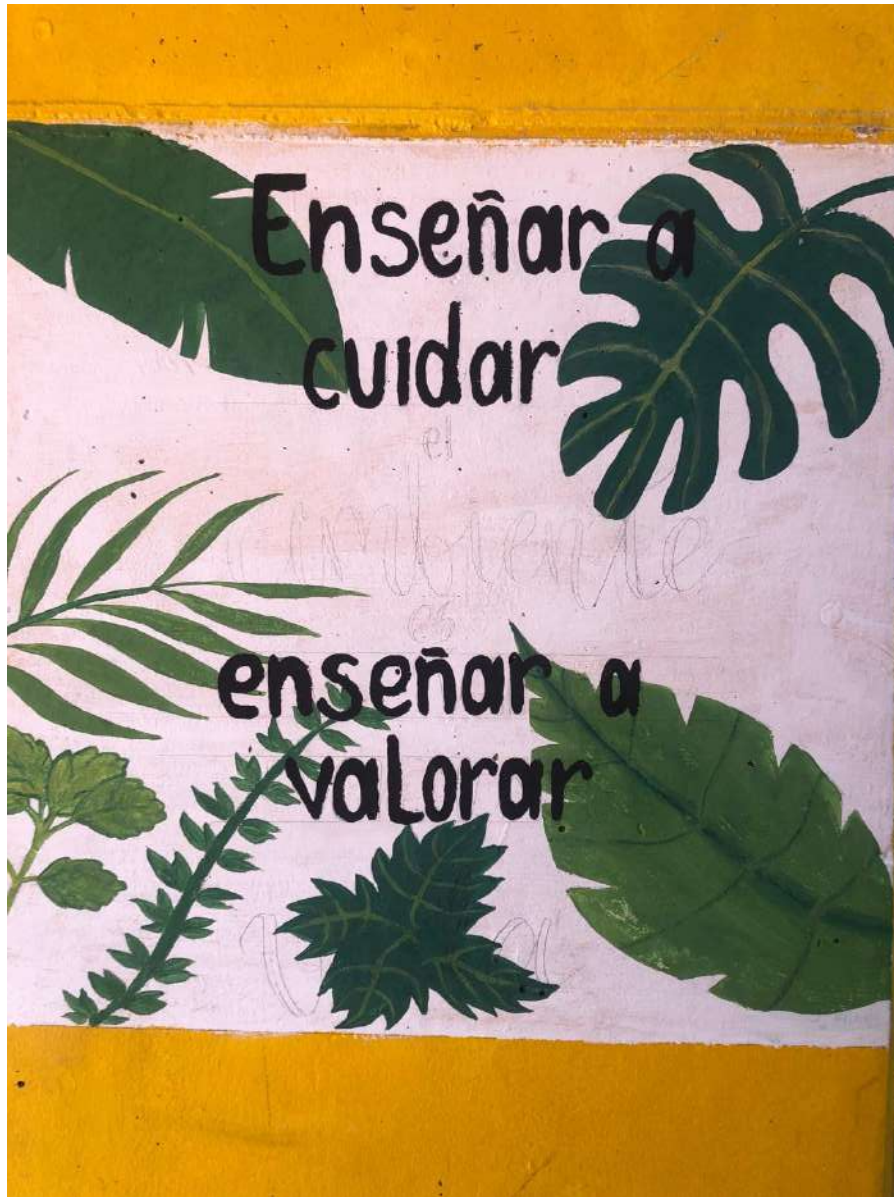

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT IN SCHOOLS: LEARNER, TEACHER, CAREGIVER, AND COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF PROGRAMMING AND IMPACT



FINDINGS FROM QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FEATURING THE
NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL'S BETTER LEARNING
PROGRAMME IN COLOMBIA



Report authored by Alejandro Henao Guáqueta and Jennifer Flemming, PhD
The MHPSS Collaborative



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ACRONYMS

BLP	Better Learning Programme
C.E.R	Rural Educational Center for its acronym in Spanish as part of the name of the schools in Colombia. “Centers” are a smaller category than “Institutions” in the educational system and receive less resources by the government for that reason.
Colors	Colors of Kindness
EiE	Education in Emergencies
ETCR	Territorial Space for Training and Reincorporation for its acronym in Spanish. These are the places where ex combatants of the FARC guerrilla have been located by the Government after the Peace Agreement of 2016.
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
ICLA	Information, counseling and legal assistance
I.E	Educational Institution for its acronym in Spanish as part of the name of the schools in Colombia
I.E.D	Distrital Educational Institution for its acronym in Spanish as part of the name of the schools in Colombia
I.E.R	Rural Educational Institution for its acronym in Spanish as part of the name of the schools in Colombia
KII	Key Informant Interview
LMIC	Low and Middle Income Countries
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PSS	Psychosocial Support
RA	Research Assistant
RC	Research Coordinator
SEL	Social Emotional Learning
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the end of 2022, 40% of the nearly 110 million persons forcibly displaced globally were children under the age of 18.¹ Displaced children face acute and chronic adversities that significantly threaten their mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.² The urgent needs of children in humanitarian crises underpin various policies and programmatic approaches that include increasing attention to both mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services broadly³ and in education approaches specifically.⁴ MHPSS in education in emergencies (EiE), including social-emotional learning (SEL), has been identified as an important pathway to address both children’s mental health and psychosocial needs and to improve learning outcomes.⁵

There is increasing recognition that quality education is reflected not just in academic outcomes such as literacy and numeracy, but also in those indicating learner psychosocial wellbeing.⁶ Learners are embedded within a context of specific relationships, environments, and systems that notably influence their daily lives, learning, and holistic wellbeing. These socio-ecological factors are complex and context-specific and can have a significant impact on the efficacy of an intervention aimed at supporting children’s growth and learning.⁷

Improved understanding of this social ecology around learners can lead to more relevant and impactful program design and implementation. The perspectives of children, caregivers, teachers, and relevant community and education system stakeholders are critical to understanding not just if an intervention is effective, but how, why, and for who.

This research set out to examine the enabling environments for MHPSS interventions delivered in education settings in humanitarian contexts, with specific focus on the Norwegian Refugee Council’s (NRC) Better Learning Programme (BLP) implemented in Colombia.

Research Objectives	
1	To understand what contributes to an enabling environment for MHPSS interventions and approaches to improve holistic wellbeing, from the perspective of children, teachers, caregivers, and other education actors.
2	To understand the role of education systems, including schools (and formal and nonformal programmes), and educators in contributing to children’s holistic wellbeing from the perspective of children, teachers, caregivers, and other education actors.
3	To describe similarities and differences of enabling environments for MHPSS interventions across diverse contexts, including both geographic location and type of emergency or adversity.
4	To understand how an MHPSS intervention may be useful and relevant in dynamic contexts, such as in the case of education interruptions, and what the role of schools is in supporting children’s holistic wellbeing.

5	To understand the perceived impact of NRC’s Better Learning Programme in Colombia, in order to contribute to organizational and programmatic learning and implementation.
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NRC’s BLP is a PSS/SEL programme which is integrated within education programming in crisis affected communities. BLP is a holistic approach to supporting children’s recovery from traumatic events experienced during conflict and from the impacts of displacement on both displaced and host communities, by improving conditions for learning. The programme mobilizes a child’s support network of caregivers, teachers, and counsellors, encompassing a multi-layered approach to restore a sense of normality and hope. BLP-1 is a general, classroom-based PSS approach targeting all children and young people; its implementation in targeted locations in Colombia was the focus of study for this research.

METHODS

To achieve the research objectives, the target population for participation in the research included children, teachers, caregivers, implementing organization staff, school administration and boards, community-based education actors, and education officials (at local, regional, sub-national, and national level). The research team collected data from 214 total participants across 5 locations in Colombia. This included data collection via 22 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 8 Key Informant Interviews (KIs) at 10 distinct schools. Education stakeholders included students (87), teachers (68), caregivers (35), principals (4), secretary of education staff (5), and NRC implementers (15). The participating learners were aged 5-20 and included internally displaced persons (IDPs), migrants, indigenous, and armed conflict victims. Data was analyzed via qualitative software (MAXQDA) using thematic analysis, via team collaboration amongst the lead researcher and the Colombia research coordinator.

COLOMBIA CONTEXT

Colombia is facing a deep-rooted humanitarian crisis, fueled by internal conflicts since 1958 and resulting in over 2.17 million IDPs by 2022.⁸ This crisis has been compounded by the arrival of more than 2.47 million Venezuelan migrants by May 2023.⁹ These factors have led to widespread community displacement, poverty, and disruption to daily life. The nation is recognized as the third most neglected in terms of displacement crises globally, as reported by NRC in 2022,¹⁰ with a mere 38% of its funding needs met and dwindling media attention to the conflict. Education has been particularly impacted, with displaced children facing numerous educational barriers and schools in IDP-dense areas struggling with overcrowding and limited resources.

A notable aspect of this crisis is the urgent need for MHPSS programming, particularly for impacted children, adolescents, and the larger educational communities. Prolonged exposure to violence and instability has led to heightened levels of anxiety and depression among children and youth. While Colombian laws mandate mental health care and early detection in schools, there is a significant gap between policy and implementation of such programs, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas. The lack of mental health programming in schools, coupled with the limited reach of state mental health services in many regions, underscores the urgent need for enhanced MHPSS initiatives to address the growing mental health crisis among Colombia's children and youth.

MAIN FINDINGS

Understanding and responding to context of intervention

Understanding Colombia's diverse context and its ongoing challenges is essential in order to design and implement effective and appropriate MHPSS programming. Challenges across regions include acute emergencies, structural violence, and effects of historical and ongoing armed conflict—all of which profoundly impact the mental health of children and communities broadly. Issues include natural disaster such as flooding; displacement both internally and across borders; and domestic violence and substance abuse. These adversities vary in intensity and impact across different locations, and are addressed by communities and education systems in different ways.

Communities perceive safety in educational contexts differently across locations, but largely agree that children and adolescents face significant threats outside homes and schools. For example, urban areas face drug-related dangers and rural areas

contend with both armed conflict and environmental hazards.

The presence of indigenous and migrant populations adds complexity to these challenges and how to respond to them. Across all locations of this research, there was a scarcity of MHPSS services available. The research additionally emphasizes the importance of context-sensitive programming that addresses both the educational process and community-specific needs for effective mental health and wellbeing support.

The environment where I am every day with my children really has nothing safe. At this moment, there is the presence of armed actors 24/7 in our village. I mean, we are surrounded by armed people all the time. So, even though they don't enter the school... here is the street, [just nearby] the school, and armed actors transit around the school, everywhere. So, it's not safe where the children are. Caregiver FGD

Perceptions of holistic wellbeing and the role of education

This research underscores the significant role of education in contributing to learner wellbeing and highlights diverse perceptions of educational community members on the value and purpose of school.

Across locations, schools are seen as vital for developing social and emotional skills; offering safety and support to learners; and providing access to opportunities and basic needs. In conflict affected locations, this research emphasizes the role of education in teaching tolerance and empathy so children can grow within diverse populations.

Perceptions of school safety differ markedly among students, teachers, and caregivers, and are influenced by local contexts and the presence of armed groups or harassment. Relationships with teachers and school staff that are trusting and supportive help students to feel both physically and emotionally safe. Children, teachers, caregivers, and other education actors all emphasized that such relationships and the stability of education were essential to learners' holistic wellbeing.

In all research locations, support to teacher wellbeing was lacking, with educators describing emotional strain and their own psychosocial challenges. Teachers are exposed to the same contextual risks as their students and need their own support in order to address their own mental health and

I think something important [...] is the trust that we give to the students. Because through trust, they approach us and tell us about the problems they have, the needs they have, what they face daily, what they experience in their homes. So, I think that is the most important thing we can offer them, and based on that, we can give them advice and guide them for their future life.
Teacher FGD

psychosocial wellbeing, which in turn can improve their capacity to help their students to cope with these risks and challenges. Additionally, most schools visited did not have a school psychologist or counselor on staff; or had one per hundred or even thousands of learners.

Overall, this group of findings emphasizes the need for MHPSS programs to align with community perceptions and address the holistic wellbeing of all stakeholders, including teachers.

Perceptions of impact of NRC's Better Learning Programme (BLP)

The research emphasizes that, overall, BLP is well-received by teachers and caregivers. It is valued for introducing playful, non-traditional activities into the classroom, as well as for positively impacting learners' emotional management skills.

Teachers highlight BLP's role in diversifying classroom activities and improving students' ability to manage emotions. Caregivers appreciate the program's positive behavioral impacts on their children. Satisfaction levels overall, however, vary based on how extensively BLP is integrated with other educational strategies or programs. In some locations, caregivers, students, and teachers expressed higher satisfaction with BLP due to more explicit messaging from NRC around its implementation.

The program has helped me understand my students better. I can now identify when a student is going through emotional stress. **Teacher FGD**

I've learned how to control my anger and talk about my feelings more openly. **Learner FGD**

BLP's positive impact is closely tied to implementers' belief in its value. Those who personally benefit from or believe in the program's goals are more effective in teaching and transmitting its benefits to learners. This was specifically true of teachers and school administrators, who were often champions of BLP in their schools.

BLP's primary objectives are recognized as fostering holistic learner wellbeing, offering psychosocial support, enhancing pedagogical methods, and building institutional capacity. Despite these goals, children often resort to personal coping mechanisms outside of school, suggesting a gap in the application of BLP strategies in their daily lives in the Colombian context at present. At the time of this research, BLP had been implemented in pilot phase only, and implementers noted that a longer duration of implementation, as well as more local support and buy-in, will likely lead to more widespread adoption of BLP strategies in children's daily lives both in and out of school.

The contextualization of BLP to suit various locations of implementation is crucial for its sustainability and effectiveness. Implementation of BLP by NRC in Colombia offers a diversity of examples of such

contextualization, from standard integration with other education programme activities, to new strategies for involving caregivers, to adapting content in order to reflect local indigenous practices. Despite these significant efforts, BLP still faces challenges like cultural resistance, logistical barriers, and limited resources, which affect its widespread implementation and long-term sustainability in different regions. These barriers highlight the need for comprehensive support and strategic planning for the successful integration and sustainability of BLP (and, in turn, other MHPSS programs) into diverse educational settings.

Call to Action

To effectively implement MHPSS programs such as BLP, **implementers should focus on creating standardized approaches with the flexibility to adapt to regional and cultural nuances.** This calls for the development of contextualization tools to address unique local needs, as evidenced by the BLP implementation in Colombia. BLP offers important examples of openness and support of programming to such contextualization, which other implementers of MHPSS programming could learn from.

Additionally, **advocating for the integration of MHPSS into national curricula, training, and policies is crucial to ensure continuity and sustainability.** Implementers are urged to document and share best practices, lessons learned, and case studies to build capacity and facilitate knowledge exchange both on a national and global scale. While mental health of children is often reflected in national education policies, the financial and political commitment required to assure such policy translates to action at the school level is still lacking.

Recognizing the value of local knowledge is essential; programs should be led or co-led by local entities to ensure cultural relevance. Furthermore, a focus on sustainable models is vital, including the integration of MHPSS into teacher training and linkage to national risk management plans with cascading models. **Interdisciplinary collaboration is key, as MHPSS intersects with education, health, and social work.**

Lastly, **a context-sensitive approach is crucial for effective implementation.** This involves understanding the specific challenges, needs, and capacities of each community. Ensuring safety, both emotional and physical, is foundational for MHPSS interventions. This includes creating safe environments in schools, providing secure transportation, and fostering relational safety. Cultural sensitivity and contextualization should be integrated into program planning, adapting to local beliefs and practices, and addressing logistical challenges in migrant populations.

The recommendations included in this report aim to optimize the impact and sustainability of MHPSS programs, emphasizing the need for standardized yet flexible approaches; policy integration; local knowledge utilization; and a context-sensitive, safety-focused implementation strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND

At the end of 2022, 40% of the nearly 110 million persons forcibly displaced people globally were children under the age of 18, and 76% were hosted in low and middle income countries (LMIC).¹¹ A growing evidence base shows that displaced children face acute and chronic adversities that significantly threaten their mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.¹² Research emphasizes that children exposed to war and displacement exhibit a range of distress and stress reactions, including specific fears, dependent behaviors, psychosomatic symptoms, and aggressive behaviors.¹³ The urgent needs of children in humanitarian crises underpin various policies and programmatic approaches that include increasing attention to both mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services broadly¹⁴ and in education approaches specifically.¹⁵

Education is a basic right and access to quality education for refugee children is underlined via strategic priorities and policy by major humanitarian actors and governments hosting significant refugee populations.¹⁶ The provision of quality education has important overlaps with child protection priorities and includes efforts to address children's wellbeing in humanitarian contexts, such as promoting a sense of stability and normalcy, providing important relationships with peers, and opportunities for building life skills.¹⁷ MHPSS in education in emergencies (EiE), including social-emotional learning (SEL), has been identified as an important pathway to address both children's mental health and psychosocial needs and to improve learning outcomes.¹⁸ There is widespread interest from a range of actors in this type of programming, as well as increasing recognition that quality education is reflected not just in academic outcomes (such as literacy and numeracy) but also in those measuring learner psychosocial wellbeing.¹⁹

This clear interest in MHPSS programming across EiE is not currently matched by the evidence base. This includes a dearth of evidence to support effectiveness in terms of type of MHPSS in EiE intervention or implementation method; what groups/subgroups of children may most benefit; and how interventions can or should be adapted for specific contexts. Further, although research in high income and stable contexts shows influence of environmental and ecological factors on children's mental health and learning outcomes,²⁰ there is limited understanding of what aspects of classroom, school, household and community environments influence children's wellbeing and learning in humanitarian settings in LMICs.

Support for classroom-based MHPSS and SEL interventions is based on the proposition that such interventions can improve children's mental health and learning outcomes. The specific factors surrounding these interventions (in terms of delivery of the interventions, and the socio-ecological factors influencing children beyond the intervention itself) are complex and often poorly understood.²¹ In addition, children, caregivers and teachers are more likely to actively participate in and benefit from classroom-based MHPSS interventions if the programs are relevant, acceptable and feasible.

This research is based on a social ecological framework that considers the complex interplay between the individual learner; their home and school environments; their community; the relationships built across these levels; the systems and institutions around them; and finally the policy and funding environment of humanitarian and education programming broadly.

Children learn in an environment that is situated within a larger “ecosystem.” Their lives and wellbeing are notably influenced by their relationship with families or caregivers;¹ with friends and peers; with teachers and school administrators; and with other community members such as religious leaders. Schools are a critical site of influence, and learners, teachers, and families see the role of education as contributing to holistic wellbeing, human development, and learning that includes both academic and life skills. Such education relies on actors and action in the education system largely, including education and health policies that reflect mental health and wellbeing of children as clearly articulated priorities.

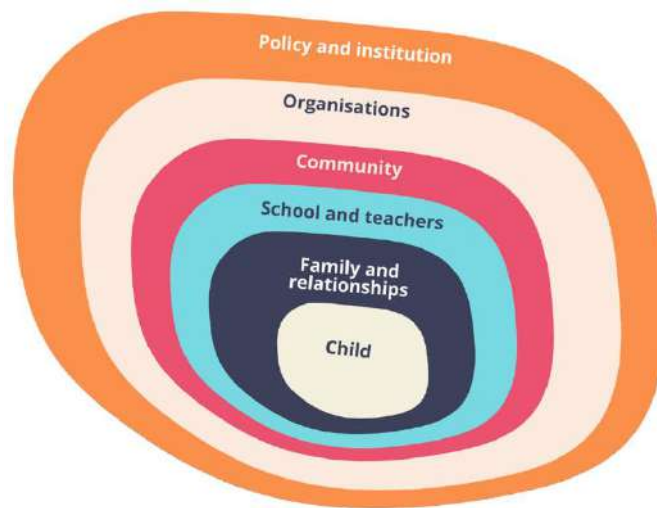


Figure 1: The social ecological framework for understanding children's psychosocial wellbeing in education contexts

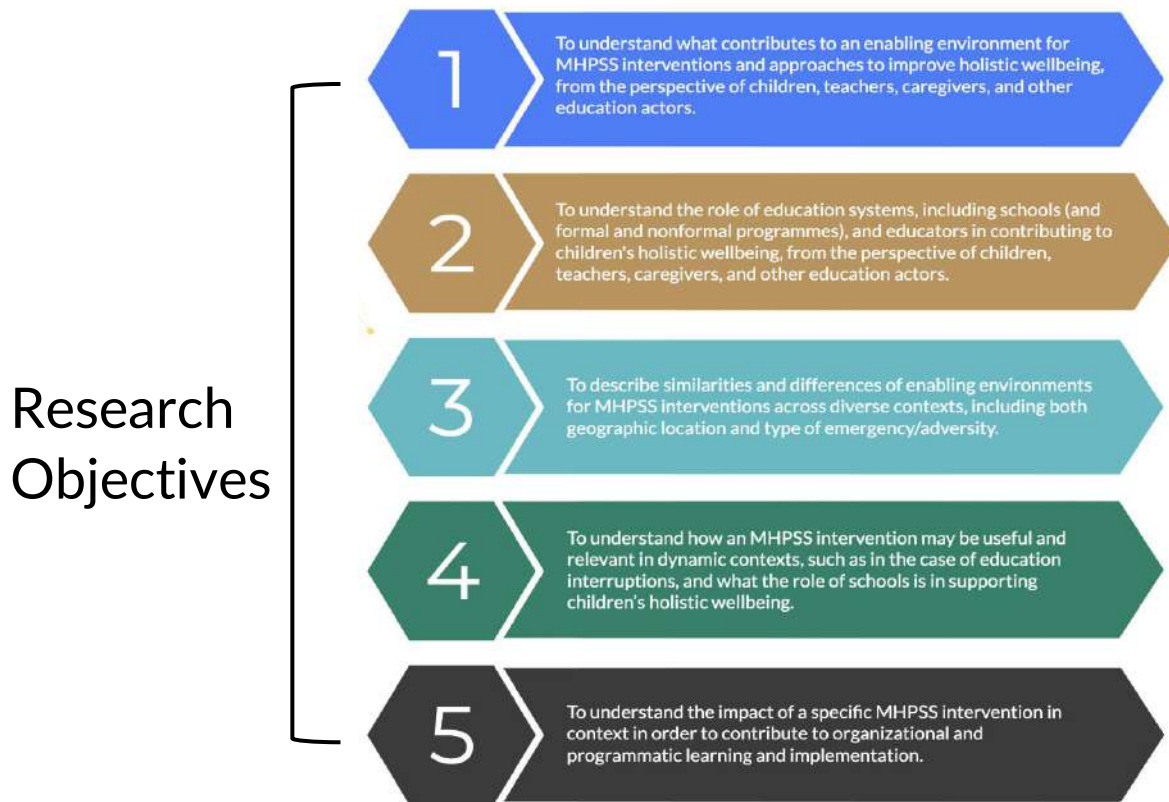
Improving understanding of this social ecology around learners can lead to more relevant and impactful program design and implementation and provide the building blocks for future study of impact.

1.2. “MHPSS IN ACTION” RESEARCH INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

This research set out to examine the enabling environments for MHPSS interventions delivered in education settings in humanitarian contexts. The study consisted of two phases. The first phase included a significant desk review (culminating in the publication of a Realist Review of current evidence), an MHPSS global programme mapping exercise, and targeted expert interviews.²² Key learnings from Phase 1 directly informed the design of Phase 2, consisting of primary qualitative data collection in Colombia, Kenya, and Greece. The research focuses on key aspects of an enabling environments for MHPSS programme efficacy. Five primary research objectives underpin phase two of the project, shown in Figure 2 below.

¹ Throughout this research we used the term caregiver to encompass any adult with significant responsibilities of care for children in their lives. For the majority of data collection in this project, the term indicates parents or other close related family members living with the children.

Figure 2: Research Objectives



The MHPSS Collaborative partnered with two implementing organizations to conduct the research: the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in Kenya and Colombia to study their flagship PSS/SEL programme, the Better Learning Programme (BLP). In Greece, the team partnered with Amal Alliance to study their SEL programme, Colors of Kindness. For each country, specific Research Questions (RQs) were crafted based on the overarching research objectives. Additional RQs were developed in collaboration with the two implementing partner organizations via in-person workshop prior to the start of data collection. Country-specific sections of this report elaborate on the RQs per country.

For each country of study, the research team produced both a full research report and a learning brief which overviews key findings. In addition, the team summarizes key learnings and comparison from Kenya and Colombia in a synthesis report in order to contribute to organizational learning about BLP. All reports and briefs can be found in full on the MHPSS Collaborative's website.ⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱ See: www.mhpsscollaborative.org

1.2.1. NRC'S BETTER LEARNING PROGRAMME

NRC's BLP is a PSS/SEL programme which can be integrated within education programming. It is NRC's flagship classroom-based PSS intervention for children in crisis affected communities. The BLP is a holistic approach to supporting children's recovery from traumatic events experienced during conflict and from the impacts of displacement on both displaced and host communities, by improving conditions for learning. The programme mobilizes a child's support network of caregivers, teachers, and counsellors, encompassing a multi-layered approach to restore a sense of normality and hope. The BLP consists of three components of programme intervention. The first, BLP-1, is a general, classroom-based PSS approach targeting all children and young people. The BLP-2 is a small group intervention to support resilience amongst a more specific target group of academic underachievers. The BLP-3 is a specialized PSS approach to address nightmares, which many children experience as a chronic symptom of traumatic stress. Finally, BLP for Youth is a combined intervention integrating both BLP1 and BLP2 implemented through participatory approaches and targets learners 17-24 years old. The BLP-1, and its implementation in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya and in targeted locations in Colombia, was the focus of study for this research.

BLP was first implemented in 2012 in Palestine and has since grown current implementation to 33 countries worldwide. This implementation is supported by various programmes in each country, as well as by a regional and global level BLP unit. Resources to support country offices in implementing BLP 1 include: Guidance and Tools to Implement BLP 1; a Monitoring and Evaluation/Research Toolkit; and a Classroom Sessions supporting document.

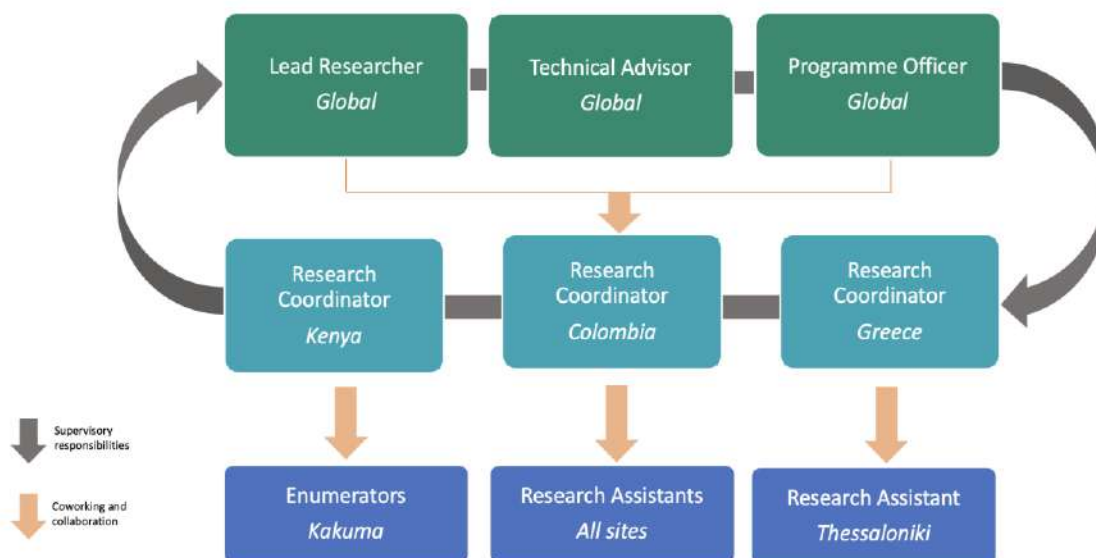
1.3. APPROACH AND METHODS

1.3.1. RESEARCH TEAM

The research team was comprised of a six-person core team at the MHPSS Collaborative, plus enumerators or research assistants in each site. Figure 3, below, depicts the make-up of the research team. The team is comprised of both "global" and "country-specific" levels. While there is some indication of oversight amongst members in the table, the team was strategically structured to be a collaborative, non-hierarchical group of notable technical and contextual expertise. While Research Coordinators (RCs) in each location were, in first instance, responsible for their specific location, there was also strategic collaboration amongst the RCs as well as amongst the global and country-level teams.

In addition, for Kenya and Colombia, NRC composed a project Research Technical Committee comprised of both NRC BLP Unit staff, regional staff, and external experts. In addition to the country-specific staff inputs and support (described in subsequent country-specific section 2 of this report), this global steering group provided significant inputs to the research approaches, priorities, and products.

Figure 3: Research Core Team Makeup



1.3.2. DATA COLLECTION

Across all sites, the target population for participation in the research included children, teachers, caregivers, implementing organization staff, school administration/boards, community-based education actors, and education officials (at local, regional, sub-national, national level). The sample sizes per location were based on most relevant principles of sample size for qualitative research (i.e. purposive sampling, maximum variation, and saturation). This allowed for disaggregation of the data by subgroups (e.g. gender, age) in each location as relevant for analysis.

The methodology used was a qualitative study of purposefully selected participants in Kakuma refugee camps, host communities, and the Kalobeyei settlement in Kenya; in five municipalities in Colombia; and in six locations/communities in Greece. In all locations, the sample included both learners that had and had not received the PSS/SEL intervention (BLP or Colors). The amount of exposure to the intervention differed by location, and is further described in the corresponding country section of this report.

Primary data collection was conducted by the RC, Research Assistants (RAs), and enumerators in all countries, supervised by the Lead Researcher.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

- (1) **Targeted document review:** This included NRC BLP / Colors programme documentation; additional BLP/ Colors data, context and foundational documents; and policy and other programmatic documents as relevant;
- (2) **Qualitative data collection:** This included Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and arts-based activities with children, teachers, and caregivers/parents. Researchers additionally collected data via Key Informant Interviews (KII) with principals, school management committees, school administrators, community members, implementing partners, NRC or Amal staff, other I/NGO staff, key regional and national education leaders, and other relevant stakeholders as identified in location.
- (3) **Introductory and Validation Workshops with implementers and other stakeholders:** This included at least two workshops per country, facilitated by RCs in order to gain input into research design, research questions, preliminary findings, and analytical framing of findings.

The research team recorded all data collection activities and performed translation (when necessary) and transcription. Enumerators and RAs completed note-taking forms which were submitted upon completion of daily data collection activities. All data was input into the data analysis software MAXQDA.

1.3.3. DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, via team collaboration amongst the lead researcher and all RCs. The framework for analyzing data was both inductive and deductive in nature. All research objectives and questions informed the creation of initial codes; the team additionally partook in two facilitated preliminary analysis activities, in which RCs brainstormed new and emerging themes based on initial data review and the rest of the team fed back with additional probing questions. Based on this iterative process, a finalized coding scheme was crafted. Validation workshops with the NRC or Amal team members provided additional inputs into points of interest, potential missing codes/themes, and areas to unpack or examine further.

All coding was conducted by the RC for their respective country. The lead researcher additionally reviewed all data and completed two reliability exercises with the coding scheme. Findings were triangulated across the data sources whenever possible.

1.4. LIMITATIONS, ETHICS, AND OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This research project demanded careful attention to ethics, with particular attention paid to the participation of children as well as others currently living in displacement contexts. In order to assure that ethical protocols were observed, all research team members involved in data collection participated in a specific training module on research ethics.

All three study sites were approved by Save the Children USA's internal ethical review board process. Additionally, in Kenya ethical approval was received through the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation and United States International University of Africa. All protocols were approved through these processes, and further reviewed/refined by implementing staff in location. All research team members adhered to Save the Children International Child Safeguarding Policy.

There were limitations in carrying out this research at both the global (across all three countries) and individual country level. Country specific limitations are included in the subsequent section of this report; notable shared limitations across all locations include the following:

- In all locations, a notable amount of flexibility was critical due to the dynamic nature of the contexts. While initial targeting and sampling strategy was created, it was necessary in all countries to adapt these plans once in the field. For any significant adaptation, additional IRB approval was sought. Often, however, this meant that the research team needed to be flexible and adapt protocols on the spot. This included, for example, the number of participants in an FGD; the number of learners or caregivers participating in total; the sites that could safely be visited; and the exact actors with whom interviews could be conducted.
- The number of participants is not equal across all sites (within country) of data collection; thus the research in each country is not intended to be representative of all locations equally. For this reason, the data analysis did not include "counts" of any kind that would represent an attempt to quantify responses.
- The implementation of BLP and Colors is intended for learners ages 6-16 (BLP) and 5-12 (Colors) and so the initial research plans mirrored this; however, on the ground, teams found that often there was a larger age range of children receiving the intervention. Thus, the sample reflects a larger age range overall (5-18) and age disaggregation is again not representative across all locations
- There were some limitations in recording interviews, based on safety concerns, surrounding noise, or poor recording quality. In all countries, at least one data collection activity relied on the notes of the RAs or enumerators. In anticipation of this, multiple ways of recording data was planned for all events. However it does mean that not all events prompted high quality transcripts for coding. In these cases, the team coded their in depth notes to be analyzed. This creates some limitations, again, with regard to representation across sites.
- Translation was necessary for a majority of data. Translation was completed by RAs or the RC in each country. Back translating and check was conducted for a sample of the data in each country and reviewed in order to mitigate translation subjectivity, but it is noted that such subjectivity cannot be completely controlled for.

2. MHPSS IN ACTION IN COLOMBIA: STUDYING NRC'S BETTER LEARNING PROGRAMME

2.1. COLOMBIA OVERVIEW

Colombia, characterized by its rich cultural diversity and varied landscapes, has been grappling with multifaceted humanitarian challenges for years. Central to these are the internal armed conflicts that have spanned over six decades (since 1958), according to the Truth Commission Report, which involves state forces, guerrilla groups, and paramilitary units.²³ This prolonged conflict has positioned Colombia among nations with the highest rate of internally displaced persons (IDPs), with at least 2.1 million people uprooted from their homes as of 2022.²⁴

Compounding the situation is the influx of nearly 2.5 million Venezuelan migrants by May of 2023,²⁵ who have fled their nation's socio-economic turmoil. Additionally, Colombia's vulnerability to natural disasters, such as flooding and natural storms, has further exacerbated displacement and community disruptions.²⁶

According to NRC's tracking of the most neglected displacement crises of the world, Colombia ranked third in 2022. Only 38% of humanitarian funding needs were met in that year, while media coverage of the armed conflict has waned.²⁷

These intersecting crises have had profound implications for education. Children who have been displaced frequently face obstacles to education, such as access issues and other adversities which affect their ability to learn. Schools, especially in high IDP and migrant areas, grapple with overcrowded classrooms and scarce resources.

The prolonged exposure to violence, displacement, and family separation has had a notable impact on the mental health of Colombians, especially children and adolescents. Additionally, there has been a decrease in quality of life, disruption of social and community networks, modification of family roles, and cultural detachment.²⁸ Although there is a lack of data regarding the long-term psychological effects on children and adolescents in Colombia who have experienced such adversity, a national mental health survey carried out in 2020 found that displaced adolescents reported high to moderate levels of anxiety and depression symptoms.²⁹

The need for MHPSS programming is immense but the availability of such services is limited, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas. According to law 1616 of 2013 in Colombia, children and adolescents are eligible for comprehensive and preferential mental health care, and schools are established as an entry point to the system for accessing those services.³⁰ This law stipulates that mental health services should be integrated into the following services: outpatient, prehospital and home care; addiction treatment and substance abuse support; community mental health centers; patient and family support groups; day hospital for adults, children, and adolescents; community-based rehabilitation; mental health specific units; and psychiatric emergency care.

Additionally, the Code of Childhood and Adolescence (law 1098 established in 2006), establishes the responsibility of schools for early detection and referrals to mental health services for learners.³¹ Policy dictates that every school maintains counselors and psychologists at a rate of one counselor per 250

students (Resolution 2340 of 1974).³² There is no specific policy that mandates schools to integrate MHPSS programs into curriculum, although the above legal frameworks allow schools to do so if they are willing and have the resources.

These laws offer a consistent legal framework through which children should have access to different services for promoting, preventing, and care for their mental health. Nevertheless, the link between such services and the schools is not clearly articulated in policy. In different regions of Colombia, **schools and teachers are the only state agent or institution to which communities have access**, creating a gap between what policy intends and what the population receives.

2.2. BLP IN COLOMBIA

In March of 2021, NRC introduced BLP into its country offices in Latin America. This included global direction and guidance on BLP implementation by NRC teams in Colombia, Ecuador, and Panama. That year, the manual for BLP1 was translated to Spanish, followed by guidance documents such as the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) toolkit. NRC held workshops to support field teams on how to integrate BLP into already-existing NRC programs.

In August of 2022, NRC began implementation of BLP in selected areas in Latin America, through a series of pilots. As is the case for BLP in all countries of implementation, BLP was not implemented as a stand-alone program, but instead integrated into other existing NRC programs. Since contexts in Colombia and Ecuador are notably diverse, the field teams further contextualized BLP to their local needs. Learning from the contextualization and adaptation processes has been a priority for NRC, with specific goals of more harmonized implementation for 2023 and beyond.

Across Colombia, NRC works in contexts of armed conflict, displacement, poverty, and migration crisis. BLP was introduced to address the related need for school-based psychosocial support programs in locations where access to MHPSS services is limited or non-existent. Due to the diverse range of issues affecting the target groups, there are often significant mental health needs that go beyond the scope of what a non-specialized PSS program (such as BLP) may adequately address. This includes, for example, substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and suicidal ideations. **NRC acknowledges that a non-specialized approach such as BLP is not a substitute for targeted mental health support services; however, BLP does provide initial first aid and support for such learners and often serves as the only MHPSS programming available.**

At the time of this research, NRC had implemented the pilot versions of BLP in seven departments of Colombia: Nariño, Magdalena, Arauca, Caquetá, Guaviare, Norte de Santander and Cundinamarca.

2.3. APPROACH AND METHODS IN COLOMBIA

2.3.1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

At the start of the research, the MHPSS Collaborative team held an introductory workshop with field teams from across the implementation sites in Colombia. A key objective of this workshop was to facilitate feedback on the content and methods of the project, most notably to add or adapt key research questions based on the needs and interests of NRC at both the country and field office level. This was done in order to assure the research results were useable and relevant to the implementation teams. The addition of site-specific questions emphasized this collaborative approach and the priority of useable, applied research overall. Based on this workshop, an adapted set of research questions was developed for Colombia. These are indicated in Table 1, below.

Table 1. Research Questions for Colombia

Research Questions	
1	What do children, caregivers, and teachers perceive to contribute to creating safe learning environments that promote holistic wellbeing and learning?
2	What do children, caregivers, teachers, and community members perceive is the role of education/schools/educators in contributing to the improved holistic wellbeing of children?
3	How do teachers integrate BLP into their education curriculum, and how does this impact their daily activities/duties in the classroom?
4	What are the enablers and barriers that teachers face when integrating BLP into their curriculum and classrooms?
5	Will it be possible to integrate an MHPSS intervention in education (such as BLP) into national education policy? What are the enablers or barriers to this?
6	Which contexts should be prioritized to implement BLP based on the elements of an enabling environment?
7	What is the sustainability of BLP? What is the role of NRC once the implementation of BLP is over?
8	What other stressors, in the particular context, are relevant to the implementation of BLP? What roles does BLP play in contexts of migration, poverty, and violence?
9	How does NRC take into account how the various challenges that children face in contexts of adversity impact their wellbeing? How does this understanding impact the implementation of BLP?
10	What is the impact of BLP on the wellbeing and learning of participating <u>children</u> , <i>from the perspective of children, caregivers, teachers, and communities?</i>
11	What is the impact of BLP on <u>families</u> of participating children, <i>from the perspective of caregivers, teachers, and communities?</i>
12	What is the impact of BLP on <u>communities</u> , <i>from the perspective of caregivers, teachers, and communities?</i>

2.3.2. LOCATIONS OVERVIEW

The research was conducted in five locations in Colombia, indicated on the map below. The following section offers a brief overview of each.



Nariño



The department of Nariño is located in the southwestern part of Colombia. Nariño shares its borders with the Colombian departments of Cauca and Putumayo, the country of Ecuador, and the Pacific Ocean. The sociopolitical dynamics of the region have been influenced by its indigenous and Afro-American heritage, colonial history, and its strategic location, as a corridor for migration to South America and a starting point for narcotraffic that ships to other countries.

For the data collection, the Research Team visited two cities: Pasto (the capital of Nariño) and Ipiales. Data was collected in three schools:

- I.E.R Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe is located in the town of Catambuco, at the exit of the Panamerican Highway in Pasto (the main corridor of Nariño's migration). The institution has an indigenous population and migrants who leave Pasto, so it constantly faces the challenge of a migrating population. It has 1,400 students divided into 13 sites, most of them rural.
- I.E.R El Placer is located in the periphery of Ipiales and has mostly families that come from rural areas, as well as a high indigenous population.
- I.E Insur is located a couple of blocks from the transportation terminal, which determines both its student population and the social dynamics that cross it, since many migrants from the region move through this terminal. It has 3 campuses, 2 rural and 1 urban-principal, which receive more than 1300 students. It has a large migrating population; some are victims of internal displacement and others of Venezuelan and Ecuadorian origin.



Image 1: Data Collection in Nariño

Magdalena



The department of Magdalena is located on the northern coast of Colombia bordering the Caribbean Sea. The capital city of Magdalena is Santa Marta, which was the city visited by the Research Team. Due to its strategic location, Santa Marta has received many migrants both from the East (Venezuela and La Guajira) and the West (people from Chocó, displaced due to internal conflict).

In the peripheries of this city, data collection was made in the “ludoteca,” a playroom near the school I.E.D Cristo Rey and with teachers from the school I.E.D John F. Kennedy. Both schools face gang violence in their neighborhoods, as well as poverty and a migrating population.



Image 2: One of the schools visited in Santa Marta

Arauca



Arauca is a department located in Eastern Colombia, situated in the extreme north of the Orinoco Basin, bordering Venezuela. Arauca faces a three-layered crisis. It is one of the main corridors for Venezuelan migration and has an extended history of armed conflict and state abandonment. By 2023, armed groups like ELN (National Liberation Army) and FARC-EP descendants had a strong presence in the department. Political instability is also part of the context, having five different governors within six months by the time the data collection was conducted. Also, the proximity of many populations to the Arauca River puts them at risk of floods.

The research team visited the municipalities of Tame and Saravena, two of the locations where the armed conflict is notably intense. In Tame, data collection was conducted with students and caregivers from the school C.E.R Simón Bolívar, and with teachers from two different schools where NRC implements BLP. In Saravena, this included teachers from C.E.R Luis Antonio Calvo. All the schools are located in rural areas, far from population centers and exposed to armed groups.



Image 3: Focus Group Discussion in Arauca

Caquetá



Caquetá Department is situated in the southern part of Colombia and is part of the Amazonas region. Caquetá has historically been a region of interest due to its strategic location in the Amazon basin and its rich natural resources, but it has also faced challenges related to illegal activities and armed conflict.

The Research Team visited the school I.E.R Los Andes, located in the rural area of the municipality San Vicente del Caguán. This was the main location of FARC-EP guerrillas before the Peace Agreement of 2016, and currently the school is part of the ETCR (Territorial space for training and reincorporation) Oscar Mondragón, in the rural area called Miravalle, where former FARC combatants inhabit.



Image 4: School visited in ETCR Oscar Mondragón

Guaviare



Guaviare is a department located in the southern central region of Colombia. The latter half of the 20th century witnessed a boom in cocaine, leading to the cultivation of almost 30,000 hectares of coca annually. This period also saw the territory under the control of drug traffickers and the FARC-EP guerrilla group, resulting in widespread violence. The Research Team visited the school C.E.R Las Charras, located in the ETCR Las Charras. Although the FARC presence is not as widespread as before, the community faces threats by their descendants, and state abandonment affects the access to basic services.



Image 5: School visited in ETCR Las Charras

2.3.3. PARTICIPANT OVERVIEW

The research team collected data from 214 total participants across 5 locations in Colombia. This included data collection via 22 FGDs and 8 KIIs at 10 distinct schools. Education stakeholders included students, teachers, caregivers, principals, secretary of education staff and NRC implementers. Tables 2-7 below indicate the breakdown of participants by type among locations.

The research team collected data from learners ages 5-20 and included children who were IDPs, migrants, indigenous, and armed conflict victims. Table 8 provides demographic information on learner participants.

Table 2: Participants from Nariño

Type	FGD participants (F)	FGD participants (M)	KII (F)	KII (M)	Total
Learner	18	23			41
Teacher	18	16			34
Caregiver	10				10
Principals			2		2
Secretary of Education Staff	2	3			5
NRC staff	4	1			5
Totals:	52	43	2		97

Table 3: Participants from Magdalena

Type	FGD participants (F)	FGD participants (M)	KII (F)	KII (M)	Total
Learner	8				8
Teacher	5	2			7
Caregiver	6	1			7
Principals					
NRC staff	3				3
Totals:	22	3			25

Table 4: Participants from Arauca

Type	FGD participants (F)	FGD participants (M)	KII (F)	KII (M)	Total
Learner	12	9			21
Teacher	12	5			17
Caregiver	10	2			12
Principals			1		1
NRC staff	4		1	1	6
Totals:	38	16	2	1	57

Table 5: Participants from Caquetá

Type	FGD participants (F)	FGD participants (M)	KII (F)	KII (M)	Total
Learner	2	9			11
Teacher	2	3			5
Caregiver			1		1
Totals:	4	12	1		17

Table 6: Participants from Guaviare

Type	FGD participants (F)	FGD participants (M)	KII (F)	KII (M)	Total
Learner	4	2			6
Teacher	2	3			5
Caregiver	5				5
Principals				1	1
NRC staff				1	1
Totals:	11	5		2	18

Table 7: Total Participants by type

Participant Type	Female	Male	Total
Learner	44	43	87
Teacher	39	29	68
Caregiver	32	3	35
Principal	3	1	4
Secretary of education staff	2	3	5
NRC staff	12	3	15
Totals:	133	81	214

Table 8: Learner participant demographic information

Learner	6-12 (M)	6-12 (F)	12-20 (M)	12-20 (F)	Total
IDP				2	2
Migrant	1			4	5
Indigenous		3	6	5	14
Armed conflict victims	17	12	2	4	35
Other ⁱⁱⁱ			21	12	31
Totals:	18	15	27	27	87

ⁱⁱⁱ Learners that do not fit into previous categories.

2.4. COLOMBIA SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

In addition to the broad limitations indicated in the previous section, there were specific limitations of the research encountered in Colombia. These include:

- The original research plan consisted of 7 locations, which included Catatumbo, in the department of Norte de Santander, and Ecuador, where BLP was also implemented. Due to security issues at the time of data collection, the Research Team was advised not to visit these two locations. This change impacted the sample size and logistics of data collection; however, such change had been considered as a possibility and oversampling had been built into the research design. This ultimately impacts the research mainly in terms of NRC-specific learning which cannot be fully extrapolated to include all locations of implementation.
- There were only a few schools where all the actors targeted were interviewed. Only 4 of the 10 schools visited have the perspective of all intended actors (students, caregivers, teachers and principals). The other schools have only the perspective of one or two actor types (mainly teachers and students), since it was not possible to meet with the others.
- This research does not specifically address issues of inclusivity within BLP. There is no comparison made in the analysis across genders, ethnic groups, or in regard to learners with disability. While the sampling was intended to garner a wide range of participants and include all types of learners, the research team acknowledged that the logistical challenges of recruiting participants resulted in less representation than intended. In the future, such targeted sampling should be taken into account (for example, oversampling of less accessible ethnic groups in a single location) and specific lines of inquiry should be included based on inclusivity. Additionally, we emphasize that this is a point that NRC should consider more explicitly as it considers further study of BLP across Colombia.
- It was not possible to gather the same number of participants for each location. The findings of the research therefore do not represent all locations equally.
- It was only possible to meet with the Educational Secretary of Ipiales. Due to this, the research only has the perspective of localized educational authorities in this location.
- This research is not an impact assessment. However, it was intended to capture and report the perspectives of the educational communities on the impact of BLP. NRC's MEL systems are intended to offer specific indication of impact; this research was intended to complement such data with in-depth and context-specific description.
- Although BLP is intended to be implemented with children of 6-16 years, the implementation in Colombia includes young people through secondary school and up to the age of 18. For this reason, the results include answers both from children and adolescents. This is reported on when possible.
- Some recordings of the data collection events were not of high quality due to ambient noises. In these focus groups discussions, the data relies on the notes of the Research Team.

- In some locations it was not possible to record the interviews, due to security issues with armed groups. For safeguarding reasons, the data of these groups relies entirely on the notes of the Research Team.
- All the interviews and focus group discussions were led in Spanish, since it is the language the population speaks. Some nuances can be lost in translation.

3. FINDINGS

This report summarizes the perspectives of students, teachers, caregivers, secretaries of education and program implementers of Colombia on the enabling environments to implement MHPSS programs in education settings. It refers to the actors that participated directly in interviews or focus group discussions of this study. Findings are organized into three sub-sections: (1) context overview; (2) holistic wellbeing and the role of education in context; and (3) BLP implementation in Colombia. A summary of all findings is presented as Table 9, below.

The sections build from the general to the more specific of the studied intervention (BLP) itself. An important foundation of this research was to create a holistic picture of the enabling environment around an MHPSS intervention, thus it is critical to report on contextual constraints and enablers, as well context-specific perceptions and understanding of wellbeing and MHPSS programming. These findings are constructed to be relevant to a broad audience of actors interested in MHPSS programming in Colombia. The final section of findings presents the key findings of the specific, studied intervention (BLP) for this research, which is intended as relevant to both the same broad audience but also specifically for NRC program and organizational learning.

There are many nuances and differences between the locations that were the focus of this research; when these differences are significant, they are noted.

Table 9. Findings

Findings: Context overview	
1	Acute emergencies and structural violence lead to unmet basic needs which impacts mental health and wellbeing.
2	Research participants perceive that spaces outside the home and school are the most dangerous for children and young people.
3	Population diversity creates both opportunities and challenges in education settings.
4	MHPSS services are not easily nor reliably accessed in any of the locations in this study.
Findings: Holistic wellbeing and the role of education	
5	The perceived value of school is strongly linked to wellbeing, especially as a place to develop character (values, social, and emotional skills) and access to opportunities and basic needs.
6	Perceptions vary across contexts about safety in schools and what constitutes a safe learning environment.
7	Children perceive the greatest sense of safety and wellbeing from their immediate environments, especially their homes and schools, and from their close relationships, particularly with family and friends.

8 There is a lack of support for teacher mental health and wellbeing as well as support to teachers to provide for student wellbeing

9 Most schools do not have a psychologist or counselor on staff. The ones that do have only one for hundreds or even thousands of students.

10 While Secretaries of Education value PSS interventions in schools, the provision of such services is delegated to NGOs rather than provided by the Secretaries of Education themselves.

Findings: BLP implementation and impact

11 Teachers and caregivers expressed satisfaction with BLP and spoke of its value for supporting learners' behaviours and management of emotions.

12 Respondents had more to say about the impact and value of BLP in locations where it is delivered in dedicated sessions, rather than integrated into lessons.

13 Adults who are most committed to BLP are those who have implemented it and have felt the benefits of the BLP activities on their own lives.

14 The most commonly perceived purposes of BLP are to address the holistic wellbeing of students, not just their academic performance, and to provide psychosocial support for students and communities that face contextual challenges.

15 There were a number of clear outcomes perceived as a result of BLP by across all actors in this research, including enhanced emotional intelligence, improved classroom management, positive impact on student wellbeing, improved learning environment, and holistic development of learners.

16 Implementers of BLP perceive the program as a method to help children cope with the challenges of their context, but acknowledge its limitations due to ongoing adversity.

17 According to children, they do not often use BLP coping strategies *outside* the school and the sessions. In their daily life, they use different coping strategies.

18 In all research locations, BLP has been contextualized from the implementation guidance in order to make it more relevant and appropriate for the particular location.

19 Teachers across most locations of implementation desire further and more explicit support for including parents in BLP implementation, either in schools or different locations.

20 The sustainability of BLP in the current locations of implementation relies on the continued uptake and use by teachers (supported through NRC training), as well as the ultimate goal of integration into official curriculum.

21 Although participants note the positive impacts and perceptions of BLP, its implementation still faces many barriers and challenges to be fully realized. These include motivational and psychological barriers; cultural and social barriers; institutional barriers; and economic barriers.

3.1. CONTEXT OVERVIEW IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MHPSS PROGRAMMING SUCH AS BLP

In order to better understand the research findings, this section presents context-related findings as a foundational step, ensuring background and environmental understanding in order to fully grasp the subsequent findings and recommendations. In the case of Colombia, the context of the intervention is critical to understand and define the scope of any MHPSS program, both in terms of logistics around implementation and impact. This includes description of the sociocultural and economic issues faced by the target population, as well as how such details affect their mental health and wellbeing. These details are also relevant for planning the logistical aspects of programming, such as access and materials. In Colombia, there is notable difference across the locations of BLP implementation; these specifics are elaborated on in this section of findings.

Finding 1: Acute emergencies and structural violence lead to unmet basic needs which impacts mental health and wellbeing.

Across all contexts, many vulnerabilities were described by research participants. Some of these include emergencies such as the mention of **floods** in Arauca; the direct effects of **armed conflict** (displacement, presence of armed groups, shootings, bombing, antipersonnel mines, confinement, forced recruitment, illicit crops) mentioned especially in Arauca, Caquetá and Guaviare; a **migration crisis** that has resulted in human trafficking, overcrowded populations, presence of human traffickers, a transient population that enters and leaves school frequently, and overpopulation that makes more evident the already existing lack of jobs and poverty, as expressed by communities in Nariño, Arauca and Santa Marta.

Violence and insecurity were present in all contexts of the research. This led to fear of using certain roads in rural areas or the streets in the urban areas; sexual abuse and harassment; young girls pregnant and raped; robbery and assaults; domestic violence and abandonment, child abuse; murder; drug dealing and consumption of psychoactive substances (alcohol in rural areas, drugs in urban areas); and bullying and violence amongst students in the classrooms.

*I think that in my case, the environment where I am every day with my children really has nothing safe. At this moment, Holanda is a village where there is the presence of armed actors 24/7. I mean, we are surrounded by armed people all the time. So, even though they don't enter the school... here is the street, [just nearby] the school, and armed actors transit around the school, everywhere. So, it's not safe where the children are. **Teacher from Arauca***

Some of the problems in these contexts are related to structural violence, in which state structures and institutions fail to assure the basic needs of the population there are met. The lack of opportunities and state support has led to conditions of poverty, which was mentioned in all contexts and among all actors. Such poverty means that students often only eat what the school provides and arrive at school without breakfast, as well as without notebooks or uniforms. Schools often lack adequate material to teach with. Additional risks associated with poverty include child labor because students must work to support their families, and ultimately lack of opportunities for both continued study and work.

Lack of safe transportation to and from school was a problem raised in all contexts and exposes students to multiple risks. Across all contexts, the lack of transportation to get to school was described. In the **rural areas**, this means having to walk sometimes for hours, with potential exposure to armed actors, antipersonnel mines and wild animals. Students then arrive to school tired and with less disposition to learn, as mentioned in Arauca, Caquetá and Guaviare. In **urban areas**, it means crossing numerous insecure streets with exposure to car and motorcycle accidents, as mentioned in Santa Marta and Nariño. In Guaviare, these dangers prevented some students from accessing education entirely, since schools which offer the appropriate grades are too far away.

In my classroom, a girl just yesterday said "Teacher, I'm so tired." "But we are about to start the class. How are you tired already?" I asked her. "I had to walk here from beyond Guadalupe," she answered. She had to walk from school from so very far away, because the bus does not go near to her home. This girl, who arrives to school so tired every day, is obviously going to have a learning deficiency.

Teacher from Nariño

Context challenges, such as those above, were most often described by adult participants, especially teachers and principals. In addition, some students made reference to robbery, harassment and insecurity in Nariño and Guaviare.

*[State] neglect hinders families from supporting their child's education because there are parents who can't read, who can't write, or who lead a nomadic lifestyle. We are blessed with the Arauca River, so these parents depend on the river, living wherever the fishing takes them. It's a transient population. There are no job opportunities in Saravena, let alone in the more rural areas. Therefore, with the little [funding] that reaches the school, and with additional contributions from teachers, we try to provide opportunities for these children. However, we also encounter parents who unfortunately lack the resources and ability to help their children. We must consider the abandonment that the countryside and the area we work in have experienced, which has allowed other activities to flourish, activities that have brought more violence. It's a matter of opportunities, [and should be] the responsibility of the state through the education system. *Teacher from Arauca**

Context challenges – both the type of challenge and the degree to which they impact the population – differed significantly by location. For example, in relation to armed conflict, communities from Arauca talk about direct violence (bombing, murders, presence of armed groups), while people in Caquetá talked

about more indirect impacts related to the armed conflict (roads that cannot be taken, communities that take their own security measures as there is no state presence or institutions).

These contextual challenges impact the mental health of communities, but in notably different ways.

Key impacts mentioned across all locations were permanent feelings of unease,^{iv} fear, and vulnerability. Teachers in Nariño, Caquetá and Santa Marta mentioned that students, due to the contextual challenges and the lack of opportunities, do not have dreams or a life plan. Arauca was mentioned by a teacher as ranking third of all departments in Colombia for suicide rate, which coincides with official data for the year 2021. According to the report of DANE (National Administrative Department of Statistics), from 2021 to 2022, suicide rates have increased 12.3% in adolescents from 15 to 19 years old.³³

It is also important to note the compounding effects of these challenges related to child development and physical wellbeing, such as: lack of food; less access to education; reduced learning readiness and poor learning outcomes; limited future job opportunities; regular physical danger; adult involvement or relation to combatants in armed groups (especially in family or other adults that children look up to); fewer opportunities to experience play and ease in childhood; and restricted opportunities to express themselves as children. **Learners in all locations of research are exposed to multiple, interacting stressors which impact their wellbeing.**

*In my classroom, an 11-year-old boy went to work in the harvest and returned months later. He lived on the farm and worked there, and he came back with money... an 11-year-old boy with [his own] money. He even brought a ring for a girl in 5th grade that he liked, supposedly to propose to her. That boy, living in the countryside, turned into a man because he only saw men. Imagine, 11-12-year-old children with men who are 22, 38, 49 years old. It's obvious that they start behaving like them. That's why school is so important. It's a space where children interact with other children, with their peers, and create appropriate culture and discourse at their age. **Teacher from Caquetá***

Finding 2: Research participants perceive that spaces outside the home and school are the most dangerous for children and young people.

When asked about safety, actors differ on whether the school or the homes are safer. Students and caregivers generally perceive home as safest, and teachers and principals mention schools as the safest

^{iv} In Spanish, the word used is “zozobra”. It involves a feeling of uneasiness, restlessness, or distress. Rather than being a response to a specific threat, “zozobra” is a feeling of uncertainty or instability that may be more diffuse, prolonged and less concrete than fear.

place in their communities. **However, they all agree that the spaces between home and school are the most dangerous.**

In Nariño and Santa Marta—more urban locations—the perceived danger is in “the streets”. These are described as places of drug dealing, harassment, robbery, assaults, traffic accidents and “bad influences” for students. In Arauca, Caquetá and Guaviare, they mention the roads between the school and home as places where you can find armed actors, wild animals, antipersonnel mines, dead bodies, and where students must cross rivers and flooded zones. In Guaviare, this is mentioned as a cause for not accessing education, since the school is too far from some homes and the single boarding school does not offer enough space for all students.

*In rural areas, many children have to travel on foot for two hours...Children arrive however they can at the schools, some come on mules. And there are so many risks along the way. Besides that, it rains... We started a project called "El Calvo with Boots" to get boots and raincoats for the children because when it rains, they arrive with rolled-up pants and barefoot because they don't even have boots. And there are parts [where it is] not just rainwater but overflowing rivers, and snakes come along when the rivers overflow. So as these children walk along the road, they can get bitten by a snake... They miss classes because they can't cross the streams. That's what I would change first: the school transportation issue. **Principal from Arauca***

Due to the lack of transportation to the schools, these risks are enduring for education communities. Besides physical safety, there are constant feelings of fear, unease, and concern from teachers and caregivers about this journey between home and school. In urban areas in Nariño and Magdalena, that fear has led caregivers to keep their children at home any time they are not in school, despite providing fewer opportunities to play and interact with peers and have free time activities.

*My son... went out on the street and that is where there are drugs and alcohol. Once, he got lost. Then they [the people from the neighborhood] found him...who knows what could have happened? That's why I'm afraid of the streets. When my daughter says "I'm going to do something with a friend," I start to suffer. I tell her to come home at 5, but I'm scared the entire time. **Caregiver from Nariño***

*Thank God, we have Wi-Fi at home, so it is ok to stay in my house... So [the children] don't do anything in the street because they have their phones. They don't go out as much. Sometimes, the neighbors ask my daughter, "Why doesn't your mom let you go out? Why don't you play with us at night?" 8:30 pm is not time to play because we mostly live where the mules pass, so there are robberies there at night because it's on the border with another neighborhood. It become so dangerous after 8:00 pm. So by then we're already locked up, as soon as dad comes home we do not go outside. **Caregiver from Magdalena***

Finding 3: Population diversity creates both opportunities and challenges in education settings.

In Arauca and Nariño, teachers and NRC Staff mention the presence of the indigenous population amongst educational communities they work with. **Participants note that they have different cultural referents, ways to express affection, beliefs, and that they have specific barriers to meeting basic**

needs and access to services. This includes food (often acquired by fishing and hunting, which are currently limited since armed groups do not allow free movement in the area) and access to higher education (as students do not always have the same knowledge as expected for entering a higher education institution). Simultaneously, diversity in the classroom allows schools to teach tolerance and the value of respecting others.

*We work a lot on respect for diversity because, as teachers working in indigenous territory, we see that so many belong to the indigenous sector... so there are so many differences. But everyone has respect for everyone that comes [to school]. Each person is a world apart, so respect for each one is important to us. It is how we contribute to building across the communities. **Teacher from Nariño***

Also in Nariño, Santa Marta and Arauca, there were mentions about migrant populations, especially from Venezuela.[∨] Children with a migration background were used as a criterion for choosing BLP participants in Nariño and Santa Marta. In the municipality of Ipiales, in Nariño, which is a migrant corridor of the continent, actors also mentioned the presence of Haitian, Chinese and Peruvian migrants.

Some specific effects that mainly teachers, principals, and NRC staff mention regarding people on the move that affect the educational processes are:

- There is a large transient population coming and going through the communities; much of this migration is due to lack of economic opportunities. This population is often perceived to have learners with inconsistent educational experiences, and that involves adapting the programs to students that arrive or leave late in the school year.
- Extreme distress is present in students and families due to leaving their country, families, and possessions, as well as exposure to violence.
- There is the presence of illegal activities such as illegal transportation and housing, that lead to a sense of insecurity and instability in the communities.
- There is description of bullying and xenophobia towards some migrant students and families.

*At the moment, we have 127 Venezuelan children in our school. These are children who arrive in very complicated situations. Their parents were expelled [from their country]...often their parents are going through a terrible situation. And the children had to come here and leave their things and home behind. Imagine a five-year-old child coming to a school with that burden, and suddenly another child says, "Why do you always come in the same clothes?" That hurts me in the stomach. It just happened this morning at the main campus. I said, "Teacher, how is it that the child is saying that to another girl? ...She comes every day in the same clothes. How might that child be feeling?" **Principal from Arauca***

[∨] It is noted that the term "migrant" here is used in reference to refugees across borders. While the research team acknowledges the different cross-cultural meanings of words such as migrant and refugee, we follow the lead of NRC Colombia here and use the word migrant in reference to these populations.

Finding 4: MHPSS services are not easily nor reliably accessed in any of the locations in this study.

Despite all the adversities experienced by communities in Colombia mentioned in the above findings, access to MHPSS services is limited and often nonexistent. In Guaviare, Caquetá and Santa Marta, all actors mention that there is no access to these services. The only locations where access was described were Arauca and Nariño, but with difficulties in consistency:

I scheduled an appointment in the first week of December, and it was easy. But when we wanted to schedule another appointment, they gave it to us towards the end of January. The professional from the first time was no longer contracted, so we had to wait after the first fifteen days of January because that's when they contract the [new] professionals. We couldn't get an appointment; not with the nutritionist, the psychologist, or the specialist. So some programs that could help us and facilitate things, especially here through the school, would be good. Caregiver FGD

We don't have any of these [MHPSS] services here. In 2021, when we arrived, there was a meeting in San José, and a psychologist was introduced who was supposed to come to schools, especially Charras. We have been waiting for her since 2021. Teacher FGD

It is important to note that actors were asked about access to MHPSS services and who they can go to for help or support, not solely if there are psychologists available. As mentioned in the introductory section describing the Colombian context, MHPSS services in the country should not only include specialized attention, but community-based centers and family support groups. None of these were mentioned by the interviewed actors, even though, as mentioned in previous findings, the population of these areas live in environments that directly affect their mental health.

WHY ARE THESE CONTEXT RELATED FINDINGS IMPORTANT IN RELATION TO MHPSS PROGRAMMING?

The above context findings relate to specific impacts on the wellbeing and mental health of the educational communities where this research was conducted. If MHPSS programs seek to address these impacts, implementing organizations must consider the specific needs and development of each community. As mentioned in Finding 1, the same problem (such as armed conflict or poverty) may manifest very differently by location due a range of factors, which can lead to differing levels and types of impact on communities and community members. In order to implement a successful MHPSS program, the program must be context- and conflict-sensitive. The following are key questions that are critical to ask before the start of implementation, which have been examined through this research (and are largely presented above):

- What are the specific challenges of this community and the impacts they have on their members?

- What are the specific needs of this community that are not met, and how can the program contribute to them?
- How does the program consider all the stages of the educational process, not only when students are in the classrooms (e.g. in the journey from school to home)?
- How does the program consider the diversity of the communities, their cultural references, and values?
- What MHPSS services are available and how can the program generate coordination to facilitate access to them?

Overall, these context findings also emphasize how, ideally, MHPSS programs need to be accompanied by interventions that help meet the basic needs of the population in order to truly improve mental health and wellbeing. When the context continues to neglect basic needs of the population, the value of these programs is often related to mitigation of harm and supporting children, caregivers and teachers to cope with these difficult situations, rather than changing them.

3.2. UNDERSTANDING HOLISTIC WELLBEING AND THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN CONTEXT

Wellbeing and the role of education were a central topic of this research. The second group of findings examine the perceptions of educational communities on learner wellbeing and how it is related to school. When implementing school-based MHPSS programs it is crucial to understand how different actors perceive school, and in particular what space and support are available for non-academic activities and how such activities are valued.

Finding 5: The perceived value of school is strongly linked to wellbeing, especially as a place to develop character (values, social, and emotional skills) and access to opportunities and basic needs.

This perceived value of the relationship between education and wellbeing was emphasized across all actors and contexts, but differed slightly across actors as to the major contribution of education to students' life.

Interviewed teachers and principals perceive the value of education mainly in relation to the development of social and emotional skills. For them, school is a place where students receive **trust, affection and love, support, active listening to their emotions, guidance and advice, safety, emotional management skills, values for living in communities (respect, valuing differences, tolerance) and the confidence to believe in themselves.**

This perceived value is even mentioned above the academic and cognitive development amongst teachers. In all the conducted FGDs, there is significant elaboration on this point.

*The other day I heard a phrase that said that the best gift we can give to our children is to be happy. In that same vein, it is also something we can give to our students. Trying to build oneself, to grow, and to have a way of being happy. Because someone who is happy transmits it. In hugs, in affection, in effort, in loving what they do. Being at peace with oneself is also a way of educating them. Not so much from academia, but as my colleague said, from being. **Teacher, Magdalena***

I think something important [...] is the trust that we give to the students. Because through trust, they approach us and tell us about the problems they have, the needs they have, what they face daily, what they experience in their homes. So, I think that is the most important thing we can offer them, and based on that, we can give them advice and guide them for their future life.

Teacher, Nariño

TEACHERS

*[School] is very important because students spend more time with teachers, and we can give them confidence, make them feel important, let them know that they are loved, respected, and valued. **Teacher, Arauca***

*In my case, it's about recognizing their abilities, capacities, and talents, and giving them the place they deserve because they are the most important part of the institution. They are the soul of the school, and without them, we wouldn't be here. Making them feel that they can count on us in whatever they need, both academically and on a human level. It's important to prioritize the human aspect. So, it's about making them feel that they are the most important, that they can do it. **Teacher, Guaviare***

*For me, it is my job to keep them in education, to prevent them from leaving and going back [to the armed groups]. I need to see them more as individuals, not just vessels to fill with knowledge, but to instill values in them. We try to create a sense of family...they are like our own children... and we also try to communicate with their families. Beyond being a teacher who only imparts knowledge, it is my job to see the person there, to try to shape them into good humans, and to encourage them to break free from the challenges in their environment. I ask them what they want to do, and I teach them values and do my best to guide them. **Teacher, Guaviare***

Learners perceive school as a place to meet and socialize with friends; to play; to learn values (respect, kindness, responsibility, honesty); to avoid working; and to gain academic skills (reading, writing, English and mathematics were the most mentioned) specifically to become professionals. At all ages, learners emphasize the importance of school for fostering their social relationships and friendships. In terms of learning, younger students mention specific academic skills like reading and math, while older students focus on the opportunities they gain for their future by going to school.

*[Without school], I imagine myself without a life project, without friends, and my life would take different paths. **Learner, Nariño***

[Without school], I imagine my life being sad because I wouldn't see my friends again. I would probably work and help my mother financially. Learner, Nariño

[Without school], I wouldn't learn to read books clearly or write them. Where else [besides school] would I meet friends? What would I do in the future? Learner, Nariño

Although caregivers also mention some social and emotional aspects of education, such as learning respect and socialization with other children, they describe more value in the future economic opportunities that school provides to learners. A very common phrase in Colombia was repeated among caregivers in all contexts, relating the value of school to “becoming someone in life”. This phrase emphasizes learners gaining the knowledge and skills to become professionals and to avoid environments that their caregivers perceive as harmful.

[School] provides them with job opportunities, so they can do things differently than current generations... [they will] not have to live like former combatants who haven't known how to do anything else. Caregiver, Caquetá

We want the best for them. We ask God that they follow the right path, that they are responsible young women. As a mother, I want them to go to school so that they can be someone in life, so they do more than hang out on the streets. Caregiver, Nariño

Additionally, some students, teachers and caregivers describe school as a place to receive basic services that promote wellbeing. Food was the most mentioned across locations, which is provided as part of the PAE (school food program). In the limited contexts where it is available, such as Nariño, participants also note the value of access to **psychological services directly provided by schools**, such as the access to a psychologist.

Finding 6: Perceptions vary across contexts about safety in schools and what constitutes a safe learning environment.

There is no unified perception about whether schools are a safe place for students or not. Indeed, this perception varies even within locations, across different actors, and even in different individuals of the same group. Different perceptions will be described here as there is no unified answer.

In **Arauca**, teachers affirm that school is not safe due to the presence of armed groups, which leads to situations like bombings, shootings, and feeling like they cannot express themselves freely. This was described with the caveat that, even with these situations, the presence of teachers gives some sense of safety to learners. In contrast, the interviewed principal assures that the school is the only safe place that learners have, and learners and caregivers state both home and the school as the safest spaces.

The space where I am with the children is not a safe environment at all, there are armed actors 24/7, they do not enter the school but they are around. There, one cannot express oneself as one would like. In the territory, there are armed actors,

the school is no longer respected, one has to remain silent. There is no security.
Teacher from Arauca

There is unease. In front of the school, last year a man was killed around 11am. In previous years, they killed police officers right in front of the school. So, inside is one thing and right outside is another... What security can the students and teachers have? **Teacher from Arauca**

In **Guaviare**, the school where the research was conducted does not have a fence surrounding it. For that reason both learners and principal affirm that the school is not a fully safe place, due to potential robberies and forced recruitment. The caregivers also do not describe the school as a safe space, and teachers have divided opinions. Some teachers noted schools as unsafe due to the presence of armed groups. Others, however, note that the school is often safer than children's homes because they avoid being exposed to situations like alcohol consumption and domestic violence.

Honestly, [it is] not really safe, because things get stolen from the school, but nobody harms the students here. It would be safer if it were enclosed. **Learner from Guaviare**

The environment within the institution is safe because it promotes good life practices, such as coexisting in peace. But the environment at home, when they are with their families, is often not very safe due to what happens around them, such as abuse or alcohol. It's different here than for those children because they are safer away from that environment. **Teacher from Guaviare**

In **Caquetá**, neither learners nor caregivers described school as providing safety. Teachers affirm that the school provides safety mainly as it helps them avoid child labor.

In **Magdalena**, both students and caregivers perceive home as safer than school, as they mention situations of bullying and mistreatment perpetuated by school staff. Teachers mention that the school is not totally safe due to problems with the infrastructure.

In **Nariño**, teachers affirm that the school is the only safe place their students can count on, in contrast to their homes where they face different risks. Caregivers mention that school prevents learners from being in the streets. Principals say that schools are not safe because they cannot meet learners' basic needs. Learners have divided opinions: some think that schools are safe because of their teachers' support, and others say they are not because of the presence of migrants.

Overall, the huge variation in description of schools as safe spaces indicate how contextually dependent (down to the school or specific home level) such perceptions are. The varying descriptions of what makes a space safe or not additionally emphasize how much safety cannot be assumed for children across these locations in Colombia, and how any services provided for them (including MHPSS programming) should consider ways in which such safety could be improved.

Finding 7: Children perceive the greatest sense of safety and wellbeing from their immediate environments, especially their homes and schools, and from their close relationships, particularly with family and friends. Children's perceptions of where and why they feel safe are essential for considering

programming to impact their wellbeing. In addition to understanding what locations and relationships are most important to this, children can also describe the activities and experiences that are beneficial to their sense of wellbeing and safety.

Activities that allow for creative expression, physical activity, and bonding with pets are perceived as beneficial for their mental and emotional health. On the other hand, negative interactions such as bullying or judgment can adversely affect their sense of safety and wellbeing. Table 9, below, summarizes responses from learners participating in the research activities.

Table 10: Learners perceptions of safety, relationships, and wellbeing

Where do children feel safe?	What relationships are most important to children?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Home Environment: Children feel safe at home, in their rooms, or with their families. The home appears to be a sanctuary for many. ● School: Some children mention feeling safe at school, indicating that the structured environment and the presence of authority figures (like teachers) can provide a sense of security. ● Nature and Outdoors: Being in nature or the countryside was mentioned as a place of safety and comfort. ● Libraries: A few children mentioned the library as a safe space, indicating that places of learning and quiet can be comforting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Family: The family, especially parents, siblings, and grandparents, is repeatedly mentioned as a source of comfort and safety. The bond with family members is perceived as paramount. ● Friends: Friends, especially those made at school, play a significant role in the children's perception of their lives. For them, they provide companionship, understanding, and shared experiences. ● Pets: Pets, especially cats, were mentioned as sources of comfort and safety. The bond between children and their pets was described as very deep and important. 	
What do children do to feel safe?	Which experiences contribute to children's wellbeing?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Engage in Activities: Activities like listening to music, playing soccer, singing, dancing, reading, and writing stories were mentioned as ways to feel safe and relaxed. ● Seek Solitude: Some children mentioned seeking solitude, like sitting on their bed and breathing, as a way to calm down and feel safe. ● Self-talk: A few mentioned talking to themselves or looking in the mirror as coping mechanisms. ● Crafts: Engaging in crafts was mentioned as a way to focus on positive thoughts and express feelings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Music: Listening to music was frequently mentioned as a source of comfort. ● Physical Activity: Playing soccer and dancing were mentioned as activities that contribute to their wellbeing. ● Creative Expression: Singing, reading, writing stories, and engaging in crafts were highlighted as positive activities. ● Being with Animals: The presence of pets, especially cats, was mentioned as comforting. 	
	<th data-bbox="812 1617 1427 1688">Which experiences harm children's wellbeing?</th> <td data-bbox="812 1690 1427 1837"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Experiencing Bullying: Some children mentioned feeling humiliated or made fun of at school, indicating that bullying negatively impacts their wellbeing. </td>	Which experiences harm children's wellbeing?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Negative Self-talk: A few children mentioned feeling unsafe with their own thoughts, indicating internal struggles or negative self-perception. ● Facing Judgement: Being judged for appearances, like a particular hairstyle, was mentioned as a source of discomfort.
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Similar to the adults in their lives, children perceive the greatest threats to their safety and wellbeing from things external to their school and homelife, often occurring during transit between safe spaces (such as home and school). However, there are also threats to safety and wellbeing from within these safe spaces, such as bullying or the negative behaviors of caregivers or extended family. Such descriptions emphasize that close relationships are essential aspects of children’s wellbeing, and identifying unhealthy or unsafe relationships or interactions is important for assuring safety. As noted in previous findings, teachers and other education actors emphasize the role of school in identifying students in need of specific support due to difficult home circumstances.

Finding 8: There is a lack of support for teacher mental health and wellbeing as well as support to teachers to provide for student wellbeing.

Overall, teachers describe being emotionally and psychologically taxed by their work. Across all contexts, the research team found groups of teachers with difficult emotional situations that arose during FGDs. Tears and emotions of helplessness, frustration, fear, sadness, and pain were perceived by the interviewers across locations, although with different intensity (teachers from Nariño, for example, showed more hope in general than teachers from Arauca and Guaviare, where helplessness was an intense emotion).

*We have a lot of work to do to support teachers as humans, too. We demand quality [from teachers], but what are we giving to our teachers to help them when we are in a situation of conflict, a situation of great needs? How can teachers work? We also often find ourselves with the issue of student wellbeing, but we don't think about the wellbeing of other teachers. **Teacher from Nariño***

*I must say that this is the first time in thirty years that I have been in front of professionals interested in the mental health of us teachers [...] and if we go to the government they will barely give us some pills and referrals for support are four months or more later. **Teacher from Arauca***

Teachers describe that their difficult emotions are often exacerbated by the burden of listening to children's stories and situations and not knowing how to handle them or respond. During multiple FGDs, teachers broke down crying describing the situation of learners in their classrooms.

In my classroom, when a girl expressed to me what she felt and went through, it broke my heart. I would only be able to give her a hug. That girl... [tears]...it breaks my heart because of her terrible situation. I've been feeling down all week because I

know she won't be coming back to school... She's an excellent student and also I just know she needs a lot of love and affection because of the difficulties she faces at home. To know she is no longer here, it's so frustrating [tears]. **Teacher from Guaviare**

In addition, teachers describe the general lack of support and materials to do their job effectively; being constantly overloaded by the work itself and all of the requirements from the system; and the insecurity and challenges of some locations. There was no mention of psychosocial support for teachers available in any of the research locations.

Sometimes teachers use their own resources to support certain activities for their classrooms. It's our responsibility as teachers to take the little that arrives at educational institutions and turn it all into fun activities and opportunities for the children. **Teacher from Arauca**

The Ministry itself burdens us with so many tasks that it takes away our authority. Teachers can't make many changes within their classrooms because there are so many forms, so many things to fill out. In reality, there are many things we want but cannot do in our classrooms. There are so often new requirements, and what we planned to do is no longer possible. We really have to find more ways to support teachers. This is also about recognizing ourselves as individuals, realizing that we are not machines... because it's very difficult to reach our students when our mood is so affected. **Teacher from Guaviare**

Besides their own mental health, **teachers mention that they are in real need of external and specialized support and guidance to deal with some of the most serious student situations**, such as sexual abuse and domestic violence. Many of them note there can be a lack of support from caregivers in serious situations, and this places even larger burden on the teachers who feel responsible to act as the trusted adult in learners' lives.

There are many times when I think "I wish someone would come" because...this is well beyond my capabilities. When a girl comes to me and says, "I've been abused" ... well I can address it from a human perspective, but we need a specialist. In the Department of Education, how many schools does one psychologist serve? They come once a year and think they can solve the [problems] of many children at one time. But the children won't [open up]... they talk to me because they see me every day, they dare to speak up, but it's difficult for them to open up to a stranger. And I say it's supposed to be once a year, but actually three years have passed and no one has come. **Teacher from Guaviare**

Many times, as the teachers mentioned, we don't know what the children experience at home or what family issues they bring. Many of them come to vent to the teachers... [Teachers] do what they can, but sometimes it requires significant family support, such as having a mother, a father, a grandparent to be involved. We can't demand the caregiver to suddenly "come and support" the child. We can really only suggest it. However, often there is no space or willingness for it [from the caregiver]. It takes a

*lot to encourage and motivate parents to provide that support because most of them believe that it's not necessary. This is true because here it is a rural area. From the teachers' perspective, we can only try to invite them and motivate them. **Teacher from Arauca***

Finding 9: Most schools do not have a psychologist or counselor on staff. The ones that do have only one for hundreds or even thousands of students.

Only four of the schools visited have one psychologist in their institution. And, among those, it is one person for 1200-1400 students and their families, which does not align with the standard established by law of one psychologist per 250 students. Some principals and teachers have tried to access psychosocial support services for students through their local Secretaries of Education, with no success in accessing continued specialized service.

Today, what we are requesting is there... be at least one mental health professional for every 200 students in a school. It's necessary, especially in this area and the issues the children have here....However, it hasn't been possible to achieve this. In some schools, there is one psychologist for the entire school. Here, we have 1500 students and one psychologist, and the psychologist is temporary with contracts expiring after three months. So, there is no consistent support in that regard.

Principal from Guaviare

*A new law only provides one psychologist for a population like ours of 1400 people. That's impossible. The kids live with a number of problems that need to be heard, addressed, and recognized in all their complexity. The psychologist tells me, "Principal, I can't do it. I can't see 20 or 30 cases a day. I just can't." **Principal from Nariño***

*There's a shortage of psychologists in institutions who can support us with this coordination [of BLP]. In fact, we often don't even mention it with schools, because in so many of the schools there weren't any. **NRC Implementer from Magdalena***

The value of having a mental health professional in the school was most often mentioned by **principals and caregivers**, especially in Nariño where they already have one. Principals and caregivers describe how helpful it is for learners to talk about their life situations. Additionally, the school can then provide referral service into the health system (and targeted care) that is otherwise difficult to access. The Research Team also noted that these school-based mental health professionals were also the ones in charge of implementing BLP in their schools, which eased the workload of teachers.

*The psychologist also teaches them, so it helps them a lot because they trust and share things with her. They come out of their routine, de-stress, and trust her. That has definitely happened with my daughter, because at home I have little conversation with her...she won't share with me. But I know that they [the psychologist] talked to her a lot and this is what has helped her. **Caregiver from Nariño***

Finding 10: Although psychosocial support is perceived as valuable, programs and activities in school related to it are not assumed by the Secretaries of Education but delegated to NGOs.

When the data for this research was collected, the schools visited in all contexts had no other MHPSS program implemented besides BLP. In some schools, like Santa Marta, actors mention other programs and projects targeting aspects of learner wellbeing, such as the sexuality and reproductive health project of ISIS International. Research participants were not aware of any other mental health or psychosocial wellbeing-specific intervention available via schools.

The NRC teams elaborated on their perceptions of support from the Secretaries of Education in implementing BLP, given it is the only such program mentioned in these locations. NRC staff emphasize that they have rarely received denials to implement BLP in schools when they approach education authorities. Secretaries allow NRC to implement the programs and coordinate the contact with the schools, but do not intervene on the implementation itself or conduct follow-up or evaluation.

*Someone [other than the government] has to implement it. In other words, the Secretary creates spaces for us, but it is not within their purview to implement this program themselves. So it is established that they will coordinate, and they create the spaces for organizations such as NRC, Save the Children, and other organizations in the territory to act as trainers and the like. But they are not directly involved in implementation. **NRC Implementer from Magdalena***

NRC staff further elaborate on how this may present challenges to the sustainability of BLP in these locations, since the Secretary of Education is not involved in any follow-up regarding implementation or impact. While there may be positive buy-in at the school level, without the support of the implementing NGOs, these schools would be unable to continue with such types of intervention.

*What we have been able to realize here is that there is a lot of interest on the part of teachers and educational institutions. We did the BLP training here at the school, and the motivation is there [from teachers and staff], as well as the desire to include it in the curriculum. However, the municipal secretariat has been a little difficult, and I think we have realized not only with this project but with others, that there is a barrier on the part of the municipal secretariat. We try to manage it, but it is there. **NRC Implementer from Nariño***

*When you're interested in something, you go and find out: "How did it go with NRC, the activities you did with the children, going to find them, implementing MHPSS activities with them?" If you don't inquire about something happening in your own house, it implies that you're not interested. That's what I noticed: they [the Secretary of Education] encourage you to do it, but they don't get involved... That's basically the impression they gave us. The Department of Education never even conducted a survey among the institutions to see how things went or to evaluate the process. **NRC Implementer from Guaviare***

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND PERCEPTIONS OF HOLISTIC WELLBEING, AS WELL AS THE ROLE OF EDUCATION, IN CONTEXT?

Interventions and programs that try to address holistic wellbeing in school must consider what those concepts mean to the communities they are working with, in order to assure that the intervention is relevant and addresses the perceived needs of the communities. The values held by communities will directly relate to their engagement and commitment to the program and activities, which will ultimately define the possible impact of the intervention. As seen in the findings of this section, this perceived value of MHPSS programming and the roles of education in relation to it, varies among actors and locations. Understanding perceptions of holistic wellbeing and education should foreground the work of implementers in the planning stages of a program. In order to do so, potential implementers of school-based MHPSS programming should consider certain questions:

- How can the program support communities to build a shared vision of school that includes the needs of all actors?
- How can the program build value of MHPSS into the perception of actors that still do not prioritize it? Why are they not currently prioritizing it? This question is especially important in terms of the involvement of Secretaries of Education, who ultimately lead the way in what schools can implement and what support they receive.
- What would be needed for all actors to perceive school as safe?
- How can programs take into account where and what makes children feel safe? How can programs integrate the perception of children in terms of what supports their wellbeing and mental health?
- How can an implementer enhance coordination to improve existing MHPSS services and assure complementarity in new interventions?
- If teachers are the frontline support for educational communities, how can programs provide psychosocial support for their own mental health and wellbeing?

3.3. BLP IMPLEMENTATION

In addition to learning broadly about MHPSS programming in context, this research specifically studied NRC’s BLP implemented by field offices across five locations in Colombia. This section of findings shares key learning about perceptions of BLP broadly, about the perceived impacts, and other relevant implementation details.

In order to understand these findings in Colombia, it is important to note that the implementation of BLP in each location varies significantly, since it is embedded within other education programs that NRC implements. Table 11, below, summarizes some of these implementation differences across the five locations of research, and the following paragraphs offer additional description prior to presentation of the findings.

Table 11. Implementation of BLP in five locations

Location	Program in which BLP is integrated	Who received training to implement BLP?	Who conducted BLP sessions or activities with students and/or caregivers?	Team implemented full BLP sessions or integrated individual activities to teachers’ training?	Were caregivers involved?
Nariño	Recuperación de los estudiantes en situaciones de emergencia	Teachers and psychologists	Teachers and psychologists	Full BLP Sessions	Yes
Magdalena	Education Cannot Wait	Teachers	NRC’s tutors	Full BLP Sessions	Yes
Arauca	Recuperación de los estudiantes en situaciones de emergencia	Teachers	NRC’s tutors	Full BLP Sessions	No
Caquetá	Arando la Educación	Teachers	NRC’s tutors	Individual activities integrated to other program sessions	No
Guaviare	Arando la Educación	Teachers	NRC tutor (which was also a school teacher)	Individual activities integrated to other program sessions	No

In Nariño and Arauca, BLP is implemented as part of the Second-Line Education Response program, NRC's education recovery program implemented in EiE contexts. However, in each location the exact implementation differs. In Nariño, the sessions of the program are implemented directly by school teachers and psychologists, who receive training by NRC staff. In Arauca, NRC tutors implement the sessions with learners and meet with teachers before implementing them as part of the training, since the context does not allow teachers to meet all together for training.

In Magdalena, the program is implemented within the activities of the Education Cannot Wait (ECW) consortium, and include some academic reinforcement activities directly implemented with learners in a "ludoteca" (a playroom outside the school), where BLP is integrated. This also includes training sessions for teachers, though it was noted that these do not have follow up on how they are implementing BLP in their classes.

In Guaviare and Caquetá, the implementation of BLP is embedded within the program Arando la Educación, which has different overall goals. These program goals include helping young people and adults to finish their studies by implementing flexible learning models; active identification of out-of-school children in order to reintegrate them into the education system; training of teachers in different activities; and accompanying children of ex-combatants through reincorporation processes. The program does not have specific PSS/SEL related objectives. All sessions of BLP differed from official NRC guidance.^{vi} Some BLP activities were integrated into other program activities, for example the BLP breathing exercises were used as a way to start or create pause in teacher training sessions from Arando la Educación. The main difference between these two locations was that, in Guaviare, the NRC tutor also acted as a substitute teacher in the school and therefore lived in the boarding school among the other teachers and students.

This section of findings is divided into four subsections of topics around BLP: perceptions of the program; perceived impact; implementation; and challenges and barriers.

3.3.1 PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROGRAM

Finding 11: Teachers and caregivers expressed satisfaction with BLP and spoke of its value for supporting learners' behaviours and management of emotions.

Satisfaction was described by teachers in all locations, as well as by caregivers in Nariño and Santa Marta. **Teachers** mentioned their gratitude and willingness to continue with the program, highlighting that:

- BLP provides different activities and spaces to learners, related specifically to play, different kinds of materials, and active learning. These activities help both learners and teachers get out of the daily routine and engage actively with each other and learning broadly.

[In our classroom, we covered] both the topics of emotions and social media. The children were quickly no longer interested in the class on social media because... the way it was presented bored them. However, when we [introduced] BLP and discussed

^{vi} Throughout this section, "guidance" refers to use of the BLP Manual.

the topic of emotions... the way it was done, the strategies used, the booklets... those were things that caught the children's attention. I feel that they [NRC] took into account the children's needs and interests, and that made it more appealing. I think if you were to ask a child in general which they prefer to talk about: emotions or social media, they might choose social media. But it was the way these BLP topics around emotions were presented that made more impact due to the strategies used.

Teacher from Arauca

NRC provided us with a series of activities. Something I have done in my math classes is to implement them when I have two-hour lessons and I see that the students are tired of crunching numbers. So, I tell them, "Let's take 5 minutes to do this activity," and it refreshes them a bit, changing the pace of work. It's not something you see every day, a math teacher doing this, but it helps because when you get them to sit down and work, the students are more engaged, more alert. It's something I didn't do before, but I learned to do it with NRC, and it works.

Teacher from Guaviare

- BLP has affected changes in the identification, expression and management of learners' emotions, particularly in helping them de-stress.

It is important for de-stressing... With all the BLP activities that the psychologist carried out, I noticed that the kids were calmer. After so much academic work, the activities that teacher did were like a de-stressor. So, it's a very important contribution to mental health.

Teacher from Nariño

Although only in Nariño and Magdalena, **caregivers** also mentioned their satisfaction with the program related to specific behavioral changes in their children. These include emotional management and de-stressing, motivation around studying, and confidence in expressing themselves. They also mentioned the value of the teachers or tutors that implemented the program as someone children can talk to about their problems, and that provide them support and affection.

When [my daughter] came to the NRC with the new teacher, she had such a huge change in behavior. The teacher has been the best thing that has happened to us, [my daughter] has gone through such huge change... Now she interacts more, teases, jokes around. She has benefited from the BLP, and NRC has been very helpful, really.

Caregiver from Magdalena

Finding 12: Respondents had more to say about the impact and value of BLP in locations where it is delivered in dedicated sessions, rather than integrated into lessons.

BLP is designed to be integrated into other NRC programs and is not intended as a stand-alone program. In Colombia, however, there are locations where it is implemented through dedicated sessions, as mentioned in the introduction of this section. Some locations (Nariño, Magdalena and Arauca) implement the full four sessions of BLP-1, while others integrate specific activities of the program, such as breathing exercises, into other strategies of the Arando la Educación program (Guaviare and Caquetá).

In Guaviare, Caquetá and Arauca there was little description of satisfaction and value of BLP itself among actors besides teachers and principals. Students and caregivers from these locations do not recognize BLP by its name. In Caquetá, teachers talked more of other activities (such as Golombiao, an adapted soccer game for conflict solving and gender inclusion) as being most impactful for learner wellbeing. In Guaviare, BLP activities were recognized as helpful for emotional management specifically, but not beyond that.

In contrast, in Nariño and Magdalena, caregivers described satisfaction with specific outcomes related to BLP, as noted in the previous finding. In the case of Magdalena, this satisfaction with BLP is also linked to the perception of improvement in academic performance of learners. Nariño, the location where BLP is most independent pedagogically from other activities, was the location with the most in-depth description of BLP's value, as well as actor satisfaction with the program. In this location BLP is recognized by name by all actors.

Relatedly, actors in all locations remember specific activities and strategies from BLP, even months after the program was implemented. Specific activities were mentioned by different actors who received BLP across the contexts. Some of these activities are contextualized or adapted from the original BLP approach, and others align with the original guidance. As described above, in some locations these activities were understood as explicitly “BLP” and in others not.

Students from Arauca, for example, mentioned “the chocolate and the candle” breathing technique repeatedly. Teachers from Magdalena and Guaviare mentioned the scales of emotions to track how students are feeling at the beginning of each class. Students from El Placer school, in Nariño, mentioned frequently doing crafts, which was a specific adaptation made by the implementer in that school. Caregivers from Insur school, in Nariño, mentioned “the safe space” exercise frequently.

For example, an activity from NRC where we do relaxation exercises with mats, exercises in the body. They presented situations that would lead us to safe places despite not-so-positive emotions. If we are there, nothing can affect us. Both for us and for the children, a safe place is not where nothing bad will happen to me, but where I feel calm. Things may happen outside, but inside, nothing happens to me.

Teacher from Caquetá

Finding 13: Adults who are most committed to BLP are those who have implemented it and have felt the benefits of the BLP activities on their own lives.

The research team noted that many teachers and NRC staff that implemented BLP talked strongly about the value of the program because they experienced it as useful for their own lives as well. In addition, they believed in the goals of the program as part of their personal professional mission. In the locations where this was clearest, like Nariño and Magdalena, other actors (e.g. teachers and caregivers) also relate the value of the program to the specific teacher or tutor that is implementing it. In these locations, there were notable similarities in how NRC staff, principals, and teachers talk about BLP implementation and impact.

I had anxiety and depression during the pandemic, but...I got through it, and I learned and shared what I learned with others to manage those emotions. That's why BLP was perfect for me, because I knew how it could help. But then I thought, how can I make this fit best within my subject, considering that English is a weak point for

learners? Let's say learners are afraid of it. How can I make students want [to learn] English the same way they [want to learn] math? So I realized these techniques can help you to relax when you participate or speak in another language...I thought that this could help the students to not feel afraid, and relax. And then their communicative competence progresses. **Teacher from Nariño**

For me, BLP has [many similarities with] our basic training as psychologists. Socio-emotional learning is something that we have to truly enjoy and be passionate about. The fact that we can say that we are providing children with tools to manage their emotions, I feel like that can generate a real change in Colombia as a whole. Because we are telling a child that they have the capacity to manage their reality, to express themselves, to talk about what they feel and that the feelings are valid. We adults invalidate children all the time. I feel that this is why BLP is very important to me. It's because we are taking the child into account here. **NRC Implementer from Magdalena**

Finding 14: The most commonly perceived purposes of BLP are to address the holistic wellbeing of students, not just their academic performance, and to provide psychosocial support for students and communities that face contextual challenges.

Although the perception of the purpose of BLP varies among locations and actors, there are some similarities among them all, with the exception of students and caregivers from Caquetá. Some of these are:

- **Holistic education and wellbeing:** Across all locations and actors, there is a common understanding that the program aims to address the holistic wellbeing of students, not just their academic performance. This includes their emotional, psychological, and social health.

*We are working to create an educational environment that is not just about textbooks and exams. We want to address the whole child, taking into account their emotional and social needs. Our program is designed to be flexible, allowing us to adapt our teaching methods to the unique challenges and opportunities of the Guaviare region. **Teacher from Guaviare***

*As caregivers, we often focus solely on the physical needs of our children. This program has opened our eyes to the importance of their emotional and psychological wellbeing as well. We are now better equipped to support them in all aspects of their lives. **Caregiver from Nariño***

- **Psychosocial support:** Another common thread is the emphasis on psychosocial support. All actors seem to agree that providing psychosocial support is crucial, especially in conflict-affected areas.

Our program is not just about academic achievement; it's about holistic development. We aim to provide a supportive environment where children can learn, grow, and thrive emotionally and socially. We understand the unique challenges our students face,

especially in a region like Arauca, and we are committed to providing them with the psychosocial support they need to succeed. NRC Implementer from Arauca

- **Capacity building:** For institutional actors such as Secretary of Education staff, NRC implementers, and principals, capacity building is a shared goal. They aim to integrate the learnings from BLP into policy and practice.
- **Focus on Pedagogy:** Teachers and some principals emphasize the importance of different pedagogical strategies, indicating that for them, the program serves as a tool for improving teaching methods. It helps them and the children get out of the routine and learn by playing.

The program has helped us understand that the way we teach matters. It's not just what we teach but how we teach it. Teacher from Guaviare

There are some **nuances and differences** among actors and locations, such as:

- **Institutional Integration:** For the Secretary of Education staff from Nariño, the program is important in relation to policy alignment and institutional capacity building, which is not a focus mentioned by other actors.

This program has been an eye-opener for us at the policy level. We now understand the importance of integrating psychosocial support into our educational frameworks. This is not just about academic performance; it's about the holistic wellbeing of our students. Secretary of Education member from Nariño

- **Community Engagement:** In Magdalena and Nariño, NRC implementers talk about community engagement and parental involvement, indicating that for them, the program is as much about community building as it is about education. This is in alignment with global BLP guidance that emphasizes parental involvement; however, this is not fully accomplished in all locations in Colombia. In the other locations the mentioned focus is specific to the students themselves.

Community engagement is a big part of what we do. We involve parents in the program, and we've seen how this collective effort benefits not just the child but the community as a whole. NRC Implementer from Magdalena

- **Immediate vs. Long-term Goals:** Teachers and principals seem more focused on immediate classroom and school-level impacts, such as student behavior and teaching methods. In contrast, NRC implementers and Secretary of Education staff seem to have a more long-term vision, focusing on systemic change and policy impact.

3.3.2 PERCEIVED IMPACTS OF BLP

Finding 15: There were a number of clear outcomes perceived as a result of BLP by across all actors in this research. Teachers, caregivers, and learners were able to give many examples of positive impact that they perceived to be resultant of BLP. Key perceived outcomes perceived around BLP across actors and locations are summarized in Table 12, below, and subsequently elaborated on.

Table 12. Perceived impacts of BLP

Outcome	Description
Enhanced Emotional Intelligence	Teachers, caregivers and students report an improvement in their ability to understand and manage emotions, leading to better interpersonal relationships
Improved Classroom Management	Teachers across locations find that the program equips them with effective strategies for managing classroom dynamics, particularly in dealing with emotionally charged or stressful situations.
Positive Impact on Student Wellbeing	Students, parents, and school staff note an improvement in emotional stability and stress management. Teachers and school staff describe how this contribute to a more positive school environment.
Conducive Learning Environment	Principals and Secretary of Education Staff believe that the program positively influences school culture, making it more conducive for learning.
Holistic development of learners	Across the board, BLP is perceived to contribute not just to academic learning but to the holistic development of students, encompassing emotional, social, and cognitive aspects.

Enhanced Emotional Intelligence: Teachers, caregivers and students report an improvement in their ability to understand and manage emotions, leading to better interpersonal relationships. For example, teachers declare themselves to become more attuned to the emotional states of their students, allowing them to recognize signs of distress or discomfort; some students mention that the program is equipping them with the tools to understand and express their emotions in a healthy manner.

*The program has helped me understand my students better. I can now identify when a student is going through emotional stress. **Teacher from Nariño***

*I've learned how to control my anger and talk about my feelings more openly. **Learner from Magdalena***

In BLP we work with stories, and there was one about a dragon. The dragon represents what one feels. For instance, it says that the dragon explodes, and there's another dragon that helps it calm down and provides strategies on how to reduce what it feels. So, the children now say: "calm down, you have to lower your inner dragon," and they know exactly what this means. When they get angry, they would say, "we have to lower the dragon," "I'm working on my inner dragon."

*They knew they were feeling something and how they could increase or decrease it. That's what we worked on with the kids. **Teacher from Nariño**^{vii}*

Improved Classroom Management: Teachers across locations find that the program equips them with effective strategies for managing classroom dynamics, particularly in dealing with emotionally charged or stressful situations. Teachers mention that BLP is providing them with strategies to foster a classroom atmosphere where all students feel valued and respected. These improvements are also noted by the Secretary of Education Staff.

*The program has equipped me with tools to create a more inclusive and respectful classroom environment. **Teacher from Arauca***

*We've noticed a decline in classroom disruptions and conflicts since the implementation of the BLP program. **Secretary of Education Staff member from Nariño***

Positive Impact on Student Wellbeing: Students, as well as parents and teachers, note an improvement in emotional stability and stress management, contributing to a more positive school environment and better relationships between peers. The stress management techniques introduced by BLP have equipped students with tools to navigate the pressures of personal life, fostering a more supportive and collaborative classroom atmosphere.

*My child seems happier and more confident since joining the BLP classes. **Caregiver from Arauca***

*The BLP activities make me feel good about myself. I've learned to understand my emotions and talk about them. **Learner from Guaviare***

Conducive Learning Environment: Principals and Secretary of Education Staff believe that the program positively influences school culture, making it more conducive for learning. This includes the creation of more safe spaces, a collaborative atmosphere, respectful interactions, and enhanced teacher-student relationships.

*Ever since we implemented the BLP program, the classroom atmosphere has transformed. There's a sense of unity and collaboration that wasn't there before. **Principal from Nariño***

Holistic Development: Across the board, the program is perceived to contribute not just to academic learning but to the holistic development of students, encompassing emotional, social, and cognitive aspects. This approach ensures that at school students are not only equipped with academic knowledge but also with essential life skills that foster resilience, self-awareness, and empathy. By addressing these diverse areas of growth, the program prepares students to navigate the complexities of their contexts.

^{vii} BLP has its own character present in the materials: Miskit, a polar stoat. Stories about dragons are an adaptation made by the teacher in this specific context.

*BLP is not just about academics. It's about shaping the whole child. Their emotions, their social interactions, and their thinking. **Teacher from Nariño***

Finding 16: Implementers of BLP perceive the program as a method to help children cope with the challenges of their context, but acknowledge its limitations due to ongoing adversity.

This is an important contribution as coping can help students and communities thrive, but it is important to frame the scope of MHPSS programs to schools and communities in this way. It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of a program aimed at coping if there is not also support to address underlying challenges such as safety or access to basic needs.

*It doesn't change the vulnerability itself, but it does reinforce how I am going to react to the situation. As a child, I cannot decide, for example, to move from an unsafe place to a safer one because my family does not have the resources. But I can manage my surroundings to make that path safer. For example, having the ability to tell my mom, I can't walk to school alone, please ask my uncle, my cousin, my grandpa, to accompany me. And that is something we will work on, that children have the ability to express themselves, to say what they think and feel, to expose their vulnerability from what they perceive. And I think that is the maximum achievement we can reach. **NRC Implementer from Magdalena***

Finding 17: According to children, they do not often use BLP coping strategies *outside* the school and the sessions. In their daily life, they use different coping strategies.

Some children remember and describe the BLP emotional management techniques, especially the breathing activities. However, when they were asked what strategies they use to manage sadness, anger, fear and stress, they mention activities that are not directly related to BLP. This includes, for example: sleeping, listening to music, asking for parents or friends help, praying, crying in bed, being alone, being with their pets, and going for a walk. There was only one case of a student describing the use of breathing activities when he is angry. Some even mention that they “should” breathe when they feel those emotions, but they do not do it.

Enumerator: *What do you think children do when they feel angry?*

Learner from Caquetá: *Calm down. Breathe, count to 5. Although... we don't do that.*

*They have taught us that when we're angry, we should take deep breaths, but when you're angry, you forget to breathe. **Learner from Guaviare***

Overall, this is not necessarily an indication that the BLP activities are ineffective in changing children's behaviors. Actually, the integration of BLP activities within programs, as well as the increased attention to MHPSS needs, may mean that children using *any* coping strategy to manage emotions is an improvement from pre-NRC programming. Since NRC trains teachers and other staff persons in the BLP techniques, such knowledge may be a contributing factor to children managing emotions outside of school. Such impact may be further explored through use of NRC's MEL tools for BLP.

3.3.3 IMPLEMENTATION OF BLP

Finding 18: In all research locations, BLP has been contextualized from the implementation guidance in order to make it more relevant and appropriate for the particular location.

As mentioned previously, the implementation of BLP occurs via integration into other NRC programs. This has led to contextualizing BLP differently across the Colombia contexts, as well as adaptations to its suggested implementation in some locations. This has included the integration of academic reinforcements (Santa Marta and Arauca); search for out-of-school students as part of the program (Guaviare and Caquetá); implementation with older adolescents (Nariño, Santa Marta and Guaviare); implementation only with Venezuelan girls (Magdalena); or providing educational kits to teachers or students (Nariño and Arauca).

In addition to the necessary adjustments made by NRC teams to integrate BLP into other programs, the main adjustments mentioned across interviews are related to **assuring BLP is context sensitive and appropriate**.

In **Nariño**, the implementation is explicitly committed to long-term sustainability, taking advantage of the fact that schools are more stable here than in other locations (the teacher teams, for example, do not rotate as much as they do in other contexts). Contextualizing BLP in Nariño has included:

- **The program is conducted by teachers and there is always a program “leader.”** The NRC team does not implement it directly with learners but supports teachers to learn the methods. Every school names a “leader” of the BLP implementation, often the psychologist or a teacher, who is the person in charge of conducting it within the institution.
- **The program is integrated into the classroom subjects.** This allows teachers to use BLP techniques in their daily work. Integration around English and Ethics classes was specifically mentioned by teachers.
- **The program is integrated into school projects.** There were mentions by teachers of integration into school projects, such as the environment project.
- **The program integrates caregivers into the implementation with learners.** This is specifically done via homework exercises to be done at home with parents, to include caregivers in the BLP activities.

In addition to these conceptualizations, the NRC team in Nariño has adapted BLP to **integrate aspects of Andean culture**. Using crafts and including cultural symbols and practices are common adaptations in schools with significant indigenous populations.

*BLP is a program that can be perfectly integrated with all subjects... The first time we had the opportunity to integrate BLP with English, I taught the kids through a song with words that expressed feelings, and we found them in the song: love, sadness, loneliness. I taught them that vocabulary in English, but then with BLP, we were able to connect through music, soft Andean sounds. **Teacher from Nariño***

In **Caquetá and Guaviare**, some adaptations are made in order to integrate BLP activities into activities already established under the implementing program. Often, these implementing program activities, for example the game “Golombiao” implemented as part of the Aranda la Educación program, were notably different than the BLP activities and require significant adaptation. BLP activities were adapted to be part of this game; such adaptations were made in order to assure BLP activities were relevant to the overarching program and could be integrated into it as seamlessly as possible.

Also, in Guaviare, permission to access some areas is needed from local armed actors, and this directly impacts the contextualization process. Some schools cannot be easily accessed, and so processes of support to the BLP implementers, teachers, and leaders is conducted in different, context-specific ways.

In **Arauca**, flexibility and contextualization were recurring threads emphasized by NRC staff. As mentioned in the context-related findings, it is a region with multiple crises, a diverse population, and an active armed conflict. Some of the key contextualization measures include:

- **Implementation directly with learners.** NRC tutors implement the BLP sessions directly with the students, along with other educational recovery activities. The intention is to provide direct emotional support due to emergencies faced in the context.
- **Working with teachers at their sites.** It is not easy to gather teachers in the same place for training due to security issues. Because of that, NRC tutors ask teachers to be present in each BLP session, in order to facilitate them replicating the program later.
- **Field staff maintains ongoing communication with teachers and communities.** The access of the tutors to schools depends on constant communication with teachers, monitoring the security conditions of the roads and schools. In this context, the implementation must consider the security issues for access.
- **Adaptations to materials.** The team reduced the use of some videos that they had planned to use, since some of the schools where BLP is implemented do not have access to video and sound players. They created new materials, most of all related to Miskit (the program character, a polar stoat) as the center of the program narrative. Miskit is also adapted to use academic skills in mathematics and reading, as the Education Recovery program also prioritizes those skills.
- **Ethnic sensitivity.** As some schools where BLP is implemented in Arauca are located among indigenous communities, some adaptations have been made to make it more relevant for them, using, for example, known referents and images for those communities.

*The teacher [from NRC] who accompanied us at that time saw the context. That is something that I found very interesting, that the professionals they send to the territory study the context a lot and adapt their tools to that context. The teacher used many dynamics respecting the indigenous communities' own customs... I remember one of the activities that was about breathing, I remember all the children lying on the floor, listening to natural sounds. That impacts the students a lot, and the management of emotions. **Teacher from Arauca***

In **Magdalena**, the NRC team made some different contextualizations from other locations:

- **The implementation of BLP session was made with learners and their caregivers in a non-formal education space, a “ludoteca” (playroom) from the neighborhood.** This provided a closer relationship with the community, with staff even personally fetching children who were reluctant to attend the workshops. Implementers tried to minimize risks by conducting activities in locations that were easily accessible to the children, thereby increasing the likelihood of consistent attendance.
- **Implementers added dynamic activities to help children experience different sensations.** For example, they had activities where children had to touch different textures blindfolded to better connect their mind with their brain.

Teachers in Magdalena were specifically trained to adjust BLP to their context. These teachers mention that they were encouraged to focus on what the child is feeling and consider how to involve those feelings in classroom activities.

*It is important to highlight that we did not implement the program exactly in the way it was presented in the booklet [NRC] gave us. We adapted it to our daily work. I remember we did some activities in the training... some played the role of teachers, others of students... and we tried to make the training very dynamic. They [NRC] taught us some activities to do with the kids. Maybe they were not carried out exactly as outlined in the booklet, but we did bring that emotional part to the children. We...asked how they were feeling at the moment, or how they were doing after the school day. What happened at home? How can we deal with it? How can we resolve a problem or conflict that arose in the classroom? These are skills that children should develop. We have many strategies for that. And that's what the workshop was about. We tried to find solutions to different conflicts that arose in our classrooms. We are implementing the program, not exactly as the booklet outlines, but with activities relevant to our daily work. **Teacher from Magdalena***

Finding 19: Teachers across most locations of implementation desire further and more explicit support for including parents in BLP implementation, either in schools or different locations.

Across all research locations, teachers specifically note the importance of the home environment and family support as a key element of learner wellbeing and learning readiness. For BLP to be fully and successfully implemented, caregivers and a supportive home environment are essential in addition to the program implementation at school. For example, in Arauca and Nariño, (where BLP has so far been piloted via support to teachers), teachers specify that there would be a greater impact of the program if the implementation includes caregivers.

It would be good to implement it with families first and have a second phase with the children. The second phase builds on what has already been initiated [with families], but can also look more closely into the needs of the child... to include what support the school counselor should provide. This can be to get to know each child more closely... and to identify cases where there is no support from home, or when the child is neglected or left alone there. Children are often brought to and

from school, but no one is actually paying attention to the child's needs and preferences. Teacher from Arauca

I think the impact would be better if your organization also worked with parents, changing the environment they have within their families and homes. Teacher from Nariño

Importantly, the BLP Manual includes significant focus on integration of caregivers into implementation via awareness sessions, and does prioritize caregiver involvement at a global level. Yet in many locations in Colombia this was not fully realized. This is an important consideration for BLP contextualization in locations, where a myriad of contextual and programmatic capacity considerations determine which activities are prioritized and delivered as per the Manual. In the Colombia field offices, this was likely an implementation decision based on capacity to implement BLP in full.

This finding reinforces the BLP Manual focus on caregivers, as well as the role of the home environment in learner wellbeing, and may be used to further emphasize this focus for country and field teams involved in direct implementation decision-making. This requested adaptation is thus accessible from a program perspective and resources to support improved outreach to caregivers are currently provided by NRC.

Finding 20: The sustainability of BLP in the current locations of implementation relies on the continued uptake and use by teachers (supported through NRC training), as well as the ultimate goal of integration into official curriculum.

Across all locations, NRC teams emphasize that the main factor contributing to program sustainability is teacher training. This includes NRC trainers modeling the strategies and activities for teachers and providing them with the tools for integrating the program beyond NRC involvement. In Nariño, the program trains teachers on both implementing the program sessions, as well as how to integrate it into their subjects. Teachers described how they have adopted BLP for continued use, including integrating BLP activities into their teaching subjects (in Nariño), as routines in their daily class work (in Magdalena), and as an expansion of their teaching methods (in Caquetá).

It's important not only that the students receive the program, but also that the teachers are always present in each session. Through the modeling the [trainers] do with the group, the teachers will learn how to apply this program when [the trainers] leave the school. After the intervention, the teacher should be capable of replicating this program with the students and continue it. NRC Implementer from Arauca

The only thing that remains [after NRC is gone] is the transfer of knowledge to the teachers. The strategies...and applying them. That's the only thing that I believe would remain. NRC Implementer from Guaviare

Another sustainability-related action taken was curricular integration in the PEI (Educational Educative Project) and in schools' curricular frameworks. Principals from Nariño and Guaviare mentioned that they are already working on such integration, to ensure BLP does not depend solely on NRC's presence. Curricular framework integration will occur via the ethics subject material, and in PEI specifically, within one of the three knowledge frameworks named "knowing how to be."²³

*In our school [teaching and management] workshops, we always talk about "Knowing How to Be" as one of the pillars of education, but it is limited to how you behave. When we learned these BLP strategies, we said: this is "Knowing How to Be"! That is, formal actions within everyday processes that lead you to improved coexistence with others. So we can integrate it within this framework. Before, each teacher was very clear about what goes into "Knowing How to Know", which are the standards and learning and what goes into "Knowing How to Do", which are the pedagogical and didactic strategies. We did not know exactly what went into "Knowing How to Be." Now we know about emotional management, and that's how we're going to implement it. **Principal from Nariño***

However, NRC teams note that such integration requires specific support and instruction for teachers in order for them to integrate the material into their subjects and daily work via PEI and the curricular frameworks. This can pose challenges, and can be initially overwhelming when posed to teachers when it may initially be perceived as additional workload.

*Our teachers, regardless of their qualifications or training, are overwhelmed with multiple demands and responsibilities [...] So, it's a difficult question because if you ask them if they can incorporate this and align it into institutional educational projects... and ensure it is reflected in cross-cutting projects on civic competencies... they will say it's wonderful but then ask how to do it and request we provide guidance. They are interested, but the "how" requires assistance. **NRC Implementer from Arauca***

NRC staff and teachers across all research sites describe specific actions that they perceive will improve the long-term sustainability of BLP. These include:

- **Involving caregivers** in the implementation (in contexts where it is not done).

*Although the strategy [BLP] has worked according to children, parents and teachers, there are still difficulties. At this time, unfortunately, the strategy stops with teachers and children. Caregivers are not yet involved. So any workshop, any strategy that is implemented with children but does not reach the home, will not be 100% effective. **NRC Implementer from Arauca***

- **Ensuring greater continuity and frequency** of the implementation, as in insecure locations (such as Arauca and Guaviare) the interventions are limited due to security issues, and not all the program activities can be delivered.

The lack of continuity poses challenges. We, as NRC employees, if a situation is too complex then for safety reasons we cannot go. There are some emergencies where we only go three times, which is too little. BLP in full cannot be carried out, not the full four sessions. This issue of public order and safety is present in every community, every educational institution. It affects how our strategies are implemented. If the ideal for BLP is to complete the four sessions, there are places where this just cannot be done. So we do a basic introduction, an example or something like that. But the strategy is not really

fulfilled. This means we are not able to bring what we really want to the community. **NRC Implementer from Arauca**

- **Moving towards BLP funded and implemented as a policy from Secretaries of Education.** This is critical as most schools do not have the resources to maintain implementation on their own. Actors additionally suggested that BLP could be integrated into the annual teacher training plan of the secretaries, or into their Risk Management Plans to address psychosocial risks.
- **Creating a Psychosocial Support Program National Guide,** in order for schools to have different options to meet their specific MHPSS needs and capacities.
- **Ensuring follow-up with teachers after training,** to assist in the integration of the strategies and activities into their daily work.

Finding 21: Although participants note the positive impacts and perceptions of BLP, its implementation still faces many barriers and challenges to be fully realized. These include:

- **Motivational and Psychological Barriers:**
 - **Resistance to Change:** NRC implementers from Nariño and Arauca perceived that some teachers may be resistant to new methodologies, viewing them as additional burden rather than opportunities for improvement. Some teachers from Caquetá also note that caregivers may perceive these methodologies as “losing time”, as their children are “not learning” (meaning they are not learning academics). Caregivers often cannot be involved in BLP outreach because of their work schedules, so changing this understanding is difficult.
 - **Expectations vs Reality:** There's a misconception that BLP will quickly solve all behavioral problems like bullying, sexual abuse, etc., which can lead to disappointment and reduced buy-in from stakeholders.

It's not easy to include [BLP] because parents have a lot of resistance to anything different. They come to argue, "Why isn't my child doing worksheets? They're not using their notebook, they're not writing anything, they're not learning." **Teacher from Caquetá**

- **Cultural and Social Barriers:**
 - **Cultural Sensitivity:** As mentioned in previous findings, the program needs to be contextualized for different situational and cultural contexts, such as for indigenous communities. Currently, such contextualization processes are done by the specific implementation team, who note that this is very time and labor intensive.
 - **Social Conditions:** The home environment of the learners, which often include forms of instability or abuse, is perceived as something that can counteract the benefits gained during the program. A safe home environment is essential to fully realizing the potential impacts of BLP.

- **Accessibility:** For schools in remote or dangerous areas, just getting to the schools can be a challenge for school community members (including learners, teachers, and school staff) as well as implementers, which means many learners can still not be reached with BLP.
- **Community Stigma:** Topics like emotional education and mental health may be stigmatized or trivialized in certain communities.
- **Institutional Barriers:**
 - **Lack of Support from Educational Authorities:** Resistance or lack of interest from Education Secretaries or municipal staff is a significant barrier mentioned both by principals and NRC staff.
 - **Resource Constraints:** Schools may lack the necessary resources like sufficient classrooms, trained personnel, or materials to effectively implement the program.
 - **Curriculum Integration:** Time constraints and strict project timelines can make it difficult to integrate BLP into the existing curriculum effectively.

Sometimes, due to being so strict with school project timelines, there was no space for us to return. NRC Implementer from Magdalena

- **Economic Barriers:**
 - **Financial Constraints:** Economic issues can affect attendance and participation in activities outside of the normal school schedule, as some families cannot afford the additional associated costs.
 - **Funding:** Limited funding can mean the program has to be prioritized for certain groups (for example, Venezuelan refugees), leaving others without access.

The program should be implemented in all educational institutions. We should not have to prioritize [some schools or groups]. But due to the nature of how we implement our economic resources, we have to prioritize because we do not have the resources to intervene in all institutions. Really, this should be a program that we could implement in all institutions regardless of whether the children are victims of displacement or not. NRC Implementer from Magdalena

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research is based on a social ecological framework that considers the complex interplay between the individual learner; their home and school environments; their community; the relationships built across these levels; the systems and institutions around them; and finally the policy and funding environment of humanitarian and education programming broadly.

Children learn in an environment that is situated within a larger “ecosystem.” Their lives and wellbeing are notably influenced by their relationship with families or caregivers; with friends and peers; with teachers and school administrators; and with other community members such as religious leaders. Schools are a critical site of influence, and learners, teachers, and families see the role of education as contributing to holistic wellbeing, human development, and learning that includes both academic and life skills. Such education relies on actors and action in the education system largely, including education and health policies that reflect mental health and wellbeing of children as clearly articulated priorities.

Increased understanding of these priorities—and actionable commitment to them—is required across all levels of actors described above. This importantly includes Secretaries of Education, Ministry of Education, and other policy and decision-makers that influence such policy. It also includes external humanitarian actors, such as implementers from NGOs (both at national and global level) and donors.

This final section presents enabling factors and recommendations for actors of different levels of this social ecological framework, **acknowledging that, in order to enhance the impact of a program in the mental health and wellbeing of communities they work with, a comprehensive approach that involves all actors of the system is required.**

It is important to acknowledge that qualitative research provides a snapshot of a specific context with specific actors, and does not provide a comprehensive approach that could apply for “all children”, “all children in Colombia” or even “all children in Arauca” (or any of the research locations). Many of the recommendations may not apply to all MHPSS programs, due to different contexts of implementation. Also, some recommendations may be out of the scope of what is possible for implementers, but are still included in order to provide a comprehensive picture of what is needed to enhance enabling environments for MHPSS programming.

4.1 ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS FOR MHPSS PROGRAMMING: ACTION POINTS FOR IMPLEMENTERS AND EDUCATION ACTORS

This section summarizes enabling factors for wellbeing from the perspectives of the participants in this research. The enabling factors have been structured around a socio-ecological model, as described above, which help us to understand the wellbeing of any individual as a collective issue that is influenced by the structures and people around them. The perspectives of participants (a) learners (b) teachers and principals (c) caregivers have been summarized around key actions and question prompts which are designed to provoke deeper thought about *how* a particular action might be met. These are not intended to be fully comprehensive processes, but starting points for discussion amongst key stakeholders. Suggested key stakeholders have been listed at the end of each action.

4.1.1 LEARNER LEVEL ENABLING FACTORS AND SUGGESTED ACTIONS



Ensure that learners’ basic needs are met. Learners who participated in this research stressed the importance of having food at school, having somewhere to rest, and being assured of their safety and the security of their belongings.

- What is your program’s policy on school-feeding? How might your school introduce a school-feeding program?
- What is currently being done to ensure that the learning environment is safe and secure? How could this be improved?
- What referrals systems are in place between the education and health, nutrition, psychosocial, and protection services? How can these referrals be strengthened?
- What opportunities are there to ensure that access routes to school are safe, secure, and accessible for all?

Key stakeholders: School administrators, educational authorities, country directors of NGOs or I/NGOs, sector working groups, security services, local governmental actors.

Focus on strengthening learners’ interpersonal relationships. Learners who participated in this research frequently mentioned the importance of their relationships with peers, friends, family, and teachers as creating a feeling of safety and helping them to manage emotions. These relationships can be both a protective factor or a risk factor, depending on the health of the relationship. Learners also mentioned more negative behaviors of those around them such as passing judgement, gossiping, bullying, and discrimination. It is important that interpersonal relationships at all levels are strengthened in order to create a safe learning environment.

- List out all the activities – whether in the classroom or the wider school community – which foster interpersonal relationships for learners. This could be part of the daily routine or weekly or monthly activities.
- What are the key relationships in learners’ lives, including with teachers, family members, and friends?
- What opportunities are there to build and strengthen these relationships inside and outside of the classroom?
- Which opportunities are there to celebrate positive social interactions as a way to model desired behaviors?

Interpersonal relationships were also mentioned by caregivers, teachers, and principals. Caregivers emphasized the importance of the teacher-learner relationship, and likewise teachers emphasized the caregiver-learner relationship.

Key stakeholders: Learners, school administrators, teachers, program implementers, caregivers.

Involve caregivers and the home in MHPSS activities. Learners mentioned that caregivers and their homes were a main source of safety. Learners in some locations also mentioned that despite knowing BLP techniques (for example) they rarely used these techniques outside the program. Involving “homework” with activities and strategies of the program could be beneficial for increasing internalization.^{viii}

- How could the content of MHPSS programs be shared with caregivers so they can continue some activities or strategies at home?
- What would caregivers in your school need to feel confident to support their children at home with some of these techniques?

Key stakeholders: Learners, caregivers, program implementers

Support learners to practice positive self-talk. A common strategy learners in this research mentioned for coping with difficult emotions was taking time to be on their own. Providing learners with guidance about how to treat themselves in these situations could be beneficial.

- List out any activities or approaches used in your school which strengthen learners’ self-esteem.
- What are some opportunities to model positive self-talk?
- What are some ways that learners could develop their own positive self-talk?
- How could the adults in your school community reinforce the positive self-talk that learners are practicing?

Key stakeholders: Learners, teachers, program implementers

Facilitate active and engaging activities that align with learners’ interests: Learners shared that they felt more interest and commitment to participating in programs when they involved creative and physical activities.

- List out the opportunities your school already provides for children to participate in active and engaging activities.
- Who are the adults or young people in your school community that could introduce or lead some new activities?
- Describe any opportunities for integrating activities into lessons.

Key stakeholders: Learners, teachers, program implementers

^{viii} This is included as good practice in the BLP Manual.

Provide opportunities to be in nature: Learners mentioned that being in nature and spending time in the natural environments around them is important for their wellbeing.

- List out any existing activities that allow learners to be in nature.
- What are some further opportunities to give learners time in nature? Think about integrating these experiences with existing lessons like science, writing, or art.
- What specific skills could learners develop through spending more time in nature?

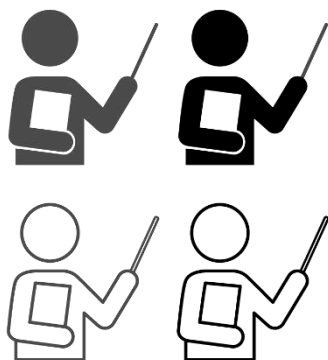
Key stakeholders: Learners, teachers, program implementers, school administrators

Provide learners opportunities to take care of other living beings. Learners mentioned their pets as having a positive impact on their wellbeing and helping them to cope with difficult situations.^{ix}

- What opportunities does your program provide for learners to interact with and take care of animals or plants?
- List out all the possible ways of creating more opportunities, for example growing plants from seed, bringing learners to visit some animals, or bringing pets to the school

Key stakeholders: Learners, teachers, program implementers, school administrators

4.1.2 TEACHER AND PRINCIPAL LEVEL ENABLING FACTORS AND SUGGESTED ACTIONS



Create safe spaces to provide relief from external challenges. Teachers recognized the major impact of the presence of armed actors, neighborhood conflicts, or issues at home on the wellbeing of themselves and their learners. They emphasized the importance of ensuring that the school environment is a safe space where learners can have some respite from external issues.

^{ix} In BLP, Miskit (the polar stoat) is integrated as the program character. Miskit was noted often throughout data collection as particularly beloved by learners and effective for program activities.

- What does your school already do to ensure the learning environment is free from sources of harm to learners and teachers?
- What do teachers already do to create a supportive learning environment for learners? You may have already listed out some of these strategies above.
- Does your program have a disaster risk reduction plan or management activities in place?

Caregivers likewise spoke of the importance of schools being a safe space, free from bullying, discrimination, and other negative influences.

Key stakeholders: School administrators, program implementers, teachers.

Integrate local cultures into programming. Teachers across all research sites emphasized the importance of recognizing and integrating the culture, traditions, and beliefs represented across the school community into school life.

- List out all the different communities who participate in school life.
- What are some ways in which your school already celebrates learners' cultures and traditions?
- How could programmes be adapted and contextualized to center local cultures?
- How could caregivers be further involved in this process?

Key stakeholders: School administrators, education authorities, local authorities, program implementers

Support adaptation of programmes and materials to meet the assets and needs of learners.

Teachers talked about the crucial importance of being permitted to adapt structured programmes and materials to meet the realities of their learners and the community.

- Reflect on how teachers are involved in curriculum planning and design. What are some opportunities to provide more flexibility within certain areas of the curriculum?
- How could some topics be further adapted to the assets and needs of the students?
- What are some opportunities to assess learner's strengths and development areas and respond accordingly?

Key stakeholders: Program implementers, teachers, school administrators

Involve families in school life. Teachers talked about how caregivers' influence is paramount to learner wellbeing and providing creative opportunities for them to participate in school life is essential for the success of any programs which aim to support wellbeing.

- List out all the ways in which caregivers are currently encouraged to participate in school life.
- What are some opportunities for further and more meaningful involvement on a regular basis?
- How can your school become a safe space for caregivers as well as learners?

Key stakeholders: caregivers, teachers, program implementers

Develop partnerships and foster collaboration with external organisations. Teachers and principals mentioned that effectiveness of MHPSS programs is greatly enhanced when they are able to collaborate with

external organisations (such as NGOs) that can provide resources, tools, awareness campaigns, and training.

- List out any organisations you know that work locally or nationally on MHPSS. Are there existing service mapping that you can draw from?
- What type of support would be most useful to your teachers and learners?
- Which organisations mission and programmes align best with the needs of your school community?

Key stakeholders: Program implementers, school administrators, sector working groups, external NGOs and I/NGOs

Prioritise social and emotional learning to support learner wellbeing and build resilience. Teachers emphasize the importance of understanding and managing emotions, both for themselves and their students. They value the activities that encourage students to recognize, express, and manage their emotions, even if this means temporarily setting aside academic concerns.

- What tools, resources, or activities does your school use to support learners emotional skills?
- What type of support do teachers need to provide social and emotional learning? E.g. training, materials, time in the school day
- List out any materials or organisations that could provide this type of support e.g. NRC’s Capacity Development Package

Key stakeholders: Program implementers, teachers, school counsellors

Prioritize teacher wellbeing. Teachers mention they play multiple roles: they perceive themselves as educators, psychologists, caregivers, and more. Their ability to connect with students on an emotional level, provide support, and mediate conflicts is perceived by them as a significant enabling factor for learners’ development. Teacher wellbeing is an important outcome to focus on in and of itself.

- What support systems are currently in place for teachers in your school?
- What systems, services, or activities could be put in place to provide more support for teacher wellbeing?
- How can MHPSS for learners also integrate elements of support for teacher wellbeing?

Key stakeholders: Teachers, program implementers, school administrators, external MHPSS service providers, health authorities, education authorities

Provide continuous training and professional development. Ongoing training for teachers, especially in areas like MHPSS and SEL, is essential for teachers. As mentioned by a principal in Nariño, this training is not usually given in the universities where teachers are trained, leaving them unprepared to manage challenging emotional situations in schools.

- As above, list out any organisations or institutions that could provide training on MHPSS and SEL for teachers and learners
- What are some opportunities for providing training, workshops, or learning circles, where teachers can build knowledge and skills for supporting their own and learners’ wellbeing

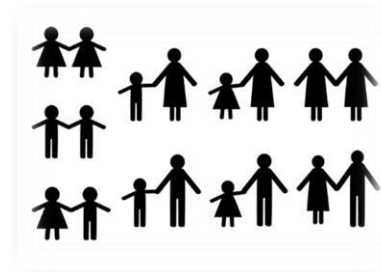
Key stakeholders: education authorities at the local and national level, school administrators, program implementers

Support integration of MHPSS into the curriculum. Teachers and principals talked about the importance of integrating MHPSS activities and programs into the school’s curriculum in order for it to be most effective. They shared that it is important the emotional wellbeing is not an afterthought but a core component of the educational experiences.

- What are the current opportunities for integrating MHPSS activities into the school day?
- What are the opportunities for MHPSS to be embedded into the curriculum? Who are the decision-makers involved in making this happen?
- Are there any ongoing advocacy efforts at the policy-level that you could contribute to?

Key stakeholders: education authorities, school administrators, program implementers.

4.1.3 CAREGIVER LEVEL ENABLING FACTORS AND SUGGESTED ACTIONS



Ensure programs address the holistic needs of learners. Caregivers shared that they appreciate programs that offer a more child-centered approach and value approaches that address holistic wellbeing needs including academic, emotional, and social aspects.

- Which needs does your school or program explicitly address? List out the activities that correspond with meeting which aspects of learner wellbeing e.g. outdoor play supports physical wellbeing
- How does your school assess learner’s holistic needs and respond accordingly?
- What areas of holistic wellbeing could be better supported in your school?

Key stakeholders: teachers, program implementers, school administrators

Engage the community in MHPSS programs. Caregivers believe in the power of community. They feel that community-based programs can offer significant support and are essential sources of strength and resilience in dealing with challenges related to their children's education and wellbeing.

- List all the current ways your school involves outreach to the wider community e.g. events, outreach, volunteering

- What are some opportunities for involving the wider community in MHPSS activities or programming? Think back to the prompts above – where learners are looking for opportunities to be in nature, are there any community-led spaces that your school could collaborate with?
- Are there any common needs across the wider community and the school community that could be addressed by a common solution?

Key stakeholders: program implementers, community leaders, teachers, school administrators

Ensure active and transparent participation of caregivers in MHPSS programs. Caregivers expressed that they want to be involved in MHPSS programs and believe that their involvement can make a difference to the effectiveness of the program.

- List all the ways that caregivers are already involved in school life.
- What are some creative ways that caregivers can be given opportunities to participate further? E.g. caregivers are involved in teacher training sessions on MHPSS, or teachers deliver dedicated caregiver sessions

Key stakeholders: caregivers, teachers, program implementers

Provide access to extracurricular activities. Caregivers value extracurricular activities and inclusive educational programs that help students discover their talents and interests, express themselves, and develop self-esteem.

- What are the current extracurricular activities on offer at your school?
- What opportunities are there to offer more and varied activities?
- Who could support in facilitating these activities? Think school community, including older learners, and the wider community

Key stakeholders: teachers, school administrators, program implementers, culture and sports authorities, community leaders

Ensure that programs are sustainable and continuous. Caregivers emphasize the importance of consistency in the programs. They believe that for MHPSS programs to be effective, they need to be consistent and continuous. They also express a desire for continuity in terms of educators and tutors, suggesting that having the same teacher can offer stability to learners.

- What is the duration of current MHPSS programs in your school?
- What are the opportunities to extend these and what would be needed in terms of resource, capacity, and time?
- Which MHPSS activities could be embedded within the school day and/or the curriculum?

Key stakeholders: donors, education authorities, program implementers

Strengthen communication between the school and home. Caregivers want to be kept informed about their child's progress and any issues they might be facing, therefore regular and clear communication between teachers, learners, and caregivers is important.

- How does your school currently communicate with caregivers?
- What are some opportunities to improve information sharing and communication in ways that best support learner wellbeing? Think beyond caregiver-teacher meetings only, and consider participatory approaches discussed above.

Key stakeholders: teachers, caregivers, school administrators, program implementers

Promote positive reinforcement. Caregivers believe in the power of positive reinforcement. They feel that children respond better to encouragement and positive feedback, and appreciate educators who motivate and encourage students positively, rather than relying on punitive measures.

- Review your school’s behavior policy. What are the current approaches to behavior management?
- What are some opportunities for teacher professional development around behavior management and positive reinforcement?
- How can teachers and caregivers come together to discuss behavior management as a whole-school approach?
- How can this be embedded in initial teacher training?

Key stakeholders: teachers, school administrators, teacher training institutes, program implementers

4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND FUNDING ACTORS

Based on the findings and building from the perspectives of the interviewed stakeholders, the following section provides recommendations for global-level implementers (such as international NGOs such as NRC), national-level implementers (such as national actors, education system actors, and national offices of INGOs), and donors.

4.2.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GLOBAL LEVEL IMPLEMENTERS OF MHPSS PROGRAMMING



Recommendation 1: Provide sufficient time, support, resources, and guidance for contextualization of MHPSS programs. The findings of this research reinforce the idea that what is needed and what is possible in terms of MHPSS programs is very dependent on context. Where an organisation has developed an MHPSS program or approach, ensure that clear contextualization processes accompany the

program materials, and that implementing teams are provided with the sufficient time, support, resources, and guidance to conduct meaningful contextualization of the materials.

For BLP specifically, both contextualization and adaptation of the BLP techniques, concepts, and activities should be clearly supported and documented to assure that objectives remain consistent and subjective implementation is avoided.^x

Recommendation 2: Advocate for integration of MHPSS into policy and curriculum at a national level.

In the interests of both sustainability and equal access to MHPSS services and activities within schools, global actors must advocate and work with national governments, education authorities, and health authorities for integration into policies and curriculum. Ensure that advocacy efforts amplify the voices of affected populations, and are cross-sectoral (health, protection, education, WASH, nutrition, GBV).

Recommendation 3: Centre localization in MHPSS programming. The knowledge of local implementers about the context is critical to the success of MHPSS programming such as BLP. Various stakeholders across all locations mentioned this as a positive factor of BLP implementation. This includes recognizing the value of local knowledge and expertise, and encouraging programs to be led or co-led by local entities, ensuring cultural relevance and community buy-in. In the case of BLP implementation, having tutors or lead teachers that already know the context dynamics was beneficial.

Recommendation 4: Ensure sustainability of programming. Some actors mention that the implementation of BLP, for example, depends on the presence of NRC. Prioritize programs and strategies that have sustainable models, such as the integration of MHPSS into teacher training modules with educational authorities or linking them with national risk management plans.

Global or national level implementers can work with local authorities to develop capacity sharing approaches and a sustainability plan to hand over implementation to local education actors. Implementers can also offer support and advice to Secretaries of Education for integrating MHPSS into education, present the program as a policy initiative to ensure it is integrated into annual plans and create guidance to standardize practices based on the specific needs of the population.

This recommendation is relevant for global and national actors.

Recommendation 5: Engage in cross-sectoral collaboration. MHPSS is a cross-sectoral intervention which requires collaboration with actors from across Health, Education, Protection, Child Protection, Nutrition, Food Security, WASH, GBV, Mine Action, and Camp Coordination. Implementers of MHPSS programming in education must seek out interagency working groups or other relevant forums and ensure that programming complements ongoing efforts across sectors.

This recommendation is relevant for global and national actors.

^x For implementation of BLP, NRC guidance notes to apply the four BLP-1 sessions using activities that vary according to context. NRC provides a 2-page guidance document to support contextualizing the BLP materials in order to assure that the underlying objectives are reached.

4.2.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATIONAL LEVEL IMPLEMENTERS OF MHPSS PROGRAMMING



Recommendation 6: Plan MHPSS responses based on participatory assessments of the context. As mentioned in Finding 1, even similar situations (e.g. armed conflict) affect differently each community, depending on their resources and capacities for handling the situation. The impact of armed conflict on communities in Arauca differed from the impacts for communities in Caquetá or Guaviare. It is essential that prior to any implementation of MHPSS programming your team has taken the necessary steps to conduct a participatory assessment of the assets and needs within the context. All decisions around the what, when, who, and how of programming should be based on a thorough understanding of the context and be co-led if not entirely led by local actors. Guidance on participatory and inter-agency needs assessment for MHPSS responses can be found <https://www.mhpssmsp.org/en>

Recommendation 7: Recognize and address the foundational need for basic services and security. While MHPSS implementers will not have control over certain contextual risk factors such as local violence by armed actors, neighborhood gangs, or poverty, there are actions that can be taken to strengthen protective factors. Many of these actions are addressed above in section 4.1 and include improving safety and security within and on the route to schools; creating a safe classroom environment; strengthening interpersonal relationships; and collaboration with other sectors including health, nutrition, and WASH.

Recommendation 8: Strengthen coordination between schools and MHPSS services. NGOs and I/NGOs are often more likely than schools to have access to mappings of the external services that might be available in their area. Organizations have an important role to play in terms of facilitating coordination and referrals between schools and service providers, whether bilaterally or through Clusters and working groups. Participants in this research also mention how sometimes it is easier for external organizations to be heard by local secretaries, and therefore they can play a role in advocating for more consistent and widespread access to mental health professionals.

Recommendation 9: Facilitate dialogue around a shared vision of how schools support wellbeing.

Finding 5 revealed that in the contexts studied in this research, all actors perceived a strong relationship between school and learner wellbeing. It is important to establish for each school the ways in which the environment, teachers, caregivers, and learners can contribute to improving wellbeing, and where the limitations lie. MHPSS programs can:

- Assess school leaders to work on unifying a shared vision on what wellbeing is for their communities and what can school contribute to it.
- Advocate with education authorities (e.g. secretaries of education) on the role of school beyond academics, in order for other aspects of human development to be included in territorial development plan.

Recommendation 10: Include children’s own healthy coping strategies in MHPSS programs. As findings 7, 15, and 17 show, learners have clear ideas about what supports their wellbeing and have developed their own coping strategies accordingly. Section 4.1.1 provides some examples including strengthening relationships with peers and adults, spending time in nature, and engaging in creative or physical activities. By listening to children and involving them at the assessment phase, programs can ensure that they build on the existing strategies used in a given context – meaning that strategies are locally-led and already context-specific.

Recommendation 11: Prioritize continuous professional development and ongoing support for teachers.

No matter how experienced teachers are with MHPSS programming, support for their professional development and wellbeing will always be essential. One of the most common threads discussed by caregivers, teachers and implementers was the importance of the emotional support the teachers give and how they become role models and a trust pillar for students, as in these locations with no access to MHPSS services, teachers are the figure who receives all the emotional burden of the daily challenges and risks that children face. Changing the way that people value school, not just a place for learning academics, but as a place to develop as humans in a holistic way, include to see teachers also as humans, who also need support, have limitations to address certain situations and need tools to manage what they have not been taught too. MHPSS programs and schools must:

- Ensure access to MHPSS services for teachers
- Provide specialized training that allows them to support the wellbeing of learners including active pedagogies and SEL
- Provide coaching and mentoring to support teachers to embed newly acquired skills and embed these into their practice

Recommendation 12: Actively engage caregivers and the community in MHPSS programming.

As seen in Section 4.1, different actors talked about the importance of involving caregivers in programs – including caregivers themselves. In some contexts it is not easy for parents and other community actors to get involved in direct meetings and workshops, as they have long work schedules and cannot assist in other activities. Programs need to include caregivers and communities in new and different ways that make the time they share with children more emotionally rewarding, and give them tools to manage challenging emotional situations. By ensuring caregivers and the wider community participate in needs

assessments or evaluation stage of a program, organizations can build in the most relevant and appropriate opportunities for caregiver engagement.

Recommendation 13: Support integration of MHPSS into the curriculum. While change at the policy level ([Recommendation 2](#)) might take time, implementers can provide support at the school level to help integrate MHPSS across the curriculum. This could involve developing processes or guidance to support integration, accompanied with follow-up and mentoring to support implementation.^{xi}

Recommendation 14: Collect data to better understand the impact of MHPSS interventions. The field of measuring holistic learning outcomes is complex and many existing tools are burdensome for implementers or teachers to use. Each program should decide what outcomes it is seeking to measure and how. Whichever approach is taken, programs should aim to provide:

- **Consistent Feedback:** Create channels for regular feedback from all stakeholders, including teachers, students, and caregivers. This helps in refining and improving the program over time, making the community feel involved, and have their perspectives for improving.
- **Periodic Assessment:** Conduct assessments periodically to understand the program’s impact and areas of improvement. These assessments must be designed at the planning step of the programs, to align them with the expected outcomes.

For more information and tools see the INEE Measurement library: <https://inee.org/measurement-library>

Recommendation 15: Develop national-level guidelines for implementation and contextualization. In the interests of documenting learning and sharing this more widely, once a program has been piloted it is useful to capture the process involved as well as the lessons learned for future implementation. This can be a living document for as long as it takes to formalize the process.

4.2.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS FUNDING MHPSS PROGRAMMING



Recommendation 16: Provide more, multi-year and flexible funding for MHPSS programs. MHPSS programs often require sustained interventions to be genuinely effective and build resilience within

^{xi} As described previously, NRC supports such processes via the BLP Institutionalization Toolkit and direct support from technical teams.

communities, especially in complex contexts like Colombia, in which crises like armed conflict can last multiple years.

Funding must cover a comprehensive needs assessment and analysis phase and be flexible for programming to respond to the results of the need assessment.

In the interests of localization, funding should be allocated as directly as possible to local or national actors.

Recommendation 17: Fund institutional capacity strengthening. In the interests of promoting localization and sustainability of programming, funding is required for training and ongoing professional development for education actors including teachers, principals, and Secretaries of Education.

Recommendation 18: Fund multi-sectoral programs. Understanding that MHPSS is multi-sectoral, and that access to basic security and services is fundamental to the outcomes of any program that supports wellbeing, funders should consider the increased impact of funding programs that take a multi-sectoral approach.

Recommendation 19: Support advocacy efforts for integrating MHPSS into national level policies and strategies. Funders can play an instrumental role in affecting change through advocacy, and become champions of MHPSS. This can have a greater impact at the policy level as they can also provide funding to support the recommendations being proposed e.g. integration of MHPSS.

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