

PlayMatters Emergency Response Mechanism Multi-Sectoral Education in Emergencies Response Implementation Study Report



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Note: The authors' views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the PlayMatters consortium, or its partner, the LEGO Foundation.

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Acronyms

IRB	Institutional Review Board
IRC	International Rescue Committee
IP	Implementing Partner
LtP	Learning through Play
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
MHM	Menstrual Hygiene Management
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services
MoE	Ministry of Education
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PHRP	Protecting Human Research Participants
PM ERM	PlayMatters Emergency Response Mechanism
ToT	Training of Trainers
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
WEO	Woreda (Local District) Education Officer



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Executive Summary

Conflict and complex crises in Ethiopia starting in 2020 have affected millions of children in the Amhara, Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Oromia regions. Children's physical, psychosocial, and educational needs were disrupted due to displacement and exposure to violence. The PlayMatters project (2020 – 2026) initiated the Emergency Response Mechanism (PM ERM) in May 2022 in response to the conflict affecting the northern regions of Ethiopia. The PM ERM funded 12 partners (including direct responses from existing consortium partners IRC and Plan International) to implement multi-sectoral PM ERM activities from September 2022 to September 2023 in **201** integrated pre- and primary schools, reaching **177,409** children. The PM ERM integrated Education, WASH, Child Protection, and Health and Nutrition multi-sectoral programming in schools. This mixed-methods study investigates the implementation of the intervention to build the evidence base to strengthen Education in Emergencies responses.

This mixed-methods study applied a case study approach of six purposively sampled schools. Data was collected two or three times throughout an academic year, pending security access. In each case study school, key informant interviews were conducted with the Head Teacher, teachers, and the implementing partner, and focus group discussions were conducted with students, parents, and local government actors for a total sample of 127 participants. To triangulate data, quantitative data was sourced from existing government education data sets from 128 ERM schools and 131 non-ERM schools from two-time points (pre-conflict and the end of the academic year), attempting to control for relevant dependent variables. Two-way ANOVA analyses were conducted for the variables of student enrolment, student absenteeism, and teacher retention with a threshold of $p < .05$ to establish statistical significance with a confidence interval of 95%. From this analysis, seven key findings emerged.

The first key finding is that the PM ERM addressed children's physical and psychosocial needs. Participants most frequently reported that school feeding, water point rehabilitation, Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) support, and nutrition screening and deworming campaigns were the most critical for supporting children's physical needs. Also, participants described the importance of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) training, clinical MHPSS services, and rehabilitation and support activities to restore a sense of hope and normalcy and to address children's psychosocial needs.

The second key finding is that the PM ERM supported children's increased access to education. The primary factors related to the reported increased enrolment and attendance and reduced absenteeism were that children's physical and psychosocial needs were met, scholastic material distributions, increased capacity of teachers to integrate new pedagogies, and rehabilitated environments. Quantitative analysis confirmed that PM ERM schools demonstrated a statistically significant increase in average student enrolment. While participants described a reduction in absenteeism, the average absenteeism rate in PM ERM schools dropped but was not statistically

significant due to overlapping confidence intervals, suggesting the PM ERM was not the sole factor for reducing absenteeism.

The third key finding is that the PM ERM supported children's holistic learning and well-being. Formal learning and well-being assessments were not possible in this study, but participants described how the PM ERM affected children's holistic learning outcomes and well-being, particularly due to teacher training on Learning through Play (LTP) teaching methods and MHPSS. These improved outcomes included cognitive and academic development, social and emotional development, physical development, and psychosocial well-being.

The fourth key finding is that the PM ERM supported teachers' instructional practices, well-being, and retention. Teacher training on LTP and MHPSS was described to support changes in teachers' classroom practices toward more engaging and active learning opportunities. The training was also reported to be a source of motivation for teachers. Some teachers also described how the professional development opportunities supported teachers' well-being by understanding new MHPSS concepts or approaches to supporting their stress management. Quantitative analysis confirms a statistically significant difference in teacher retention in PM ERM schools increased by an average of 3 teachers retained per year compared to non-ERM schools with an average of less than 1 additional teacher retained per year.

The fifth key finding is that the PM ERM strengthened local capacities. Through collaborating with local communities, implementing partners strengthened the community ownership and acceptability of the intervention, as evidenced by respondents reporting community contributions in the form of time, labor, materials, and money. Implementing partners also strengthened the sustainability of activities by partnering with government staff in local offices relevant to intervention sectors, conducting joint training, monitoring, and implementation of project activities. Additionally, participants described how the PM ERM highlighted opportunities for government actors to strengthen multi-sectoral collaboration in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of activities through stronger communication mechanisms.

The sixth key finding is that additional support is needed to meet the needs of crisis-affected communities. Many participants described the desire for continued and expanded intervention for multiple years as well as including other schools and communities. Additional technical recommendations were suggested regarding school feeding, MHPSS, economic recovery, and peace-building activities. Teachers also requested additional training and support aligned with evidence on quality continuous teacher professional development. The seventh key finding highlights challenges to implementation due to delays, insecurity, and economic inflation to consider in future programming.

This study provides a deeper understanding of the benefits, opportunities, and barriers of multi-sectoral EIE responses, providing key recommendations for future research, practice, and policies to support the holistic well-being and development of crisis-affected children.

Background

Contextual Background

In late 2020, myriad factors including armed conflict, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic led to a complex crisis in Ethiopia's Amhara, Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Oromia regions. Millions of children lost access to physical safety, water and food, school, and adequate shelter, and many were exposed to trauma^[1]. Education outcomes were directly impacted as schools stopped functioning and incurred damage, and in some cases were used as shelters for IDPs or by armed groups^[2]. Peace settlements in 2021 for the Northern Conflict brought some stability, but ongoing insecurity remains throughout the Amhara region in clashes between national and regional defense forces since April 2023, creating a complex context necessitating emergency response and recovery activities.

In response to these crises, the LEGO Foundation granted PlayMatters the flexibility to reallocate \$15M from the larger PlayMatters grant to design and implement a 1-year multi-sectoral Education in Emergencies (EiE) intervention providing an integrated and holistic response to ensure that crisis-affected children have their basic health, safety, and educational needs met in crisis-affected locations. The PlayMatters Emergency Response Mechanism (PM ERM; Sept. 2022 – Sept. 2023) was implemented by the IRC, Plan International, and 10 other implementing partners (IPs) in 201 integrated pre-primary and primary schools, reaching **177,409** children. With the school as the focal point for delivery, the PM ERM provided multi-sectoral humanitarian programming including education, child protection, WASH, health, and nutrition interventions aligned with the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies' Minimum Standards. Historically, many EiE interventions do not comprehensively include holistic responses integrating these sectors, thus this study contributes evidence on the benefits and barriers to implementing such multi-sectoral EiE responses.

Multi-Sectoral Emergency Response

The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) sets forth a set of Minimum Standards (MS) that serve as the foundation for the EiE sector to ensure equitable access to quality learning for crisis-affected children. Common EiE responses, especially in rapid response contexts, focus on the minimization of learning loss through basic rehabilitation of school infrastructure to ensure foundational safety, the distribution of

educational resources, sometimes including Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) kit distributions or other WASH activities, and some basic teacher training. This is most frequently attributed to short and rushed implementation periods or insufficient funds to adequately address such needs^[3].

Background on Multi-Sectoral Responses

While the Sphere Humanitarian Standards and the INEE MS have been aligned and harmonized to ensure consistency between technical sector responses, sectoral divisions around funding, coordination, and implementation challenge the opportunities for integrated activities across the response-recovery-development spectrum. To some, education is not viewed as a 'life-saving' response, like food or WASH, and thus omitted from some multi-sectoral rapid response activities while others understand a linkage between education and rapid responses is a source of protection, community resilience, and psychosocial well-being^[3]. Additionally, there is minimal evidence on the role of education in multi-sectoral responses in contexts of forced displacement, including conflict-affected contexts^[4]. A deep understanding of the activities and modalities of multi-sectoral EiE responses can strengthen both multi-sectoral rapid responses and EiE responses, ultimately supporting stronger physical, psychosocial, and educational outcomes for children in crisis-affected contexts.

Methodology

This study applies a mixed-methods design by taking a qualitative case study approach supplemented by secondary analysis of quantitative data captured through public government data systems.

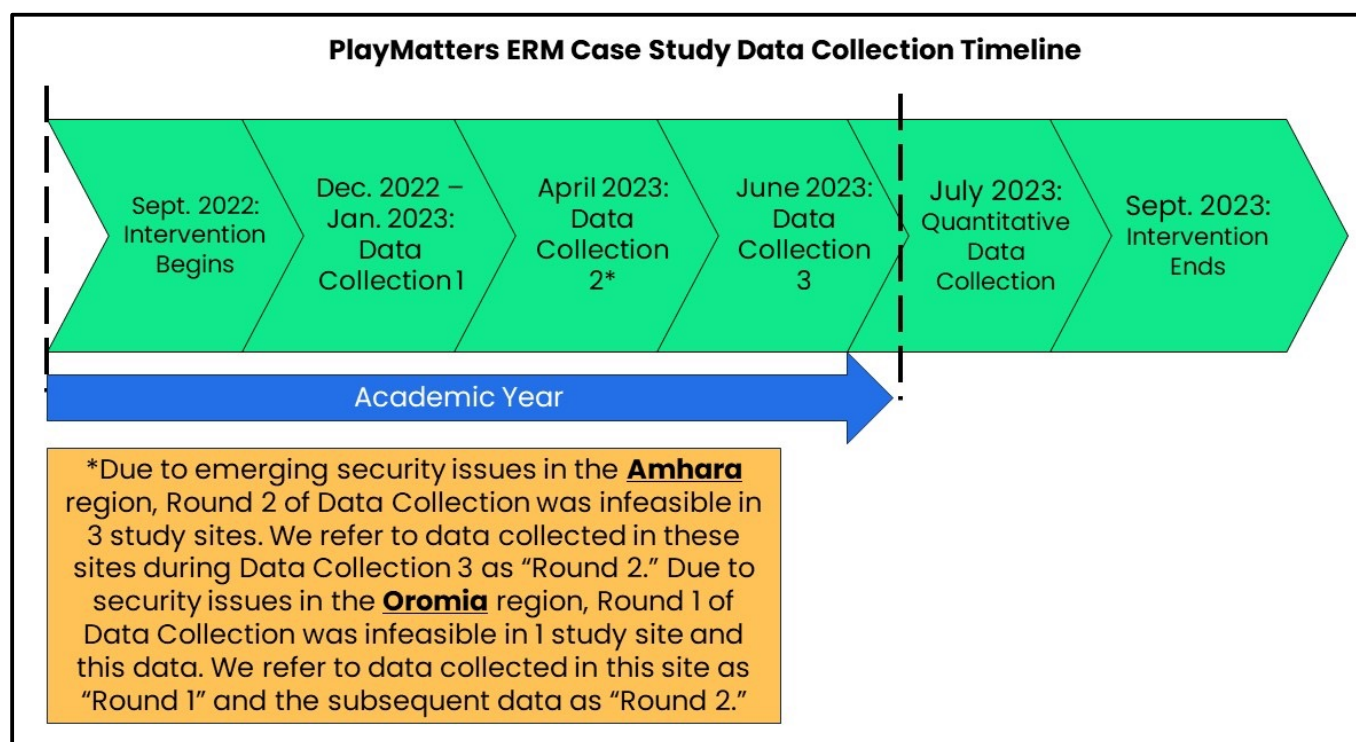
Research Questions

As the global evidence base on the integration of education into multi-sectoral displacement crises response remains underdeveloped, particularly for the WASH and Health and Nutrition sectors, this study answers the following question: *“To what extent did the PlayMatters ERM’s multi-sectoral approach improve basic health, safety, educational, and well-being needs of crisis-affected children?”* Additionally, this study serves as an end-line evaluation of the PlayMatters ERM, synthesizing learning from implementation to improve future interventions and policy.

Procedures

An IRC Ethiopia staff researcher (co-PI of this study) conducted either two or three rounds of data collection in each case study school at three different time points. Due to security concerns, data was not collected in all study sites at every time point, as depicted in Figure 1 below, but labels of “Round 1,” “Round 2,” and “Round 3” refer to the round of data collection relevant to that study site, not the time points of data collection.

Figure 1. PlayMatters ERM Case Study Data Collection Timeline



In each case study school, the researcher received permission from the Woreda (Local District) Education Officer, IP organization staff, and Head Teacher (HT). Following approvals, the researcher spent 3-4 days collecting qualitative data in participants’ dominant language or a language they were comfortable speaking, most frequently Amharic, Afar, or Afan Oromo. Data were captured on a handheld audio recording device and were translated and transcribed by an external firm.

Sample

At the school level, this study used a purposive sampling strategy to select schools based on the following criteria: (i) Implementing Partner; (ii) Region; (iii); Size of school; (iv) Urban v. rural; and (v) National v. international organizations. Only 5 schools were initially selected as case study schools, however pronged security concerns in the Oromia region throughout the first phase of data collection led the research team to add one additional school to the sample. A summary of case study demographics can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of School Sample Characteristics (n=6)

Region	# of Schools
Afar	1
Amhara	3
Benishangul-Gumuz	1
Oromia	1
School Size	
<1,000 students (small)	3
>1,000 students (large)	3
Geographic Accessibility	
Rural	3
Urban	3
Type of Organization	
National NGO	2
International NGO	4
Total	6

In each case study school, key informant interviews with one HT, three teachers, and one IP staff coordinator in addition to facilitating Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with students, teachers, and local government actors. In total, our sample included 85 adults (M=60; F=25) and 42 children (M=21; F=21). A summary of participant demographics can be found in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Summary of Participant Sample Characteristics (n=127)

Region	Teacher						Students		Parent S		System Actors	
	HT		S		IP		M	F	M	F	M	F
	M	F	M	F	M	F						
Afar	1	-	1	2	1	-	4	3	3	5	1	-
Amhara	3	-	6	3	3	-	11	10	17	1	6	3
Benishangul-Gumuz	1	-	1	2	1	-	3	4	4	3	2	2
Oromia	1	-	2	1	1	-	3	4	4	3	1	-
TOTAL	6	0	10	8	6	0	21	21	28	12	10	5

Background on Education in Emergencies Response

School 1 is located in a rural town in the Afar region. Needs assessment data reveals that half of the classrooms were deemed unusable due to damage while the remaining were classified as damaged but still functional. In addition to damaged school furniture and materials, school water points are damaged with unsafe water points. Primary protection concerns related to orphans through separation during displacement or the death of a caregiver. This school has a small enrollment of fewer than 1,000 students and received support from an international NGO.

Case Study Site 2 Background

School 2 is located in an urban town in the Amhara region close to the Amhara-Tigray border. According to a needs assessment conducted in June 2022, this area was particularly affected by the conflict in which approximately 70% of schools in this town were deemed as not meeting basic safety and health standards. Additionally, water points and latrines were damaged. In this area, there were no school feeding programs and there was a food shortage in the area. At the time of assessment, 109 internally displaced children had been identified as being vulnerable and at risk of protection concerns. This school has a small enrollment of fewer than 1,000 students and received support from an international NGO.

Case Study Site 3 Background

School 3 is located in a rural area in the Amhara region. Based on needs assessment data from June 2022, nearly half of all schools in the area were damaged due to conflict. A key protection and well-being concern identified in this school was the presence of mass graves in the school compound. Water points existed but additional maintenance was required to ensure their adequate safety. Additionally, cases of measles were reported in this area, and nutritional screening coverage of 91.2% but only 61.1% coverage of screening for pregnant and lactating women. This school has a large enrollment of more than 1,000 students and received support from a national NGO.

Case Study Site 4 Background

School 4 is located in a rural area in the Amhara region. A needs assessment conducted in June 2022 revealed that this school was identified as fully damaged, with roofs and walls damaged and educational materials looted. Additionally, the preprimary school was unable to be reopened due to damaged facilities. Water points and latrines needed rehabilitation. In this area, there was a reported measles outbreak, and additional issues related to malnutrition, infectious diseases, and MHPSS were identified. Sexual and gender-based violence, as well as child separation, were key issues of concern in this school's area. This school has a small enrollment of fewer than 1,000 students and received support from an international NGO.

Case Study Site 5 Background

School 5 is located in an urban town in the BSG region. While all classrooms were still considered functional, this school hosts a large number of IDPs and needed support to accommodate the influx of enrollment. From this, approximately 70 children have been identified as separated from a parent or guardian and 25 were identified as the head of household. Additionally, as an urban school, there is a higher risk of child trafficking in the town. This school has a large enrollment of more than 1,000 students and received support from an international NGO.

Case Study Site 6 Background

School 6 is located in a rural area in the Oromia region. Needs assessments revealed that this school hosts IDPs displaced from 13 municipalities within the area, yet educational infrastructure like doors and windows, as well as materials like desks and books, were damaged. The primary child protection issues related to high absenteeism and drop-out from girls due to early marriage, gender-based violence, and other concerns related to basic needs. In the area, only 14.5% of schools accessed clean drinking water, and only 39.29% of schools have separate toilets for boys and girls. This school has a large enrollment of more than 1,000 students and received support from a national NGO.

Quantitative Data

The quantitative data set is comprised of 128 PM ERM schools and 131 non-ERM schools with similar characteristics (size, urbanity, and location), using existing government data sets from Woreda (district) Education Offices from before the conflict (2019/2020) and at the end of the academic year (June 2023). While we cannot rigorously define non-ERM schools as control schools because we did not collect data ourselves, data from non-ERM schools were provided by government bodies upon requests for data from schools without any NGO intervention.

Tools

This qualitative study consisted of two core components of data collection to elicit participants' perspectives of the PlayMatters ERM's effectiveness. Both tools can be found in the Annex.

- **Key Informant Interviews:** A semi-structured interview guide that focused on participants' experiences, student outcomes, implemented activities, opportunities and barriers, and areas for improvement.
- **Focus Group Discussions:** A semi-structured focus group discussion guide that focuses on perceived changes, experiences in educational activities, opportunities and barriers, and areas for improvement.

Analysis

This qualitative study took an iterative approach to coding and analysis using Dedoose, using etic codes based on the research question and interview protocols and emic codes emerging from the data. Data was analyzed within each case study school across time points and again between case study schools. Analysis was conducted by two researchers with significant discussion and preliminary analysis validated by the broader research team in an analysis workshop to ensure accurate findings. The quantitative data was analyzed by STATA software version 17 and two-way ANOVA was utilized to compare the influence of PM ERM (treatment group) vs non-ERM (non-treatment group) by considering the two-time point data.

Ethics

School Directors of every school and WEOs provided permission for data collection to take place. All teachers provided informed written consent before their participation. The Principal Investigators received social science research ethical certification from either CITI or Protecting Human Research Participants. This study received ethical approval from IRC's Institutional Review Board under protocol EDU 1.00.031.

Findings

The following findings are organized into seven key themes based on cross-case analysis.

The PM ERM Addressed Children's Physical and Psychosocial Needs

Meeting Children's Physical Needs

Participants across all groups reported that physical needs were addressed through the intervention. Activities addressing children's physical needs varied in the intervention matrix and were varied at the school level based on prevailing needs. Providing high-energy biscuits through school feeding, provision of Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) support, water point rehabilitation, and vaccination and deworming campaigns were most frequently reported by participants across all case study schools as described in the following two quotes.

“ School children who used to go home hungry at times due to not eating their breakfast now eat biscuits at school, they drink water since they are provided with clean drinking water, and the children who want to wash can keep their hygiene, so they learn during all 5 school days.

- School2_Government_R2

In the past, girls used to be absent from school during their menstrual period, and we used to feel ashamed, which hindered our education. But now, thanks to the project providing us with these sanitation materials, we can attend our education properly.

- School6_Student_R2

Participants frequently discussed the relationship between children’s physical needs being met in school increased enrollment and attendance at school and reduced absenteeism as further described in section 3.2 below. Few participants also described the value of such physical needs being met to support quality learning, most particularly related to children being able to focus on learning without being hungry or thirsty and menstruating girls being able to continue their education without disruption during menstruation periods. It should be noted that some participants provided recommendations for expanding or deepening services to address children’s physical needs which will be further described in section 3.6 below.

Meeting Children’s Psychosocial Needs

Many respondents described how PM ERM programming increased morale for students and teachers, primarily by restoring a sense of hope and normalcy, moving forward from the past, and providing a sense of being cared for. Some participants mentioned the importance of more clinical mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS) services provided through the PM ERM via identification and referral pathways and psychological first aid.

Participants, especially children, repeatedly cited the rehabilitation of school facilities and the clean and attractive nature of the school compound as a source of joy. Some schools in the PM ERM, such as case study school 3, were used as mass graves during the conflict while others were heavily damaged with bullet holes and other remnants of war. Thus, while rehabilitation activities supported students’ access to safe learning environments, they more importantly minimized reminders and triggers of trauma or stress from the conflict.

“ There were so many [ethnically charged derogatory] writings on the walls of our school during the war. It was painted [over] and all of it was removed when I came back. I am happy to learn in my classroom.
– School2_Student_R2

Additionally, the provision of recreational materials supported restoring a sense of childhood and peace.

“ Since the area was impacted, children preferred to play in their spare time with making ‘Klash’ [to imply Kalashnikov rifle]. The materials they produced for the war were inclined towards the war. After we have taken a psychosocial training, however, to take them out of the war mentality... we have made an effort to help them produce playing materials that could bring their psyche back to school. – School3_Teacher2_R2

The PM ERM Supported Children’s Increased Access to Education

Participants from all population groups described increased enrollment and attendance and reduced student absenteeism and dropout in PM ERM schools. This was also increasingly reported from the first round to subsequent rounds, revealing the benefits as programming continued and expanded.

“ Previously, there was a trend of absence. Some deprived families cannot fulfill notebooks; cannot fulfill pens; the solution for those problems has made them follow their learning appropriately; this in turn, eat benefit to the students. – School4_Teacher1_R2

In addition to children’s physical and psychosocial needs being met, increased enrollment and attendance could be attributed to participants’ three primary factors:

1. Increased teacher capacity to implement Learning through Play methods in the classroom, making learning more engaging and attractive.
2. Provision of scholastic materials and teaching and learning materials, reducing barriers to attendance and increasing motivation to attend school.
3. Rehabilitated physical environments and provided play materials, creating a fun and aesthetically pleasing environment that attracts children.

These factors led participants to frequently describe increased enjoyment at school, desires to attend school, and engagement while at school.

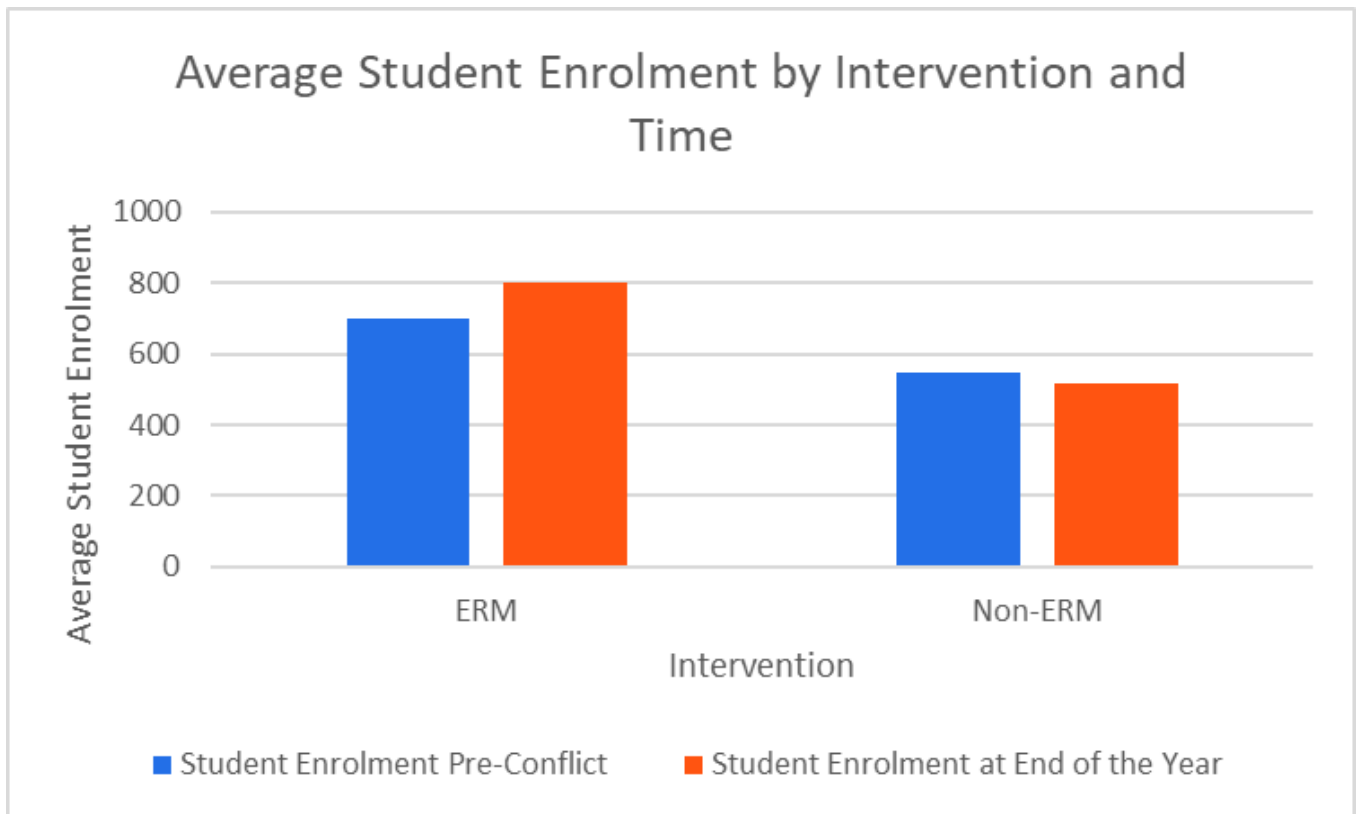


Kids are racing to go to school, or they are not being tardy, the reason why they are racing off is that for instance, even water --- if they are late without washing because they have slept in and they are late to school because there is enough supply of water in the school it is available there. Also, for food, if they have gone to school without eating their breakfast because there is prepared breakfast there, there isn't anything troubling. This organization, in the name of this organization the kids are racing to school. Rather, it has made them generate love for school.

- School3_Parent_R2

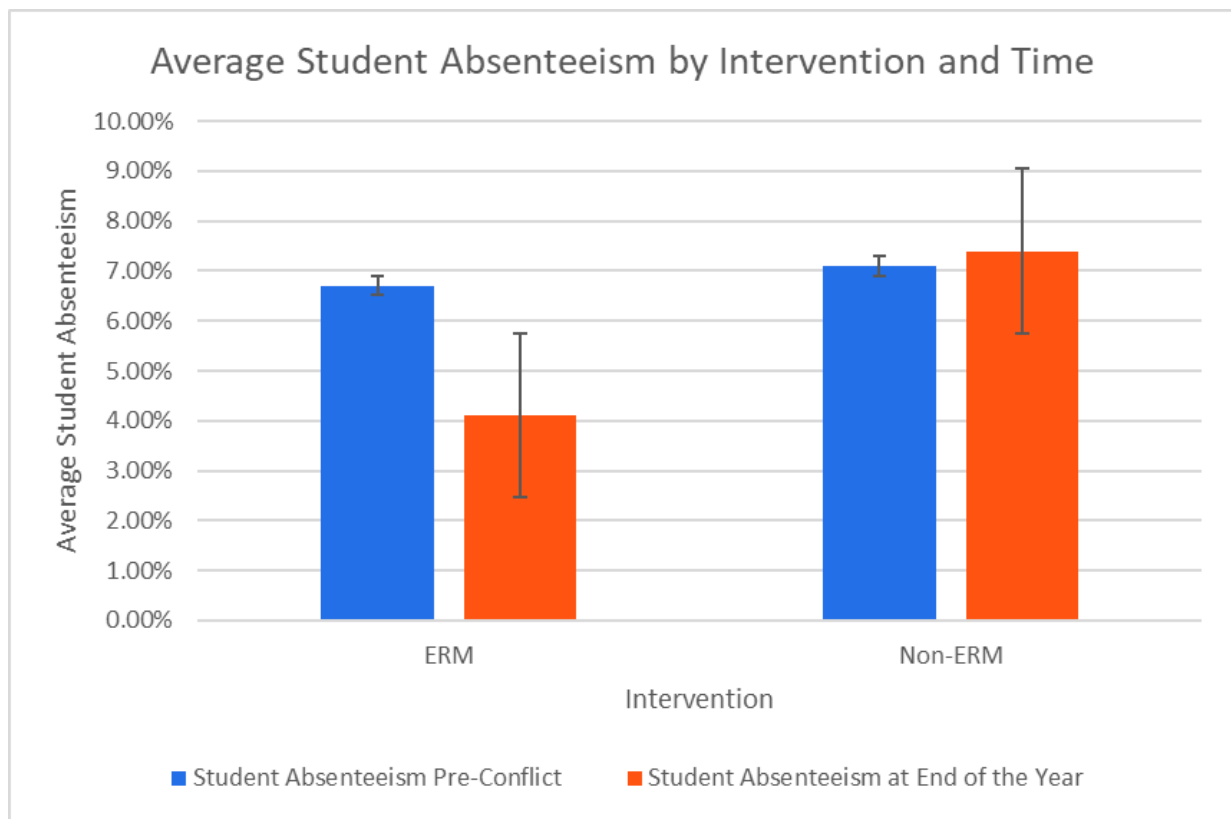
Comparative analysis between intervention schools (n=128) and non-intervention schools (n= 131) confirms a statistically significant ($p < .05$) increase in average student enrolment in intervention schools compared to non-intervention schools from data before the conflict and at the end of the 2022-2023 academic year when controlled for time using a two-way ANOVA test as depicted in Figure 2 below. PM ERM schools increased average student enrolment by 102 children compared to an increase in average student enrolment of 29 children in non-ERM schools. This implies that the PM ERM had a positive influence on student enrolment.

Figure 2. Average Student Enrolment Rates (2020 – 2023)



Additionally, descriptive statistics reveal a positive trend in reducing student absenteeism with an average absenteeism rate in intervention schools dropping from 6.71% to 4.11%, and an average absenteeism rate in non-intervention schools remaining relatively stable at 7.1% to 7.4%, though two-way ANOVA test (n=259) does not show a statistically significant association with the intervention as depicted in Figure 3 below. This indicates that, while the PM ERM might have been a contributing factor to reducing absenteeism, it may not be solely attributed as the cause of such changes. Given the complex nature of attendance and absenteeism rates, it is likely that there is another covariate besides time that is mediating this effect such as voluntary or forced displacement, socio-economic status, or another variable. Additionally, descriptive statistics reveal a positive trend in reducing student absenteeism with an average absenteeism rate in intervention schools dropping from 6.71% to 4.11%, and an average absenteeism rate in non-intervention schools remaining relatively stable at 7.1% to 7.4%, though two-way ANOVA test (n=259) does not show a statistically significant association with the intervention as depicted in Figure 3 below. This indicates that, while the PM ERM might have been a contributing factor to reducing absenteeism, it may not be solely attributed as the cause of such changes. Given the complex nature of attendance and absenteeism rates, it is likely that there is another covariate besides time that is mediating this effect such as voluntary or forced displacement, socio-economic status, or another variable.

Figure 3. Average Student Absenteeism Rates (2020 – 2023)



The PM ERM Supported Children’s Holistic Learning and Well-being

While the goal of this intervention was not to seek changes in children’s holistic learning outcomes (cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and creative skills) and well-being, the analysis revealed promising benefits of the PM ERM for supporting such outcomes. Formal learning and well-being assessments were not possible within the study design, however, participants described how the PM ERM, particularly the training provided to teachers on LtP and MHPSS, led to improved holistic learning and well-being of students, particularly their cognitive (academic), social, and emotional skills.

Some participants described improved cognitive development of students in PM ERM schools through academic performance. Students reported improved learning and increased reputation amongst the community as well-achieving schools. Adult participants described how children are better engaged in learning activities resulting in improved academic achievement.

“ At the time this school was screened our students were labeled as unproductive students, and less than half were able to pass. However, today, we believe that they can be more than just passers; they can be a hope for this village and possibly the entire nation. – School6_HT_R2

Participants described how the PM ERM influenced the social development of children, particularly in terms of the social community created among students and between students and teachers.

“ Students now engage in discussions outside of school and encourage each other to attend classes. They form a supportive network that motivates and helps any students who may be falling behind. – School6_Teacher1_R1

Additionally, participants described emotional development due to improved teacher-student interactions, the safe emotional environment in schools, and increased feelings of empowerment, especially for girls and young women.

“ What [the project] has contributed to the kids is that they have gotten what they want because they are learning with love...they haven't come across mental stress, they are learning with a relaxed mind. – School3_Parent_R2

The confidence of our female students has increased. Their initiative has increased as they address their previous fears, and they are now more focused on their education rather than being distracted by physical changes they are experiencing. – School5_Teacher2_R3

The PM ERM Improved Teachers' Retention, Instructional Practices, and Well-being

Participants, primarily teachers, HTs, and government officials, reported that professional development opportunities, including the aforementioned LtP and MHPSS training, changed teachers' classroom practices. Additionally, teachers reported the influence of professional development opportunities for their motivation and encouragement.

“ When a person takes training, it makes them happy and causes them to have a love for the job. There is a situation where we got this from the teachers during our field activities, and we saw them happy to teach and carry out the work happily. – School3_Government_R2

Additionally, participants elucidated how the PM ERM supported improved teacher-student relationships, a factor that can support teaching processes and influence teacher well-being^[5].

“ Students like the school. Students love their teachers. The capacity of our teachers has been built. – School2_Government_R2

For some, professional development opportunities also supported teachers' well-being, offering insight into MHPSS concepts or strategies to manage their own stress or social-emotional competence.

“ The teachers were suffering from mental issues due to the war. They were sad, disappointed, and depressed. But, once they took the psychosocial training, they realized there was a project...trying to bring them out of the problems they were in. The teachers are happy now. They have built the capacity. – School2_HT_R2

Teacher absenteeism and teacher retention can be affected by teacher motivation and teacher well-being, amongst other factors such as remuneration. The PM ERM primarily targeted activities that could support teacher motivation and teacher well-being. Two-way ANOVA analysis (n=259) revealed a statistically significant (p<.05) increase in teacher retention in intervention schools over non-intervention schools, with an increased average of 3 teachers retained per year compared to an average of less than 1 additional teacher retained per year as highlighted in Figure 4 below. While an average increase of 2 additional teachers may not be a large amount, especially if the teaching staff is large, this reveals the promising effects of teacher professional development and other PM ERM activities while also indicating a strong need to address other systemic factors like increasing teacher salaries or increasing public prestige and sentiment toward the teaching profession.

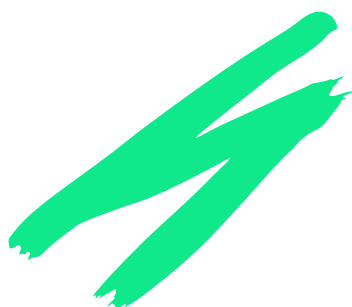
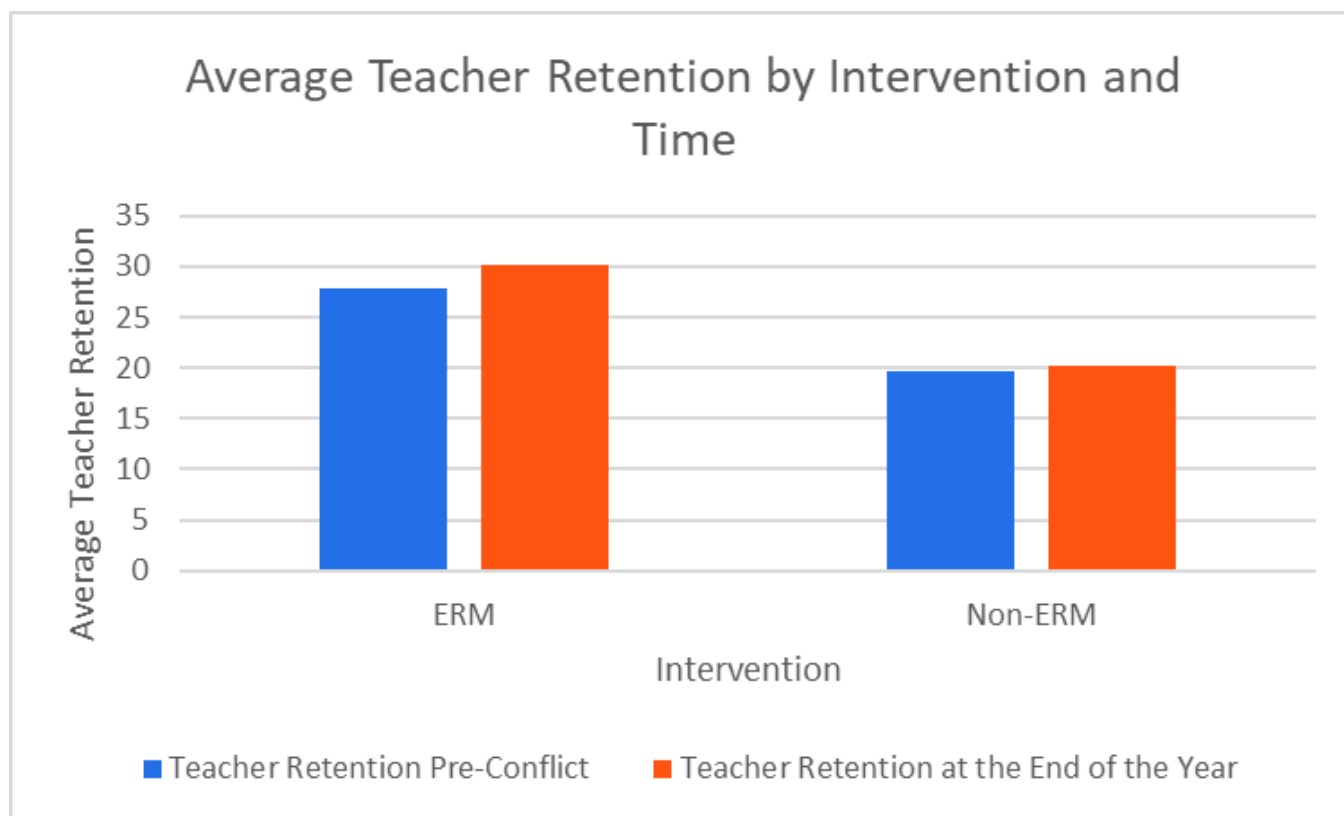


Figure 4. Average Teachers Retention Rates (2020 – 2023)

The PM ERM Supported Children’s Holistic Learning and Well-being

The core opportunity within multi-sectoral response is the ability to capitalize on and strengthen existing capacities, synergies, and systems.

Implementing partners and local government officials from offices related to PM ERM intervention sectors participated in and co-led PM ERM trainings, conducted joint monitoring, and were knowledgeable about project goals.

“ We have various stakeholders, each playing their respective roles. For instance, they facilitate, support, monitor, and evaluate the education bureau’s work in the education sector...Whenever we face challenges, we hold discussions with them to find solutions. They also support us in monitoring. The community is actively involved as well. – School 6_IP_R2

Additionally, community members were also active collaborators in implementation by donating time, money, or materials, particularly related to rehabilitation works. Community members also played a large role in the identification and prioritization of needs-based support as well as accountability mechanisms to ensure the appropriate use and allocation of resources. This increases the sustainability and ownership of the intervention to build on the available capacities amidst losses of property or livelihoods.

“ The farmers were taking water and digging by carrying their shovels and pickaxes during the time this school was being built back. They were doing this saying that it was all for their kids, and they did it without any hesitation. – School4_Parent_R2

The PM ERM also strengthened multi-sectoral synergies within local government offices across different sectors primarily by identifying the importance of collaboration and communication. This was described across the activity planning and implementation, particularly through activity planning and coordination, joint monitoring of school activities, and collaborative implementation of school-based committees (e.g., WASH club, gender club, health club, etc.).

“ Even before the project, there is a system in place at the district level called a multisectoral structure that integrates different sectors...There is a gap, particularly about resources and awareness. There is a lesson we have learned from the integrated approach or system that [Implementing Partner] follows as well as working with NGOs and different sectors. We have gained good experience, especially in relating about working well and working together. – School5_Government_R3

Out of the four regions, Afar and Benishangul-Gumuz are two regions in which the PlayMatters technical assistance project also operates. For that reason, some participants in these areas, particularly from the government and IPs, described the opportunity to build on the successes of the broader PlayMatters because some government actors have already been engaged. Collaborating with similar government actors to deliver training in both the PlayMatters technical assistance project and the PM ERM can strengthen the quality of implementation through deeper or more frequent engagement opportunities.

Additional Support is Needed to Meet the Needs of Crisis-affected Communities

Despite such successes, participants described a desired continuation and expansion of the PM ERM due to the persistent and large scope of needs beyond the one-year intervention.

One core recommendation from most participants was to expand the scope and reach of the project. Due to limited resources, IPs did not provide programming for all students, particularly related to scholastic material distribution and school feeding. In addition to a broader scope at the school level, respondents discussed needs in the community beyond intervention schools and the desire to support other schools. Also, nearly every respondent described their hopes for the PM ERM to continue as communities continue to recover to address recurring needs such as scholastic materials and hygiene materials.

“ For the future, what I want to share is that because of the achievements of the school this year, I’m afraid that we may have more students next year according to the information I get from the community. The school food program may not be reliable despite this, and we risk losing even the students we currently have at a time when we are expecting more. – School6_HT_R2

In addition to continued intervention, participants provided technical recommendations to deepen or expand the scope to strengthen the intervention. For example, while respondents were happy with the high-energy biscuits provided, many respondents recommended moving towards hot meals that would benefit the whole school.

“ Regarding the school feeding program, we provide a supplementary school feeding program, so we do not provide a permanent feeding program. If children eat food before they come to school, it is with the intention that the biscuits they are provided at school will energize them and stimulate them more, but biscuits alone are not food for children, and I think it would be good if there is a permanent system of feeding program which includes food with nutritional values. – School2_IP_R2

The PM ERM’s intervention matrix prohibited new construction, but some respondents described limitations in only rehabilitation when the school structures were made from locally available materials like mud and stones and could naturally require further rehabilitation over time.

“ Some schools may not be suitable for renovation and should be demolished as they do not meet the required standards. Instead, I suggest repairing and constructing new permanent blocks for a few schools, providing visible and standardized facilities that can be handed over to the community. This would enhance sustainability and improve the quality of education. – School5_IP_R3

While MHPSS was integrated into the project, further psychosocial support was requested for both children and teachers with a stronger focus on teacher well-being. Additionally, teachers frequently reported a desire for additional training, often regularly, echoing evidence that comprehensive, consistent continuous professional development is more responsive to teachers' needs than one-off training.

Two additional key sectors, Economic Recovery and Development and Peacebuilding, were also identified as additional considerations to a multi-sectoral response. Economic recovery and development activities could sustainably support both the schools and parents to better meet children's needs which can support education [6]. In particular, some IPs provided Child Protection assistance for the most vulnerable children through identified basic needs like food, medical costs, clothes, and other individualized needs which were quantified, and equivalent cash provided to caregivers to ensure these needs were met.

One participant from an area vulnerable to conflict suggested integrating peacebuilding into programming to mitigate the risks schools face for future conflict. Some participants also described the importance of economic recovery and development activities to sustainably support both the schools and parents to better meet children's needs.

“ [Teachers] were mostly displaced by the war, just like the students...But when we left, we had to leave behind many of our belongings...When we finally returned, we found nothing...Here, teachers' lives are quite difficult... But now, when most of the donor organizations come, they only focus on students and parents. They don't pay attention to the teachers...However, if our students receive support, it indirectly affects us as well. But I think it would be good if they also consider the teachers in the future. - School1_Teacher3_R3

Challenges and Considerations for Implementation

Due to remaining insecurity, project activities were frequently disrupted or delayed. In some cases, initial needs assessments had to be repeated due to the resurgence of insecurity. Given such security disruptions, lengthy procurement processes between field offices and head offices led to delayed procurement, with teams finding that prices significantly increased, creating tensions between compliant procurement processes and the need for a timely response. Participants described a desire for timely intervention, particularly regarding material distributions and rehabilitation activities, as well as alignment with government sector planning schedules.

“ The first big challenge was when we finished doing the need assessment, a conflict happened, and we had to do another need assessment. There was a gap between the need assessment we did and what we encountered, and this was one of the major problems. - School2_IP_R2

Some participants, primarily system actors and Head Teachers, also described the importance of coordinating with government stakeholders and other NGOs to ensure there are no duplication of efforts. Including government actors in the design and planning stages can support stronger coordination. Moreover, some IPs described a desire for stronger coordination mechanisms between PM ERM implementing partners through a community of practice as a way of sharing successes and best practices during implementation given the scope of IPs.

“ If [Implementing Partner] shares with us the plan of what activities it is planning to carry out this year about education, we can include that plan with our plan, and perhaps even if they forget, we can remind them about it. - School1_SA_R3



Recommendations

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

1. Ensure that EiE responses address children’s holistic needs through multi-sectoral interventions considering their health, safety, and educational well-being. Balance fulfilling basic needs and the provision of structural inputs (such as classroom rehabilitation) to ensure quality learning and holistic development at school.
2. Integrate LtP as an entry point for supporting teachers in crisis-affected contexts through teacher continuous professional development by recognizing the positive influence of LtP on supporting school attendance and retention for both students and teachers.
3. Provide continuous support to teachers, prioritizing their professional development and material provision responses to support how they have been affected by conflict. Consider teachers’ well-being as an outcome in future EiE responses.
4. Strengthen existing capacities and coordination mechanisms to improve communication and multi-sectoral synergies to support the transition from emergency response to recovery and long-term development stages.

Recommendations for Research

1. Conduct rigorous impact research on the benefits of multi-sectoral approaches to EiE response for both students and teachers. This should include the measurement of children’s holistic learning outcomes, including physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and creative skills and psychosocial well-being.
2. Conduct longitudinal research on the role of multi-sectoral EiE responses on children’s long-term academic progression and future education outcomes.

Conclusion

Building on the protective capacities of schools, integrating multi-sectoral service delivery across WASH, Child Protection, Health and Nutrition, and Education in one intervention supported children’s physical and psychosocial needs in a fragile recovery context, ultimately contributing to their current holistic and educational well-being. Strengthening EiE interventions with a comprehensive multi-sectoral approach can increase student enrolment and attendance, support teacher motivation, and strengthen quality education delivery for stronger cognitive, social, and emotional skills development. Strengthening the capacities of local communities as collaborators and partnering with local government bodies from a technical capacity-sharing perspective strengthened the relevance and quality of implemented activities. However, needs persist in communities, primarily regarding long-term recovery activities to address the large impact that conflict has had on communities.



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Annex: Tools

Key Informant Interview Guides

Round One

ERM Case Study Semi-Structured Interview Guide—Systems Actors & Implementing Partners

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me! This interview will take approximately 25 – 30 minutes. We will focus on your experiences as a partner of the PlayMatters ERM.

I will start with some basic background questions:

1. What is your age (optional)?
2. What is your highest level of education?
3. How long have you worked as a teacher?
4. How long have you worked in this school?

Thank you! Now we can move ahead with some questions about your experience with PlayMatters.

1. In the past 2 months, what activities have PlayMatters ERM supported schools in your area of operations with? (Probe: classroom rehabilitation, scholastic distributions, LtP training, latrine rehabilitation, school feeding, etc.)
2. How does PlayMatters ERM address the holistic needs (education, protection, WASH, and health & nutrition) of your students? Are there additional needs that are not being addressed?
3. In the past 2 months of PlayMatters ERM activities, have you observed any benefits or improvements for yourself or from your learners? If so, please describe them.
4. What are some opportunities that you have experienced or observed in the implementation of PlayMatters ERM activities?
5. What are some barriers that you have experienced or observed in the implementation of PlayMatters ERM activities?

ERM Case Study Semi-Structured Interview Guide – Teachers and Head Teachers

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me! This interview will take approximately 25 – 30 minutes. We will focus on your experiences as a teacher in a school supported by the PlayMatters ERM.

I will start with some basic background questions:

1. What is your age (optional)?
2. What is your highest level of education?
3. How long have you worked as a teacher?
4. How long have you worked in this school?

Thank you! Now we can move ahead with some questions about your experience with PlayMatters.

1. In the past 2 months, what activities have PlayMatters ERM supported your school with? (Probe: classroom rehabilitation, scholastic distributions, LtP training, latrine rehabilitation, school feeding, etc.)
2. How does PlayMatters ERM address the holistic needs (education, protection, WASH, and health & nutrition) of your students? Are there additional needs that are not being addressed?
3. In the past 2 months of PlayMatters ERM activities, have you observed any benefits or improvements for yourself or your students? If so, please describe them.

Round Two

ERM Case Study Semi-Structured Interview Guide – Systems Actors & Implementing Partners

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me! This interview will take approximately 25 – 30 minutes. We will focus on your experiences as a partner of the PlayMatters ERM.

I will start with some basic background questions:

1. How would you describe activities in your area since your first visit?

2. What activities have been done regarding CP and MHPSS for children and how it impacted the life of affected children? Please provide us with some examples from your area.
3. How does the holistic/integrated approach of the intervention impact students' attendance and learning outcomes?
4. What are some opportunities and challenges that you have observed in the implementation of the activities?
5. Have you had the opportunity to interact with other regional or district officers working in other sectors through the PlayMatters ERM?

ERM Case Study Semi-Structured Interview Guide – Teachers and Head Teachers

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me! This interview will take approximately 35 – 40 minutes. We will focus on your experiences as a teacher in a school supported by the PlayMatters ERM.

1. Please think about your teaching practice from the past few months. Can you provide an example of how you have implemented an LtP strategy/practice in your classroom? Please describe any benefits or challenges that you experienced.
2. How does the LtP methodology address the holistic learning needs of your students?
3. What do you think is the contribution of the LtP methodology to educational quality?
4. The project is implementing MHPSS services for students, how do think the service contributes to students' well-being?
5. To what extent do you feel comfortable addressing your students' psychological needs? Please explain.
6. What training or support have you received to support your well-being as a teacher?
7. What do you do to help manage your stress and emotions?
8. How do you describe your role in protecting children?
9. Please describe any training you have received on child safeguarding and referring children to protection services.
10. Thinking of WASH activities like access to safe water, latrine rehabilitation, and MHM kit distribution; how do these activities contribute to students' attendance and learning outcomes?
11. (If relevant) How have school feeding and nutrition programs contributed to students' attendance and learning outcomes?
12. How and what has been done to ensure inclusion in the interventions of the PlayMatters ERM project in your context?

Round Three

ERM Case Study Semi-Structured Interview Guide – Implementing Partners

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me! This interview will take approximately 25 – 30 minutes. We will focus on your experiences as a partner of the PlayMatters ERM.

In the past 2 months, what activities have PlayMatters ERM supported schools in your area of operations with? (Probe: classroom rehabilitation, scholastic distributions, LtP training, latrine rehabilitation, school feeding, etc.)

1. How does PlayMatters ERM address the holistic needs (education, protection, WASH, and health & nutrition) of your students? Are there additional needs that are not being addressed?
2. In the past 2 months of PlayMatters ERM activities, have you observed any benefits or improvements for yourself or from your learners? If so, please describe them.
3. Has your community experienced additional insecurity or crises? How has this affected PlayMatters ERM activities and how have you responded, if at all?
4. What are some opportunities that you have experienced or observed in the implementation of PlayMatters ERM activities?
5. What are some barriers that you have experienced or observed in the implementation of PlayMatters ERM activities?
6. Please describe your relationship with the IRC team. What support have you received in implementing activities?
7. What stories of success or satisfaction do you have from clients?

ERM Case Study Semi-Structured Interview Guide – Teachers and Head Teachers

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me! This interview will take approximately 25 – 30 minutes. We will focus on your experiences as a teacher in a school supported by the PlayMatters ERM.

1. Since my last visit, what activities have PlayMatters ERM supported your school with? (Probe: classroom rehabilitation, scholastic distributions, LtP training, latrine rehabilitation, school feeding, etc.)
2. How does PlayMatters ERM address the holistic needs (education, protection, WASH, and health & nutrition) of your students? Are there additional needs that are not being addressed?

nutrition) of your students? Are there additional needs that are not being addressed?

3. Please think about your teaching practice from the past few months. Can you provide an example of how you have implemented an LtP strategy/practice in your classroom? Please describe any benefits or challenges that you experienced.
4. To what extent do you feel comfortable addressing your students' psychological needs? Please explain.
5. What has been done to ensure inclusion in the interventions of the PlayMatters ERM project in your context?
6. In the past 2 months of PlayMatters ERM activities, have you observed any benefits or improvements for your students? If so, please describe them.
7. In the past 2 months of PlayMatters ERM activities, have you observed any benefits or improvements for yourself? If so, please describe them.

Focused Group Discussion Guides

Round One

ERM Case Study Focus Group Discussion Guide – PARENTS

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me! This conversation will take approximately 60 – 90 minutes. We will focus on your experiences as parents in a school supported by the PlayMatters ERM.

1. To begin, why is it important for your child(ren) to attend school?
2. What are some of the critical services that children access at school?
3. Are there critical services that your children do not have access to at school that you wish they did?
4. Over the past 2 months, how have you seen your child(ren) benefit from attending school? (Prompt: this could be physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, or creatively)
5. What do you know about the PlayMatters ERM project and what implementations of the ERM project do you know?
6. How do you explain the importance/benefit of the project to your children's learning?

ERM Case Study Focus Group Discussion Guide – STUDENTS

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me! This conversation will take approximately 60 – 90 minutes. We will focus on your experiences as students in a school supported by the PlayMatters ERM.

1. To begin, what do you enjoy about school? Why do you come to school?
Here are a few images to represent some different things that we need (Provide stimuli of images representing: (i) book; (ii) food; (iii) drinking water; (iv) latrine/toilet; (v) family; (vi) shelter?).
2. Which of these would you consider to be essential?
3. Why do you think this is essential? (*Follow up to Question 2)
4. Are there any images that are not essential to you?
5. Are there any images that are essential to you that are missing here? You can either describe them to me or draw them.
6. In the past two months, which of these areas has your school supported you? Please describe.
7. Are there any needs that you have that are not being filled at your school?

Round Two

ERM Case Study Focus Group Discussion Guide – PARENTS

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me! This conversation will take approximately 60 – 90 minutes. We will focus on your experiences as parents in a school supported by the PlayMatters ERM.

1. Over the past 2 months, how have you seen your child(ren) benefit from attending school? (Prompt: this could be physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, or creatively)
2. Please think about your engagement in LtP practice, how are these engagements going in your contexts and what do you think about their impact on your children's learning?
3. Thinking of WASH activities like access to safe water, latrine rehabilitation, and MHM kit distribution; how do these activities contribute to your child(ren)'s attendance at school?
4. (If relevant) How have school feeding and nutrition programs contributed to your child(ren)'s attendance at school?

ERM Case Study Focus Group Discussion Guide – STUDENTS

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me! This conversation will take approximately 60 – 90 minutes. We will focus on your experiences as students in a school supported by the PlayMatters ERM.

1. Please tell me about something that interests you in this school, give an example of how it attracts

you.

2. Have seen changes in your school compound?
3. Do you think the changes are helpful for your learning? Would you give an example, please?
4. Are all children in your school able to benefit from these changes? Why or why not?
5. Please think about a learning activity or lesson from the last two months that you enjoyed. Can you explain to me what you enjoyed about the lesson?

Round Three

ERM Case Study Focus Group Discussion Guide – Systems Actors

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me! This conversation will take approximately 60 minutes. We will focus on your experiences as a government partner in an area supported by the PlayMatters ERM.

1. What activities have PlayMatters ERM supported schools in your area of operations with? (Probe: classroom rehabilitation, scholastic distributions, LtP training, latrine rehabilitation, school feeding, etc.)
2. What activities have PlayMatters ERM supported your staff/offices in your areas of operations with?
3. How does PlayMatters ERM address the holistic needs (education, protection, WASH, and health & nutrition) of your students? Are there additional needs that are not being addressed?
4. In the past 2 months of PlayMatters ERM activities, have you observed any benefits or improvements for yourself or from children in your community? If so, please describe them.
5. Please describe your relationship with the PlayMatters implementing partner.
6. Has your community experienced additional insecurity or crises? How has this affected PlayMatters ERM activities and how have you responded, if at all?
7. What are some opportunities that you have experienced or observed in the implementation of PlayMatters ERM activities?
8. What are some barriers that you have experienced or observed in the implementation of PlayMatters ERM activities?

ERM Case Study Focus Group Discussion Guide – PARENTS

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me! This conversation will take approximately 60 – 90 minutes. We will focus on your experiences as parents in a school supported by the PlayMatters ERM.

1. Over the past 2 months, how have you seen your child(ren) benefit from attending school? (Prompt: this could be physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, or creatively)
2. Please think about your engagement in LtP practice, how are these engagements going in your contexts and what do you think about their impact on your children's learning?
3. Thinking of WASH activities like access to safe water, latrine rehabilitation, and MHM kit distribution; how do these activities contribute to your child(ren)'s attendance at school?
4. (If relevant) How have school feeding and nutrition programs contributed to your child(ren)'s attendance at school?
5. What do you think are some of the benefits of the PlayMatters ERM project for your children?
6. Are you satisfied with the project activities and services?

ERM Case Study Focus Group Discussion Guide – STUDENTS

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me! This conversation will take approximately 60 – 90 minutes. We will focus on your experiences as students in a school supported by the PlayMatters ERM.

1. Please tell me about something that interests you in this school, give an example of how it attracts you.
2. Have seen changes in your school compound?
3. Do you think the changes are helpful for your learning? Would you give an example, please?
4. Are all children in your school able to benefit from these changes? Why or why not?
5. Please think about a learning activity or lesson from the last two months that you enjoyed. Can you explain to me what you enjoyed about the lesson?

A child gets his arm measured during a deworming campaign.

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