



INSIGHTS-IN-ACTION

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Why supporting teacher wellbeing is critical to developing learners' social-emotional skills (and how to do so effectively)

Insights from Colombia's Flexible Education Models

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Latin America & Caribbean, Colombia, Teachers and teaching, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY), Curriculum

ASK THE EVIDENCE



If you only have one minute:

Colombia's flexible education models reintegrate out-of-school children and youth through school-based, accelerated curriculum which includes core subjects and social-emotional learning (SEL). Recognising that SEL depends on motivated, emotionally supported teachers, efforts to support teacher wellbeing are integrated into the programme through training, mentoring, and psychosocial support. This approach—supported by national frameworks and partnerships with NGOs—helps create more inclusive classrooms and strengthens student-teacher relationships, especially in contexts affected by conflict or displacement. Colombia's experience shows that investing in teacher wellbeing is a critical strategy for improving students' social-emotional development, engagement, and learning.

Key lessons for similar contexts:

1. Embed SEL and teacher wellbeing into national policy frameworks to facilitate local implementation: Despite the absence of a national curriculum, the national Ministry's promotion of citizenship education and teacher wellbeing initiatives create an enabling environment for SEL. These policies legitimise investment in psychosocial support and help embed SEL into local curricula.
2. Enhance implementation capacity through public-private partnerships: Decentralised systems require localised support. NGOs provide critical technical assistance to subnational education secretariats—developing SEL tools, delivering teacher training, and strengthening oversight, monitoring, and evaluation.
3. Support the whole teacher through whole-school approaches: Pedagogical training can be coupled with structural support, including psychosocial care, peer learning, stronger school leadership, and improved working conditions. When teacher wellbeing is prioritised, learners benefit from safer, more inclusive classrooms.

What challenges do out-of-school learners face in Colombia?

Colombia faces persistent educational inequalities with an estimated 2.6 million children and youth not in school ([UNICEF, 2022](#)). Many are Venezuelan migrants, internally displaced, ethnic minorities such as Afro-descendants or indigenous groups, or from rural and conflict-affected areas. These students often face adverse childhood experiences, including violence, child labour, and poverty, making social-emotional learning essential for their re-engagement. To address these gaps, both [Colombia's 2022–2026 National Development Plan](#) and most recent [education sector plan](#) prioritize flexible education models that restore learning pathways and re-engage out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY).

What are flexible education models?

In Colombia, the term 'flexible education models' (FEM) refers to over 25 different programmes targeting marginalised learners (both children and adults) in rural and urban contexts, and both in-school and out-of-school. Within these models, there are various programmes that use an accelerated curriculum, such as the Learning Acceleration Programme ([Programa de Aceleración de Aprendizaje](#)) or Walking into Secondary ([Caminar en Secundaria](#)).¹ These programmes aim to reintegrate OOSCY aged 9–17 into the formal school system.

Offered in public schools and taught by certified formal school teachers during school hours, FEMs in Colombia condense 2 to 3 years of primary or secondary education into a single academic year. They are different than other accelerated education programmes, because FEM participants are expected to already have foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Activity-based learning is used to deliver the curriculum, whereby students address relevant community concerns, and families are engaged in the learning process (Plan International and Education Cannot Wait, n.d.). Through 'Life Projects' (Proyectos de Vida), students articulate their aspirations and map out their personal development goals ([Calvo, 2019](#)). Promotion is based on portfolio assessments, approved by the school's Evaluation and Promotion Committee, after which learners transition into regular primary or secondary classrooms.

The MEN leads regulation and oversight of all flexible education models, setting national quality standards, funding teacher salaries, and distributing materials, including operating manuals and teacher guides. While there is no national curriculum, the MEN provides baseline standards for subjects like literacy, numeracy, science, and citizenship education, which includes social-emotional competencies like empathy and conflict resolution ([MEN, 2004](#)). All materials are publicly available online, increasing autonomy

for teachers and other implementers at the local level (Plan International and Education Cannot Wait, n.d.).

Local Education Secretariats are responsible for curricular and pedagogical innovation. This autonomy promotes adaptation, ensuring programmes meet the needs of OOSCY. However, local governments often have varying levels of resources, technical knowledge, and interest in implementing FEMs, creating challenges at the local level. To enhance implementation, NGOs collaborate closely with Secretariats, developing curricula, training teachers, and providing advisory support. Organisations such as Fundación Carvajal, Norwegian Refugee Council, and Plan International, for example, strengthen teacher training and embed SEL and teacher wellbeing practices into FEM delivery.

While there is limited recent evidence on the impact of these programmes, data from 2011–2016 suggest that 86% of learners participating in one FEM model (the Learning Acceleration Programme or Programa de Aceleración de Aprendizaje) transitioned successfully to formal school ([Ortiz & Betancourt, 2020](#)).

Why teacher wellbeing matters for social-emotional learning?

SEL curricula helps learners to develop confidence, autonomy, communication, teamwork, and conflict-resolution skills, amongst others. These skills result in long-term impacts, making learners more resilient after transitioning to traditional classrooms (D'Angelo et al., 2025). SEL is particularly relevant for learners who have experienced trauma or displacement, making it particularly relevant for Venezuelan migrants and communities affected by Colombia's armed conflict. But SEL curriculum is most effective when delivered by trained and motivated teachers.

In Colombia, FEM classrooms are often seen as challenging environments. Teachers are expected to manage high academic demands while working with learners who have experienced significant trauma or instability. "These are not easy classrooms," explained one implementer. "Some principals assign teachers to these rooms hoping they will resign."

NGOs help local governments address this challenge. Organisations such as Plan International, Norwegian Refugee Council, and Fundación Carvajal have developed SEL curricula, training, and monitoring and evaluation tools to assess and support the psychosocial wellbeing of teachers and their students. Norwegian Refugee Council's Better Learning Programme (BLP), for example, complements FEM delivery (see more on BLP in our Kenya case study). Likewise, Fundación Carvajal has developed a wellbeing toolkit and integrated socio-emotional training into its FEM teacher support model. This includes school visits, group reflection, and ongoing mentoring, including through collaboration with social workers. Teachers are trained to understand the effects of trauma on learning and to adopt responsive, inclusive approaches. They are also provided with spaces to share how they feel, express concerns, or learn strategies for self-care.

The training recognises that teacher motivation and emotional resilience are prerequisites for effective SEL delivery. Teachers who feel supported are more likely to come to work prepared, build strong relationships with their learners, and foster a classroom climate that enables both academic and emotional growth. Indeed, global evidence suggests that teacher wellbeing can be a conduit to student learning: when teachers feel safe and supported, they are more likely to be effective ([Falk et al., 2019](#)).

But teacher wellbeing is not just a means to an end. It is about recognising and respecting the rights and broader needs of teachers as human beings and capable professionals. As one stakeholder said:

“It’s about showing that we understand them, that we understand their situation, that we understand that it’s not easy, that the pedagogical challenge is enormous, but that also for them, as people, this experience can be exhausting.”

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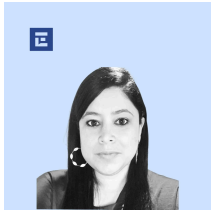
Teachers from these communities may also be vulnerable, and therefore supporting their wellbeing requires the provision of psychosocial support, improving working conditions, ensuring teachers are fairly compensated, and that they have agency and autonomy in their day-to-day work ([INEE, 2022](#)). This holistic approach is also reflected in Colombia’s policy frameworks. As part of the [MEN’s teacher wellbeing programme](#) it offers initial and ongoing training, housing, health insurance, social security, as well as sports and games as a means of “improving the quality of life of ^{teachers} and their families.” While more research is needed to understand how these efforts play out in practice, at a minimum the programme provides an supportive framework and entry point through which FEM implementers can build on.

Lessons for other contexts

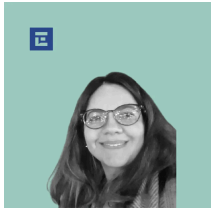
The experience of Colombia's flexible education models offers valuable insights for governments and NGOs seeking to support learners and teachers from marginalised communities, especially those who have experienced conflict or displacement:

1. **Embed SEL and teacher wellbeing into national policy frameworks to facilitate local implementation:** Despite Colombia not having a national curriculum, FEM regulations and wider policy efforts promote both SEL and teacher wellbeing. These frameworks create a clear path for scaling and sustaining local innovations. They allow education authorities and implementing partners to develop and fund SEL or teacher wellbeing strategies tailored to their contexts. And they encourage implementers to see these efforts not as an add-on, but as central to rebuilding inclusive, equitable education systems.
2. **Enhance implementation capacity through public-private partnerships:** In Colombia's decentralised education system, where responsibility for implementing programmes like the FEM lies with subnational education secretariats, technical capacity can vary significantly. NGOs and other non-state actors have played a critical role in bridging these gaps. Through sustained partnerships with Education Secretariats, NGOs like Fundación Carvajal, Save the Children or Norwegian Refugee Council, offer targeted support. These public-private collaborations are essential for embedding SEL and teacher wellbeing at scale, particularly in under-resourced or high-need areas.
3. **Support the whole teacher through whole-school approaches:** SEL cannot thrive in fragmented systems. Teachers working with vulnerable learners face significant emotional and professional demands. Effective initiatives recognise this by pairing pedagogical training with holistic support for teacher wellbeing. A whole-school approach involves providing psychosocial support for teachers, fostering peer-to-peer learning and reflective practice, strengthening instructional leadership, and addressing structural challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and resource shortages. When schools invest in the full ecosystem of teacher support, teachers thrive, and learners benefit from more responsive and inclusive learning environments.

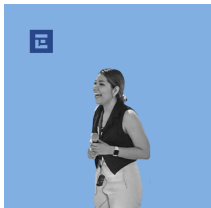
- 1 There is a total of 27 flexible education models approved by the MEN, the main ones being Escuela Nueva and Post-Primaria Rural (both for rural, multigrade classrooms), the Programa de Aceleración de Aprendizaje (PAA), Caminar en Secundaria, Secundaria Activa, and Telesecundaria (TV-delivered secondary education).

**Catalina Prada****LinkedIn**

Catalina Prada is a Project Manager at Fundación Carvajal (Cali, Colombia), where she leads initiatives to improve access, quality, and student retention in vulnerable communities. She has designed and managed education projects, primarily focused on overage and low-performing students, strengthening foundational skills and promoting family engagement. Her experience includes the educational integration of Venezuelan migrant students, as well as the design and evaluation of programs funded by public, private, and international donors. She has over a decade of experience in the education and development sectors, with an emphasis on evidence-based interventions and international cooperation. Catalina holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana Cali and a Master's degree in International Political Economy from Carleton University (Canada).

**Lorena Becerra****LinkedIn**

Lorena Becerra is a psychologist, and specialist in Social Management, with a Master's in Education from the University of the Andes. She is a fellow of the Transformative Leadership and Diversity program at the Origen Foundation. She has 18 years of experience in the social and educational sectors in organizations such as the Group for Social Development, CISP, and the University of Pamplona. She currently serves as the Norwegian Refugee Council's Multi-Skills Manager for the Northeast Area of Colombia.

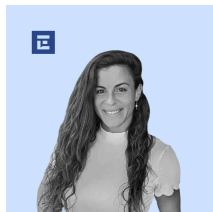
**Lizeth Cardozo****LinkedIn**

Lizeth Cardozo is a psychologist with a master's degree in social pedagogy and educational intervention in social contexts. She has extensive experience in education in emergencies, especially in contexts affected by violence, disasters, human mobility, and armed conflict. She has led processes that promote access to safe and inclusive education, strengthening local capacities for preparedness and response to risks that threaten educational continuity. She has worked with organizations such as the Jesuit Refugee Service in Colombia, UNHCR, the Norwegian Refugee

Council, and the Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), contributing to the design of pedagogical strategies and educational policies. She currently serves as Regional Advisor on Education in Emergencies for Latin America and the Caribbean at Plan International and is also an active member of the Regional Working Group on Education for Latin America and the Caribbean.

María Eugenia López

María Eugenia López is a public administrator with additional training in education, and over 20 years of experience specifically in inclusive education and influencing public policies for social and educational inclusion. She has experience providing regional support to groups of teachers, school administrators, and public servants from Colombia's Ministries of Education. Her work has been dedicated to strengthening quality, access, and retention processes in the education system, focusing on serving over-age students, migrant populations, and students with disabilities, and promoting their inclusion and retention in the education system.



Dr Sophia D'Angelo

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Sophia is an education specialist supporting Education.org's Evidence Synthesis team. With over 12 years of experiencing working in development and humanitarian contexts, she has a proven track record of conducting systematic and rapid evidence reviews, mappings, policy analyses, as well as primary research. Sophia has consulted for various organisations, including the World Bank, GPE, INEE, and UNICEF, and has published on a range of topics, including teacher professional development, gender-transformative and disability-inclusive education, EdTech, ECCE, and youth development. Based in the Dominican Republic, Sophia has extensive experience working in the regions of Latin America and the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. She holds a PhD and MPhil from the University of Cambridge's The REAL Centre, and a BA from Princeton University.