Learning Tendency Among Iraqi Children in Post-Conflict Communities

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Abstract

This study examines the factors influencing children's learning tendency (willingness) in post-conflict settings, with a specific focus on displaced students returning from Al-Hol and Al-Jad'a camps to their homes in Iraq. It also examines the impact of conflict on education and the learning environments of children. Drawing on a sample of 46 students aged 8–18, participants had lived in displacement for one to six years. They lacked access to formal and organized education. The research employs a mixed-methods approach using structured questionnaires. The data are analyzed quantitatively based on descriptive statistics like frequencies and percentages, while a qualitative approach is used in one open-ended question about respondents' future aspirations. The findings indicate that while trauma significantly reduced motivation to learn for most participants, factors such as family and teacher support, a sense of school safety, and informal educational programs played crucial roles in fostering resilience and learning willingness. Psychological benefits, including improved emotional well-being, were also reported. The study underscores the importance of integrating psycho-social support and trauma-informed teaching into post-conflict education systems and recommends stronger investment in informal learning environments as a bridge to formal schooling.

1. Introduction:

Conflicts can cause serious disruption, and the extreme case of this disruption is the conflict that ISIS spread to parts of Iraq and Syria, and that is the motivation behind this study. The conflict not only led to widespread destruction but also had a lasting impact on the education systems and the place of learning in the regions affected. Among the most vulnerable populations in conflict settings are children, who face numerous barriers in receiving quality education and staying enthusiastic to learn during such precarious times (Ashraf & Huma, 2019).

Such knowledge is vital for informing effective interventions and support mechanisms in post-conflict communities. There may be an abundance of challenges, such as trauma, displacement, lack of resources, and unsettled social structures, preventing a child from being interested in carrying out the learning process. The research investigates these multi-layered relationships to contribute to a better understanding of the diverse circumstances that uniquely impact children in post-conflict contexts, and how we can enable resilience and improve learning outcomes in the face of unfavorable conditions (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

1.1.   Statement of the Problem

Continuous crises surface in our world from time to time, such as wars, pandemics, natural disasters, and others, directly impacting the future of childhood and society as a whole. One of these crises was the invasion that occurred in some areas of Iraq and Syria by the armed groups of the so-called Islamic State, leading to war and the displacement of thousands of families. These communities were affected directly or indirectly, especially children who were left without schools and lost many family members and friends. Consequently, this paper investigates the impact of conflict on school infrastructure and children's learning environments, focusing on areas heavily affected by the ISIS conflict in Iraq and Syria. The aftereffects of violence will have an immediate and substantial impact on the rationale pupils have for participating in the learning process; therefore, it is vital to explore the complex interaction these variables have with each other. The study aims to identify opportunities for targeted interventions and solutions that can be implemented to enhance the educational experience for children in these challenging contexts.

1.2.   Purpose of the Study

The study aims to identify and analyze the determinants that influence learning tendencies among children in post-conflict communities. The researcher also tries to explore the psychological, social, and environmental factors affecting learning willingness among these children. Assessing the role of community and

educational resources in fostering learning is another objective that the study will focus on.

1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions are considered:

1. What are the key factors influencing learning tendencies among children in post-conflict communities?

2. What role do family, community environments, educational resources, and school infrastructure play in shaping learning attitudes and motivation to learn?

2. Literature Review

Learning tendency refers to the determination to acquire knowledge or skills. It embodies the motivation and commitment individuals have towards learning and personal growth. It reflects the intention and drive to engage in educational pursuits and expand one's understanding of various subjects or disciplines. Originally conceptualized as a psychological state, Bolhuis & Simons (1999) say that willingness denotes a mindset where individuals exhibit a keen desire and readiness to embrace new learning experiences. Baker et al. (2002) and Wößmann (2010), cited in Hotifah & Yoenanto (2020), show an agreement when they relate learning willingness to the psychological aspect shaped by individual traits (such as personality characteristics) and external environmental influences. As far as the factors affecting learning will, Anghelache (2013) states that Attitude stands as the pivotal element impacting the eagerness to learn. Attitudes possess the power to alter all facets of an individual's life, encompassing their educational journey. The mindset students hold towards learning plays a crucial role in shaping their capacity and readiness to acquire knowledge. Failure to transform negative attitudes may hinder students from pursuing education beyond the essential requirements. Shifting students' pessimistic perspectives on learning necessitates a systematic approach that involves identifying the drivers of attitudes and leveraging this insight to instigate transformation. Similarly, Ishigoru (2018), cited in Hotifah & Yoenanto (2020), states that the academic success of students is directly impacted by their eagerness to learn, which, in turn, is shaped by a combination of internal and family-related factors. Internal factors encompass elements such as a student's age, age upon enrollment, homework completion rate, and class participation frequency. On the other hand, family factors comprise the educational background of the father, household resources, and commuting time to school. Although the school environment plays a role in fostering willingness to learn, the specific factors within the school setting that drive this influence remain less clearly defined.

2. 1. The Role of Education in Post-Conflict Settings

Education plays a crucial role in advancing social progress and has the potential to drive transformations across various sectors in post-conflict societies. It can facilitate shifts in behaviors and attitudes towards violence, law enforcement, and the legal framework, as well as enhance comprehension of the political system, its functions, and its impact on local communities. Moreover, education aids in cultivating skills that bolster economic revitalization and the establishment of sustainable livelihoods, while also fostering changes in intergroup relations or addressing the enduring effects of conflict. These represent significant peace-building hurdles that require early intervention and continuous support to be effectively addressed over the long term (Leone, 2011). Suleri et al (2017) emphasize that the level of education attained by children and young adults is significantly impacted negatively by terrorism, war, and ethnic conflict. Both direct and indirect effects of conflicts on education exist. The direct effects include school closures, the destruction of infrastructure needed to get to schools, the relocation of teachers as a result of intimidation and violence, the displacement of families and students, the recruitment of child soldiers, and the development of a climate in which parents are reluctant to send their kids to school. Redistributing resources within homes as a result of disagreement requires kids to obtain part-time employment to help support the family. Children who are not enrolled in school can also easily become victims of abuse and exploitation, which can have serious repercussions for both individuals and entire countries. On the other hand, Ashraf & Huma (2019) state that one of the indirect consequences of conflict involves redistributing resources within households, leading children to seek employment to augment family finances. Additionally, children who are not attending school are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment, a circumstance with profound implications for both individuals and nations.

Education is a fundamental human entitlement that is legally assured for all individuals. It is crucial for the progress of individuals, economies, and societies, serving as a cornerstone for sustainable development and enduring harmony. The right to education is not just a standalone human entitlement; it also serves as a fundamental tool and crucial element in fulfilling other human rights. This is because human rights are interconnected, and the realization of one right strengthens the others. The importance of education in responding to violence and the need for early recovery has been increasingly acknowledged over the past ten years, to the point where it is now considered the fourth pillar of humanitarian aid, after food and water, shelter, and health. Children, adolescents, and adult learners can benefit from the physical, psychological, and cognitive protection that schools and teachers can offer by creating a feeling of stability and a refuge in times of crisis (Machel, 2001). It acts as a catalyst in unlocking human potential, both on an individual and collective scale. It enables individuals to take charge of shaping their destinies, promotes active involvement in the realization of their rights and those of

others, facilitates engagement in social activities, and empowers individuals to oversee governmental actions concerning them, including addressing rights and injustices that may arise in such contexts. Education and conflicts share a deeply intertwined relationship that can both exacerbate and ameliorate societal tensions. The impact of education on conflicts is multifaceted, influencing not only the causes and perpetuation of conflicts but also playing a critical role in conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict recovery. (Zendeli, 2017)

2.2. Learning Willingness Among Children

According to Jespersen and Echols (2013), Baker et al. (2002) Hotifah & Yoenanto (2020) internal factors and external factors can also affect a person's interest in learning under the influence of Wößmann (2010) while internal factors refer to the personal qualities, outlooks, and personality traits of an individual. External factors involve environmental conditions, such as where the child resides and attends school.

Internal Factors:

Interest is the degree of inherent interest and motivation an individual has to pursue learning about a subject or topic. If a person is interested in a particular topic or the topic is related to his or her goals, he or she will get motivated to learn it. Below are the most familiar internal factors. (Balvestamin and Jomuad, 2023).

Self-Efficacy: The courses success expectancy of a subject or skill determines its willingness to learn Those with a high sense of efficacy are more inclined to learn and endure in the face of obstacles.

Goal orientation: Whether an individual has a learning goal (for example, a mastery goal, or a performance goal for showing competence), can influence the willingness to learn. Those who adopt a mastery goal orientation are more inclined to learn to learn.

Existing Knowledge and Previous Learning: Previous experience about a topic can affect willingness to learn. Those who consider themselves as experts in a topic may have a greater inclination to learn more.

Mood: Mood affects our willingness to learn; Emotional reasons like confidence, anxiety, and stress tone affect learning. While emotions such as feeling curious and excited help develop the willingness to learn, those such as fear and frustration do not.

External Factors:

According to Hu, Zhang, and Liu (2023) external factors are listed as follows:

Social Support: Having supportive peers, teachers, and mentors enhance the learning willingness. Getting some encouragement, feedback, and working with others tends to increase motivation to learn.

Learning setting: The way the learning environment is structured, the way the resources are organized, and the tools that are made available for learning can influence the motivation to engage in the learning process. An environment that has all the essentials that one needs for learning will help in motivating the student to learn.

Motivation and Incentives: External incentives like praise, recognition, grades, or physical rewards may promote a willingness to learn. If people feel they will be rewarded or recognized for their efforts, they are more likely to want to learn.

Peer Influence: It means how peers relate to each other and how can their attitudes and behaviors affect follow-through with learning.

Cultural Issues: Attitudes towards learning are influenced by cultural beliefs, values, and norms; and may affect the willingness of women and men to participate in education. Cultural expectations about education, learning, and accountability can influence personal motivation.

2.3. Related Studies

After the end of this war and the return of most families to their homes, it has become crucial to focus on this affected group and attempt to integrate them into society by encouraging their return to schools. Buckland (2005) explores the role of education in post-conflict reconstruction, emphasizing how educational systems can contribute to peacebuilding and social cohesion in countries recovering from conflict. It seeks to identify effective strategies for educational reform in these contexts. The researcher finds out that there are many factors effecting education in post-conflict reconstruction, they are summarized as; necessity of early investment, systemic focus, community engagement which tackles local communities' involvement in the educational improvement process ensuring that initiatives are relevant and sustainable. Finally, identifying challenges plays a role in perpetuating conflict, and thus, addressing these systemic issues is crucial for effective reconstruction. It also points out that the urgency of peacebuilding efforts must be balanced with long-term educational goals.

On the other hand, Paulson (2009) explores the intersection of education and transitional justice, emphasizing the need for education to address past conflicts and human rights violations. The study argues that education can play a crucial role in fostering participation, recognition, and trust, which are essential for both educational and transitional justice goals. The discussion is framed within the context of post-conflict educational reconstruction, highlighting the importance of redefining educational systems to prevent the recurrence of past injustices. The researcher finds out that the emergence of "education in emergencies" underscores the critical

importance of the structures, content, and accessibility of education in fostering human development. Quality education is also linked to improved human development outcomes, emphasizing that not all educational experiences yield positive results. The paper advocates for a nuanced understanding of education's role in development, moving beyond simplistic assumptions that education is inherently beneficial.

The interest in this aspect continues in current era due its importance and sensitivity for our successive generations. To such a great extent, Alzaghoul and Archer (2022) examined Post-traumatic stress disorder of children and adolescents affected by war in the countries of Middle East. They found that group-based psycho-social programs, such as "Teaching Recovery Techniques," were especially effective in reducing trauma symptoms. The study emphasized the importance of trauma-informed, community-supported interventions in educational settings and highlights the need for scalable mental health support in post-conflict environments.it goes in line with my study in terms of supporting school-based interventions at traumas in order to improve motivated learning in post- conflict societies. Murphy & Nabhan-Warren (2022) strengthened the negative effects of conflict on school cohesion with mental health, that leaded to similar findings of the current study with the different setting that is Ethiopia. The study showed that violence-induced instability leads to both institutional breakdown and emotional distress, undermining children's motivation and ability to learn. Another study is that of Betancourt and Newnham (2022) which outlines a framework to support children affected by war through multilevel trauma-informed strategies, including classroom adaptations, family involvement, and school-based mental health services. It argued for the integration of emotional, cognitive, and environmental supports to rebuild children's trust, safety, and academic engagement. The study concluded that learning willingness can be enhanced through family, teacher, and school-level support in post-conflict contexts.

To sum up, the researcher focuses on the basic determinants of the learning desire among Iraqi displaced children, specifically in the Hit community in Anbar Province. This statement highlights the author's recognition of a research gap which have not been previously tackled in this scholarly domain.

3. Methodology

3. 1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative-quantitative (mixed-methods) approach. It aimed to identify and analyze the key factors influencing children's learning tendencies in post-conflict environments. A structured questionnaire that included both closed- and open ended answers was adopted to gather data on personal background, trauma exposure, social support, school environment, and motivation.

3.2. Participants

A total of 60 students participated in the study. Only 46 valid responses were adopted while 14 responses were neglected because they were incomplete. They were selected after returning from two major post-conflict camps: Al-Hol in Syria and Al-Jad'a in Iraq, to their homes. The researcher faced difficulties in choosing such type of data because it was a sensitive- to-access population. He took advantage of the educational awareness program organized by the Anbar Education Directorate in collaboration with UNICEF. The program aimed to rehabilitate displaced children educationally and socially, providing awareness sessions and remedial lessons to strengthen cohesion and stability in these areas, specifically, in the schools of the surrounding villages of Hit city, west of Iraq.

The Age range was 8 to 18 years, Gender distribution was 16 males, 30 females, while Education level 32 in primary education, 14 in secondary education. Duration of camp residence were Ranged from 1 to 6 years.

The participants were selected based on availability and willingness to respond, ensuring voluntary participation and anonymity.

3. 3. Data Collection Tool

A structured questionnaire was designed and administered in Arabic, the participants' native language. It was later translated into English for analysis. The questionnaire was divided into five main sections:

1. Personal Information: Age, gender, education level, place of residence, duration of displacement

2. Exposure to Trauma: Type of post-conflict education, experience of traumatic events, and their impact on learning

3. Social Support: Perceived support from family and teachers

4. School Environment: Feelings of safety, teacher empathy, quality of education, peer relationships

5. Motivation and Aspirations: Desire to succeed, impact of education on mental health, and future career goals

Each section included closed-ended questions with three-point Likert scale responses (e.g., "not at all," "to some extent," "yes, significantly") and one open-ended question on future aspirations.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered by the researcher who was familiar with the cultural and conflict context of the camps. Participants were briefed on the study purpose, and their informed consent (or parental consent for minors) was obtained before participation.

3. 5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to identify response patterns. An excel Microsoft was used in analyzing data. Qualitative responses on career aspirations were categorized thematically to capture students' future goals. The combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis allowed for a **deeper understanding** of learning willingness among displaced children. Quantitative data provided measurable insights into the impact of trauma, social support, and environmental factors, while qualitative responses revealed the **human dimension** of children's educational goals and dreams. This dual approach strengthened the reliability of the findings and aligned with the study's aim to examine both external conditions and internal motivations shaping the learning process in post-conflict settings.

4. Findings and Discussions:

Based on the comprehensive data collected from the 46 students included in the experiment, the following table summarizes the findings and results that appeared in the study.

Table (1)

Key Findings of the Students' Questionnaire

Survey Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Experienced Trauma	38	82.6%
Did Not Experience Trauma	8	17.4%
No Education	18	39.1%
Informal Education	28	60.9%
Formal Education	0	0.0%
Trauma Not Affect Learning	4	8.7%
Trauma-Affected Learning (Some Extent)	14	30.4%
Trauma Affected Learning (Significantly)	28	60.9%
Family Support (Some Extent)	4	8.7%
Family Support (Significantly)	42	91.3%
Teacher Support (Somewhat Important)	2	4.3%
Teacher Support (Very Important)	44	95.7%
School Somewhat Safe	2	4.3%

Survey Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
School Very Safe	44	95.7%
Teacher Understands Needs (Some Extent)	8	17.4%
Teacher Understands Needs (Significantly)	38	82.6%
Education Quality (Average)	10	21.7%
Education Quality (Very Good)	36	78.3%
Comfortable with Classmates (Some Extent)	2	4.3%
Comfortable with Classmates (Significantly)	44	95.7%
Somewhat Motivated	4	8.7%
Very Motivated	42	91.3%
Education and Positive Mental Health Effect	28	60.9%
Education No Effect	16	34.8%
Education Negative Effect	2	4.3%
Improved Anxiety (Some Extent)	10	21.7%
Improved Anxiety (Significantly)	36	78.3%
Belief in Education-Employment Link (Yes)	46	100.0%

Concerning exposure to trauma, 38 students, constituting 83% of the sample, reported experiencing traumatic events. Notably, none of the participants (0%) received formal education during this time. Among them, 28 students (61%) engaged in sporadic informal learning, while 18 students (39%) did not engage in any form of education.

Regarding the impact on their learning willingness, the students' responses were as follows: 4 students (9%) indicated that their experiences did not affect their motivation to learn, 14 students (30%) reported a partial impact, and the majority of 28 students (61%) acknowledged a significant influence on their learning willingness. Consequently, a significant proportion of the participants encountered traumatic events, with 61% of them expressing that these events diminished their enthusiasm for learning.

Transitioning to the social support section, the outcomes underscore the pivotal role of family support in motivating children to engage in learning post-displacement, while 42 students, representing 91% of the sample, affirming its significant influence, while only 4 respondents (4%) expressed a partial impact. Similarly, teachers' support

emerged as a critical factor, while 44 students accounting for 96%, emphasizing its paramount importance, while only 2 students (4%) noted its somewhat importance. Consequently, both family and teachers' support are deemed robust and overwhelmingly crucial, given that nearly all students attribute high value to these forms of support.

In the section concerning the school environment, the researcher sought to explore students' perceptions of safety. A significant majority of 44 students, rating (96%), reported feeling that the school environment is very safe. Furthermore, the understanding exhibited by teachers towards students' needs was highlighted as crucial, with 38 students, representing 83% of the cohort, acknowledging this understanding significantly, while 8 students (17%) noted it to some extent. In terms of education quality, the majority of respondents that are 36 responses constituting 78%, rated it as very good, whereas 10 students 22% perceived it as average. Additionally, a substantial proportion of the students, 44 students, totaling 96%, expressed feeling comfortable with their classmates while 2 students (4%) show awareness when chose to some extent.

Transitioning to the final section of the questionnaire, which focuses on motivation and aspirations, 42 of the students, rating 91%, conveyed their motivation to excel in their studies. Regarding the impact of education on mental health, 28 students responded affirmatively, indicating a positive effect, while 16 students (35%) reported no discernible impact. When questioned about the influence of education on employment opportunities, all participants, accounting for 100%, expressed a belief that education enhances these prospects. They further indicated that individuals employed or seeking jobs are unlikely to consider joining military groups. Moreover, they may be drawing comparisons between their family members who have not been involved in challenging circumstances and others who have.

In conclusion, and alignment with the research questions posed in this study, the findings affirm that the willingness to learn is shaped by a complex interplay between trauma, social support, school environment, and personal ambition. This directly answers RQ1 and supports the study's aim of identifying these determinants. On the other hand, Family and school infrastructure play crucial roles, while the lack of formal educational resources is partially compensated by informal community-based efforts. This provides a rich, multidimensional answer to RQ2.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Key Findings: The findings reveal that while trauma poses a significant barrier to learning willingness, strong family support, positive teacher relationships, and a safe school environment greatly enhance motivation and resilience. The lack of formal education infrastructure was evident, with most participants relying on informal educational experiences. Nevertheless, the majority demonstrated a high

level of motivation to succeed and held ambitious aspirations for careers in medicine, law, and education which indicate that, despite adversity, hope and ambition remain strong among displaced children. These results emphasize the urgent need for trauma-informed educational interventions, expanded access to formal education, and greater community engagement to support children's academic and psychological recovery. By prioritizing the educational needs of children in post-conflict settings, we can promote resilience, reduce vulnerability to re-radicalization, and foster long-term peace and development.

5.2. Implications

Post-conflict recovery programs must:

- Provide access to formal education.

- Integrate psychosocial support within schools.

- Train teachers in trauma-sensitive and motivational techniques.

- Enhance career awareness and skills development.

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ميول التعلم لدى الاطفال العراقيين في مجتمعات ما بعد الصراع

تقوم هذه الدراسة بالتحري في العوامل التي تؤثر على ميول الأطفال في التعلم في مجتمعات ما بعد الصراع،
مركزة بشكل خاص على الطلاب النازحين العائدين من مخيمي الهول والجدعة إلى منازلهم في العراق. كذلك
ناقشت هذه الدراسة تأثير الصراع على التعليم وبيئات التعلم لدى هؤلاء الأطفال. اذ تألفت عينة البحث من 46
طالباً في المدة العمرية من 8 إلى 18 عامًا، والذين مكثوا في مخيمات النزوح لمدة تتراوح بين السنة والست
سنوات، والذين فقدوا الوصول إلى التعليم الرسمي المنتظم. وقد استند البحث على المنهج الكمي والنوعي في
التحليل معتمدا على الاستبيان المنظم لهذا الغرض.وقد اشارت النتائج إلى أن الصدمات قللت وبشكل كبيرمن
رغبة اغلب الاطفال في التعلم، ولكن من جانب اخر هناك عوامل ساعدت في تنمية تلك الرغبة مثل دعم العائلة
والمعلم، وشعور الطلاب بالأمان في المدرسة، والبرامج التعليمية غير الرسمية فكل هذه العوامل لعبت دوراً
ايجابيا ومهماً في اعادة وتعزيز رغبة الأطفال في التعلم. كذلك تم التركيز على اهمية الدعم النفسي عن طريق
تحسين الرفاهية العاطفية لديهم. كما اكدت الدراسة على أهمية اشراك الدعم النفسي الاجتماعي في التدريس
والذي يأخذ بعين الاعتبار الصدمات في أنظمة التعليم ما بعد الصراع، واوصت الدراسة بتعزيز الاستثمار في
بيئات التعلم غير الرسمية كجسرللوصول للتعليم الرسمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم مابعد الصراع ، ميول التعلم ، الحافز ، الصدمة والتعلم ، الدعم النفسي والاجتماعي