Transforming Lives Through Play-Based Learning in Emergency Contexts: Kachin State, Myanmar

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In a world where war and conflict dominate the news, adults may become de-sensitised as a way of protecting mental wellbeing. While this is a natural coping mechanism, staying informed about global issues is part of our responsibility, not just as early years educators but as global citizens connected to our own communities and wider human stories. Global awareness matters not just for educators, but for the children and families in our care. Young children can be directly impacted through personal or family experience or indirectly exposed through media coverage. Without fully understanding what they have seen or heard, children quite naturally try to make sense of their worlds by processing events through play. When educators are globally aware, they are better equipped to respond with sensitivity, helping children explore their emotions in safe, age-appropriate ways. Understanding the context of global conflicts helps educators to humanise events and supports a compassionate, informed approach to early education.

This article considers life in Kachin State, Myanmar and how Children on the Edge (COTE), a children's rights organisation, works collaboratively to provide vital, safe spaces for children to play and learn.

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, has faced internal conflict since its independence in 1948, resulting in one of the world's longest-running civil wars. Ongoing clashes between the military and ethnic armed groups continue to displace communities and de-stabilise regions. UNICEF (2024) states that over 3.2 million nationals are currently internally displaced in Myanmar. Recent natural disasters in the country have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis; in September 2024, severe flooding caused by Typhoon Yagi affected an estimated 1 million people across 70 townships and in March 2025, a devastating 7.7 magnitude earthquake struck. These overlapping emergencies have left nearly 20 million people, more than a third of Myanmar's population, in need of humanitarian assistance, with 40% being displaced children facing disruptions to education, safety, and wellbeing.

Conflict in Kachin State

Since 1961 Kachin State, located in northern Myanmar, has been embroiled in conflict primarily between the Kachin Independence Army and the Myanmar military. After a 17-year ceasefire collapsed in 2011, hostilities resumed, leading to significant civilian displacement. The region's rich natural resources, including jade and rare earth minerals, have further complicated the conflict, with control over these assets being a strategic objective for both sides. The Kachin people have suffered horrific consequences of armed conflict, bearing the brunt of attacks against armed groups. Hundreds of thousands have been forced from their villages into remote mountain camps near the China border, enduring freezing winters and limited access to basic services or humanitarian aid. Many children have known nothing but war, and severe trauma is common.

COTE is the only non-governmental organisation offering ongoing support for young children living in active war zones in the northernmost camps of Kachin State. Working alongside local partners, the Kachin Development Group (KDG) and the Kachin Women's Association (KWA), for over a decade, COTE supports community-owned safe spaces where nearly 500 young children access their rights to play and early childhood education (ECE) in eight of the most remote and inaccessible Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps.

Running ECE centres in this context presents significant challenges. Resources are scarce and supply lines uncertain, forcing staff to be creative and resilient to keep the programme running. Teachers work with limited materials and adapt their pedagogy for children who have experienced trauma and displacement. The camps proximity to ongoing conflict means the ECE centres are frequently forced to change plans, or delay activities due to security concerns. Trenches are dug at each centre for refuge from bombings and regular emergency tests are implemented to ensure children know how to remain safe.

The Power of Play

Play is vital for all children, wherever they are in the world. In extreme contexts, like Kachin, it becomes a lifeline promoting mental health and well-being, and building the social, emotional, physical, and language skills that enable children to develop holistically. Lu Tawng is five years old. Her teacher spoke of her resilience and progress, *"She has very much improved since last year. She now has the confidence to stand in front of people demonstrating her talents, and she enjoys playing with other children"*.

COTE provide opportunities to play, inside and outside, and centres are equipped with swings, slides and climbing equipment. All learning resources are developed locally using sustainable materials, most are made, sourced or donated by parents. One ECE Committee asks every parent to create at least one play item using local resources e.g. bamboo, wood, craft materials rather than depending on commercially available toys. As Ja Awng (KDG Programme

Coordinator) explains, "*this approach not only promotes creativity but also solidifies the fabric of our community*".

Community-led Solutions

Due to logistical difficulties and personnel safety i.e. long distances, poor infrastructure, and ongoing conflict, providing in-person support is extremely challenging for KDG and KWA and impossible for COTE. This makes community ownership and teacher engagement crucial to programme success. Local ECE committees, made up of parents and community members, oversee the centres, manage logistics and finances, guide curriculum and pedagogy, and act as links between organisations and communities.

The committees also ensure the centres serve as 'community hubs' where parents and teachers can access advice and support. Seng Hkawn, a camp community member in Woi Chyai, highlights their impact, *"The management committee collaborates well with parents and teachers. Teacher lesson plans are better than previous years and parents have given up time to spend with their children and on playschool activities. KDG's support is helping to ease the hardship faced by the community during this long crisis".*

Parenting workshops are held regularly, providing a safe space for parents to reflect, share experiences, and learn together. These sessions build understanding of child development and the value of play, while supporting parents in developing nurturing relationships with their children. Ja Awng notes, *"children feel close to their parents emotionally and can freely express their feelings without anxiety".*

Teacher training, designed and delivered by KWA, begins with intensive initial sessions followed by regular refresher training. Creative activities e.g. dance, music, and art form a core part of training, and teachers are encouraged to share ideas with parents to promote learning at home. Experienced teachers are trained as future teacher trainers to ensure continuity of support even when access to camps is restricted. Each year, teachers participate in a writing competition, producing storybooks for the children. The top three books are published and distributed across all centres. One father said, *"My little girl likes to listen to stories every night, so I read the storybooks you provided us with. The stories are still a bit old for her, but she still wants to listen. Sometimes she reads and plays on her own with the books".* The competition has increased literacy access, boosted teacher motivation, and brought community pride.

Due to the extreme Kachin State context, holistic support to improve children's well-being is vital through playful early education. COTE provides building supplies and equipment to ensure the temporary buildings are functioning and safe for the children to play. This has included

health and sanitation facilities, medical supplies and training, infrastructure such as roads, fences and roofs and providing kitchen equipment. Daily nutritious meals, often a child's only hot meal each day, are provided as well as blankets and rainproof and warm clothes to keep children dry and warm through the sub-zero winter months in the mountains. Mother, Tawng Mi said "*Although I cannot afford all my household expenses, my child is developing well with the support of the teachers at the centre and thanks to the supplementary food support and playing equipment".*

In the face of profound adversity, the early years programme in Kachin State demonstrates the transformative power of play-based learning and community-driven support. By centering play, nurturing relationships, and fostering local ownership, COTE and partners have created safe, inclusive spaces where young children can begin to heal and thrive. This work addresses immediate developmental needs, promotes resilience and offers hope. For UK early years educators, this case study serves as a reminder of the universal rights of the child and the role of play in supporting resilience wherever a child lives. Reflecting on global challenges invites us to consider how we nurture empathy, global awareness, and inclusive practice in our own settings. In contexts of crisis, such as Kachin, ECE is not a luxury, it is a lifeline.