

REQUEST RESPONSE

Rapid Review: Education, Peacebuilding, and Social Cohesion to Inform Syria's Education Sector

REQUEST SUBMISSION

Education can be a powerful lever for both social cohesion and peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies like Syria. Social cohesion through schools refers to positive interpersonal relations between students, a sense of belonging of all students and group solidarity.¹ It is a multidimensional construct, and education policymakers and researchers may focus on specific domains within this concept that foster trust, tolerance, and a shared identity among students through inclusive learning. Education for peacebuilding deliberately addresses conflict root causes, promotes reconciliation, and supports broader peace processes.² These objectives are equally critical and mutually reinforcing: social cohesion activities such as inter-group contact and inclusive curricula can lay the groundwork for sustainable peace, while peacebuilding initiatives directly address conflict-sensitive reforms and/or peace education programmes that help solidify social cohesion gains.

This rapid review synthesises scholarly evidence and contextual insights to inform the design and implementation of past, existing, and prospective educational programming in Syria. Lessons from comparable contexts, including but not limited to, Lebanon, Nepal, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Northern Ireland, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Rwanda and South Sudan are presented to help inform Syria's Education sector priorities in its current, post-conflict state.

¹ Veerman, G. J., & Denessen, E. J. P. G. (2021). Social cohesion in schools: a non-systematic review of its conceptualization and instruments. *Cogent Education*, 8(1). doi:10.1080/2331186X.2021.1940633

² UNICEF. (2016). *Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy in Conflict-Affected Contexts*, UNICEF Programme Report 2012-2016.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Education must be conceptualised as an inherently ideological instrument fundamentally linked to political violence in both deliberate and unintended ways. As a whole, the education sector can serve as a powerful lever for both peacebuilding and social cohesion in conflict affected and post-conflict settings. This rapid review synthesises scholarly evidence and contextual insights to inform the design and implementation of past, existing, and prospective educational programming in Syria. Education that cultivates trust, facilitates the development of meaningful interpersonal relationships, enhances tolerance, and promotes collective identity formation among learners through inclusive pedagogical approaches serves to strengthen social cohesion. This review reflects the spirit of Sinclair's contributions to education for peacebuilding and social cohesion, where she underscores that even in emergencies, education can sow the seeds of peace by shaping values and attitudes toward reconciliation and mutual respect.³

Social cohesion building interventions focus on intergroup contact initiatives and inclusive curricular frameworks. At the same time, they establish foundational conditions conducive to durable peace. Conversely, education oriented toward peacebuilding explicitly engages with the structural elements of conflict, advancing reconciliation processes and supporting sustained peace consolidation. Explicit interventions are peace education and conflict-sensitive education practices, which consolidate and reinforce social cohesion outcomes. Andy Smart, co-convenor of the Network Integrating SDG 4.7 and Social emotional learning into Education Materials, emphasises that curriculum and textbooks in under-resourced settings should be deliberately designed to support these pro-social outcomes, which ultimately help prevent conflict and heal social divides.⁴ These twin objectives are equally imperative and demonstrate mutually reinforcing goals.

Key findings

Findings demonstrate that education can advance peace and social cohesion at multiple levels: individual, community, and systemic, as well as through education programme service delivery.

First, integrating trauma-informed social emotional learning and psychosocial support activities into individual and community-level education programmes enhances well-being and empathy, thereby increasing participants' likelihood of forming positive relationships across former group divides.⁵ Reaching children living in conflict zones is a high priority with the share of such children almost doubling from 10% in the mid-1990s to 20% today.⁶ Evidence suggests that conflict-affected children and adolescents who access protective educational environments experience restored normalcy amid otherwise disrupted lives, with access to quality education within such contexts facilitating social support and nurturing care through positive peer and educator interactions.⁷

Second, education service delivery such as accelerated learning programmes, remedial education, and afterschool classes can quickly integrate out-of-school and displaced children into formal

³ *Learning to Live Together: Education for Conflict Resolution, Responsible Citizenship, Human Rights and Humanitarian Norms* edited by Margaret Sinclair. Doha, Qatar: Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict (PEIC), 2013. Available at <https://www.scribd.com/document/328938255/Learning-to-Live-Together#>.

⁴ Smart, A., Sinclair, M., Benavot, A., Bernard, J., Chabbott, C., Russell, S. G., & Williams, J. (2020). Learning for uncertain futures: the role of textbooks, curriculum, and pedagogy. *Background paper for the Futures of Education initiative. Commissioned by UNESCO. Zugriff am, 29, 2020.*

⁵ Betancourt et al., 2014

⁶ Stop the War on Children, Save the Children, 2019 <https://www.stopwaronchildren.org/report.pdf>

⁷ InterAgency Standing Committee Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (IASC), 2007

schools by providing reliable, safe routines and catching up on lost learning. Such programmes offer illiterate learners, unqualified teachers, and vulnerable learners, such as young mothers, a second chance to gain education credentials after early drop out thereby equalising access and enhancing a more socially cohesive society. Similarly, data suggest education services for Syrians in Jordan enhanced their protection and empowerment while increasing their sense of safety; improved academic performance and learning motivation were likely owing to child-friendly classroom management and interactive and differentiated pedagogies.⁸ A randomised control trial showed the impact of an educational programme with Syrian refugees in Turkey which built cohesion in ethnically mixed schools by developing perspective-taking ability in children.⁹

Third, at the education systems level, there are inclusive education policies such as for integrating curricula and schools across ethnic or sectarian lines. For example, in Northern Ireland, students who attended mixed-integrated schools developed significantly more positive attitudes toward communities who they were in conflict with as compared with their peers in segregated schools.¹⁰ A study showed social reconstitution and healing through post-conflict Sierra Leone's state reforms embedded a culture of peace that helped sustain the country's stability.¹¹ Another study points to the impact of an educational programme with Syrian refugees in Turkey which built social cohesion in ethnically mixed schools by developing perspective-taking ability in children and was subject to randomized control trials.¹² Rwanda and Sierra Leone have, in post-conflict periods, established formal peace education policies and frameworks.¹³

Education can be a powerful lever for both social cohesion and peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies like Syria. This rapid evidence review synthesises global research and lessons from comparable contexts, including but not limited to, Lebanon, Nepal, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Northern Ireland, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Rwanda, and South Sudan. This review can inform Syria's education sector priorities in its current, post-conflict state. Social cohesion through schools refers to positive interpersonal relations between students, a sense of belonging of all students and group solidarity.¹⁴ It is a multidimensional construct, and education policymakers and researchers may focus on specific domains within this concept that foster trust, tolerance, and a shared identity among students through inclusive learning. Education for peacebuilding deliberately addresses conflict root causes, promotes reconciliation, and supports broader peace processes.¹⁵ Both objectives are

⁸ Komatsu T, Ghalawinji-Tamamoto K, Iwama Y, Hattori S (2024)

⁹ Hardiyansyah, M., Darma, A., and Nugraha, M. (2023) Peace education in history learning at man Medan. *East Asian J. Multidiscip. Res.* 2, 1289–1298 doi:10.55927.v2i3.3619

¹⁰ Roulston, S., & Cook, S. (2025). Duplication in a Divided Society: A Case Study of Primary Schools in Northern Ireland. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 73(4), 449–471. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2025.2507631>

¹¹ Abdi, F., and Madut, K. (2019). How can civil society support reconciliations and civil engagement in Somalia? *Human Geogr. J. Stud. Res. Human Geogr.* 13, 139–151. doi: 10.5719/hgeo.2019.132.2

¹² Alan, S., Baysan, C., Gumren, M., & Kubilay, E. (2021). Building social cohesion in ethnically mixed schools: An intervention on perspective taking. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 136(4), 2147–2194. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjab009>

¹³ Torres-Madroño, E., Botero, L., Rua, C., and Torres-Madroño, M. (2021). Peace education in contexts of transition from armed conflict in Latin America: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Colombia. *Peace Conflict J. Peace Psychol.* 27, 203–211. doi: 10.1037/pac0000563 and Hardiyansyah, M., Darma, A., and Nugraha, M. (2023). Peace education in history learning at man Medan. *East Asian J. Multidiscip. Res.* 2, 1289–1298. doi: 10.55927/eajmr.v2i3.3619

¹⁴ Veerman, G. J., & Denessen, E. J. P. G. (2021). Social cohesion in schools: a non-systematic review of its conceptualization and instruments. *Cogent Education*, 8(1). doi:10.1080/2331186X.2021.1940633

¹⁵ UNICEF. (2016). Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy in Conflict-Affected Contexts, UNICEF Programme Report 2012–2016.

equally critical and mutually reinforcing: social cohesion activities such as inter-group contact and inclusive curricula can lay the groundwork for sustainable peace, while peacebuilding initiatives directly address conflict-sensitive reforms and/or peace education programmes that help solidify social cohesion gains.

Strategic priorities for Syria

In the current Syrian context, marked by fragmentation, widespread trauma, resource constraints, and social divisions, the most feasible and impactful education investments lie in scalable programme modalities that address immediate needs while planting seeds for long-term peace. This review identifies three priority approaches for the Education sector in Syria to expand and go to scale: (1) Trauma-informed social and emotional learning (SEL) and psychosocial support (PSS) in schools, (2) Accelerated Learning Programmes (ALPs) for out-of-school displaced, returnee, conflict-affected and over-age learners, and (3) Afterschool and remedial programmes that support both academic learning outcomes and social cohesion across diverse learners. These modalities, described in detail in this report, have shown evidence of improving learning outcomes, psychosocial well-being, and intergroup relations in other conflict-affected contexts. They can be implemented in Syria's diverse local settings with high displacement and access challenges, and through partnerships with local NGOs, community networks, and existing formal and non-formal education structures. Each approach is accompanied by an implicit theory of change: if children and youth gain skills to heal from trauma, learn together with peers from different backgrounds, and see tangible educational opportunities available for all, then social trust and resilience increase, while grievances and risks of violence decrease. Ultimately, education that is conflict-sensitive and inclusive can help transform Syria's next generation into agents of reconciliation and reconstruction, advancing formal peace processes.

Review structure

This report first outlines the methodology of the rapid review. It then provides a contextual analysis defining key concepts, including a positive and negative peace framework and a multi-level political economy lens. The review then summarises the Syrian education context and constraints. Next, it presents evidence-based programme models which include trauma-informed SEL and PSS, ALPs, and remedial, afterschool programmes, incorporating global examples and theories of change for each. Following that, case studies from Lebanon, Nepal, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and South Sudan illustrate successes and pitfalls in implementing education for social cohesion and peacebuilding. The report then discusses monitoring and evaluation, highlighting mixed-methods indicators by drawing on both design principles and social cohesion measures to track progress. It concludes with targeted strategic recommendations for Syria education programmes and stakeholders, including immediate actions in a post-Assad transition. Annexes provide supplementary details on key researchers and select programs informing the core of the review, however, many other journal articles, books and research are also cited and can be found in the bibliography.

Methodology

This rapid evidence review was conducted over a focused period of four weeks, combining systematic literature review with targeted searches of academic studies, policy reports, programme evaluations, and grey literature. Over 50 sources were analysed, including the UNICEF's Peacebuilding,

Education and Advocacy Programme's Learning for Peace reports, 2012–2016,¹⁶ the 2021 global systematic review of Social and Emotional Learning¹⁷ and country case studies from conflict-affected contexts, including from The Role of Education in Peacebuilding¹⁸ and syntheses for Lebanon, Nepal, Sierra Leone.¹⁹ Syrian-specific data on internally displaced persons (IDPs) and country reports from UNHCR, UNICEF, UNESCO, and other donor funded education programme reports were reviewed to ground the analysis in current realities.²⁰

Framework

The review was guided by a multi-level analytical framework following, building upon, and expanding findings from Novelli and Smith's methodology used in reviews of education and peacebuilding as well as numerous researchers and select programs over the past few decades. The analysis considered four levels at which education intersects with peacebuilding: (1) the national context, including conflict drivers, political economy, and the state of peace and levels of violence and social cohesion, (2) the education sector and overall system, including policies, curricula, access, equity issues (3) international actors and donor priorities, including the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, and (4) programme implementation at community and school level. This ensured that evidence and recommendations accounted for macro-level constraints such as political instability, governance as well as micro-level dynamics in the classroom, approach to pedagogy, and community participation. The review also explicitly distinguished between initiatives aimed at *social cohesion* versus *peacebuilding*, to examine how each is conceptualised and operationalised in education programmes.

Data collection

Sources were identified via academic databases and development organisation portals. Given the need for up-to-date insights up to 2025, the search included recent journal articles up to 2025 studies on peace education,²¹ policy briefs, and NGO reports. Syrian focus areas in the northwest and northeast were profiled through humanitarian needs overviews and expert commentary to ensure recommendations are anchored in on-the-ground conditions. While time did not permit primary data collection, the review leveraged key informant perspectives indirectly through published interviews and reflections from practitioners who worked in or knew the context well.

¹⁶ See comprehensive final report UNICEF Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy <https://www.unicef.org/media/96556/file/UNICEF-PBEA-Final-Report.pdf#:~:text=28%20Learning%20for%20Peace%20Programmeme,Leone%20and%20Yemen%20recast%20established>

¹⁷ See final report https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366977372_Social_and_Emotional_Learning_SEL_Systematic_Review_Final_Report

¹⁸ Smith, A., McCandless, E., Paulson, J., & Wheaton, W. (2011). The role of education in peacebuilding: Literature review. *New York: UNICEF*.

¹⁹ Novelli, M., & Smith, A. (2011). The Role of Education in Peacebuilding: A synthesis report of findings from Lebanon, Nepal and Sierra Leone. UNICEF Evaluation Office.

²⁰ Summary information found <https://world-education-blog.org/2019/12/16/internally-displaced-people-and-education-in-syria/#:~:text=The%20primary%20education%20service%20providers,%29NGOs>

²¹ Yu Y, Wyness M. Peace Education in a Post-Conflict Society: The Case Study of Sierra Leone. *Social Sciences*. 2025; 14(9):541. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14090541>

Limitations

Security and access conditions in Syria mean that rigorous evaluations of local education-for-social cohesion and/or peacebuilding programmes are scarce. Thus, this review extrapolates from comparable contexts and general peace education theory, while noting assumptions that may not fully hold in Syria's complex environment. Evidence on long-term impacts of education interventions on peacebuilding outcomes is also limited, which is a gap noted in literature. To mitigate this, we triangulate quantitative outcomes on enrolment, social attitude surveys with qualitative observations, narratives of change, and stakeholder testimonies. All external sources are cited, and an effort was made to prioritise peer-reviewed research and meta-reviews where available.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS: SYRIA'S CONFLICT, EDUCATION, AND PEACEBUILDING

Social Cohesion vs. Peacebuilding in Education

In conflict contexts, social cohesion and peacebuilding are related but distinct goals for the education sector. Education for social cohesion typically focuses on the horizontal relationships among students and communities: it aims to rebuild trust, tolerance, and coexistence after fracturing conflicts. This involves inclusive schooling practices that encourage interaction across social divides, be they ethnic, sectarian, or linguistic. Additional cultivation of shared identities may occur through education activities emphasising national unity or common values in the classroom. Pedagogies that model respect and cooperation were also included in the review. Education for peacebuilding programmes, on the other hand, goes a step further to address vertical relationships and conflict drivers and deliberately uses curriculum content, teaching methods, and extracurricular activities to confront the root causes of violence. Jim Williams' research on education, national identity, and conflict underscores that school systems influence peace not only through access but also through what and how they teach. His analyses of history and civics textbooks in conflict-affected contexts show that when curricula foreground exclusive, one-sided national narratives and reflect segregated schooling structures, they risk entrenching grievances, whereas multi-perspective, inclusive textbooks and integrated learning environments can strengthen social cohesion and open possibilities for reconciliation.²² This aligns with the present review's call for conflict-sensitive curriculum and assessment reform in Syria—particularly in history, language, and civics—so that ALPs, remedial programs, and mainstream schools alike become spaces where learners critically engage with diverse narratives and build shared identities rather than reproducing wartime divisions. Addressing injustice, exclusion, and historical grievances as well as providing support to broader peace processes constitute key goals of these programmes, including in many cases, reconciliation, or transitional justice processes.²³ In the education sector, conflict-sensitivity and peacebuilding approaches overlap. A cohesive school environment can reinforce peace, and peace education content can strengthen social cohesion. Maintaining a distinction clarifies whether an intervention is primarily aimed at improving intergroup relations in the here-and-now or also oriented toward long-term structural change.

Importantly, horizontal social cohesion is often seen as contributing to “negative peace” referred to as the absence of direct violence by reducing communal tensions, whereas peacebuilding education aspires to “positive peace” with deliberate building of conditions for peace and focus upon justice and equity by transforming societal structures and narratives. We adopt Johan Galtung's definitions: *negative peace* is the absence of war and physical violence, and *positive peace* is the presence of

²² Williams, 2014 and 2017

²³ Bush, K. D., & Saltarelli, D. (2000). The two faces of education in ethnic conflict: Towards a peacebuilding education for children. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

social justice, equality, and harmonious social relations.²⁴ In an educational context, negative peace might mean a classroom free of bullying or a community where schools are not attacked, which are necessary but not sufficient conditions for a more peaceful future. Positive peace in education would mean, for example, a history curriculum that acknowledges all groups' perspectives and a governance system that allocates resources fairly to all regions and identities.

Another conceptual lens used here is John Paul Lederach's multi-level peacebuilding approach, which stresses building peace infrastructure at top-level with national policies and leadership, then at the mid-level where it is found in institutions and civil society groups. Finally, the grassroots community and individual levels are also active in everyday peace.²⁵ Education intersects all three: policy reforms whereby removing biased content and assuring equitable financing is a way to address top-level issues. Teacher training colleges and youth organisations operate at mid-level. And, at the grassroots level there are daily teaching-learning processes. A comprehensive strategy for Syria must link these levels. For instance, an inclusive national curriculum from the top-level can empower teachers with common peace education frameworks to implement at the mid-level, and then they can adapt to local classrooms to change attitudes and behaviours of the students themselves at the grassroots level. The political economy and conflict analysis framework used by UNICEF and other researchers²⁶ further guides us to examine how power dynamics and economic factors at each level influence education's role in peace. In Syria, for example, national-level sectarian politics and external interventions have splintered the education system. As such, understanding this informs what kind of peace education content is feasible and who might resist it.

A final conceptual approach is 'Learning to Live Together' emphasised by Sinclair,²⁷ and it means that a priority is given to key interpersonal and intercultural competencies that must be taught, integrated, and nurtured in ways that are not currently happening. Intercultural competencies have been defined broadly as effective and appropriate communication and behaviour across difference, involving such key aspects as listening for understanding, respect, empathy, curiosity, openness, and adaptability, which are crucial for developing both greater awareness as well as deeper relationships.^{28,29} Researchers define intercultural competences as abilities to adeptly navigate complex environments marked by a growing diversity of peoples, cultures, and lifestyles. They specifically, argue that cultural values are the "bedrock" of resilience, underpinning the meaning attributed to great suffering, hope for the future, and a sense of emotional, social, and moral order in ordinary and extraordinary aspects of life. They go on to show that war-related trauma is not the principal driver of poor mental health: traumatic experiences are linked to fractured family

²⁴ Johan Galtung, "An Editorial," *Journal of Peace Research* 1, no. 1 (1964): 1–4.;

²⁵ Miletic, T. (2011). A peace-building paradigm for peace psychology. In *Peace psychology in Australia* (pp. 305–318). Boston, MA: Springer US.

²⁶ Novelli M, Higgins S, Ugur M, Valiente V (2014) The political economy of education systems in conflict-affected contexts: A rigorous literature review. Department for International Development.

²⁷ *Learning to Live Together: Education for Conflict Resolution, Responsible Citizenship, Human Rights and Humanitarian Norms* edited by Margaret Sinclair. Doha, Qatar: Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict (PEIC), 2013. Available at <https://www.scribd.com/document/328938255/Learning-to-Live-Together#>.

²⁸ Deardorff, D. K. (2018). Theories of cultural and educational exchange, intercultural competence, conflict resolution, and peace education. In *Cultural and educational exchanges between rival societies: Cooperation and competition in an interdependent world* (pp. 23–38). Singapore: Springer Singapore.

²⁹ Patel, J. (2022). Learning to live together harmoniously: A conceptual framework. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 52(3), 327–347.

relationships and a failure to achieve personal, social, and cultural milestones.³⁰ Such an intercultural focus in education becomes even more imperative with the increasing divides faced within and between societies and as new technologies give rise to deeper questions such as what it means to even be human.

Syria's Current Education Landscape and Constraints

After over a decade of war, Syria's education system is fragmented and fragile. The formal system is divided among different authorities: the Government of Syria controls education in what were regime-held areas; an alternative Syrian Interim Government runs schools in parts of the northwest; a Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration manages the northeast; and various non-state actors and NGOs fill gaps, especially in IDP camps.³¹ This fragmentation means multiple curricula and examination systems co-exist, often with differing history narratives and languages of instruction. Uncertified schools, and children facing disruption of schooling when they move across regions and even countries, are commonplace today. Coordination between providers is minimal due to political tensions and lack of a unified framework. As a result, displaced students often encounter "dead-end education pathways"; for instance, a child who studied under an NGO in an IDP camp might not have their learning recognised if they later transfer to a government school.

The scale of disruption is enormous. Over 6.1 million Syrians are internally displaced (as of 2024), roughly half of them children.³² Nationwide, an estimated 3.3 million school-aged children are out of school or at risk of dropping out.³³ Access barriers are especially acute in conflict zones and displacement settlements. In northwest Syria, an area with one of the highest displacement concentrations, 57% of IDP sites have no primary school on site.³⁴ Many existing schools operate double-shifts or are overcrowded, and safety is a concern in structurally damaged buildings. In such areas, parents often prioritise immediate survival needs and may keep children and especially girls at home due to security fears or cultural norms exacerbated by instability.

Quality and protection deficits compound the access problem. Schools that do operate often lack basic resources in schools including learning materials and trained teachers, and psychosocial support services are in short supply. Years of war have led to a depletion of qualified educators due to their flight, injury, or death, and newly recruited volunteer teachers frequently have minimal training. Many children carry unaddressed trauma from violence, family loss, or displacement, manifesting in negative classroom behaviours and learning difficulties. Yet only a fraction of schools have counsellors or structured PSS activities. The learning environment can thus be quite strained. Observations suggest some classrooms in Syria have students of vastly different ages and conflict experiences sitting together without any support to process their trauma, risking behavioural issues and dropout. For example, a study discusses the educational challenges faced by Syrian refugee children, highlighting that many schools do not provide tailored trauma-informed interventions or

³⁰ Panter-Brick, C., & Eggerman, M. (2011). Understanding culture, resilience, and mental health: The production of hope. In *The social ecology of resilience: A handbook of theory and practice* (pp. 369–386). New York, NY: Springer New York.

³¹ See summaries <https://world-education-blog.org/2019/12/16/internally-displaced-people-and-education-in-syria/#:~:text=The%20primary%20education%20service%20providers,I%29NGOs>

³² See [Migration, Displacement and Education \(2019\)](#). Nevertheless, approximately 6.1 million, or 29%, of Syria's population remain internally displaced. Fifty-two percent are children. As of June 2018, more IDPs lived in areas controlled by the government of Syria (GoS) than in areas of opposition control. As such, donor coordination with the GoS on education sector programming is increasingly critical.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ <https://projects.hpc.tools/project/209676/view>

counselling, and exposes the risks of neglecting trauma among diverse student populations by showing the consequences of behavioural problems, social isolation, and higher dropout rates.³⁵

Social divisions also enter the educational space. Syria's war was marked by sectarian and ethnic cleavages. In some communities, distrust persists between groups: for example, IDPs from one region and host community members from another sect may experience tension and distrust today. Language differences pose another hurdle where Kurdish-majority areas may teach in Kurdish, while Arab areas use Arabic, complicating reintegration for displaced students.³⁶ If not carefully managed, these factors can lead to bullying, discrimination, or self-segregation in schools. It is noteworthy that pre-war Syria's education system had strengths that could be leveraged, with near-universal primary enrolment and a history of public investment. In contrast, there were also known inequities across rural versus urban settings as well as quality gaps and marginalised ethnic languages that fed grievances among groups. A post-conflict reform must tackle those root inequities, for instance, by ensuring all regions and language groups see their culture reflected in curricula and receive fair resource allocations in order to effectively impact and contribute to peacebuilding.

Finally, the *humanitarian-development-peacebuilding "triple nexus"*³⁷ is a constant reality in Syria. Emergency education involves stages, beginning with temporary learning centres and urgent trauma healing activities within the programmes. These early responses are still needed in many areas, while more stable regions call for rebuilding and system development, all under the umbrella goal of peace. Balancing these stages is challenging and donors and NGOs must meet urgent needs in the short term to ensure catch-up classes for recently displaced children, while at the same time investing in longer-term measures such as teacher training systems, curriculum reform, and other resilient systems building requirements. The triple nexus approach encourages simultaneous action by integrating humanitarian efforts with development planning to avoid gaps. For example, a donor-funded remedial programme in an IDP camp can be designed to feed into the formal system through, for instance, accredited exams, contributing to both immediate social stabilisation and long-term institutional coherence.³⁸ The *resilience* of both students and systems is a cross-cutting theme that works to build children's resilience to cope with trauma and education system resilience to withstand political shocks or funding fluctuations. Both are preconditions for sustained social cohesion and longer term peace.

In summary, Syria faces a paradoxical context for education that presents enormous challenges, including fragmentation, trauma, and resource scarcity, but also opportunities for change and improvement of the education system. The cessation of large-scale hostilities in many areas, as of late 2024, and the political transition underway provide a window to reconstruct and reimagine education. Communities are eager to see their children learning and healing. If reforms and programmes are carefully tailored to Syria's context and account for diversity, engage local actors, and remain conflict-sensitive, education can become a unifying force rather than another

³⁵ Mohamed, N. (2025). Lost in the host: The struggle of a Syrian refugee family in urban schools with a child suffering from undiagnosed PTSD symptoms. *Online Journal of Distance Education and e-Learning*, 13(1), 25-40. <https://www.ojed.org/jump/article/download/2579/1506>

³⁶ See more information Integrating Returning Refugees into Syria's Education System: A Proposed Strategy Based on Post-Conflict Experiences <https://www.harmoon.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Integrating-Returning-Refugees.pdf>

³⁷ Norman, J. M., & Mikhael, D. (2023). Rethinking the triple-nexus: Integrating peacebuilding and resilience initiatives in conflict contexts. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 18(3), 248-263.

³⁸ Brown, L., Gjicali, K., Kim, H. Y., Tubbs Dolan, C., Frisoli, P., Bwary, M., & Aber, J. L. (2023). Evaluating Programme Enhancement Strategies for Remedial Tutoring: A Cluster-Randomized Control Trial With Syrian Refugee Students in Lebanon. *AERA Open*, 9, 23328584231209268.

battleground of division. The following sections explore concrete programme models and global lessons to seize this opportunity.

Programme Models and Good Practices

This section profiles three priority education programme modalities for scaling that address well-known, increasing, and ongoing areas of focus within education programmes over many years. These are specifically trauma-informed social emotional learning (SEL)/psychosocial support (PSS) programmes, accelerated learning programmes (ALPs), and remedial and afterschool programmes. The review shows how they can foster social cohesion and peacebuilding and what to keep in mind for scaling. Each sub-section describes the modality and then presents evidence of effectiveness. Thereafter, there are global case examples used to illustrate the type of programme model for scaling. It outlines the implicit or explicit *theory of change* linking the intervention to desired peace and/or social cohesion outcomes.

Trauma-Informed Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Psychosocial Support (PSS)

Trauma-informed SEL and PSS initiatives seek to help children and adolescents recover from the psychological and social impacts of conflict. A central tenet is to develop social emotional competencies for emotional regulation, empathy, and nonviolent conflict resolution, among others. These programmes often include teacher training in trauma-informed pedagogy to improve teachers' understanding of students' normal reactions to abnormal circumstances in violence or displacement and how to manage behavioural issues stemming from trauma. Capacity is developed to ensure teachers' ability to integrate SEL curricula targeting skills like self-awareness, social skills, responsible decision-making, and establishment of safe, healing learning spaces. In practice, this could mean daily class routines that provide a sense of normalcy and safety, structured activities like play therapy, art, mindfulness activities, or sports for expression, managing overcrowded classrooms, and peer support or peace clubs. The approach recognises that children who have experienced violence or displacement cannot fully engage in learning, nor build positive relationships, or contribute fully to social cohesion until their emotional needs and stress responses are addressed.

Global evidence and examples are increasingly being implemented through education sector initiatives. A robust body of research underscores the efficacy of SEL and PSS, particularly in crisis contexts. A global systematic review in 2021 found that SEL/PSS interventions in low-resource and conflict-affected settings often led to improved well-being, reduced aggression, and better social relations among youth.³⁹ While not all programmes explicitly measured "peace" outcomes, those that did showed promising signs. For example, in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan's "Youth Theater for Peace" project, engaging adolescents in drama activities around conflict themes reportedly improved their communication and reduced prejudices. Results of a mixed-methods evaluation conducted comparing attitudes and behaviours of programme participants and the comparison group around conflict issues and towards those of other ethnicities, religions, and nationalities, showed abilities and confidence in having a positive impact on solving community and interpersonal conflicts in a peaceful manner.⁴⁰ In Sri Lanka, a short peace education workshop over four days had significant long-term effects on empathy among participants from both sides of the civil war divide, an outcome

³⁹ Aldin, C. O. M. E. (2021). Social and Emotional Learning (Sel) Systematic Review.

⁴⁰ See more information here <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/node/resource/youth-theater-peace-programme-evaluation-executive-summary.pdf>

closely tied to social cohesion. These findings align with developmental theory that enhancing children's emotional literacy and trauma coping skills can reduce their susceptibility to hatred and violence.

In terms of structured programming, Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) and related school-based PSS models have been widely used in emergencies. These are safe zones where children can play, learn, and receive support under supervision. A review of UNICEF's emergency education efforts noted that since the late 1990s, CFS interventions combine *"learning with play, peer-to-peer socialization and expressive activities, all within a protective space"*, providing routine and a sense of normalcy after chaos. The primary aim is to help children heal and regain trust. For instance, in Burundi and Uganda during civil conflicts, CFS programmes allowed war-affected children to sing, draw, and play in a structured environment and evaluations indicated these activities helped reduce children's trauma symptoms and improved their interactions with peers. Another key component is often psychosocial support services, such as having a counsellor or trained facilitator who can identify children needing extra help and refer severe cases to mental health professionals. However, a recent systematic review of research also said interventions that primarily targeted SEL did not see improvements in mental health outcomes and are not replacements for targeted mental health support, and more targeted services for those children and youth with greater needs should be layered on top of general SEL programmes. More research is needed to better understand how addressing distress and psychosocial issues interacts with the building of positive social and emotional skills.

An illustrative success is Save the Children's Healing and Education through the Arts (HEART) programme, implemented in several post-conflict countries. Through guided art and storytelling sessions, children process painful experiences and build coping skills. Anecdotal evidence from HEART in South Sudan suggested that participating students were more inclusive in their play afterwards and showed fewer aggressive incidents in class, hinting at improved social cohesion at the micro-level, such as the classroom climate.

Relevance and theory of change for Syria: Trauma-informed SEL/PSS is arguably the *foundation* upon which any further peacebuilding or academic intervention must rest in Syria. The theory of change can be outlined as: if students feel safe and supported in school, and learn social emotional skills like empathy, cooperation, and managing anger, then they are more likely to form positive relationships across group lines and less likely to engage in violence, because they have improved psychosocial well-being, a restored sense of belonging, and tools to resolve conflicts non-violently. In a society where mistrust and fear have been sown by war, these individual-level changes are critical for rebuilding social fabric. Moreover, trauma-sensitive practices increase students' engagement in learning, which leads to better educational outcomes and hope for the future. Also, these are factors which can reduce grievances that can fuel conflict.

Applying this in Syria could include: training teachers across different regions in basic psychosocial first aid and positive discipline, moving away from any punitive approaches that might re-traumatise children. In order to do this, it would mean incorporating structured SEL activities in daily lessons. For example, short mindfulness exercises, cooperative games that mix students from different backgrounds, and creating support networks such as school-based counsellors or referral systems for cases of acute trauma. Other possibilities are via tele-counselling if professionals can't be on site. It is also vital to engage parents and communities in understanding trauma impacts. Stigma around mental health can be high, but community buy-in will help reinforce children's healing. Notably, programmes should be culturally adapted as we know that what constitutes trauma-healing practice in one culture may differ in another, so Syrian educators and psychosocial experts must tailor approaches. For instance, using storytelling and poetry, which resonate in Syrian culture, as a medium for SEL can be effective. These efforts contribute to peacebuilding by fostering a generation

of learners who are mentally resilient and capable of empathy, which is a stark contrast to the wartime experiences of toxic stress and division. Recent research with Syrian refugee children in Lebanon underscores that high rates of depression, anxiety, and comorbidity are driven less by past war exposure than by current refugee environments marked by poverty, poor housing, limited services and hostile social contexts. Building on this evidence, Bosqui and colleagues developed a brief systemic family psychosocial support intervention, designed for delivery by non-specialists through child protection systems, to strengthen family functioning and reduce adolescents' psychological distress in high-adversity settings. Their work highlights the importance of embedding trauma-informed SEL and PSS within wider family- and community-level supports that address daily stressors and social determinants of mental health, rather than focusing solely on individual symptoms⁴¹. Furthermore, Dr. Dajani's *We Love Reading (WLR)* initiative illustrates how innovative educational approaches can build social cohesion and agency from the ground up. Dajani's model centres on the simple act of reading aloud in community settings to nurture empathy, imagination, and a love of learning among children. She flipped traditional hierarchies by empowering children and local volunteers as the drivers of change.⁴²

Accelerated Learning Programmes (ALPs)

Accelerated Learning Programmes are specifically designed education courses that cover a standard curriculum in a compressed timeframe, enabling children or youth who missed out on schooling due to conflict, displacement, etc. to catch up to an age-appropriate level and reintegrate into formal education or gain equivalency certification. ALPs often target older children and adolescents who have fallen behind. For example, a typical ALP might condense six years of primary education into three or four years, with students completing multiple grade levels in one calendar year. Classes tend to be flexible in timing and location to reach working youth or those in remote areas and use learner-centred methods suitable for older students. ALPs can be part of the formal system run by ministries with an official curriculum or non-formal run by NGOs, sometimes with more flexible content focused on life skills and livelihoods. Crucially, ALPs usually incorporate foundational literacy and numeracy, along with life skills, given the gaps in participants' prior education.

Global evidence and examples: ALPs have been widely implemented in post-conflict settings with generally positive outcomes in terms of access. They are effective at reaching marginalised and over-age learners who would otherwise not return to school. In Sierra Leone after the civil war (1991–2002), a variety of accelerated education initiatives were launched to reintegrate former child soldiers and other out-of-school youth. Formal programmes led by the Ministry of Education, along with UNICEF/UNESCO support, reintroduced tens of thousands of out-of-school children to structured learning, including a condensed primary curriculum that many war-affected youth completed successfully.⁴³ Alongside, non-formal initiatives, such as community education classes, radio instruction, and vocational training with literacy components, were instrumental in reaching ex-combatants and rural youth.⁴⁴ Evaluations in Sierra Leone found that ALP graduates had literacy and

⁴¹ Bosqui, T., Mayya, A., Farah, S., Shaito, Z., Jordans, M. J., Pedersen, G., ... & Brown, F. L. (2024). Parenting and family interventions in lower and middle-income countries for child and adolescent mental health: A systematic review. *Comprehensive psychiatry*, 132, 152483.

⁴² Dajani, R., Al Sager, A., Placido, D., & Amso, D. (2019). The value of the we love reading program for executive functions in jordanian children. In *Proc. MIT LINC Conf* (Vol. 3, pp. 61–69).

⁴³ <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/14/9/541#:~:text=Formal%20Peace%20Initiatives%3A%20Formal%20peace,school%20children%20to%20structured>

⁴⁴ Yu, Y., & Wyness, M. (2025). Peace Education in a Post-Conflict Society: The Case Study of Sierra Leone. *Social Sciences*, 14(9), 541. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14090541>

numeracy gains comparable to peers in formal schools, and communities reported that having *idle youth* engaged in education reduced local tensions and crime which at least supported negative peace. One formal programme there, the RapidEd initiative, explicitly combined catch-up education with peace education content, aiming to address both skills deficits and mindset change; while quantitative impact data is sparse, qualitative feedback indicated improved conflict resolution skills among participants.

In South Sudan, ALPs have been key to addressing massive disruptions from decades of conflict. An innovative case is the Accelerated Education Programme (AEP) pilot, which targets two groups: young women who dropped out and did so due to early marriage or insecurity, and unqualified primary teachers who never completed secondary school. By condensing schooling into a 4-year intensive programme, AEP helped these learners obtain secondary certificates in a feasible way. Not only did this increase individual opportunities, it also especially empowered female graduates and improved teaching quality as those teachers got certified. Additionally, it also had a cohesion dimension, as many participants formed study groups across ethnic lines and reported greater mutual respect by programme's end. The programme's success in South Sudan, which is a country with diverse ethnic tensions, illustrates that ALPs can be more than academic bridges; they can serve as platforms for social integration when participants from different backgrounds learn together towards a common goal.

Other notable examples are Afghanistan's community-based accelerated classes for girls in the 2000s, enabling tens of thousands of adolescent girls who were denied education under the Taliban to complete primary education in villages. And these classes often doubled as community dialogue spaces building trust between villagers and facilitators. In Liberia and DR Congo, NGOs ran "Speed Schools" which was an ALP model showing high transition rates of graduates into formal schools and evidence of improved self-esteem and hope among war-affected youth.

Theory of change: ALPs contribute to peacebuilding and social cohesion through multiple pathways: first, by providing educational opportunity to those who missed out on schooling, often the most marginalised groups like former child soldiers, displaced youth, minorities, or girls. ALPs address grievances related to inequitable access, thereby tackling a potential driver of conflict which is notably, youth disenfranchisement. Research has long shown that idle, uneducated youth in post-conflict settings are at higher risk of recruitment into violence; ALPs help convert this risk into a dividend by equipping youth with skills for employment or further education. Second, ALPs often emphasise civic and life skills in their curricula. For example, content on human rights, conflict resolution, and teamwork can shape more informed and engaged citizens, which is an aspect of positive peace. In Sierra Leone's programmes, peace education was integrated, aiming to foster reconciliation as students from former opposing sides studied together.⁴⁵ Third, the communal nature of many ALPs, which are often run in local centres with community educators, can rebuild trust at the community level. Parents and community leaders who support these initiatives frequently collaborate across divides, e.g., joint school management committees for ALP centres in Burundi's returnee areas built solidarity between returnee and host populations as they worked to construct classrooms.

Applying this in Syria: In Syria, ALPs could be transformative. The country has large numbers of over-age children, and a 14-year-old who has not been to school in 5 years cannot realistically re-enter primary grade 3 with younger children. Without an ALP option, that adolescent is effectively denied

⁴⁵<https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/14/9/541#:~:text=Formal%20Peace%20Initiatives%3A%20Formal%20peace,school%20children%20to%20structured>

education. By implementing ALPs, Syria's education actors, predominantly NGOs or eventually governments, can rapidly increase the human capital of a generation that would otherwise be lost. A concrete theory of change is, if we provide accelerated, flexible education to out-of-school and over-age youth with attention to psychosocial support and civic engagement in the curriculum then, these children and youth will gain literacy, skills, and a sense of purpose, which leads to reduced risk of violence. Economic opportunities and less frustration will generate increased social cohesion across society, as youth from different backgrounds learn together and build mutual respect.

One must plan for challenges, as quality can be a great concern if ALPs are scaled up too quickly. When there is an influx of inexperienced facilitators, it could undermine learning and certification so critical for legitimacy. Furthermore, graduates need to be recognised for jobs or higher education afterward. In Syria's fragmented context, an interim solution could be a standardised ALP curriculum developed by a consortium of education actors and possibly under UNICEF or a sector Working Group that all providers agree to use. An exam that is recognised across governing authorities would help legitimise the content. This would prevent ALP graduates from one area being rejected in another. Additionally, coupling ALPs with livelihood training, specifically for older teens, and community service components can enhance their peacebuilding impact. For example, ALP students might undertake a project to rehabilitate a community space, signalling youth's positive role in rebuilding society. Overall, ALPs align with both humanitarian aims to urgently educate those left behind as well as focus on longer term peacebuilding aims, making them a high-priority modality for Syria.

Afterschool and Remedial Education Programmes

Afterschool and remedial programmes are supplemental learning opportunities provided outside regular school hours, in the afternoons, evenings, weekends or school vacations, and are meant to bolster children's academic skills, provide safe social spaces, and facilitate integration for learners who face difficulties in the formal classroom. These programmes can take various forms, such as remedial classes in core subjects, basic literacy and numeracy tutoring for students who are behind, language classes (e.g., host-country language for refugee children or mother-tongue support), homework clubs, weekend "catch-up" schools, and extracurricular groups. Other activities may also include sports teams, music or drama clubs, etc. that mix different student groups. They are also a means of providing structured activity for children in safe environments, keeping them engaged and off the streets which has protection benefits in and of itself.

In emergencies, afterschool programmes are sometimes used to accommodate more students when formal schools are full. Double-shift use of facilities may be organised where locals attend in the morning and displaced children have regular or remedial classes in the afternoon or there may even be mixed classes.

Global evidence and examples include remedial and afterschool initiatives that have proven effective in improving learning outcomes and in some cases promoting social cohesion. In Lebanon, faced with an influx of Syrian refugee children, the Ministry of Education, with international support, instituted a second-shift school system with afternoon classes dedicated to refugees as well as community-based homework support and language tutoring. These remedial programmes helped bridge Syrian students, many of whom initially spoke only Arabic, into the Lebanese curriculum, which uses French or English for some subjects. This improved their literacy/numeracy performance over time. Critically, when designed well, such programmes also reduced social tensions. Lebanese teachers reported that refugee students in second shifts who received additional language support adjusted better and had fewer conflicts with peers. It fostered a sense that refugees were being helped to succeed rather than dragging down the system, which eased host community resentment, which is an important social cohesion outcome.

In Nepal, a different model of afterschool programming contributed to peacebuilding. During the insurgency period, some NGOs set up Saturday clubs where youth from various caste and ethnic groups came together for activities like theatre, debates, and community projects. These were informal education spaces that supplemented formal schooling. Evaluations noted that participants of mixed identity clubs developed more trust and friendships across group lines. One specific initiative trained youth as “*peace ambassadors*” who then led afterschool dialogue sessions with other students on themes of tolerance. This peer-led model was associated with reduced inter-group fights in the participating schools, according to school records and teacher testimonies.

Sports and arts-based afterschool programmes are frequently cited as cohesion builders.⁴⁶ In Burundi, as part of the UNICEF Learning for Peace programme, the NGO Right To Play organised sports leagues and peace education games for children from different communities. Over 15,000 youth took part in these clubs, learning teamwork and conflict resolution on the playing field. Coaches reported examples of Hutu and Tutsi children who previously never interacted ending up as teammates and friends, illustrating contact theory in action. Similar approaches in Northern Ireland that involved cross-community sports days and joint drama productions for Catholic and Protestant schools have been documented to improve inter-community attitudes, alongside deeper interventions such as integrated schooling.

For remedial academic learning outcomes specifically, there is strong evidence that targeted tutoring significantly improves learning for conflict-affected children, which is relevant because academic failure can exacerbate frustration and dropout and thus, indirectly affect peace by expanding grievances. A World Bank study in Bosnia shortly after the war showed that remedial classes for minority returnee children, those who had missed years of schooling, helped close the achievement gap and made those children more likely to stay in school. We know from research that a factor such as staying in school is linked to greater social stability in return areas, as education participation by returnees builds confidence in the peace process.⁴⁷

Theories of change related to education building peace or strengthening social cohesion are many. The particular contribution of afterschool and remedial programmes to social cohesion lies in both academic and social effects. Academically, by helping struggling learners catch up, these programmes ensure children are not left behind due to conflict disruptions. As a result, this promotes equity in educational outcomes. Equitable access to learning success can reduce resentment that might otherwise build if, say, displaced children were seen as failing or burdening the system. Socially, afterschool settings are often more relaxed and flexible than formal classes, providing ideal opportunities for positive interactions among students, and between students and teachers. The theory of change can be summarised as the following statement: if students from different backgrounds participate together in well-facilitated afterschool learning and recreation activities, then they will form friendships, improve mutual understanding, and build empathy, because the informal setting allows them to engage as equals around shared interests or goals such as solving a math problem together, winning a football match as a team, etc. These relationships can carry over into broader community relations, especially when parents are also involved in ways that may be simply attending a tournament or a school play featuring their children.

Applying this in Syria: In Syria, afterschool and remedial programmes are particularly pertinent to the two prioritised areas with high displacement and educational access issues, for instance,

⁴⁶ Cunningham, T., & Krysa, S. (2024). *An Art-Based SEL Curriculum and Its Impact on Resilience, Sense of Belonging, and Climate at a Faith-Based After-School Programme* (Doctoral dissertation, Lipscomb University).

⁴⁷ Magill, C. (2010). *Education and fragility in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning.

northwest Syria's Idlib camps and parts of the northeast with dispersed communities where the formal school infrastructure may be insufficient or operating in shifts. Establishing informal, accelerated, or community learning centres that offer evening classes or weekend sessions can greatly expand reach. For example, in an IDP camp, afterschool literacy classes could be set up in a tent for children who cannot enrol in the local host school. Not only do those children gain skills, but the very act of learning in a group normalises their routine and interactions.

One feasible model is the creation of 'safe healing and learning spaces' (SHLS) that run outside of formal school hours. These combine remedial education with play and psychosocial support—essentially blending the first and third modalities. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has successfully used SHLS in Syria's neighbouring countries; scaling such models inside Syria could provide a triple benefit: catch-up learning, socialisation, and trauma relief.

Integration and scaling considerations: For Syria, afterschool programmes can be started even in relatively unstable conditions because they are flexible and can be community-run. Local NGOs or parent associations could lead homework support groups if formal teacher capacity is low. However, to maximise peace outcomes, these programmes should be inclusive in a way that invites both displaced children and host community children, or children from different sectarian backgrounds, to learn together. Language support will be important in mixed settings, for example, offering Arabic classes to Kurdish-background kids and vice versa if needed. Also, linking content to peacebuilding is a huge opportunity. Remedial classes need not only be about academic catch-up, but they can integrate peace education themes subtly. For instance, reading comprehension passages might be stories that model cooperation or celebrate Syria's multicultural heritage, and they also need to have qualities that encourage literacy engagement, thereby reinforcing positive messaging as students improve their language skills.

Finally, monitoring the impact on social cohesion can be done by tracking indicators like levels of interaction with other groups, or asking if children choose to work with peers from other groups over time. For example, checking on whether parents report improved attitudes towards the other group as their kids participate in activities together. These indicators will be discussed more in the Monitoring section, but they are vital to ensure afterschool initiatives truly contribute to building peace and are not just parallel programmes.

CASE STUDIES: GLOBAL LESSONS FOR SYRIA

Drawing on the above programme models, we present succinct case studies from seven contexts that offer relevant lessons for Syria. Each case outlines what was done, results achieved or not achieved, and implications for future education strategies. They include both *successes* to emulate and *challenges or missteps* to avoid, providing a balanced perspective.

Case Study 1: Lebanon

Integrating Refugee Children and Host Communities through Education

Context:

Since 2011, the swelling school-age Syrian refugee population in Lebanon has increased tensions between refugees and host communities, fuelled by competition for services and cultural misunderstandings. Lebanon early on maintained an open door policy for Syrian refugees, and yet,

according to UNHCR as of the end of September 2025, 41% of Syrian refugee children do not attend primary school, whereas 81% do not attend secondary school. The Lebanese government, with UNICEF and other partners, implemented an education response focused on inclusion and social cohesion⁴⁸ for the two populations.

Interventions:

Key programme components included the second-shift school system for Syrian refugee children in public schools, alongside afterschool support programmes open to both Lebanese and Syrians. In second-shift schools, Syrian children follow the Lebanese curriculum, with adaptations, in the afternoons, taught mostly by Lebanese teachers. To promote cohesion, some schools organise joint extra-curricular activities between morning Lebanese students and afternoon Syrian students.⁴⁹ Another example is sports day and school club events held with mixed groups.

Additionally, a programme known as “No Lost Generation” is a major UNICEF-led advocacy platform launched in 2013 up until today supporting children, adolescents, and youth affected by the Syria crisis, both inside Syria and in neighbouring host countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. The focus is on education, child protection, and mental health and psychosocial support to ensure that Syrian children do not miss out on learning and safety amid the ongoing conflict. Co-led by UNICEF and World Vision, it engages over 40 UN and NGO agencies working together across the region.⁵⁰ It also provides cash transfers to refugee families for each child enrolled, conditional on attendance, with the dual aim of reducing economic barriers and encouraging social inclusion by sending a message that all these children belong in school together.

Results:

After eight years, in 2019, an estimated 200,000 Syrian children were attending second shifts. Academic outcomes showed gradual improvement and instructional language remained a hurdle, yet some bridging courses helped with these barriers of subjects taught in Arabic in and after school. More importantly for social cohesion, qualitative evaluations found that prejudices declined over time.⁵¹ A study in 2016–2018 found host community parents initially worried about quality and discipline issues with refugee learners, but after a year, most reported positive interactions, while Lebanese principals described Syrian students as ‘eager and respectful’ and noted instances of Lebanese and Syrian youth interacting through the joint activities.⁵² There were deliberate efforts to ensure joint representation in student councils, with some second-shift schools including Syrian members, giving them a voice. UNICEF’s monitoring reported improved perceptions by 85% of

⁴⁸ Kamruzzaman, P., Al-shanableh, N., & Albanna, H. (2025). Navigating coexistence: perspectives of host community and Syrian refugees in Al-Mafraq, Jordan. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2469595>

⁴⁹ See more information in Search for Common Ground report https://documents.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Search-Lebanon_Case-Study_Social-Cohesion_Dialogue-and-Joint-Initiatives-2016.pdf

⁵⁰ See No Lost Generation Report <https://www.unicef.or.jp/news/2014/pdf/No-Lost-Generation-initiative-One-Year-Report-Sept-2014.pdf#:~:text=psychological%20wellbeing%20of%20this%20generation%2C%20along%20with%20its%20protection>

⁵¹ See more information by International Alert (2015) impact of education on social cohesion and declines https://www.international-alert.org/app/uploads/2015/12/Lebanon_LebaneseSyrianSchoolingSystem_EN_2015.pdf

⁵² Shuayb, M., Al Maghlouth, N., Held, K., Ahmad, N., Badran, T., & Al Qantar, S. (2016). An education for the future: The schooling experience of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon and Germany. the Education Commission.

surveyed Lebanese and Syrian parents who agreed that ‘the school is a safe place for my child to learn with others’, up from around 60% at baseline.⁵³

However, segregation persisted in many ways whereby Syrian students by and large did not attend class with Lebanese, only occasionally meeting during extracurricular events. Some hostility and bullying were reported, especially outside school. Teachers were not always adequately trained for mixed cultural sensitivities, and a few admitted they held lower expectations of Syrians at first. However, training and experience mitigated this over time. Another lesson was the importance of community engagement at the school level. When schools pro-actively held meetings and outreach, these communities fared better in terms of acceptance. Finally, sustainability is a concern, and the approach relied heavily on donor funding for the second-shift teacher salaries and cash transfers. As Syria stabilises, a scenario might emerge of refugees returning, and if they do, the inclusive practices learned in Lebanon could be transplanted to Syrian contexts. For example, integrating returnees with those who stayed, can draw lessons from how Lebanese integrated Syrians.

Implications for Syria:

Many lessons can be drawn from Lebanon’s experience. The education history shows the value of flexible school scheduling and targeted support to handle influxes of displaced learners while avoiding excessive strain on hosts. For Syria, in areas receiving returning refugees or IDPs from other regions, adopting double-shift or weekend classes could increase absorption capacity. The case also underlines that inclusion must be intentional. It is not just about putting children in proximity but facilitating positive contact and communication. Syria’s educators can plan joint activities such as cultural events and sports for mixed groups of students from different backgrounds to build bridges. An International Alert report, illustrating positive outcomes from mixed classes reported ‘Lebanese school students, parents and teachers testify to improved relationships between Lebanese and Syrian students within the mixed morning shift compared to three years ago. This is reinforced by the non-discrimination policy set by the school administration and good academic performance of Syrian students.’⁵⁴ Moreover, the use of conditional incentives with cash or other means to encourage attendance can work, but should be coupled with messaging that frames education as a shared value for community reconciliation. Lastly, investing in community liaison roles, possibly repurposing Syria’s existing parent-teacher association structures, can pre-empt misunderstandings and rumours that often fuel tension. Drawing lessons from Lebanon is critical for Syria’s rebuilding, in particular, the experience with education’s split system of formal afternoon shifts in public schools and informal education through NGOs and community initiatives. While formal education offers recognised certification and potential pathways for social mobility, informal education is widely seen by students and parents as more accessible, relevant, and supportive, providing tailored, culturally sensitive, and trauma-informed instruction. Furthermore, informal schooling addresses children’s well-being, contrasting with exclusion, overcrowding, and linguistic barriers in formal schools, which in the end challenge the assumption of formal education’s superiority and highlights the need for

⁵³ Evaluation of UNICEF’s Adolescents and Youth (YAD) Programme (2017–2019) in Lebanon Final Evaluation Report Reference Number: LRPS- 2019- 9150318 Warsaw, 3 rd of May 2020. See <https://evaluationreports.unicef.org/GetDocument?documentID=16863&fileID=38537>

⁵⁴ See more information by International Alert (2015) impact of education on social cohesion and declines https://www.international-alert.org/app/uploads/2015/12/Lebanon_LebaneseSyrianSchoolingSystem_EN_2015.pdf

more inclusive and flexible educational approaches.⁵⁵

Case Study 2: Nepal

Schools as Zones of Peace and Post-Conflict Recovery

Context:

Nepal endured a decade-long civil war from 1996 to 2006 between Maoist rebels and the government, which heavily affected rural communities and the education system. Schools were often politicised and even served as sites of violence and recruitment of students by armed groups, and using school grounds for rallies was commonplace.⁵⁶ After the 2006 peace accords, stabilising education was seen as key to consolidating peace.

Intervention:

A nationwide campaign called 'Schools as Zones of Peace' (SZOP) was launched, led by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education with support from Save the Children and local NGOs. The SZOP initiative aimed to depoliticise and protect schools from conflict. Its components included elements such as developing Codes of Conduct at school, village, and district levels. Relatedly, binding agreements signed by all community stakeholders including teachers, political party representatives, security forces, rebel groups, and parents promised not to interfere with schools or use them for political purposes.⁵⁷ Additionally, public awareness campaigns declaring that schools should be safe sanctuaries for children were conducted alongside targeted efforts to strengthen student participation and to make school management committees more inclusive. These efforts led to the peaceful addressing of grievances as they emerged. The programme also overlapped with quality improvements through the widely known Child-Friendly Schools framework, promoting participatory, inclusive teaching methods. Notably, SZOP explicitly framed its goals in peacebuilding terms, and in particular, to promote a culture of peace, tolerance, and respect for different ethnic groups, opinions, and values, as well as a culture of civic responsibility among children and young people.

Results:

SZOP is often cited as a best practice example of education contributing to at least negative peace by stopping violence in and around schools. By 2011, the government formally endorsed the policy of schools as peace zones. Incidents of school closures due to strikes or conflict dropped significantly. One report highlighted that in districts where SZOP was active, even during a nation-wide political strike in 2009, over 3,300 schools remained open which benefited over 1 million students who gained extra days of schooling that would otherwise have been lost. Armed groups generally respected the codes and there were far fewer reports of school abductions or army presence on campuses after SZOP committees were established. However, it was imperfect: Pherali argued that the end of the conflict in 2006 merely reduced the tangible attacks on education, and the political interference in

⁵⁵ Kamruzzaman, P., Al-shanableh, N., & Albanna, H. (2025). Navigating coexistence: perspectives of host community and Syrian refugees in Al-Mafraq, Jordan. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2469595>

⁵⁶ Schools as Zones of Peace see here https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/documents_schools_as_zones_of_peace_szop_education_for_stabilization_and_peace_building_in_post-conflict_nepal.pdf#:~:text=young%20people.%20From%201996,or%20from%20children%20attending%20classes

⁵⁷ Ibid

the education system continued, with schools symbolising power centres in the community which provide a space for multi-party political scuffles.⁵⁸ Reportedly, there was also broad adherence indicating a shared recognition of safe learning sites, even among former combatants, and a general recognition of the importance of education.

On the social cohesion and peacebuilding side, SZOP also had subtler impacts. Strengthening community management of schools meant different castes and ethnic groups worked together on school improvement plans. Many communities formed Peace Committees around schools, which became forums to mediate local disputes, and not strictly education issues. In multi-ethnic villages, having a neutral safe school space allowed children from historically opposed groups to learn together in a less tense environment. Surveys found increased trust in the local schools. For example, parents from all sides felt more confident sending their children to school, knowing it was off-limits to violence.⁵⁹ Nepal's case also demonstrates a link between education and resilience, illustrating how keeping schools open and stable during political turmoil provided children a sense of continuity and hope, which has intangible peacebuilding value for the next generation.⁶⁰

Challenges:

A challenge was ensuring the codes of conduct were honoured universally. There were instances, in some conflict hotspots, where violations occurred, and schools were occasionally dragged into local disputes. It required continual advocacy and vigilance. Another issue was moving from *negative* to *positive* peace: SZOP succeeded in removing violence from schools, but critics asked, what about curriculum reform to address structural inequalities and historical grievances? That part progressed slowly. Also, once immediate threats subsided, maintaining momentum for community engagement was hard; some committees became inactive after the crisis passed, which suggests such initiatives need institutionalisation in Nepal to eventually integrate peace education into its educational policy, but this takes time.

Implication for Syria:

The SZOP model could inform efforts to make education a conflict-free domain in Syria. A similar approach of community-driven education accords could be pursued in areas still experiencing localised conflict or potential clashes. For example, local councils or tribal leaders in parts of Syria could convene to declare schools as safe zones. Declaring a safe zone may mean that no weapons, no political rallies, and no recruitment inside school premises are allowable. This could be especially critical in the northwest where multiple armed factions operate. Having them on record agreeing to protect education (perhaps facilitated by international agencies as neutral parties) would set norms for the post-conflict era. Additionally, the emphasis on local monitoring committees in SZOP is something Syria can adopt, involving elders, parents, youth, and teachers in jointly monitoring that schools remain safe and inclusive, and giving them training in conflict resolution to handle issues that arise (like fights or discrimination in school).

Nepal's case also highlights focusing on local governance of education. In Syria's eventual transition, decentralising school management and making it inclusive can ensure all groups feel vested. Lastly, teaching about the conflict in a healing manner ("helping new generations understand why conflict

⁵⁸ Pherali, T. J. (2013). Schooling in violent situations: The politicization of education in Nepal, before and after the 2006 peace agreement. *Prospects*, 43(1), 49–67

⁵⁹ Parker, S., Standing, K., & Pant, B. (2013). Caught in the cross fire: Children's right to education during conflict—The Case of Nepal 1996–2006. *Children & Society*, 27(5), 372–384.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

took place and deal with its legacies” was a stated theory in Nepal) is vital. Syria will need to carefully craft how the war is discussed in classrooms, Nepal shows that delaying this conversation can leave a vacuum. Perhaps initially, just establishing peace zones and basic PSS is the priority, with deeper curricular dialogue to follow when safe.

Case Study 3: Sierra Leone

Education and Reconciliation after Civil War

Context:

Sierra Leone’s 11-year civil war (1991–2002) was marked by extreme brutality, child soldiering, and the near collapse of the education system. After the war, the country faced the challenge of rebuilding infrastructure and reintegrating ex-combatants and displaced populations. Sierra Leone is often hailed as a “successful” post-conflict recovery in terms of stability, and education played a part in that.

Intervention:

Several initiatives were rolled out in the Rapid Rehabilitation of Schools, with UN peacekeeping support: thousands of primary schools were rebuilt or repaired in the immediate aftermath, and a nationwide school enrolment drive was launched. This “Back to School” campaign within months of the war’s end sent a powerful signal of normalcy returning. Afterward, the Accelerated Learning & Youth Education emerged nation-wide. Programmes like the Complementary Rapid Education for Primary Schools (CREPS) offered accelerated primary education for war-affected youth. As mentioned earlier, formal and non-formal peace education programmes were introduced, and the government, with support from UNESCO and UNICEF, integrated peace education topics into the civics curriculum and trained teachers accordingly.⁶¹ Non-formal approaches included community sensitisation through radio programmes, such as one called the “Voice of Children” radio clubs, where youth discussed peace and education issues.⁶²

Community Healing and School Reconstruction: NGOs such as CAREN and World Vision facilitated communities in collectively rebuilding schools. They would bring together villagers of different factions to make bricks, roof buildings, etc. The idea was that working on a tangible common goal (the school) would mend relationships. In parallel, *Fambul Tok* (a local reconciliation initiative) organised ceremonies and dialogues often held on school grounds, reinforcing the school as a community hub for healing.

Girls’ Education Initiatives: Given the war’s impact on girls (many were abducted or assaulted, leading to stigma), programmes targeted girls for scholarships and created “safe space” clubs in schools to encourage their return and retention. This was partly to address the conflict driver of gender inequality and to ensure the benefits of peace reached girls.

Results:

Educational access surged, particularly when primary enrolment doubled within a few years post-war. While quality lagged, this mass inclusion itself was seen as a peace dividend. Crucially, ex-child soldiers and other youth got opportunities to reintegrate through education and training. A study on

⁶¹ Yu Y, Wyness M. Peace Education in a Post-Conflict Society: The Case Study of Sierra Leone. *Social Sciences*. 2025; 14(9):541. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14090541>

⁶² <https://www.beyondintractability.org/reflection/childrens-role-in-peacebuilding>

Sierra Leone's peace education efforts found that formal curriculum changes had limited reach initially; notably, teachers often skipped new peace content due to time/test pressures, but the non-formal education efforts had significant impact in communities.⁶³ For instance, evaluations of community reconciliation programmes (for example *Fambul Tok*⁶⁴) noted that in villages where they were active, school committees took on roles in conflict mediation, and children who participated in reconciliation dialogues exhibited more prosocial behaviour in school. On a broader scale, Sierra Leone maintained peace and gradually improved governance; observers credit its investment in basic services, including education, as one reason ex-fighters did not remobilise, as they saw hope for their children's future, defusing grievances.

However, quality and equity issues persisted. Rural areas and some marginalised groups such as disabled children were still left behind, which are reminders that if education does not become truly inclusive, it can sow new discontent. Also, despite the peace education curriculum, there was critique that it remained superficial by focusing on slogans of unity but not engaging deeply with the war's history or justice issues. In the long run, that could be problematic if past grievances are glossed over.

Interestingly, Sierra Leone also engaged in third-party monitoring of education in the post-war recovery through the use of community oversight and international NGO audits, partly to ensure transparency. Trust in the system is important because corruption could have derailed public confidence. This resonates with Syria's context, in that trust in institutions will need major rebuilding.

Implication for Syria:

Sierra Leone shows the importance of a holistic approach: 1. Get schools running quickly to deliver a peace dividend. Syria likewise will need visible improvements in education (rehabilitated schools, kids back in class) as a sign of stabilisation. 2. Use education as a platform for community reconciliation, e.g., involve community members in rebuilding schools or in school events that acknowledge losses and promote forgiveness. Syria might replicate something like *Fambul Tok* where communities gather (perhaps in school halls) to discuss grievances with support from traditional and religious leaders, which can complement formal transitional justice. 3. Provide alternative pathways for youth who fought or missed school. If Syria ends up with many youths who were in armed groups or otherwise outside the system, specialized programmes (like Sierra Leone's CREPS or vocational training with peace modules) should target them to prevent them from being spoilers. 4. Keep an eye on curriculum reform. Sierra Leone updated civics and social studies to include messages of unity and human rights. Syria will face the task of revising curricula that may have been propagandistic or divisive. While doing so thoroughly takes time, starting with symbolic changes (removing hateful content, and including narratives from different communities) can signal a new era. 5. Do not neglect quality: Sierra Leone learned that just getting kids in school is not enough; if they do not learn or if corruption persists (like teachers demanding bribes), frustration can mount. Syria should thus pair expansion with teacher training and anti-corruption measures in education. This ties to peacebuilding because it affects vertical social cohesion and also trust between citizens and state.

Case Study 4: Burundi

Youth Clubs and Education in a Fragile Peace

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Cilliers, J., Dube, O., & Siddiqi, B. (2012). Reconciliation in Sierra Leone: *Fambul Tok* Analysis Plan.

Context:

Burundi experienced a protracted civil war (1993–2005) largely along ethnic lines (Hutu vs Tutsi), followed by ongoing political crises. Post-war Burundi, much like Rwanda, faced the task of reconciliation between groups that had suffered mutual atrocities. Education access was relatively low and unequal at war's end, and there were fears that unemployed youth could destabilise the fragile peace.

Intervention:

Under the umbrella of UNICEF's Peacebuilding, Education, and Advocacy (PBEA) programme (2012–2016), Burundi implemented a multi-pronged approach, including formal education reforms. The government introduced free primary education and made reforms to the curriculum to remove divisive teachings. They attempted to foster a shared national identity in textbooks, although with varying success.

Youth engagement through clubs: A flagship was the "Child Messengers of Peace" initiative run by Right to Play and local partners. This involved establishing peace clubs in schools and communities; by 2015, about 150 clubs with 15,000 youth members existed. These clubs used sports and games that incorporate peace education messages. They trained 300+ coaches (teachers and community volunteers) to facilitate regular activities and dialogues on conflict resolution, gender equality, etc.

Community education projects: In areas with returning refugees from Tanzania, integrating with remaining communities, UNICEF supported communities to jointly build or rehabilitate 10 schools using conflict-sensitive approaches. The returnee and host community members worked side by side, using local materials.⁶⁵ Simultaneously, village education committees were linked with women's savings groups to tackle both education and economic needs, to reduce competition and foster cooperation.⁶⁶ Peace education curriculum, including peace clubs, also fed into formal lessons, and the Ministry developed a peace education curriculum and trained teachers in using more participatory methods, partly inspired by club methodologies. The content emphasised coexistence and non-violent communication, and was introduced in select pilot schools.

Results:

The youth clubs proved very popular and had anecdotal success stories: for example, Hutu and Tutsi youths who traditionally would not mix were observed forming friendships through the sports teams. Coaches reported reduced incidents of ethnic slurs or bullying in schools with active clubs. An evaluation noted that club members demonstrated "*improved teamwork and empathy*" and often acted as mediators when conflicts arose among peers.⁶⁷ These micro-level changes suggest a shift in social norms among youth which is a critical foundation for long-term peace.⁶⁸

At the community level, the joint school construction projects served as entry points for dialogue. In

⁶⁵<https://www.unicef.org/media/96556/file/UNICEF-PBEA-Final-Report.pdf#:~:text=Somalia%20and%20Yemen%2C%20communities%20built,resolved%20conflicts%20through%20school%20construction>

⁶⁶Ibid

⁶⁷Ibid

⁶⁸ Nizigiyimama, L. P., & Bigirimana, C. (2019). *Peace Clubs in Burundi: Evaluation of Activities and Impact*. Evangelical Friends Church. Africa Peace Institute. Retrieved from

one instance cited, a dispute over land between returning refugees and residents was settled amicably via the school committee, which had both groups represented. This prevented violence and built confidence that coexistence was possible. Trust in local institutions like those committees grew as people saw concrete benefits to a new school from cooperation.

However, Burundi's larger political situation remained unstable. Despite these positive educational efforts, a political crisis in 2015 led to violence and displacement again. Interestingly, UNICEF documents suggest that areas with intensive PBEA programming did not fall into mass ethnic violence in 2015, implying some community resilience was built.⁶⁹ But the gains are fragile and need consistent support.

Implication for Syria:

Burundi underscores the role of extracurricular peace education, such as clubs and sports, especially in contexts where formal curriculum change is sensitive or slow. Syria could emulate this by setting up Peace Clubs in schools when security allows. Alternatively, clubs could take place in community centres for out-of-school youth. Such clubs cost relatively little and can be set up by NGOs quickly, even during conflict lulls. They offer flexible platforms to discuss formerly taboo topics like prejudice or trauma in an informal setting.

Another lesson is the integration of economic and social interventions. Burundi tied education to livelihoods such as with women's savings groups improving educational access. In Syria, integrating livelihoods, for youth or parents, with education programmes could similarly ease tensions. For example, education authorities could employ local tradesmen from various groups to work on school rehabilitation, or offer stipends to youth club leaders. This would address both conflict drivers of poverty and social division.

Burundi also highlights the importance of monitoring conflict dynamics. UNICEF introduced tools like regular conflict scans in Burundi to adapt programmes.⁷⁰ For Syria, continuous context analysis and flexibility in programming are essential. Education programmes should adjust if, say, tensions rise due to a local incident, by perhaps introducing a facilitated dialogue session in the curriculum that week.

Case Study 5: Northern Ireland

Integrated Schools and Shared Education

Context:

Northern Ireland's sectarian conflict often referred to as "The Troubles" formally ended with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, but society remains largely segregated along Catholic, and nationalist, as well as Protestant, and unionist, lines. Historically, most schools were religiously segregated, which was seen as both reflecting and perpetuating division. Education reforms have attempted to bridge this divide through integrated education that mixed religious groups in schools and shared education in the guise of collaboration between separate schools.

⁶⁹ Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy in Conflict-affected Contexts Programme: Learning for Peace. (2012). <https://www.unicef.org/media/96556/file/UNICEF-PBEA-Final-Report.pdf>

⁷⁰ Ibid

Intervention:

The Integrated Education movement started in the 1980s by parents who established a few mixed schools. By 2020, there were around 65 integrated schools, enrolling a small but growing percentage of pupils of around 7%. These schools intentionally enrol a roughly equal mix of Catholic and Protestant children, and often include learning about both communities' cultures. In parallel, since the mid-2000s, the government promoted Shared Education programmes—where segregated schools remain separate but conduct joint classes or projects regularly. For instance, a Catholic and a Protestant school might bus students to each other's campus for certain courses, or co-host field trips and extracurricular clubs.

Results:

Research in Northern Ireland provides some of the most concrete evidence on education's impact on attitudes. Longitudinal surveys of youth at age 16 found that those who attended integrated schools were significantly more likely to have friends from the other religion and held more positive views of the other community.⁷¹ Specifically, one study (McGlynn et al.) showed integrated school alumni expressed greater endorsement of intergroup mixing and less prejudice than those from segregated schools. This suggests that daily contact in a cooperative setting (the school) does help reduce sectarian biases, supporting contact theory. Importantly, these attitude changes persisted into adulthood in many cases, contributing to a broader peacebuilding effect by creating a constituency less interested in returning to violence.

Shared Education, though a newer approach, has had successes too. Meaningful approaches included sustained joint classes, not just one-off visits. Sometimes students in shared programmes also improved their perceptions of each other and increased cross-community friendships. One key finding was that teachers involved in shared education began to collaborate and trust each other more, spreading cohesion beyond students. Since teachers had historically been from segregated communities too, this was significant. By 2019, 93% of participating teachers said Shared Education led to improved student relationships and wider educational experiences.⁷²

However, challenges remain: the vast majority of Northern Irish students still attend single-identity schools, meaning these positive outcomes, while real, only affect a minority so far. Also, integrated schools sometimes face pushback from parents or churches resistant to losing their distinct school identity. Even within integrated schools, there can be internal clustering (students self-segregating in the playground) that needs conscious facilitation to overcome.

Implication for Syria:

The Northern Ireland experience resonates strongly given Syria's sectarian and ethnic fragmentation. One takeaway is the power of integrated or shared schooling to heal divides, if politically feasible. For Syria, proposing integrated Alawite-Sunni-Kurdish schools might seem distant at the moment, but it could be a long-term goal in stable areas. Establishing demonstration schools in key cities that enrol children of all sects/ethnicities together, under agreed principles that are similar to Northern Ireland's parent-driven model, could be symbols of a new unity if they show success.

⁷¹See—

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311484155_Integrated_Education_in_Northern_Ireland_Education_or_Peace

⁷²See—

<https://www.ncb.org.uk/sharededucation/seupb#:~:text=PEACE%20IV%20Shared%20Education%20%E2%80%93,of>

In the interim, shared education models could be applied within Syria's current fragmented system. For example, in areas where different community schools exist (say a government-run school and an autonomous administration school in neighbouring towns), one could facilitate joint activities—a science fair or a student exchange for a week. Even when full integration is not possible, structured inter-school interactions can chip away at mistrust. The key is to ensure it is reciprocal and sustained. For example, in Northern Ireland, one-off encounters were found less effective; Syria programmes therefore must be regular.

Another lesson is the need for government and policy support. Northern Ireland's integrated schools eventually received state funding and a legal framework. Similarly, both Sierra Leone and Rwanda's policies for peace-oriented education received support. In Syria, once a national government is more representative post-conflict, it should also consider policies that incentivise mixed enrolment. Meanwhile, NGOs and local communities can pilot integration.

Finally, Northern Ireland's case shows that attitude change in youth is achievable and can persist. Monitoring attitudes of Syrian youth in various education settings can similarly be useful in order to gauge impact. Perhaps a future study in Syria might compare youths who attended mixed programmes versus those who did not, akin to research in the Northern Ireland case, to demonstrate outcomes. The hope is that by deliberately mixing Syria's returnee children with those who remained inside Syria and those from varying backgrounds all together in learning environments, future generations will be less susceptible to the sectarian manipulation that fuelled war.

Case Study 6: Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Risks of Segregated Education

Context:

Bosnia's 1992–1995 war ended in a peace agreement that cemented ethnic division territorially (Bosniak/Croat Federation and Serb Republic entities). Education became one of the most contentious sectors post-war. Rather than integrating, many communities kept "two schools under one roof."⁷³ This meant Croat and Bosniak students attend the same school building but are taught separately with different curricula and often even start times. In Republika Srpska, almost all schools follow a Serb-centric curriculum. The idea was initially a temporary compromise, but it has endured. International agencies have pushed for common curriculum standards and inclusive education, with limited success.

Intervention:

Various peace education projects tried to counteract this segregation:

Curriculum reform efforts: UNESCO and OSCE helped develop shared curriculum guidelines in subjects like math and science. These subjects were used as they are generally considered non-controversial. They also worked on history textbook reviews to eliminate extreme bias. However, each

⁷³ Halilovic-Pastuovic, M. (2022). Textbook politics: education in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. In *Teaching peace and conflict: The multiple roles of school textbooks in peacebuilding* (pp. 173–190). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

ethnic group still produced its own textbooks emphasising its narrative.⁷⁴

Integrated schools pilot: A few genuinely integrated schools were established in places like Sarajevo and Brčko District, the latter of which was under special multi-ethnic administration. These schools taught a unified curriculum and had mixed staff.

Inter-group activities: NGOs ran numerous programmes to bring Bosniak, Croat, and Serb youth together, including peace camps, dialogue workshops, joint student councils, etc. One notable initiative was the Nansen Dialogue Centre in Sarajevo which facilitated dialogues on education policy among teachers and officials from different ethnic backgrounds, seeking to build consensus for integration.⁷⁵

Monitoring and legal action: Civil society advocates even resorted to lawsuits to end “two schools under one roof” on the basis of discrimination. Courts in the Federation actually ruled the practice unconstitutional in 2014, but implementation lags.

Results:

Unfortunately, Bosnia illustrates a case where education did not become the hoped-for bridge, and the consequences are evident in continued social mistrust. Studies of textbooks show that each group’s books present an ethnocentric version of history, with very little mention of the others’ positive contributions or shared experiences.⁷⁶ This reinforces division in young minds. A systematic textbook analysis found that similarities between groups’ history books were rarely highlighted (only 3–11% of content addressed commonalities), whereas conflicts and differences were emphasised far more. The result is that each new generation is essentially educated into a separate collective memory, which hinders reconciliation.

Surveys of Bosnian youth reflect high levels of bias and mistrust toward other ethnicities in areas without integrated education. By contrast, the small integrated schools have had outcomes echoing Northern Ireland where their students tend to hold more positive attitudes about ethnic others and prefer mixed environments.⁷⁷ However, because these integrated settings are rare, their impact on society at large is limited.

Bosnia’s stagnation in education unification is often cited as a cautionary tale. Two decades after the war, the country remains polarised and its political system paralysed by ethnic quotas. Young people have few opportunities to challenge stereotypes if their schooling keeps them apart. Arguably, this has impeded positive peace: Bosnia has no war (negative peace) but lacks the deep social healing (positive peace) that integrated education might have fostered.

Implication for Syria

The Bosnian case underscores what Syria should avoid. If post-war education in Syria was envisaged

⁷⁴ Baranović, B., Ivas, I., & Hodžić, A. (2000). Education for Peace: A Conflict Resolution Initiative for Post-War Bosnia. *Balkan*, 2, 38–40.

⁷⁵ Goranci-Brkic, L. (2013). Interethnic Dialogue and Cooperation for Integrated Education in BiH: The Practice and Experiences of the Nansen Dialogue Center Sarajevo. In *Integrated Education in Conflicted Societies* (pp. 59–68). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Roulston, S., & Hansson, U. (2019). Kicking the can down the road? Educational solutions to the challenges of divided societies: a Northern Ireland case study. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 42(2), 170–183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2019.1594171>

to be strictly organised by sect and/or ethnicity, this would need to be actively discouraged. For example, if the Alawites only learn their narrative, Sunnis theirs, and Kurds theirs, this situation could entrench the fractures and sow future conflict. Bosnia shows that separate schooling often perpetuates “us vs. them” thinking.⁷⁸ Therefore, even if Syria ends up with a federal or decentralised political structure, a concerted effort should be made for a common education framework that all groups buy into, with room for local cultural content but within a unifying vision.

It may be tempting for different factions in Syria to demand control of their own education systems. On the ground in Syria, some of that tendency is already a reality. But as Bosnia warns, the price of cementing those parallel systems can be a frozen conflict mindset. Syria’s policymakers and international supporters should prioritise a curriculum commission and integration task forces early in the peace process to prevent diverging narratives. Even symbolic steps like a unified national examination or shared civic education module taught in all areas can make a difference.

Bosnia also teaches us that textbook content matters. Syria’s textbooks will need a thorough review to remove bias and foster inclusion. If multiple versions are necessary, such as language-specific ones for Arabic and Kurdish languages, they should be coordinated so that they do not contradict each other on sensitive historical or identity points.

In short, the lesson is that one should not institutionalise divisions through education. Instead, one should use education reform as a tool to create a shared sense of nationhood after conflict. The heavy international engagement in Bosnia’s education reform, which partially failed due to local politics, suggests also that local political will is crucial. Syria’s peacebuilding leadership must champion integrated education as part of the reconciliation process, or risk sowing seeds of future discord.

⁷⁸ Kovač, V. B. (2024). “Us” vs. “Them”: a systematic analysis of history textbooks in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina across three ethnic educational programmes. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 57(3), 271–286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2024.2436353>

Case Study 7: South Sudan

Accelerated Learning and Peacebuilding amidst Ongoing Conflict

Context:

Gaining independence in 2011 after decades of war with Sudan, South Sudan almost immediately fell into internal conflict between 2013–2018. Education indicators were among the worst globally, and the conflict's ethnic dimensions with the Dinka versus Nuer ethnic groups at war added to the country's challenges. Many youths were uneducated, and some were involved in armed groups.

Intervention:

Despite conflict, South Sudan, with donor support, pushed forward on education for peace.

Accelerated Learning Programmes (ALP): Even during conflict, NGOs and the Education Ministry ran ALPs targeting demobilised child soldiers and other out-of-school adolescents. As noted earlier, ASEP provided a secondary-level accelerated programme for young teachers and women.⁷⁹ At primary level, an Accelerated Learning Programme condensed 8 years of primary into 4, and importantly, it was open to older youth up to age 18.

These ALPs had a peace education component, teaching tolerance and life skills. Peacebuilding education in curriculum areas, such in the country's national curriculum developed in 2015, included a subject called 'Peace Education and Life Skills' mandating lessons on unity, diversity, and conflict resolution.⁸⁰ Teacher guides were produced to facilitate interactive learning such as role-plays and discussions about ethnic cooperation. Also, community-based education and protection were present in areas with heavy displacement. Another key feature in South Sudan were community girls' schools and pastoralist education programmes for nomadic cattle camps, which were set up to reach marginalised groups. These often doubled as community meeting points where messages of reconciliation were spread. For example, in one initiative, adolescent girls in an ALP formed a peace club and led outreach dramas in their communities about ending revenge killings, which leveraged their new education status to influence social norms.

Results:

The impact in South Sudan has been mixed—the context of ongoing conflict made sustained implementation hard. However, there were bright spots. Over 100,000 learners enrolled in primary ALP centres in the first few years, and many went on to formal schools or vocational training, according to UNICEF reports. The presence of ALP and community schools in volatile areas provided *islands of normalcy* and at times even safe refuge during violence, and the communities respected these learning spaces. One anecdote recounts how in a town in Jonglei state, opposing militias agreed to spare the local school where ALP classes were held after community elders pleaded citing the

⁷⁹See here <https://www.ukfiet.org/2021/accelerated-secondary-education-as-an-alternative-to-returning-to-school-a-case-study-from-south-sudan/#:~:text=The%20second%20target%20group%20was,have%20been%20pressured%20into%20becoming>

⁸⁰<https://www.unicef.org/media/96556/file/UNICEF-PBEA-Final-Report.pdf#:~:text=Somalia%20and%20Yemen%2C%20communities%20built,resolved%20conflicts%20through%20school%20construction>

importance of education and showing education's potential to be a neutral ground.

On the attitudinal side, a 2016 UNICEF evaluation across several PBEA countries noted that in South Sudan, students in peace education programmes showed higher acceptance of other ethnic groups in surveys than those who had not been exposed to such content. Moreover, the integration of peace messages in schooling correlated with slight increases in trust towards government schools among parents, hinting at improved vertical social cohesion. Yet, the recurrence of conflict obviously overwhelmed many positive efforts. And, many schools were destroyed or closed, and teachers fled, which underscores that educational peacebuilding cannot succeed in isolation from the broader political peace process.

Implication for Syria:

South Sudan offers lessons on implementing education for peace amid instability.

Flexibility and local partnerships: Many education programmes were delivered through local organisations or churches, which maintained access when international staff had to evacuate.⁸¹ In Syria, working with local civil society and communities is likewise key to keep education going in conflict-prone areas (e.g., volunteer teachers in Idlib's informal schools have effectively done this). A focus on marginalised groups in South Sudan's ALPs addressed pastoralists and girls, showing the importance of reaching those traditionally left out. In Syria, that might mean ensuring education for groups like displaced minorities, children in besieged or former ISIS areas who had no schooling, etc., as a priority for cohesion so no group should feel left behind. Furthermore, integrating peace into everyday learning is critical, even if formal curriculum reform takes time. To assist, the teachers can be trained to integrate simple peace activities. In South Sudan, some teachers would start class with a 'unity song' or use group work deliberately mixing tribes. Syrian educators can adopt similar micro-practices that deliberately mix children from different backgrounds in group assignments, rotate leadership roles, and celebrate all cultural holidays in class. Another anchoring effect is that education amid uncertainty is stabilising. Perhaps the biggest takeaway is that one cannot wait for perfect peace to start using education to build peace. South Sudan shows that even amid ceasefires and flare-ups, continuing education programmes, especially non-formal ones, was crucial to prevent a lost generation and to maintain social fabric. Syria, even if still fragmented, should invest in these programmes now. They both mitigate current suffering and lay groundwork for the post-conflict recovery.

These case studies reinforce and complement each other. Whether inclusive, flexible, or both, education approaches have repeatedly shown contributions to stability and reconciliation. By contrast, exclusion or segregation in education often exacerbate divisions. Syria's strategy can draw on the successes like Nepal's SZOP for safe schools, Northern Ireland's integration for trust-building, and Lebanon's inclusion of refugees to pre-empt conflict. At the same time, it should consciously avoid the pitfalls evident in Bosnia's segregated status quo, as any neglect of quality or equity undercuts legitimacy. Each context is unique, but human dynamics of trust, identity, and hope through education resonate similarly.

MONITORING, INDICATORS, AND EVALUATION TOOLS FOR SOCIAL COHESION OUTCOMES

To ensure that education interventions are indeed contributing to social cohesion and peacebuilding,

⁸¹ Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy in Conflict-affected Contexts Programme: Learning for Peace. (2012). <https://www.unicef.org/media/96556/file/UNICEF-PBEA-Final-Report.pdf>

robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is needed. This section outlines key indicators that draw on global frameworks such as the SAFE approach and established SEL and/or cohesion metrics, and tools for tracking progress in Syria's programmes. It also discusses the role of third-party monitoring in conflict contexts to enhance credibility.

Indicator Framework: SAFE and Beyond

High-quality SEL programmes are often designed to be what is referred to as SAFE, i.e., using Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit approaches. This acronym, originating from CASEL research, guides programme design and can inform indicator development. For sequenced, one asks whether the programme follows a logical stepwise process such as first, building trust, then tackling deeper issues. The indicator refers to the presence of a structured curriculum or session plan that progressively builds skills. Secondly, is it active, otherwise asking, does it use active learning methods such as role plays and games rather than passive lectures to impart knowledge? The indicator is the percent of activities that are participatory versus lecture-based in a given programme. Third, focus is next. Does it allocate sufficient time and attention to SEL or peace objectives so that they are not just incidental? The indicator is then how many hours are dedicated per week for SEL or peace-oriented activities. Fourth, is it explicit? Does it clearly define the specific skills or values being nurtured or taught, such as empathy or teamwork skill? The indicator would be that the curriculum and teacher lesson plans explicitly mention targeted skills.

While SAFE is about programme quality, for outcomes we need mixed-method indicators capturing changes in attitudes, behaviours, and community relations. Based on global experience such as UNICEF's Learning for Peace M&E and INEE's guidance, we propose indicators in several domains:

Social Cohesion (Horizontal) Indicators

There are many domains that could be measured for social cohesion. A key area is intergroup relations or contact: in-person shared activities where students live in mixed populations or perhaps virtual shared activities with those living further away. With this in mind, an indicator is the percent of students who report having friends from a different ethnic or sectarian group. In Northern Ireland, this was a crucial metric.⁸² Syria can use similar self-reported friendship data or map social networks in a class. Attitudes of tolerance is another area that is typically used for determining changes and improved cohesion among groups. The indicator is the change in proportion of youth who express tolerant attitudes towards other groups. This can be measured by a scale that measures attitudinal change. Many peace programmes use adapted Bogardus social distance scales or similar questionnaires pre- and post-intervention.⁸³ Incidents of identity-based conflict can be recorded: e.g. *Number of reported bullying or conflict incidents in school related to identity differences*. A decrease would suggest improved cohesion. Teachers can keep logs, and student surveys can ask if they feel safe from identity-based harassment. Participation and inclusion measures can include, e.g., *Diversity of student representation in student councils or extracurricular leadership positions*. If all leadership is dominated by one group, cohesion is suspect; a balanced representation indicates inclusion. Finally, the key concepts of trust and cooperation among students can be measured

⁸² Integrated Education in Northern Ireland: Education for Peace? December 2017

DOI:10.1007/978-3-319-45289-0_5 In book: *Enlarging the Scope of Peace Psychology* (pp.75-92 Author, Shelley McKeown

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311484155_Integrated_Education_in_Northern_Ireland_Education_for_Peace

⁸³ Martin, E. (2014). A quasi-experimental approach to measuring the impact of educational interventions on attitudes and social distance towards depression, in relation to authoritarian personality type

qualitatively, via observations or sociometric exercises (who do students choose to work with?), and quantitatively via survey items (e.g. “*Do you trust students from X group?*” on a Likert scale, though this is at risk of social desirability reporting bias). These concepts remain central to peacebuilding and underlying strengthening of social cohesion.

Peacebuilding (Vertical/Structural) Indicators:

Perception of fairness refers to the percentage of community members who feel the education system treats their group fairly. This could be captured in community surveys or focus groups. It gets at vertical cohesion, in particular ‘trust in institutions’ as PBEA’s final report notes. Curriculum reform progress can be viewed as: 1) Existence of a revised curriculum that is conflict-sensitive (yes/no), and 2) number of teachers trained in the new curriculum or additional measures. These are more output oriented indicators but vital to track structural changes over time. Additionally, grievance resolution can be seen as the number of disputes or grievances that are related to educational access or resources resolved through peaceful mechanisms. Syria could set up feedback or complaint committees as Nepal’s school management committees did, in order to track how many potential conflicts arise over teacher hiring, language of instruction, or other debated elements of the system and the extent to which these get mediated successfully.

At a systems level, policy inclusion may be, for example, adopting policies such as language accommodation or minority hiring quotas in the education system workforce to address conflict drivers of exclusion. Monitoring such policy changes and their implementation can quantify commitment to positive peace.

Psychosocial and Individual SEL Indicators

Well-being and trauma symptom scores on child psychosocial well-being scales such as the known Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)⁸⁴ are measures of improvement indicating PSS success. safe healing spaces should see reductions in severe distress signs. In considering SEL skill acquisition, one would assess empathy, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills or similar competencies. Some SEL programmes use simple performance tasks or scenario responses to gauge if children can apply skills. An example of this is whether a student can articulate how to resolve a hypothetical conflict without fighting. When it comes to overarching school climate, an index is commonly used, for how this is perceived by students or teachers. It covers safety, teacher-student relationships, respect among peers, or other areas. A positive shift in climate correlates with social cohesion.

Educational Outcomes (as indirect peace indicators):

Attendance and Retention: High attendance, low dropout especially among formerly marginalised groups can indicate increased engagement and hope or a peace dividend. For example, monitoring indicators may include *attendance rates of IDP children vs. baseline*. Lebanon’s second shift saw attendance rise when social cohesion measures were in place.

Academic Achievement Gaps: Reductions in achievement gaps between groups (such as girls versus boys, region versus region) can signal greater equity which is important for structural peace. An indicator could be, for example, *the difference in exam pass rates between two sectarian districts*, which ideally should narrow over time.

⁸⁴ Goodman, R. (1997). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: a research note. *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry*, 38(5), 581–586.

Mixed-method approaches combining quantitative data, including surveys, attendance records, incident reports, and qualitative methods, including focus group discussions, interviews, classroom observations, and student narratives, is crucial. Qualitative data provides context and explains the ‘why’ behind numbers. For instance, if a survey shows 80% of students have cross-group friends, interviews might reveal if that resulted from group work in class or a peace club activity, or some shared activity outside the education sector.

Tools and Data Sources:

Surveys and Attitude Scales: Standardised questionnaires for students, teachers, and parents at baseline and endline of programmes. Can include items on trust, tolerance, sense of safety, civic attitudes. The Everyday Peace Indicators approach^{85,86} can be adapted: have communities define what peace means to them (e.g. “children playing together from different communities” could be an indicator they choose) and measure that.

Classroom/School Observations: Trained monitors or third-party evaluators visit classes and observe interactions. Are students mixing? Is the teacher using inclusive language? Checklists can guide them. For example, they can note if any hate speech is observed, or if classroom displays reflect multiple cultures.

Administrative Data: EMIS (Education Management Info System) data disaggregated (if possible) by region/sect/gender can show trends in enrolment and dropouts. PBEA in some countries incorporated conflict-sensitivity into EMIS: for example, Burundi added fields to track attacks on schools or conflict incidents.⁸⁷ Syria could integrate similar fields to monitor if any conflict incidents affect education.

Third-Party Monitoring (TPM): In a polarised or insecure setting, independent monitors (e.g., contracted NGOs or community committees) can gather data where official staff might not be trusted. For example, in opposition-held areas, a neutral NGO might be better placed to survey community sentiments on education than a government agency. Utilising tech, such as SMS-based surveys or crowd-sourcing feedback platforms, can be part of TPM to get information from hard-to-reach areas or ensure anonymity to encourage honest responses.

Case studies and Most Significant Change (MSC): Qualitative MSC stories can capture personal experiences of change, such as a student recounting how the peace club changed his view of a rival tribe. Periodically collecting stories humanises the data and can highlight outcomes not captured by formal indicators.

Monitoring Models and Practical Considerations:

Implementing M&E in Syria’s context faces challenges. The limited access, security risks, mistrust of data collectors, and politicisation of information has impacted the number, rigour, and even possibility of having robust M&E systems. A multi-layered approach is advised in effort to build M&E capacity among local partners, involving training Syrian NGOs and even school staff in basic data

⁸⁵ What Is Positive Peace?,” Institute for Economics and Peace,
<https://www.economicsandpeace.org/about/faqs/>

⁸⁶ Peace, D. (2019). Defining Peace. Designing Peace. <https://exhibitions.cooperhewitt.org/designing-peace/copy-3/>

⁸⁷ Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy in Conflict-affected Contexts Programme: Learning for Peace. (2012). <https://www.unicef.org/media/96556/file/UNICEF-PBEA-Final-Report.pdf>

collection tools and ensuring conflict-sensitive approaches so that asking questions about identity does not inflame tensions. Community monitors can be empowered to track indicators like attendance, incidents, etc., and feed information upward.

Using technology and remote monitoring. If areas are inaccessible, phone surveys or WhatsApp questionnaires for teachers may be considered, noting, however, issues of honesty and sampling. Satellite imagery can be used for infrastructure monitoring (e.g., seeing whether schools are rebuilt), though this is less relevant for social indicators. Third-party evaluations need to be commissioned by independent evaluators to determine if pilot programmes are effective from the perspective of impartial insight. For example, after one year of a trauma-SEL programme in Idlib, an academic team could do an outcome evaluation comparing psychosocial scores with a control group to validate the model. Participatory monitoring is a manner of engaging youth themselves in monitoring via youth-led assessments that can be empowering and yield candid results. For instance, a group of students may be trained as “peace evaluators” to interview peers about changes they see.

Alignment with global indices gains legitimacy. Linking with initiatives like the Institute for Economics and Peace’s Positive Peace Index or similar may be considered to situate Syria’s progress on broader peace factors, for example, tracking attitudes, institutions, structures as per positive peace components. While perhaps too high-level for programme evaluation, it can be effective for contextual monitoring.

In terms of indicators for two priority areas: for each of the high-displacement areas targeted, one could have area-specific baselines (education access rates, tensions indices) and then monitor those after interventions. These might use the Humanitarian Needs Overview for data which often include education and social cohesion metrics—the 2023 Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview might have figures on children in school, perception of safety, etc., that can serve as baselines.⁸⁸

Finally, any M&E should not just be for accountability but for learning and adaptation. Given the rapid review nature of this study, we recommend an adaptive management approach for SEP: regularly reviewing monitoring data and adjusting programmes. For example, if an indicator shows that trust in a particular region’s education services is not improving, investigate why—maybe a certain group feels unheard, so a local dialogue forum might be established to address that. Or if intergroup friendships are not forming in a programme, maybe the activities are not truly mixing kids; they might be sitting separately even in the same room, which calls for more intentional facilitation.

In sum, by tracking a combination of education outputs (enrolment, etc.), peace outcomes (attitudes, behaviours), and process indicators (participation, inclusion), SEP and its partners can measure whether they are on course toward building social cohesion and peace. The evidence from global cases provides confidence that changes can be captured: for instance, Northern Ireland measured attitude change, Nepal measured reduction in strikes, Burundi measured youth engagement numbers, etc. Syria’s monitoring system can incorporate all these dimensions.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Grounded in the evidence and analysis above, we present strategic recommendations for Syria’s existing and prospective education programmes for donors and partners. These are divided into immediate and medium-term actions, aligned with a post-Assad transition but with many steps that can begin now in preparation.

⁸⁸ See more information <https://world-education-blog.org/2019/12/16/internally-displaced-people-and-education-in-syria/#:~:text=analysis%20by%20senior%20commentators%2C%20including,and%20increasingly>

Embed Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding Objectives Equally in Education Strategy

Syria's education stakeholders should formally recognise both social cohesion and peacebuilding as core objectives of the education sector in crisis recovery, and articulate distinct strategies for each. This means in any sector plans or donor strategies, include goals and indicators for social cohesion (trust, inclusion) and peacebuilding (addressing conflict drivers) alongside traditional access and quality targets. Concretely, policy making can be done when an issue or strategy document becomes officially agreed and recognised, and is at either ministry or sector-working-group level. It would be critical to define education for social cohesion versus peacebuilding (as in this review) and commit to promoting both. This helps set a common vision and counters any one-sided approach. Ideally, if time and capacity permits, designate focal points to create roles or working groups focused on peacebuilding education, ensuring expertise is available to guide programming (as UNICEF did by recruiting peacebuilding officers).⁸⁹ Balance funding allocations by advocating with donors that funding envelopes support both "software" such as community cohesion activities and SEL training and "hardware" which would entail school rehabilitation and revision of education materials in tandem. Peace outcomes need investment.

Rationale

This ensures that, from the top, education is not seen merely as humanitarian relief or human capital development, but also as a peace instrument. The UNICEF Learning for Peace programme found that making peacebuilding explicit in education programming improved clarity of results and resources for it. In Syria, such an approach could unify currently disparate projects under a common peace umbrella.

Prioritise Trauma-Informed SEL and PSS Interventions at Scale

Based on evidence that psychosocial recovery underpins all other gains, SEP should scale up trauma-informed practices as a foundational layer; Teacher Training in PSS can rapidly train large numbers of teachers (including volunteer and interim teachers) in basic trauma-informed pedagogy and classroom PSS. Use enhanced cascade models that continue to train trainers as well as multiple teacher sessions across school vacations and/or reinforced online or via WhatsApp; and include modules on recognising trauma, psychological first aid, positive discipline, and SEL activities. Ensure teachers in high-displacement areas are trained first, as those children likely have the highest trauma exposure. Integrate SEL into curriculum by incorporating structured SEL lessons or periods into the weekly timetable of schools and learning centres. This could be a stand-alone "well-being" class or infusion into existing subjects. Use existing SEL curricula tailored to the conflict at hand; the 2021 SEL systematic review identifies effective programmes that can be adapted to the Syrian context (culturally relevant stories/examples).⁹⁰ Psychosocial support services in programmes, where possible, could deploy psychosocial support professionals or paraprofessionals to schools or communities, or even a roving counsellor model where one counsellor covers five schools. Also set up referral pathways for children needing more intensive mental health support. Healing spaces in priority areas can aim to establish Safe Healing and Learning Spaces (SHLS). This is a known intervention and could be established in the two priority areas (northwest and northeast Syria) for populations with limited school access as interim measures. These combine a protective

⁸⁹ UNICEF PBEA Final Report <https://www.unicef.org/media/96556/file/UNICEF-PBEA-Final-Report.pdf#:~:text=Expertise%20in%20peacebuilding%20and%20shared,in%20peacebuilding%20and%20conflict%20resolution>

⁹⁰ ALDIN, C. O. M. E. (2021). SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) SYSTEMATIC REVIEW.

environment with education and PSS. Coordinate with child protection actors to manage these spaces, ensuring they meet INEE minimum standards for psychosocial well-being.

Rationale:

Syria's widespread trauma is a cross-cutting barrier. Without addressing it, academic and social goals will be less effective. The investment in SEL/PSS has proven returns in improved behaviour, reduced violence, and readiness to learn, and in some cases improved academic outcomes.⁹¹ Also, visibly caring for children's well-being builds trust in the education system (vertical cohesion) among parents and communities. This recommendation is immediate. Following this, such training and integration can start even while conflicts simmer, leveraging NGOs in various areas.

Expand and Strengthen Accelerated Learning Programmes (ALPs) for Out-of-School and Over-Age Youth

To prevent a lost generation and mitigate youth-related conflict risks, existing and prospective education programmes should make ALPs a flagship initiative and a high priority. For example, a national ALP Framework can develop a unified curriculum and operational framework that can be used by all providers, including government, NGOs, and community groups. The basic tenets are that it should be flexible with modular learning levels rather than strict grade progression. The ALP content needs to be condensed so that the primary cycle can be completed in three to four years total, and the skills include social emotional competencies (e.g., empathy, prosocial behaviours), life skills, and peace education components. Get buy-in from different education authorities (SIG, Kurdish admin, etc.) so it is accepted widely.

Displaced and conflict-affected youth would be prioritised and as such, the need to map out concentrations of over-age, out-of-school children is first priority. For example, IDP camps, former ISIS areas, and areas for returning refugee populations are locations for early engagement and for opening ALP centres. Use existing facilities in afternoons or set up learning centres in communities. Ensure girls, minorities, and disabled youth are proactively included, through community outreach and possibly incentives.

Additionally, it is critically important to train ALP educators and recruit educators, including potentially volunteer teachers, or even educated youth from the communities. The training itself can focus on the ALP pedagogy, which should be learner-centred and supportive, and take into account that many learners may have faced traumas or been combatants during the warring period. Also, training them in delivering the peace and life skills content explicitly can help learners heal. Recognised certification allows for credible transition pathways that may include mechanisms for ALP graduates to re-enter formal education, begin vocational training, or move into the workforce. For example, establish an ALP completion exam recognised by the Ministry of Education in the post-Assad central ministry or interim authorities for these varied results and in order to give ALP learners legitimate credentials.

Partnerships developed with a wide range of employers and vocational institutes that are willing and able to accept ALP graduates constitute an important step in the pathways as well. ALPs offer possibilities of innovative modalities, such as mobile ALP models with specific classes that move with pastoral communities or radio-based ALP for remote areas. Radio-based learning can build on long-

⁹¹ Durlak JA, Weissberg RP, Dymnicki AB, Taylor RD, Schellinger KB. The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Dev.* 2011 Jan-Feb;82(1):405-32. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x. PMID: 21291449.

term experiences in Sierra Leone⁹² and South Sudan. Additionally, ALP for adults may be shorter literacy programmes for parents to promote intergenerational healing and support for schooling.

Rationale:

ALPs directly address the massive backlog of unreached children, which if left unaddressed can fuel instability and then, idle, disenfranchised youth become a security concern. Moreover, as the case studies show, ALPs can be designed to also impart social cohesion values, for example, group projects that mix clans or content that stresses unity. This recommendation is urgent because every year of delay sees tens of thousands age out of the chance for education. From a peace perspective, ALPs are a form of violence prevention, channelling youth energies into learning rather than desperation or militancy. Donors like Education Cannot Wait and others have funding streams specifically for such catch-up programmes and should be engaged.

Implement Remedial and Afterschool Programmes to Support Integration in Two Priority Areas

Focus on high-displacement, low-access regions identified in Syria, for example, Northwest Syria/Idlib and Northeast Syria, to roll out intensive remedial and extracurricular programmes. This could begin with organising community learning circles and afterschool clubs in communities where displaced and host children can come together for homework help and language support. These can be run by trained youth facilitators or volunteer teachers. They reinforce academic skills and encourage friendships across host-displaced lines in a low-pressure setting. On Saturdays, peace clubs offering catch up and remedial classes establish regular weekend sessions that combine academic catch-up with peace education activities. For example, Saturday mornings for tutoring in math and language; afternoons for sports, arts, or theatre activities that include explicit social cohesion aims (like cooperative games). Ensure participation of various groups. Lebanon's approach to Saturday remedies for both Lebanese and Syrians can be instructive.

Mother-Tongue and Second Language Bridging: In Northeast Syria, many Kurdish or other minority children may struggle if the main curriculum is Arabic. Provide afterschool language bridging classes for Arabic for non-Arabs, and possibly basic Kurdish/Assyrian for Arab teachers in those areas to reduce language barriers that can cause ethnic self-segregation in school. This affirms linguistic rights, and a component of positive peace, while enabling integration in mixed schools.

Sports and Arts for Cohesion: Scale up sports leagues, music, and arts programmes that intentionally mix youth from different communities (e.g., host and IDP, different sects). Perhaps create regional youth sports tournaments with mixed teams, drama clubs that produce plays on reconciliation themes, etc. Use and adapt models like Burundi's Right to Play clubs. This can be tied into existing cultural traditions that may revive a tradition of joint festivals or communal games that war disrupted.

Safe Transportation and Meeting Spaces: A practical barrier often is that displaced kids might not mingle if they live in separate camps. Provide transport or choose neutral venues for joint afterschool activities. In Idlib, for instance, coordinate with local councils to use community centres or safe open areas for joint activities, ensuring security is arranged and maybe via community policing or agreements as in Nepal's SZOP codes.

⁹² Barnett S, van Dijk J, Swaray A, Amara T, Young P. Redesigning an education project for child friendly radio: a multisectoral collaboration to promote children's health, education, and human rights after a humanitarian crisis in Sierra Leone *BMJ* 2018; 363 :k4667 doi:10.1136/bmj.k4667

Rationale:

These programmes directly foster day-to-day contact and support for children who face the toughest circumstances. They also engage the *whole child*—not just academic, but also social and emotional, development. By prioritising the two regions where needs and tensions are highest, SEP can demonstrate quick wins (for example, within a year, show increased literacy rates and improved social relations indicators in those localities). It also aligns with the direction to handle safe reception and integration of displaced and returnees in prioritised areas. Another benefit: Afterschool programmes can be more easily supported by NGOs and communities even if formal schools are under strain or political contention; they add capacity without as much bureaucratic overhead.

Ensure Conflict-Sensitive Curriculum and Teaching Practices (Positive Peace through Content)

Revising what is taught and how it is taught is fundamental for long-term peace:

Curriculum Content Review Committee: Establish a representative curriculum reform committee (including educators from different regions/ethnicities, and possibly child psychologists, historians, etc.) to review textbooks and syllabi for bias, exclusion, or inflammatory content. Start with identifying the existing subjects being taught and consider history, civics, language, and literature revisions first. Remove any stereotyping and add content that highlights shared heritage and cooperation and includes pedagogy within the content.

Incorporate Peace Education Themes: Introduce elements of human rights education, civic engagement, and mutual respect into the curriculum. For example, develop units on famous examples of Syrian unity or compassion across lines, lessons on nonviolent conflict resolution, and critical thinking about prejudice. This can draw on resources from UNESCO's peace education guides and lessons learned in places like Sierra Leone and South Africa.⁹³

Bilingual/Multilingual Education: Recognise Syria's linguistic diversity (Arabic, Kurdish, etc.) in the education system as a way to respect all groups. Recognising the large and, at times, difficult effort involved to enact such policies may take time, this would be a long term perspective. This might mean allowing mother-tongue instruction in early grades in Kurdish-majority areas or including Kurdish and other minority language/culture classes in the national curriculum. It sends a powerful message of inclusion, while addressing past cultural marginalization. Bosnia's failure in this regard shows the cost of perceived cultural domination,⁹⁴ whereas acknowledging languages can strengthen cohesion.

Teacher Practice: Train and incentivise teachers to use learner-centred, participatory methods that encourage student voice and collaboration. Notably, there may be limitations on the teacher workforce in this context and bias based on experiences may need to be managed as well. Didactic, authoritarian teaching can mirror authoritarian social relations; in contrast, if students learn in a democratic classroom environment (discussing, respecting differing opinions, participating in decision-making), they practice the skills of positive peace. For instance, encourage forming mixed-ability or mixed-background study teams, and use teaching aids that represent various identities such as names and contexts from different regions in math problems.

⁹³ See also Batton et al. (2026) for approaches to conflict resolution education conflict-affected settings.

⁹⁴ Education for peace – a conflict resolution initiative for post-war Bosnia – Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa. (2025, October 18). Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa. https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/cp_article/education-for-peace-a-conflict-resolution-initiative-for-post-war-bosnia/

Teaching Controversial History: Develop a careful approach to teaching the recent conflict in due course. This might initially involve *avoidance of blame narratives* and focus on universal suffering and the need for peace, before gradually introducing more nuanced truths as the society processes them (perhaps in higher grades). Consider drawing on techniques used in Rwanda where there was teaching about unity and the dangers of division or Northern Ireland where the approach was to teach multiple perspectives in a small set of schools. There are additional examples through the NISSEM network to study⁹⁵. External support from truth and reconciliation bodies could eventually feed into curriculum content on the war.

Rationale:

Education content can either undermine or promote peace. Given that Syria's prior curriculum reflected a different political situation, reform is essential for a new social contract. The UNICEF synthesis report emphasised that education sector reform addressing issues that fuelled conflict (like inequitable access, biased content) is crucial to peace. Conflict-sensitive education ensures that what children learn in school does not perpetuate grievances or falsehoods. This is a medium-term action (curriculum change takes time and consensus), but preparatory work (reviews, piloting new materials) can start immediately. It complements short-term programmes: while SEL and clubs do the immediate repair work, curriculum change institutionalises peacebuilding for the next generation.

Engage Communities and Youth as Partners in Peace Education

Top-down measures alone won't suffice. The social cohesion agenda must be co-owned by communities. Beginning with community dialogues and education shuras (councils) in Syrian communities e.g., at the village or neighbourhood level, there can be convening of regular forums to discuss peace and education's role. It is possible to perhaps overlay these dialogue activities on existing parent-teacher associations' meetings or forming new education shuras where community members discuss education issues, voice concerns, and contribute ideas to promote social cohesion. Importantly, diverse representation (IDPs and hosts, different sects, men and women) needs to be built in. This echoes Nepal's local code of conduct gatherings and Sierra Leone's community healing dialogues, rooted in schools.⁹⁶

Youth have a key role in creating channels for youth to be not just beneficiaries but leaders. For example, support youth peace committees or networks that connect peace club leaders from different schools to coordinate inter-school events and advocate for their needs. Perhaps a national Syrian Youth Education for Peace Summit could be held annually (even virtually, if travel is hard) to give youth a platform to share experiences from their communities and propose solutions. Leverage religious and local leaders in Syria's social fabric including influential religious figures and elders. Engage them to champion the importance of social cohesion in education. For example, have imams, priests, or respected tribal leaders speak at school events about unity, encourage families to send kids to integrated programmes, and mediate when conflicts arise around schooling. Communication campaigns that disseminate and run public information campaigns highlighting "success stories" of education bringing communities together can be a positive emphasis for peace. Radio, social media, and community theatre can disseminate messages like children from X and Y villages studying and playing together, teachers of different backgrounds teaming up, etc. During Nepal's SZOP, advocacy with political parties was key; similarly in Syria, public commitment from key figures that they will keep education depoliticised and inclusive will influence attitudes.

⁹⁵ See more information in Volume 1 Chapters 16 and 23 in NISSEM <https://nissem.org/>

⁹⁶ See more information <https://governancefutures.org/2025/04/fambul-tok-a-case-study-of-reintegration-reconciliation-and-cultural-practices-in-sierra-leone/#:~:text=A%20Sierra%20Leonean%20organization%20that,ended%20in%20the%20early%202000s>

Rationale

Education takes place in a community context. If communities are not engaged, programmes may fail or even spark backlash (e.g., rumours that one group's narrative is being imposed could torpedo curriculum reforms). On the other hand, community support can amplify programme impact such as parents reinforcing SEL at home, for example. Youth involvement is also critical because they are the bridge between school and society. Many parties to conflicts have youth wings; better to channel that energy into peace clubs than street protests or violent uprisings. By fostering local ownership, these interventions build vertical cohesion such as trust and partnership between society and education providers and make outcomes more sustainable.

Coordinate Across Levels and Sectors (Adopt a Multi-Level “Peace Wedge” Approach)

Following the multi-level framework, ensure interventions and policies align from top to bottom and link with other sectors:

National-Level Commitment: Push for inclusion of education for peace in any national peace or reconstruction plans. For example, if a peace accord or transition plan is developed, include an education clause. Plans can include quotas for marginalised groups in teacher training and education jobs, or guarantees for language rights in schools. Garner funding commitments from major donors for an “Education Peacebuilding Fund” similar to the PBF model, focusing on innovative pilot projects in education. At the same time, education system reforms at ministry or department levels would help mainstream conflict sensitivity in all operations. Budgeting should prioritise equitable resource distribution, teacher deployment, and balanced assignments, so all areas get quality teachers and examinations. Safety could be strengthened by implementing codes of conduct protecting schools nationwide, building off Nepal's model. International actor coordination can be done by using platforms like the Education Sector Working Group, which includes UN, NGOs, donors, to harmonise approaches. Ensure humanitarian and development actors are working to a common outcomes framework, so short-term efforts feed long-term goals. The PBEA experience showed the value of integrated programming at multiple levels. For instance, a donor could fund both a community peace education project at the grassroots and technical assistance for curriculum policy at the system level, in tandem.

Cross-Sector Linkages: Recognise the triple nexus to coordinate education programmes with protection, livelihoods, and governance initiatives. If a local governance programme is running, tie in the school management committee to strengthen it. If a livelihoods project for youth is present, maybe integrate literacy/education components. This ensures education is part of the broader social rebuilding (e.g., ex-combatant reintegration programmes should have an education component for younger members).

Monitoring and Early Warning: Set up communication flows where school and community data, such as rising absenteeism or increased bullying, are analysed as potential early warning of tensions and fed to local peace and security actors for preventive action. This might be ambitious, but schools often mirror society. If conflict is brewing, signs appear in student behaviour. A multi-level approach means linking that information upwards and sideways.

Rationale

The multi-level political economy analysis taught us that disconnect between national policy and local reality can doom programmes. For example, if national policy proclaims inclusive education but local actors have not internalised it, implementation fails. By addressing each level and connecting

them, the “peace wedge” can be driven in effectively. The evidence of Learning for Peace and other multi-country initiatives is that coherence matters. Horizontal and vertical social cohesion both need attention. Particularly important is bridging international support with local legitimacy: Syrians must feel the education reforms are theirs when local voices lead curriculum reform, even as international expertise and funds facilitate it.

Focus on Teachers and Education Personnel as Peacebuilders

Teachers are the frontline peacebuilders in classrooms, and their recruitment, training, and well-being deserve special focus. Diverse recruitment in new teacher hiring, or re-hiring of former teachers, should largely strive for representation of all communities. Encourage applications from underrepresented groups and consider affirmative measures to ensure, for instance, that Sunni, Alawite, Christian, Kurdish teachers all are present in the workforce throughout Syria. This helps students see positive role models from all groups and reduces perceptions of favouritism. Bosnia's lesson of segregated teacher allocations shows the need to mix.⁹⁷ Peace and conflict-sensitivity training goes beyond generic SEL, to provide teachers with training on dealing with sensitive topics, preventing and mediating conflict among students, and understanding their own biases. This could be a special module in teacher professional development, perhaps mandatory for certification renewal. It should cover practical skills like facilitating dialogue circles, as well as theoretical understanding of how education intersects with conflict. This allows teachers to buy into why neutrality and inclusion matter.

Support teacher well-being and motivation to enhance stressed, undervalued teachers' commitment. Teachers cannot be expected to champion peace always or naturally. Approaches to improve teacher conditions gradually, with fair pay to avoid grievances and psychosocial support for teachers, are critical as many are conflict-affected themselves. This could include forming teacher peer support groups or communities of practice that will include peacebuilding in their agenda. The possibilities of using WhatsApp groups for such mutual support mean that Syria may be able to achieve what might have been elusive before. Teacher satisfaction and belief in the mission will translate into positive classroom climate.⁹⁸ Peace education champions are those who identify and empower a cadre of master teachers who exemplify peace education best practices. They can mentor others, develop locally relevant materials, and serve as “champions” advocating for the approach in their districts. These could be teachers who led successful integration in a mixed school or innovated a good practice in SEL. Showcase their work nationally through conferences or media to inspire peers.

Rationale:

Teachers have daily influence on children and are interpreters of curriculum. A biased or fearful teacher can reinforce divides, whereas an open-minded, well-trained teacher can turn a simple lesson into a transformative experience, such as guiding a frank discussion after a playground incident between ethnic groups, rather than ignoring it. In Northern Ireland and elsewhere, teacher attitudes moderated the impact of integrated schooling: supportive teachers enhanced it, while reluctant ones limited it.⁹⁹ So investing in teachers' capacity and commitment is non-negotiable. Additionally, in Syria's context, many experienced teachers might have fled or been killed; new ones will step in, and they need orientation to this peacebuilding role, not just subject matter.

⁹⁷https://berghof-foundation.org/files/publications/daytone_fischera_edu.pdf#:~:text=The%20post,Here%2C

⁹⁸<https://www.unicef.org/media/96556/file/UNICEF-PBEA-Final-Report.pdf#:~:text=Expertise%20in%20peacebuilding%20and%20shared,in%20peacebuilding%20and%20conflict%20resolution>

⁹⁹ https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/75949532/Can_kicking_25Jan2019.pdf

Strengthen Monitoring, Evaluation, and Adaptive Learning for Peace Outcomes

Implement the earlier outlined M&E framework to track progress and inform course corrections. For example, begin with a baseline assessment in target areas on key indicators that may include a social cohesion index from surveys, education access levels, and conflict incident reports. Use these data to then set realistic targets such as increasing the percentages of girls and boys with cross-group friends (e.g., groups that are in conflict with each other or different language or religious groups). Another target outcome could be percentage decrease in dropout disparity. Furthermore, establish a regular monitoring report. This could be supported by a dashboard that allows education programmes and partners to review feedback quarterly, summarising both education stats and peace indicators. As suggested earlier, these may include attendance, survey results, or conflict incidents.

Over time, it is important to highlight emerging red flags, such as spikes in violence affecting schools or rises in hate speech incidents, and also point out success stories that may occur, for instance a notable increase in girls' enrolment due to ALP. Employing third-party evaluations is critically important in order to ensure independent evaluations of pilot projects, including priority areas of remedial programmes. Evaluations should ideally take place after 1-2 years, and findings should be shared transparently to build trust and knowledge. Where possible, design them with comparison groups to rigorously assess impact on attitudes or behaviour. Finally, knowledge sharing and learning across contexts in the South by creating mechanisms to share what's working and what's not among practitioners within Syria is paramount. Options to capture dynamics include establishing an online portal or conducting a periodic workshop for NGO and government education officers to facilitate learning. Also link with global communities, for example INEE and regional learning hubs, allowing Syrian educators to both jointly learn from others and contribute their experiences. This continuous learning culture will help keep programmes effective and innovative.

Programmes based on data allow us to pivot. If monitoring shows an approach is not yielding expected results, investigate why and adapt. For instance, if ALP enrolment of girls remains low, maybe the programme needs a childcare component or more female teachers and adjust accordingly. If peace clubs are flourishing but not linking to a formal curriculum, figure out how to integrate those lessons. Essentially, use data to steer the programme in real time.

Rationale

As noted, peacebuilding through education is relatively limited in practice and highly context-specific, and it can be expected that not everything will work as assumed. A strong M&E system ensures that an education programme strategy is evidence-based and dynamic. It also provides accountability to donors and stakeholders by demonstrating tangible changes and transparently confronting challenges. The emphasis on mixed methods and participatory monitoring is critical to capture the full picture of social change, which numbers alone can miss. Over time, this will also build a repository of evidence on what education interventions yield the most peace dividends in Syria, contributing to global knowledge.

Plan for Scale and Sustainability from the Outset

Finally, thinking beyond pilots to education system-wide impact and longevity is foundational for eventual government ownership.

Ensure education reforms are conflict sensitive and support peacebuilding, social cohesion, and reconciliation in and through education. Education reform must support peacebuilding, stability, promoting the recognition of diversity, gender equity, and sensitive teaching of a nation's history.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Novelli and Smith, 2011

Reforming, revising, and reimagining curricula must involve a collaborative process that is sensitive to historical, ethnic, or sectarian tensions in order to build community resilience, peace, and stability. The tensions fuelled by the conflict require sensitive planning related to the teaching of history, politics, religion, and other subjects. For returnees, experiences of displacement, linguistic differences, and cultural adaptation require MHPSS support and safeguarding mechanisms to protect against discrimination.¹⁰¹

Work closely with any emerging legitimate education authorities in Syria's post-Assad context to embed these existing and new programmes into official structures that can be started at the earliest moment. For example, given resource constraints it is important to aim for transition of NGO-run ALPs into ministry-endorsed programmes with line budget support once capacity allows. The sooner national and local governments see these as their programmes, the better for sustainability.

Advocate for multi-year funding mechanisms such as GPE and ECW multi-year resilience programmes¹⁰² that allow scaling up gradually and not just short projects. Financial planning may be an obstacle while current education budgets are diminishing. Also, incorporate cost-effectiveness analysis into pilots to find models that can be affordable at scale. Engage the Ministry of Finance and/or donors about a possible education peacebuilding trust fund and pooling resources.

Promote new policies by using evidence from pilots to inform new policies or legislation, for example, a law making schools violence-free zones, or a policy on ALP equivalency. Once policies are in place, programmes survive beyond individual projects.

Encourage community co-investment in education, which does not necessarily need to be financial, but through labour, oversight, and building educational structures to root programmes locally. For instance, communities that build their school are more likely to maintain it and uphold its values.¹⁰³ When parent groups help run afterschool activities, they are likely to continue even if external funding dips, because parents see the benefit.

A gradual handover where international agencies start programmes and plan from day one how Syrian institutions, whether public or local NGOs or school committees, will take them over once the programme has ended is recommended. A way to phase those steps is to build capacity accordingly and set milestones, for example, by year 3, local actors manage 50% of peace clubs without external facilitation.

Rationale

Peacebuilding is a long-term process that takes place over decades, not months. Educational change particularly requires generational commitment. As such, these interventions must become part of Syria's normal education fabric, not remain special initiatives.

In Syria, non-formal education refers to structured, institutionalised learning that supports either a return to formal education, accelerated learning programmes in order to participate in national assessments, or interventions that facilitate building technical and cross-cutting skills. Key programs serving as catch-up interventions already widely adopted by humanitarian actors in non-formal

¹⁰¹ Education for Syrian refugees and returnees: Opportunities and risks in the post-Assad transition, May 2025 ERICC Report

¹⁰² See here details of GPE and ECW programmes, see <https://www.globalpartnership.org/content/multi-year-resilience-education-programme-2020-2023-syria>

¹⁰³ Somalia and Yemen, communities built relationships and resolved conflicts through school construction and refurbishment projects in wider report on PBEA see

education centres are ripe for scaling due to acceptance. Additionally, “Curriculum B” is an accelerated version of the GoS curriculum and is used in non-formal learning centres.¹⁰⁴

The risk of not planning for scale is seen in many post-conflict settings where promising pilots die out when funding ends or political attention shifts. By weaving these into policy and community practice, Syria can avoid that fate. Also, scaling means reaching rural and marginal areas, not just easier urban centres, which is vital for wider, national social cohesion with no enclave left behind.

Concluding Reflections

In conclusion, the above recommendations form a comprehensive package of concepts: interpersonal relationship building, healing, and skills-building programmes that support well-being through SEL/PSS programmes, catching up the lost learning through ALP, and bridging divides daily in remedial and afterschool clubs. Reinforcing these programme approaches, structural changes will shape the narratives by reforming curriculum, and empowering the agents of change who are teachers, youth, and communities. This review focuses on ensuring the whole education system is oriented towards peacebuilding and social cohesion with multi-level coordination and policy directives. This responds directly to Syria’s context of fragmentation, trauma, and diversity.

Implementing these recommendations will require political will, resources, and careful management, but the rewards will accelerate a more socially cohesive society, resilient children, and a foundation for building lasting peace; thus, collectively they are well worth the effort. Education cannot single-handedly resolve Syria’s deep conflict-affected past, but without education sowing peace, no resolution can fully take root. As Syria moves into its post-Assad chapter, making education a pillar of peacebuilding with underlying social cohesion will help ensure that the next generation grows up without cycles of violence and rather, in a culture of mutual respect and hope.

¹⁰⁴ Qaddour, K. I. N. A. N. A., & Husain, S. A. L. M. A. N. (2022). Syria’s education crisis: A sustainable approach after 11 years of conflict. *Middle Eastern Institute*.

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ANNEX 1: KEY RESEARCHERS

Researcher	Key Publications & Contributions
Affolter, Friedrich W.	Focused on socio-emotional enablement, transformative learning in Afghanistan, and reflective practice in Angola. Key works include <i>On the absence of a 'socio-emotional enablement' discourse</i> (2004) and <i>Learning for Peace</i> (2019).
Benavot, Aaron	Explores education in the global development agenda and educating for resilience. Co-authored <i>Should we not be educating for resilience? Leveraging SDG4 in times of crisis</i> (2024).
Betancourt, Theresa S.	Expert on the mental health of children affected by armed conflict. Notable for longitudinal studies on Sierra Leone's former child soldiers and the book <i>Shadows into Light</i> (2025).
Bosqui, Tania J.	Specializes in mental health interventions and resilience in Lebanon and Palestine. Authored systematic reviews on psychological interventions for youth in conflict zones (2016, 2018).
Dajani, Rana	Founder of <i>We Love Reading</i> . Research focuses on women in STEM in the Arab world and community-driven literacy/psychosocial resilience for refugees.
Naidoo, Jordan	Focuses on community schools in Africa and the role of SDG4 in crises. Edited <i>Community schools in Africa: Reaching the unreached</i> (2007).
Novelli, Mario	Developed the 4Rs Framework . Focuses on the securitization of education and the role of education in peacebuilding across Lebanon, Nepal, and Sierra Leone.
Sinclair, Margaret	Pioneer in planning education in emergencies. Instrumental in establishing INEE and PEIC . Edited <i>Learning to live together</i> (2013).
Smart, Andy	Expert on textbook policies in Asia and integrating SEL into educational materials. Core contributor to the NISSEM Global Briefs (2019).

Smith, Alan	Co-developer of the 4Rs Framework . Conducted synthesis reports for UNICEF on the integration of education and peacebuilding in Myanmar, Pakistan, and South Africa.
Williams, James H.	Research centers on school textbooks, national memory, and the "twelve propositions" of education's work in civil conflict. Edited <i>(Re)constructing memory</i> (2014, 2017).

ANNEX 2: KEY PROGRAMMES

Programme Name	Description & Key Leadership
4Rs Framework	Analytical framework (Redistribution, Recognition, Representation, Reconciliation) developed by Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith via the UNICEF PBEA Research Consortium.
Early Childhood Peace Consortium	A global platform integrating early childhood development with peacebuilding; Affolter served as Secretary (2015–2019).
Family Strengthening Intervention (FSI)	Developed by Betancourt in Rwanda to promote family resilience and child mental health in post-conflict settings.
Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA)	Co-founded with support from Sinclair to advocate for the safety of education systems during conflict.
Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)	Established by Sinclair; sets global minimum standards for education in emergencies (EiE).
Learning for Peace (PBEA)	A UNICEF initiative (2012–2016) managed by Affolter; produced foundational research on social cohesion and peacebuilding.

NISSEM	Spearheaded by Sinclair, Smart, and Williams; focuses on integrating SDG 4.7 and SEL into textbooks and curricula.
Protecting Education in Insecurity and Conflict (PEIC)	Part of the Education Above All Foundation; Sinclair served as technical adviser and interim director.
Research Consortium on Education & Peacebuilding	Led by the Universities of Amsterdam, Sussex, and Ulster; co-led by Novelli and Smith; produced the 4Rs Framework.
SAFE Framework	A rights-based model (Safety, Access, Family, Education) developed by Betancourt for children in conflict settings.
Somoud Psychoeducational Comic Book	A context-specific MHPSS intervention in Lebanon developed by Bosqui to disseminate coping strategies to adolescents.
Sugira Muryango	An early childhood development and violence prevention intervention in Rwanda led by Betancourt.
We Love Reading (WLR) / Taghyeer	Founded by Dajani; a community-driven literacy program active in 56+ countries, serving refugee camps in Jordan.