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Harnessing Play-based Pedagogy for Inclusive Education Among Displaced Children in Mali

Yacouba Dena , Boubacar Garango

Ingo Right To Play, Mali

Abstract

Armed conflict and insecurity in Mali have led to the displacement of thousands of children, particularly in the central and northern regions, severely disrupting access to formal education and psychosocial support. In response, the EMPOWER project—implemented by Right To Play and funded by Global Affairs Canada (GAC)—adopts a play-based pedagogical approach to promote inclusive education for displaced children in crisis-affected communities. This intervention integrates structured play into both formal and non-formal learning environments, aiming to enhance cognitive engagement, emotional resilience, and social inclusion. Research shows that play in humanitarian contexts supports children's healing, reduces toxic stress, and fosters the development of critical socio-emotional skills. EMPOWER also foregrounds the role of women-led community-based organizations as key actors in educational service delivery. These organizations, through capacity-building and leadership development, strengthen local ownership and foster gender-responsive governance in education. Preliminary findings indicate improved school attendance, enhanced psychosocial well-being, and increased community participation in education governance. The project demonstrates that play-based learning, when combined with grassroots leadership, can serve as a scalable and culturally adaptable model for inclusive education in humanitarian settings. This paper discusses the theoretical underpinnings, implementation strategies, and emerging outcomes of EMPOWER, offering insights into the potential of play as a transformative tool in education for displaced populations.

Keywords: Play-Based Pedagogy, Inclusive Education, Displaced Children, Mali, Empower Project, Community-Based Organizations, Psychosocial Support