aman Bencana (Disaster-Safe Education Unit)</u></b>	Ministry of Education and Culture	Indonesia	Environmental
<b><u>Time to Be a Child</u></b>	War Child	Jordan, Lebanon	Conflict

\* United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

These interventions have a child-centered pedagogical approach aiming to honor and nurture children's interests, knowledge, and competencies; they acknowledge children's perspectives and understanding, helping them challenge and reconfigure those while supporting their wellbeing, development, and learning.

For example, the **Satuan Pendidikan Aman Bencana (SPAB)** (Disaster-Safe Education Unit) program, seeks to protect education from disasters' adverse effects and ensure the continuity of education services in emergencies. SPAB's child-centered approach understands

that children have specific needs in facing disaster hazards and should participate according to their capacities and interests in achieving a resilient education system (SEKNASS SPAB, 2019). Another example, **Right to Play** focuses on empowering children through transformative education. The program provides standards for child-centered learning spaces – including strategies to grant access to children with disabilities – and teaching practices so children actively participate in their learning processes (Right to Play, n.d.).

Additionally, these programs leverage community-based organizations and local education authorities, which allows them to access physical infrastructure already in place and facilitates the contextualization of pedagogical models. For instance, the **Aflatot** and **HEART** programs build partnerships with education-focused community-based organizations and provide comprehensive training to their teachers so they can incorporate transformative pedagogical models into their curricula.

Most of the programs reviewed use the transformative power of creativity and play to help children in high-stress situations cope with complex feelings and experiences in emotionally supportive settings. These creativity- and play-based approaches tend to be culturally relevant, incorporating local traditions and resources. For instance, **aptART** offers educational workshops in which children collaboratively create street art pieces on issues that affect them, such as conflict, peace, hope, education, and hygiene (The Awesome Foundation, n.d.). Similarly, as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, **Arts for All** leveraged the power of e-learning resources to create a series of art-based experiences to preserve children's wellbeing in times of such uncertainty (Slam Out Loud, n.d.b).

These eight interventions also help children develop the life skills and attitudes – such as communication, critical thinking, and empathy – necessary to be empowered, active, and engaged citizens capable of navigating their challenging environments and leaving a positive imprint. For example, **SPAB** promotes risk reduction and resilience education so that children can understand the potential disaster vulnerabilities – physical and social – in their surroundings. This helps them acknowledge the importance of maintaining solidarity and cooperation during disasters and encourages the development of risk management plans (Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia, 2019). Another example is **Aflatot's** framework promoting social and financial education, which helps children acquire essential life skills – self-regulation and delayed gratification – to change their personal circumstances (Aflatoun International, n.d.).

Transformative education programs require significant family involvement in children's learning processes, which enables positive spillover effects on the broader community. **Learning Circles** and **Aflatot** often encourage children to engage their families and neighbors in developing learning activities that address complex issues in their communities, exercising their problem-solving skills.

All interventions offer teachers comprehensive training to support children's healing and learning processes. These training sessions often include strategies to promote equitable participation, the contextualization of pedagogies, and psychological support.

Overall, these transformative education programs appear to have helped children regain the feeling of childhood that is often lost through a crisis. They have also reinforced resilience by supporting children in acquiring life skills, such as better emotional control and a more developed sense of adaptation to challenging new environments (Buriel et al., 2019).



## A Closer Look at Programmatic Examples

This section provides a closer look at four transformative education programs that have been extensively evaluated and shown promising results; it presents a description of their objectives, pedagogical approaches, and the transformative learning outcomes observed in the children participating in these programs.

### Círculos de Aprendizaje (Learning Circles)

Escuela Nueva designed the Learning Circles program to address the educational and social-emotional needs of Colombian children forcibly displaced by conflict. Its primary goal is to support children in transitioning to the formal education system. To accomplish this, Escuela Nueva establishes partnerships with local education authorities to identify formal schools – known as “mother schools” (*instituciones educativas madres*) – that will take in Learning Circle students (Aguilar, 2021).

#### Círculos de Aprendizaje (Learning Circles)



**Location:** Colombia



**Implementer:** Escuela Nueva and Ministry of National Education



**Target:** children



**Emergency:** forced displacement

Learning Circles' pedagogical model considers that children arrive in these educational spaces with a set of valuable knowledge and capabilities; thus, teachers and tutors play a vital role in identifying and embracing these capabilities. Consequently, this intervention employs a student-centered, flexible approach in which interaction and collaboration are highly encouraged. Circles are relatively small – 15 to 20 children – allowing teachers to adapt the activities to children's needs and interests, and thus, offering contextualized learning experiences that honor different learning speeds and styles (Luschei & Vega, 2015).

Escuela Nueva believes teachers' and tutors' work is a key determinant of Learning Circles' success. Teachers and tutors are usually recruited from the communities where Circles are located, meaning they often have similar backgrounds to the children. Once recruited, teachers and tutors participate in two five-day training sessions and receive continuous pedagogical and psychosocial support (Aguilar, 2021).

This intervention promotes a high level of family and community involvement, primarily through collaborative learning activities. For instance, children are encouraged to collectively create narratives about their experiences with displacement through a “traveling notebook” that moves from home to home, with each family adding to the story (Luschei & Vega, 2015). This helps children cope with mental distress while developing communication skills.

Evaluations suggest the Learning Circles have positively affected numerous outcomes, including cognitive abilities (such as mathematical and reading skills), self-esteem, conflict management, and peaceful social interaction between children (Luschei & Vega, 2015).

## Healing and Education Through the Arts (HEART)

HEART's primary goal is to provide psychosocial support for children, youth, and adults in high-stress environments worldwide, using expressive arts to help them process and communicate complex feelings, experiences, or ideas (Save the Children, 2021). This intervention trains adults (teachers and other facilitators) already working with children from marginalized and underserved communities to integrate arts-based psychosocial support into their classrooms or community-based centers (Hommel, 2021).

### Healing and Education Through the Arts (HEART)



**Location:** global



**Implementer:** Save the Children



**Target:** youth age 3-25



**Emergency:** conflict, forced displacement, environmental, health

Through a culturally relevant, sustainable curriculum that incorporates local art traditions and resources, HEART encourages children to use arts as means of self-expression and critical skill development. Children participate in daily relaxation activities, weekly structured art activities, and weekly free art spaces; they then engage in sharing circles, where they can find and offer emotional support (Hommel, 2021). This gives children a safe place to cope with chronic stress even if they cannot explain their feelings in words (Save the Children, n.d.b).

HEART also provides support mechanisms for parents and caregivers; using the same pedagogical approach, they participate in one structured art session per week, one free art session per week, and daily relaxation activities (Hommel, 2021; Save the Children, 2021).

According to assessments led by Save the Children, this program has shown promising results for children, parents, and caregivers. For instance, Mexican children who participated in HEART experienced changes in their emotional regulation, such as improved ability to follow instructions, enhanced social cohesion, and everyday frustration and anger management. Parents commonly reported that HEART helped them feel closer to their children and pay more attention to their children's needs (Save the Children, 2021).

## Time to Be a Child

Time to Be a Child seeks to deliver child-centered play and learning activities in Jordan and Lebanon to children affected by the Syrian crisis. Its approach promotes teaching and learning to ensure children's school readiness, providing opportunities for them to acquire a broad range of knowledge and skills and setting a solid foundation for good future progress through school and life (Oddy, 2017).

### Time to Be a Child

 **Location:** Jordan and Lebanon

 **Implementer:** War Child

 **Target:** refugee children

 **Emergency:** conflict

Children attend community centers three times a week for three hours each session. At the centers, children work in small, mixed groups to complete specific tasks that are designed to support all areas of their development; it also supports their creative skills, knowledge of personal health and safety, understanding of the relationship between people and the environment, and awareness of social relationships. Facilitators are trained on Time to Be a Child's curriculum and methodology and are provided with comprehensive and easy-to-use teaching materials. They receive support through technical assistance, classroom observations, and regular feedback (Oddy, 2017).

Time to Be a Child incorporates several strategies for parent and caregiver support based on training sessions. Parents and caregivers learn how to express their emotions, communicate, overcome difficult situations, and build relationships with peers, family members, and other adults. In turn, they can help their children face the challenges of everyday life in crises.

Monitoring by War Child UK found that children participating in Time to Be a Child presented an overall improvement in all development domains: social behaviors and skills, perception of self and environment, cognitive skills, language and communication skills, and physical development. Parents and caregivers presented positive changes in their psychosocial wellbeing; better coping with stress helped them embrace a more supportive role in their children's healthy development (Oddy, 2017).

## Right to Play

Right to Play aims to empower children through transformative education, addressing the critical need for life skills development, quality education, and psychosocial support. It has a particular focus on challenging gender stereotypes and promoting equitable participation. In addition, the program seeks to enrich the quality of learning environments by renovating classrooms and providing teaching tools and resources (Right to Play, n.d.).

### Right to Play



**Location:** Palestine



**Implementer:** Right to Play, UNRWA, Ministry of Education and Higher Education



**Target:** children and teachers



**Emergency:** conflict, forced displacement

In contrast to the other interventions highlighted in this brief, Right to Play offers continuous training to empower teachers and help them build capacity. The program has a comprehensive training strategy for teachers' professional development, promoting gender-responsive, child-centered, play-based pedagogies. It also creates a sustainable support structure with peer exchange, coaching, and mentoring schemes so teachers receive ongoing guidance (Sawalma, 2021).

Right to Play helps communities address violence (including gender-based violence) both in and out of school, offering counseling and psychosocial support (Right to Play, n.d.). It also seeks to create awareness of the importance of play-based learning among parents and caregivers; in some cases, parents have become advocates for this type of pedagogy, pushing local education authorities to adopt the model (Sawalma, 2021).

Program's evaluations have shown that Right to Play appears to have fostered positive learning environments and enhanced the practices of teachers, who apply active, child-centered approaches in classrooms. Children have shown strengthened socio-emotional skills, such as in leadership, communication, and teamwork (Sawalma, 2021; Right to Play, n.d.).



# Challenges of Providing Transformative Education in Crisis-Affected Contexts

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Implementers have faced, and overcome, numerous challenges in assisting children affected by crises by providing socio-emotional support and enabling transformative learning. In this section, we summarize such challenges.

Some implementers have experienced difficulties in reaching and approaching children in distress, especially when it comes to children on the move. For instance, implementers of transformative education programs in Latin America, like Escuela Nueva, do not have – and are unable to develop – a mobile structure that could support Venezuelan *caminantes* (families and children on the move), making it difficult to provide continuous education services. Likewise, given their irregular migration status, *caminantes* may experience distrust, preventing them from accessing transformative education services even when available.

Additionally, COVID-19 has made reaching children in need more complex than ever before. Education services throughout the world are shifting to remote and family-based learning models, which presents an enormous challenge – particularly for transformative education in emergencies. In crisis contexts, digital connectivity is insufficient, implementers may lack the means to reach children, and families may not actively engage in children's learning processes. Even when transformative education implementers can reach children using digital and technological tools, a new dilemma emerges: how to balance quality teaching through technological mechanisms with a healthy and meaningful use of technology.

Implementers may encounter obstacles to building flexible pedagogical models that can adapt according to children's diverse realities. Simultaneously, teachers may have issues contextualizing such models. Transformative education programs foster child-centered approaches that embrace diversity, especially since children of different ages, backgrounds, capabilities, and interests usually access transformative education spaces – a challenge for both the design and the implementation of suitable pedagogical models.

In addition, regarding the critical role of teachers and other facilitators in transformative education, implementers have faced a significant challenge in maintaining teachers' commitment and engagement, as well as in assuring quality teaching practices. Even if a program has a substantial training component, teachers might not have a solid background in pedagogy, which can translate to inadequate teaching practices. Moreover,

they may not have the skills and knowledge to appropriately respond to the psychosocial needs of children deeply affected by crises. Likewise, these teachers work in highly stressful contexts and may also experience distress and burnout that could hinder their wellbeing, commitment and performance. These challenges draw attention to the importance of addressing teachers' needs related to psychosocial assistance, program training, and ongoing support in their work.

Furthermore, transformative education programs could face significant challenges in building bridges between non-formal and formal education services, especially considering that non-formal programs usually run parallel – rather than connected – to accredited education schemes. Ideally, children whose education has been disrupted by crises should be reintegrated into formal education systems.

Finally, in terms of evaluating the effectiveness of transformative education interventions: Understanding that transformative education's impact goes beyond children's individual transformations, there is a challenge in assessing how such interventions permeate learning environments and foment meaningful transformations in children's households and communities.

In summary, implementers of transformative education interventions must overcome important obstacles to providing quality services in crisis contexts. Despite these challenges, transformative education interventions have offered crisis-affected children the necessary psychosocial support while facilitating relevant learning outcomes.

# Children's Experiences of Creative Learning

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Creativity-based transformative learning is a powerful tool for promoting children's well-being since it helps them cultivate self-knowledge and emotional management while coping with stress. The following examples highlight some of the benefits of engaging in creativity-based learning activities.

Save the Children (n.d.a) shared the story of 6-year-old Marina, who participated in HEART's programming; Marina had a very close and special relationship with her grandfather, and when he died, she felt troubled and confused; according to her teachers, she cried a lot and had difficulty expressing how she felt. Thanks to HEART's methods, Marina found comfort in The Calm Corner (*El Rincón de la Calma*). There, she spent some time drawing pictures about her grandfather or writing him letters, which helped her understand and process grief. Teachers witnessed her healing process through art and noted she was able to become emotionally open.



The Calm Corner (*El Rincón de la Calma*), © Susan Warner for Save the Children

Similarly, HEART's approach was critical in the aftermath of the earthquake that hit Mexico on September 19, 2017. A traumatic event that left children feeling anxious and distressed. Save the Children's response included opening child-friendly spaces with psychological and emotional support sessions in Mexico City, Morelos, Oaxaca, and Puebla (Save the Children, n.d.b). Thanks to this response, children could use art as an outlet for distress, while sharing circles functioned as spaces for psychosocial support.



Children drawing and sharing in a circle. © Save the Children Mexico

The psychosocial support offered by transformative education interventions has been fundamental to improving children's wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Emma, a 5-year-old participant of Aflatot who developed anxiety, benefited from engaging in creativity-based activities while in home confinement. Teachers realized Emma felt sad, bored, and even apathetic toward her school responsibilities. To help Emma, teachers encouraged her to participate in crafting activities involving an animated character known as Aflatoun.

Emma started showing interest in Aflatoun and projected some of her emotions onto it. Once, she asked why Aflatoun was not wearing a face mask and was curious why it was not scared of getting sick. The more Emma engaged in creativity-based activities, the more comfortable she felt sharing some difficult emotions; she expressed that she was scared COVID-19 could take her or her family away. Communicating and dealing with her



fears helped Emma, and teachers noted her behavior gradually started to change back. She was once again an extroverted girl, eager to learn. Based on this experience, teachers decided to adjust the animated character by adding a face mask and making it more relatable for children.



Aflatoun, © Aflatoun International

As another example, an 11-year-old girl from the rural side of Cali, Colombia – who participated in the Learning Circles program – was inspired by the mood meter, a tool developed by Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and used by Escuela Nueva, to write a song about emotions (Aguilar, 2021). In her words:

“Las emociones tienen sus efectos, y te los demuestran por tus sentimientos. Verde te da tranquilidad, calma y serenidad. Azul te da dolor, tristeza y miedo.”

“Emotions have effects, And they show them through your feelings. Green gives you tranquility, calm and serenity. Blue gives you pain, sadness and fear.”

Note: Transcription provided by Escuela Nueva, and translation prepared by the author.

Through music, she was able to challenge her preconceptions about her emotions and make new meanings about them; by doing so, she acquired new knowledge and strengthened her emotional management and communication skills.

These examples highlight how engaging in creativity-based experiences could benefit children’s wellbeing and transformative learning processes. In addition, such experiences are powerful tools for helping children cope with stress and trauma while developing relevant cognitive abilities in areas such as problem-solving and assertive communication.

# Effects of Creativity on Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Cognitive Abilities

Children affected by crises face multiple risks and vulnerabilities. While continuing their educational trajectory is essential, addressing their psychosocial needs is also a priority. In emergency situations, transformative education services are vital to providing psychosocial support; when adequately delivered, these services offer learners a safe, stable environment and help restore a sense of normalcy, dignity, and hope. All these build children's cognitive, social, and emotional skills (INEE, 2018).

As facilitators of learning processes and supporters of children's socio-emotional wellbeing, teachers can observe firsthand how children affected by crises may benefit from transformative, creativity-based instructional activities. This section presents some of the positive transformations that teachers have observed while working with children in crisis contexts.

Teachers have noticed mood improvements in children who engaged in creativity- and play-based activities since these children had a channel to express and process difficult emotions. These mood improvements, in turn, resulted in positive behavioral changes: Children appeared to be less defensive, more open to learning, and capable of regulating their emotions (Ferrera, 2021). This is important because children in emergency situations often present psychological stress responses, hindering their healthy functioning and development (Brown et al., 2016). Thus, transformative education processes based on creativity and play can improve children's emotional wellbeing by alleviating stress responses while strengthening their capacity to manage emotions and behaviors.

Teachers believe children use creativity and play as languages to communicate, understand, and make meaning of life experiences, especially disruptive and distressing ones. Participating in creativity- and play-based activities helps children know themselves and their surroundings, supporting them in increasing their self-esteem and adopting a positive outlook toward the future (Ehtasham, 2021; Ferrera, 2021).

In addition, children who engage in transformative education spaces that are participatory and inclusive demonstrate improved communication, leadership, and teamwork skills (Sawalma, 2021). Teachers have felt more able to foment equal participation among children – particularly when transformative curriculums include gender-sensitive practices. Likewise, children are better able to listen and communicate, which allows them to engage in critical dialogues where new understanding can emerge (Paris & Hay, 2019).

Creativity-based approaches to transformative education can foster empowerment among children. Teachers and implementers strongly believe this approach helps children find their voice and gain self-confidence, and they consider it important to provide a safe space and platform to make children's voices heard (Ehtasham, 2021; Kumar, 2021). In doing so, children can recognize and act on opportunities for change (Paris & Hay, 2019). Exposure to creative pedagogies helps children develop meaningful new frames of reference, allowing them to understand and connect differently with their realities. As they become more confident in their capabilities, they can identify new ways to address the challenges they face in their personal lives and communities.

Instructional activities based on creativity appear to encourage the acceptance of diversity, an important feature in transformative learning spaces, which usually welcome a large variety of individuals (Arce, 2000). Teachers consider these spaces as opportunities for children to meet and connect with others, as creativity- and play-based pedagogies are relevant to embracing children's different backgrounds. Therefore, children can challenge their beliefs and biases about those who are different through participating in art-based activities that often encompass valuable narratives of past experiences and understandings.

Creative approaches involve a series of meaningful interactions that frequently lead to empathic, trusting relationships. Teachers have observed that while sharing and reflecting on emotive issues, children often experience empathy that increases their trust in others – facilitating collaborative relationships; these trusting and empathetic features extend to teacher-child relationships as well (Sawalma, 2021). According to transformative education theory, empathic and collaborative relationships within learning spaces could lead to positive social change when these newly acquired mental schemes permeate immediate environments through children's actions (Gallego, 2018).

Teachers have also observed creativity-based activities enhancing children's cognitive abilities. Participating in an enjoyable process in which they assume an active role makes children more open to learning, which is reflected in strengthened attention, reasoning, and problem-solving skills. Teachers believe that championing active, participatory learning has helped children feel confident and motivated to explore while acknowledging that they are capable of questioning and reasoning (Ferrera, 2021).

Ultimately, the interventions examined for this brief present encouraging results on how creativity- and play-based learning approaches affect children's wellbeing and cognitive abilities, particularly for those children experiencing trauma and distress due to crises.

# Good Practices for Effective Transformative Education Interventions



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Implementers of programs analyzed in this brief have successfully navigated challenges, constraints, and uncertainties related to supporting children who have experienced stress and trauma. The innovative and timely strategies these implementers developed are a valuable resource to support others facing similar difficulties.

Given the challenges in approaching target populations – especially amidst a global pandemic – implementers have been innovative in addressing some barriers to accessing transformative learning spaces, moving away from face-to-face instruction and toward family- and remote-based learning strategies supported by information and communications technologies. To keep making transformative education accessible to children, some programs have leveraged online platforms and resources; for instance, Arts for All provides parents and caregivers with activities through WhatsApp messages, which engages them in hands-on, creativity-based activities and allows them to share the materials. However, digital connectivity is not always feasible, and programs such as Learning Circles, have employed strategies such as audiobooks and radio to reach children in need, share information, and engage families and communities.

Considering that teachers are essential in providing valuable transformative learning experiences, implementers must prioritize establishing support mechanisms. For example, most programs offer initial training that introduces teachers to their specific pedagogical models, and training sessions tend to be more beneficial when they include creativity-based activities, similar to those teachers are expected to develop with children. However, in emergencies and crises, teachers also experience their own losses and trauma, and they can experience stress and burnout in their role as teachers. These challenges affect teachers' wellbeing, which has implications for teaching quality and children's learning and wellbeing. Therefore, implementers must address teachers' needs before these teachers can be expected to support children's psychological and cognitive needs (Falk et al., 2019).

For this reason, some programs provide continuous pedagogical and psychosocial support so teachers can regularly improve their teaching practices. For example, Learning Circles support teachers via monthly meetings or calls with specialists, allowing them to discover or develop innovative, contextualized practices addressing children's particular needs. Additionally, Right to Play uses a long-term training scheme that is complemented

by ongoing mentoring and coaching mechanisms; and some interventions, like Aflatot, have implemented a “train the trainer” approach that capitalizes on the experience of teachers with outstanding performance.

Transformative education implies a close link with children's contexts, which has implications for pedagogical practices. For example, HEART and Right to Play use community-based settings in which children can explore their immediate environment and use learning materials that usually mirror local features and customs, allowing them to learn in a contextualized manner.

Additionally, parents' and caregivers' involvement is crucial to integrating children's realities into transformative learning processes. Some programs include family engagement strategies, incorporating simple ways to integrate learning into a daily routine at home; for instance, Learning Circles helps parents become familiar with what children are learning and invites them to participate in specific learning projects. Parents' involvement also increases as the children become more enthusiastic about their progress; Aflatot periodically communicates children's progress to parents and encourages them to celebrate it.

Establishing close partnerships with community-based organizations and local and national education authorities has been a key determinant in the success of many of the examined interventions. When programs emerged as non-formal education alternatives, these partnerships could facilitate children's transition to formal schooling. From an operational perspective, some interventions have expanded their reach and capacity by leveraging education networks. Moreover, some programs, such as SPAB and Right to Play, have influenced education policies and helped make transformative learning models part of national curriculums.

Transformative pedagogies – creativity, contemplative, and play-based – are effective means of providing psychosocial and educational support to children affected by crises. Programs appear to be more successful when they find alternative ways to reach beneficiaries and they observe these beneficiaries' context and particular needs. In addition, providing a solid support strategy for teachers has proven essential in fomenting quality teaching practices. Engaging with parents and immediate communities, as well as building partnerships with local education authorities, have also facilitated these interventions' implementation.

# Key determinants for successful transformative education programs

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Transformative education has proven successful in supporting crisis-affected children by allowing them to continue their learning trajectories while fostering their psychosocial wellbeing. Its creativity-based pedagogical approach provides an outlet for distress and trauma responses and assists children in developing a relevant skill set that helps them navigate challenging environments. In addition, transformative education contributes to individual and societal transformations by encouraging a close relationship between learning and learning environments.

Based on the examples of transformative education programs in crisis contexts examined in this brief, here are some key recommendations related to implementing such interventions successfully:

- **Donor agencies and education authorities should invest in multi-year transformative education interventions to support more holistic and rights-based approaches to quality education in emergency settings.** These interventions help children cope with trauma and stress through creating new frames of reference for children to interpret their realities and encouraging them to tackle the challenges affecting their communities.
- **In their interventions, implementers should consider creativity- and play-based approaches.** These approaches should provide continuous learning and psychosocial support from the outset of crises by fostering children's wellbeing while helping them acquire actionable skills and knowledge. These approaches should extend to promoting the wellbeing of parents and caregivers since they are responsible for fomenting children's learning and healing.
- **To deliver quality, contextualized transformative education in crises, donors and implementers should leverage local education structures, embrace the community's knowledge, and make use of the community's capacity.** By doing so, donors and implementers could ensure the relevance, timeliness, and sustainability of psychosocial and pedagogical responses (INEE, 2018).

- **Implementers and national and local education authorities must coordinate their work to support children's transition to formal education systems.** This would help in advocating for flexible legal frameworks and inclusive education systems that reduce the barriers children face to access accredited learning opportunities and guarantee their right to quality education.
- **To facilitate and increase access, implementers of transformative education interventions should use information and communications technologies, especially during crisis-related school closures.** However, for technology to be an effective delivery mechanism for learning experiences, it is crucial to acknowledge the context and its limitations.
- **Implementers should incorporate comprehensive teacher support strategies into the design of transformative education programs in emergencies.** These should go beyond training sessions and foster teachers' overall wellbeing through ongoing pedagogical assistance and psychosocial support. Transformative education interventions should develop mechanisms to improve teachers' self-efficacy, increase job satisfaction, enhance socio-emotional competencies, and help them manage stress (Falk et al., 2019).
- **Donors, implementers, and specialized research institutions should make concerted, collaborative efforts to assess interventions' effectiveness through rigorous impact evaluations.** This would expand the understanding of what works to ensure quality transformative learning outcomes for children and promote transformations at the community level. Impact evaluations should be complemented by in-depth qualitative studies that help understand children's and communities' experiences in detail.
- **Education stakeholders should favor innovative partnerships and platforms for valuable knowledge exchange.** To disseminate evidence-based practices that help shape actions with improved quality and effective use of resources, all relevant actors should coordinate through cluster meetings and other organizing bodies. These spaces should nurture collaboration to conduct assessments, design appropriate responses, and cooperate on implementation (INEE, 2018).
- **Ultimately, education stakeholders should champion transformative education interventions to assist crisis-affected children.** This would create opportunities to provide children with integral support since these interventions' pedagogical approaches simultaneously foster psychosocial wellbeing and the achievement of learning outcomes. Furthermore, transformative education seeks to equip children with the necessary skills to tackle their communities' immense challenges, fomenting positive transformations at the societal level.

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