



Preservice Teacher Education for Refugee and Displacement-Affected Learning Environments: A Scoping Review

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This scoping review examines how preservice teacher education prepares teachers to work in refugee and displacement-affected learning environments, particularly within emergencies (EiE) contexts. The review aims to map existing literature, identify emerging patterns, and highlight gaps in how teacher preparation is conceptualized and implemented across diverse settings.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a scoping review approach, literature was identified through broad database searches conducted across four academic databases - ERIC, Education Source, Online Wiley Library, and Google Scholar - supplemented by backward citation tracking and screened based on relevance to preservice teacher preparation in displacement contexts. Four themes were identified through a synthesis matrix and theme development process.

Findings – The literature reveals a persistent gap in preservice teacher preparation for refugee and EiE contexts, which has been documented since 2006 and remains unresolved. Approaches such as experiential and community-based engagement represent the most evidence-based pathway for addressing this gap, yet their implementation remains uneven and program-dependent. Third, literature consistently identifies relational, psychosocial, and culturally responsive competencies as essential for effective teaching in displacement-affected settings, but they remain largely absent and insufficiently integrated into formal training. Fourth, systemic and structural conditions, including resource constraints, policy limitations, and geographic instability, define the operating context within which all preparation gaps are embedded.

Practical implications – The findings suggest a need for teacher education programs to expand beyond traditional coursework by integrating context-specific content, structured field engagement, and relational competencies into preservice preparation in the form of teaching practice -clinicals. Greater alignment between teacher education and the realities of displacement contexts is necessary to support effective teaching. Its value remains, offering a foundation for developing more responsive and contextually grounded approaches to teacher education in education in emergencies contexts.

Keywords: Preservice teacher education; refugee education; education in emergencies; teacher preparation; public pedagogy; displacement contexts; unconventional learning spaces

INTRODUCTION

Education extends beyond formal schooling and occurs across social, cultural, and informal environments, including what scholars call unconventional, public, or pedagogical spaces beyond the classroom (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013; Giroux, 2004). Globally, an increasing number of children and youth are educated in refugee and displacement-affected contexts, often under conditions shaped by conflict, instability, and limited resources. For this review, displacement-affected learning environments are educational settings that are disrupted, destabilized, or fundamentally reshaped by forced migration, conflict, or humanitarian crisis, encompassing both contexts of origin and resettlement. It is also important to distinguish between the pop-



ulations and contexts represented in this literature: refugees are persons who have crossed international borders under recognized legal status, while internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain within their country of origin; conflict-affected communities include both, alongside host populations living in zones of instability; and resettlement contexts refer to third-country settings where displaced persons have been permanently relocated. These distinctions carry different legal, institutional, and educational implications, and where individual studies in this review address a specific population or context, this is noted accordingly.

Constrained learning environments are settings where physical infrastructure, institutional support, and material resources are significantly limited, while complex learning environments are contexts in which multiple intersecting challenges, both linguistic, psychosocial, cultural, and structural, simultaneously shape teaching and learning processes (Anumenechi, 2025; Anumenechi & Jaga, 2025; Pherali et al., 2020). Within these environments, teachers play a central role in supporting learning, continuity, and social stability, often serving as the primary point of contact between education systems and displaced communities (Akin-Sabuncu, 2022; Molla, 2024; Pherali et al., 2025). As a result, preparing teachers for these contexts has become an increasingly urgent concern in education research and policy discussions. Despite this growing recognition, questions remain about how effectively existing preservice teacher education programs prepare teachers to engage with the complex realities of refugee and education in emergencies (EiE) settings (Wessels et al., 2024).

So far, existing literature on refugee and education in emergencies contexts has pointed out and examined the challenges of teaching in displacement-affected environments, highlighting issues such as linguistic diversity, interrupted schooling, and the psychosocial needs of learners, as well as the limitations of technological infrastructure and access in resource-constrained settings (Kirk & Winthrop, 2022; Mendenhall et al., 2021; Pherali et al., 2020). In response to these challenges, several studies have emphasized the importance of adaptive, culturally responsive, and context-sensitive teaching approaches, suggesting that effective teaching in these settings requires a broader set of competencies than those typically emphasized in traditional teacher preparation programs (Alitolppa-Niitamo et al., 2022; Garrity et al., 2025; Kovinthan Levi, 2019). At the same time, research has begun to explore different approaches to preparing teachers for these contexts, including community engagement models and experiential learning opportunities that connect preservice teachers with refugee learners and communities (Akin-Sabuncu et al., 2024; Walker, 2023). This body of work suggests that while the field has made important advances in understanding the nature of teaching in displacement contexts, it also has several serious variations in how teacher preparation is conceptualized and implemented across different national and institutional settings.

Despite this growing body of research, there is a noticeable lack of focused attention on how preservice teacher education programs systematically prepare teachers for refugee and displacement-affected learning environments. While many studies highlight the complex demands placed on teachers in these contexts, fewer studies directly examine how the relevant competencies are developed during initial teacher education (Brandt et al., 2026; Molla, 2024; Palik & Østby, 2023). Indeed, Palik and Østby (2023), after screening over 1,800 studies on refugee education interventions, found that only eight -- a small number of studies met their criteria, underscoring broader gaps in the literature, including limited attention to areas such as teacher preparation in shaping refugee learner context, underscoring the depth of this gap.

This absence has been identified across different regions and methodological approaches, suggesting that preservice preparation remains structurally underdeveloped within the broader literature on refugee education and education in emergencies. Moreover, existing discussions often focus on in-service teachers or field-based experiences rather than structured preservice training, thereby limiting understanding of how preparation occurs before teachers formally enter the profession (Garrity et al., 2025; Pherali et al., 2020).

In response to this gap, this scoping review aims to map the existing literature on preservice teacher education for refugee and displacement-affected learning environments. In this case, this review takes a global orientation, drawing on studies from across diverse national and institutional contexts, including the United States, Canada, Australia, Turkey, Lebanon, Kenya, South Sudan, Afghanistan, and beyond, in order to capture the breadth of how preparation is conceptualized and implemented internationally. Specifically, the review is guided by the following research question: ***How are preservice teachers prepared to teach in refugee and displacement-affected learning environments?*** The purpose is to examine how preparation is currently conceptualized across studies, identify key patterns and approaches, and highlight areas requiring further research and development. A scoping review methodology was selected because the literature in this area is dispersed across multiple disciplines, uses inconsistent terminology, and addresses a wide range of contexts, with respect to conditions for which a scoping approach, designed to map breadth and identify gaps rather than synthesize comparable outcomes, is most appropriate (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010). By synthesizing findings across diverse contexts, this review seeks to contribute to a clearer understanding of how preservice teacher education can better align with the realities of education in emergency contexts.

Research Question

This scoping review asks a central research question: How are preservice teachers prepared to teach in refugee and displacement-affected learning environments? The essence is to discover what forms of training or preparation are included in preservice teacher education for refugee education contexts. Understand what is known and to also identify what gaps exist in current teacher preparation programs for this context?

Essentially, the purpose is not to test a hypothesis but to map the existing literature, identify patterns and gaps, and examine how preparation is currently conceptualized and implemented across diverse national and institutional contexts. The four themes presented in the Results section emerged from this process of systematic mapping rather than from predetermined categories

METHODOLOGY

For this study, a scoping review methodology was employed to map the literature on preservice teacher preparation for refugee and displacement-affected learning environments, particularly within education in emergencies (EiE) contexts. A scoping review was selected rather than a systematic or narrative review because the relevant literature is dispersed across disciplines, including education, development studies, refugee studies, and humanitarian policy, uses inconsistent terminology, and addresses a wide range of geographic and institutional contexts. These characteristics align with the core rationale for scoping reviews as outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and later refined by Levac et al. (2010), whose frameworks guided the design of this review. Sources were obtained through searches of four main academic databases: Google Scholar, ERIC, Education Source, and Wiley Library, supplemented by backward citation tracking from key theoretical and empirical sources, including Brandt et al. (2026) and Pherali et al. (2020).

Search terms and strings were built from four core concept clusters using Boolean operators: (1) preservice teacher education, teacher preparation, or initial teacher education; (2) refugee education, education in emergencies, or displaced learners; (3) constrained or unconventional learning environments; and (4) relational pedagogy, psychosocial support, or culturally responsive teaching. Broader terms such as “refugee education” and “displaced learners” were used alongside more specific combinations such as “preservice teacher education AND education in emergencies” to ensure that studies using varied terminology were captured, while more specific strings were employed to filter results toward sources that directly addressed teacher preparation rather than refugee education more generally. The search process was iterative, with keywords



adjusted based on emerging results and their relevance to the guiding research question. The search focused on publications from 2002 to 2026, with foundational works from 2006 included purposively, given their historical significance to the field.

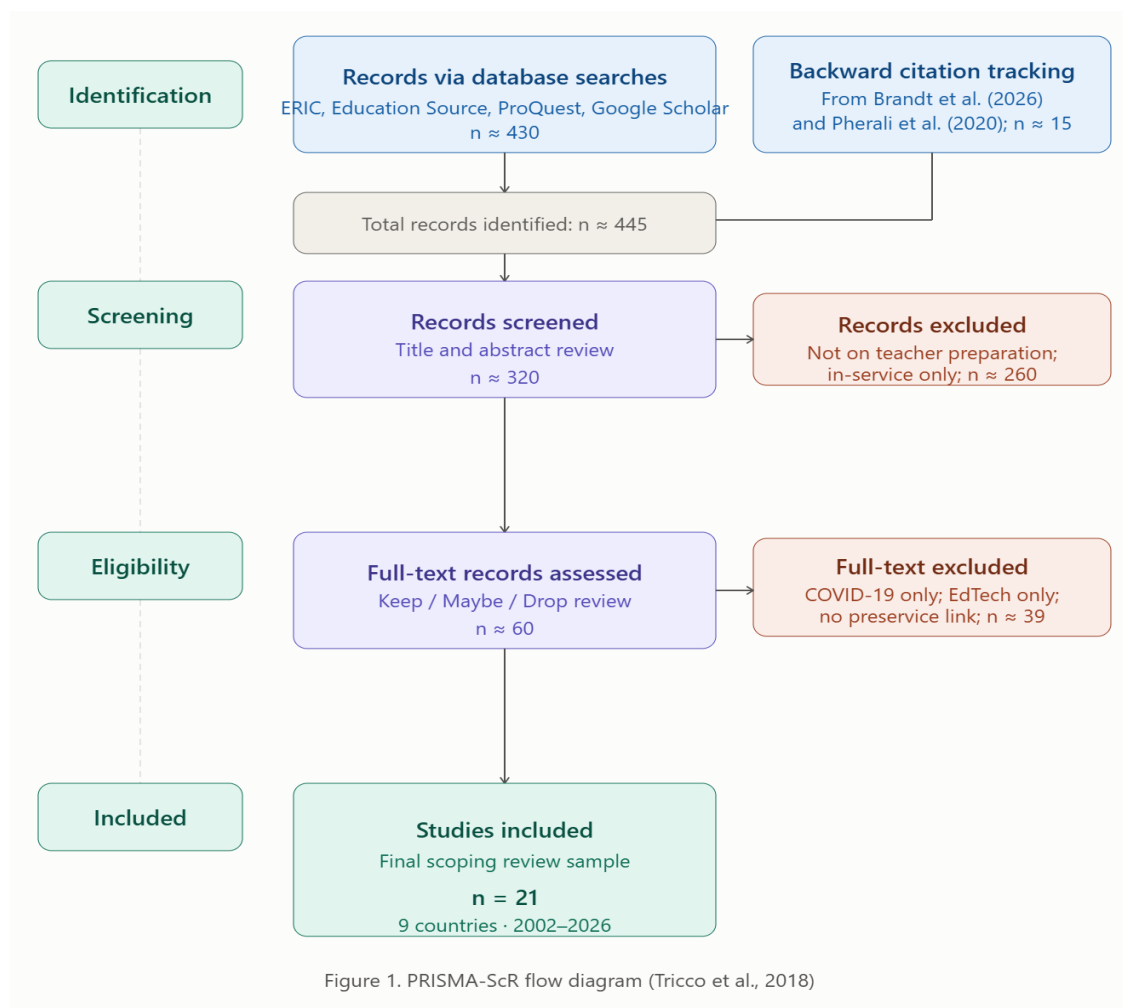
Inclusion criteria required that sources focus on preservice or initial teacher education, address refugee, EiE, or displacement-affected learning environments, be published in peer-reviewed journals, and be available in English. Sources were excluded when they focused exclusively on in-service teachers without relevance to preservice preparation, addressed only educational technology or COVID-19 emergency teaching without connection to teacher preparation, or were limited to stable, resource-rich classroom settings. Table 1 summarizes the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied throughout the screening process.

TABLE 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Peer-reviewed journal articles available in English	Studies not published in or translated into English
Published between 2002 and 2026	Studies published before 2002, except for foundational works included purposively
Focused on preservice or initial teacher education (ITE) programs	Focused exclusively on in-service teachers with no relevance to preservice preparation
Addressed refugee education, education in emergencies (EiE), or displacement-affected learning environments	Addressed only educational technology or COVID-19 emergency remote teaching without a connection to teacher preparation
Included empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods), conceptual or theoretical articles, scoping or narrative reviews, program evaluations, or practitioner reflections	Limited to stable, resource-rich, non-displacement classroom settings
In-service studies retained where they explicitly identified competency gaps relevant to preservice preparation	Studies focusing solely on refugee learner outcomes without reference to teacher preparation

These criteria were applied consistently across all searches, with the distinction between preservice and in-service focus serving as the primary boundary marker. However, in-service studies that explicitly identified competency gaps relevant to preservice preparation, such as Mendenhall et al. (2021) and Pherali et al. (2020), were retained as contextual evidence of what preparation should address, even when they did not directly study initial teacher education programs. The review included all study types, particularly empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods), conceptual and theoretical articles, scoping and narrative reviews, program evaluations, and practitioner reflections.

The screening process also involved reviewing titles and abstracts first, using Keep, Maybe, or Drop decisions, followed by full-text review for sources marked Maybe. A total of 21 peer-reviewed sources were selected, spanning nine countries and covering the period 2002 to 2026. The literature was organized and analyzed thematically, with four emerging themes identified through a synthesis matrix and theme development process. Each theme was examined for patterns of agreement, contradiction, and gaps across studies. This scoping approach was selected to map the breadth and range of existing literature on this topic rather than to evaluate the outcomes of specific interventions.



The review followed the scoping review framework established by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and refined by Levac et al. (2010), and reporting adheres to the PRISMA extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR; Tricco et al., 2018). Database searches were conducted between May and June 2026. Initial searches across the four databases yielded approximately 430 records. Following duplicate removal, approximately 320 records were screened at the title and abstract stage using Keep, Maybe, or Drop decisions. Of these, approximately 60 records were retained for full-text review. Following full-text assessment of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 21 sources were included in the final review. As this was a single-authored review, screening disagreements were not applicable; however, to mitigate selection bias, all Maybe decisions were reviewed at full text before a final determination was made. Data was charted using a synthesis matrix that recorded author, year, country, study type, population, and thematic relevance for each source. Thematic synthesis was conducted by identifying recurring patterns across the charted data and grouping them into coherent categories, which were then refined into the four themes presented in the Results section.

RESULTS/ FINDINGS

Theme One: The Persistent Preservice Preparation Gap

Operationally, this theme captures studies that document the absence, insufficiency, or structural underdevelopment of preservice teacher preparation specifically for refugee, EiE, and displacement-affected learning contexts. In other words, the most consistent and cross-cutting finding in this literature is the identification of a persistent gap in preservice teacher preparation for refugee and education in emergencies (EiE) contexts, a gap that was first named nearly two decades ago and remains unresolved today. Sinclair (2006) represents the earliest peer-reviewed documentation of this specific gap in the EiE and teacher preparation literature, making it the historical baseline for this review; his work initially described this absence as a “conspicuous gap” within teacher education, establishing a foundation that subsequent research has consistently confirmed rather than contradicted. More recent work demonstrates that this issue remains



structurally embedded in how teacher education programs are designed: Brandt et al. (2026) find that preservice curricula still lack structured integration of EiE content, suggesting minimal progress despite increased global attention to displacement. Drawing on scoping and systematic analyses, Molla (2024) and Palik and Østby (2023) further demonstrate that teacher preparation remains both underdeveloped in practice and underrepresented as a research focus within refugee education literature. Extending this perspective, Anumenechi (2025) argues that dominant models of teacher education marginalize unconventional and crisis-affected learning environments, limiting the inclusion of displacement contexts within formal training structures. Taken together, these studies suggest that the persistence of this gap reflects not only a failure of implementation but also a broader structural silence in how teacher preparation is conceptualized across the field.

While there is strong agreement that a gap persists, scholars diverge in how this absence is understood and where it is located within the broader system of teacher education, and these different explanations are not merely academic distinctions but have direct consequences for how the gap might be addressed. Some authors position the gap primarily as a curriculum issue, arguing that preservice programs fail to integrate refugee and EiE-specific content in meaningful ways (Brandt et al., 2026; Lee & Corrison, 2026; Molla, 2024). In contrast, others frame the issue as institutional or structural, suggesting that teacher education programs operate within policy environments that do not prioritize displacement contexts (Damaschke-Deitrick et al., 2023; Palik & Østby, 2023; Pherali et al., 2020; Ruben & Kasner, 2025). A further perspective emphasizes epistemological limitations, with Anumenechi (2025) arguing that dominant models of teacher education inherently exclude unconventional and crisis-affected settings from their conceptual scope. At the applied level, Akin-Sabuncu (2022) demonstrates how these layered gaps manifest in practice, showing that teachers working with Syrian refugees in Turkey report feeling unprepared due to both curriculum limitations and systemic constraints. Crucially, this divergence in how the gap is explained does not undermine the strength of Theme 1 but rather enriches it: the fact that multiple, independent explanations converge on the same diagnosis persists under preparation, across different national and institutional contexts, strengthens rather than weakens the case for urgent attention to this area. Consequently, the multidimensional nature of this gap suggests that preservice teacher preparation remains structurally misaligned with the realities of refugee and displacement-affected education contexts.

The implications of this persistent gap are evident in how teachers experience displacement-affected classrooms. Multiple studies show that teachers report feeling underprepared to address the linguistic, cultural, and psychosocial complexities of refugee learners (Akin-Sabuncu, 2022; Garrity et al., 2025; Lee & Corrison, 2026), highlighting the practical consequences of limited preservice training. Particularly striking is the evidence from Kovinthan Levi (2019), in which preservice teachers themselves, not researchers observing from outside, identified trauma-informed practices, parent communication with refugee families, and culturally responsive curriculum adaptation as critical absences in their own preparation programs. This insider evidence underscores that the gap is not only analytically identified in literature but also experientially felt by those it most directly affects. This lack of preparation often translates into reliance on ad hoc strategies rather than pedagogically grounded approaches, particularly in contexts where formal support structures are weak or absent. At the same time, the literature suggests that these challenges are not solely due to individual teacher limitations but are shaped by broader systemic constraints, including limited institutional resources and policy support (Pherali et al., 2020; Retamal, 2025). These findings indicate that the preservice preparation gap has tangible consequences for both teaching practice and learner experience, reinforcing the need to reconsider how teacher education programs engage with displacement contexts.

Theme Two: Community and Experiential Engagement as a Preparation Pathway

This theme captures studies that document implemented approaches, particularly community-based, experiential, and field-placement models — through which preservice teachers have been exposed to refugee and displacement-affected educational contexts. While the literature consistently identifies a persistent gap in preservice teacher preparation, a parallel body of research points to community and experiential engagement as the most promising pathway for addressing this deficiency, and this theme directly responds to the question of what has been tried. Rather than relying solely on theoretical coursework, several studies demonstrate that



structured interaction with refugee communities significantly enhances preserve teachers' readiness, awareness, and relational capacity. Program-based research across different contexts shows that direct engagement with refugee learners produces measurable shifts in teacher attitudes and pedagogical understanding, outcomes that are rarely achieved through classroom instruction alone (Ferfolja, 2009; Ruben & Kasner, 2025; Walker, 2023). Extending this pattern, the evidence spans more than fifteen years and multiple national contexts: Ferfolja and Vickers (2010) documented similar outcomes in Greater Western Sydney as early as 2010, suggesting that the effectiveness of community engagement as a preparation strategy is not a recent discovery but a durable and replicable finding. Most recently, Wessels et al. (2024) provide the most methodologically robust example of this approach, demonstrating through an arts-based co-creation program with Yazidi refugee community members that preservice teachers developed interculturality, disrupted personal stereotypes, and became more relationally attuned educators. The deliberate centering of refugee community voices in this program design, not simply observing refugee learners but co-creating with community members, represents a meaningful evolution in how experiential preparation is theorized and implemented. This body of work, therefore, reframes preparation not as knowledge acquisition alone but as an embodied and relational process best developed through situated experience.

Despite strong evidence supporting experiential approaches, the literature also reveals important limitations and tensions that must be addressed if these models are to be meaningfully integrated into teacher education systems. While many studies report positive outcomes, questions remain about the depth, structure, and scalability of these experiences. Hefflin (2002) argues that exposure alone is insufficient, emphasizing that without intentional program design and structured critical reflection, experiential learning may not lead to meaningful pedagogical development, and this is a caution that subsequent studies have not always sufficiently addressed. Furthermore, Walker (2023) offers an important conceptual reframing, arguing that community-based programs are most effective when reframed as community learning and exploration rather than service learning, thereby positioning refugee communities as knowledge sources rather than service recipients. This distinction has implications for how experiential preparation is designed and what kinds of teacher competencies it develops. In addition, much of the existing research is concentrated in high-income, English-speaking contexts, raising concerns about the transferability of these approaches to displacement settings in the Global South, where resource constraints and institutional structures differ significantly. These variations suggest that while experiential engagement is promising, its effectiveness is contingent on how it is designed, contextualized, and supported within teacher education programs.

These findings indicate that experiential engagement, while widely recognized as effective, remains inconsistently integrated into formal preservice teacher education structures. As a result, access to meaningful field-based preparation is often dependent on specific programs rather than being systematically embedded across teacher education curricula, a limitation that mirrors, and in some ways perpetuates, the broader preparation gap identified in Theme 1. This connection between Themes 1 and 2 is important: the community engagement approaches documented in the literature represent promising responses to the gap, yet their limited and uneven institutionalization means that they cannot yet be considered a systemic solution. Consequently, while community engagement offers a compelling and evidence-based pathway for enhancing preservice teacher readiness, its impact remains constrained by the institutional and structural factors that govern whether and how such experiences are implemented.

Theme Three: Relational and Psychosocial Pedagogy – Essential but Absent Competency

Theme three captures studies that identify the specific pedagogical, relational, and psychosocial competencies that the literature frames as essential for effective teaching in displacement-affected settings, whether or not those competencies are currently embedded in preservice programs. Across the literature, teaching in refugee and education-in-emergencies contexts is consistently framed as requiring a distinct cluster of relational, psychosocial, and adaptive pedagogical competencies, and the evidence is strong because it converges across six countries and multiple methodological approaches without contradiction. While the following studies are drawn from in-service and professional development contexts rather than preservice programs directly, they establish the empirical baseline for what teachers in displacement settings are required to do - and therefore define the competencies that preservice preparation is failing to develop hence, across diverse contexts,



scholars emphasize that teachers must be equipped to respond not only to academic needs but also to the emotional, cultural, and trauma-related experiences of displaced learners (Kirk & Winthrop, 2022; Mendenhall et al., 2021; Pherali et al., 2020).

While these competencies are widely recognized as essential, they are seldom foregrounded within formal preservice teacher education programs, a disconnect that the literature frames not as an oversight but as a structural failure of how teacher preparation is designed. The literature positions relational and psychosocial responsiveness not as supplementary skills but as central components of effective teaching in displacement-affected environments (Alitolppa-Niitamo et al., 2022; Ekin & Yetkin, 2021; Mendenhall et al., 2021). Critically, the in-service and field-based studies included in this theme are not peripheral to the argument about preservice preparation; rather, they establish the empirical baseline for what teachers in displacement contexts are required to do and therefore define the competencies that preservice programs are failing to develop. This framing directly responds to the core research question by mapping not only what preparation currently looks like, but what it must include.

Despite strong conceptual agreement, the literature reveals a persistent gap between the recognition and the implementation of these competencies in preservice education. Studies consistently identify relational and psychosocial skills as critical yet also indicate that such competencies are more frequently addressed in in-service or field-based contexts rather than embedded within formal teacher preparation programs (Alitolppa-Niitamo et al., 2022; Garrity et al., 2025). Particularly revealing is the evidence from Lee and Corrison (2026), whose comparative case study of two preservice teachers working with Afghan refugee children demonstrates that even well-intentioned preservice teachers navigate significant ideological and linguistic tensions without any formal preparation to do so. Their finding that normative language ideologies created barriers to effective engagement with refugee learners suggests that the relational competency gap extends beyond emotional responsiveness to include ideological dimensions, specifically, how teachers conceptualize language, difference, and the educational rights of displaced children. Anumenechi's (2025) "uncommon pedagogies" framework provides a theoretical anchor for this cluster of competencies, arguing that a fundamentally different pedagogical orientation is required for unconventional and displacement-affected contexts, not merely additional content knowledge. This suggests that preservice education continues to privilege technical and content-based knowledge, leaving future teachers underprepared for the relational, psychosocial, and ideological demands of refugee classrooms

Theme Four: Systemic and Structural Conditions as the Operating Context

Operationally, this theme captures studies that foreground the structural, institutional, and policy conditions that shape what is possible in both displacement-affected education and the teacher preparation programs designed to serve it. Beyond the question of how teachers are prepared, the literature consistently emphasizes that refugee education in emergency contexts is fundamentally shaped by broader systemic and structural conditions that define what teaching and learning are possible and any serious discussion of preservice preparation must be situated within this structural reality. Across multiple studies, factors such as resource scarcity, policy limitations, geographic instability, and conflict-related disruptions emerge as central constraints that influence both educational delivery and teacher practice (Akin-Sabuncu et al., 2024; Damaschke-Deitrick et al., 2023; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2025; Pherali et al., 2025; Retamal, 2025; Ruben & Kasner, 2025; Sherris et al., 2026). Rather than viewing these conditions as background variables, scholars frame them as constitutive elements of the educational environment itself, shaping not only instructional choices but also the expectations placed on teachers. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from individual teacher preparedness to the broader structural realities within which preparation gaps are embedded and perpetuated.

While there is broad agreement that structural conditions shape educational possibilities, literature diverges in how much weight should be assigned to these constraints relative to the potential contribution of teacher preparation. Some scholars argue that systemic factors are so pervasive that preservice training alone cannot meaningfully address them, positioning structural reform as a necessary precondition for educational improvement (Molla, 2024; Retamal, 2025). In contrast, other perspectives maintain that well-prepared

teachers can act as adaptive agents within constrained systems, capable of navigating structural limitations through context-sensitive practice (Garrity et al., 2025; Pherali et al., 2020). Importantly, this tension does not represent a contradiction but rather a productive debate that has direct implications for this review: it suggests that pre-service teacher preparation, while not a structural solution, is nonetheless a necessary response to structural conditions. The evidence of Damaschke-Deitrick et al. (2023), who conducted interviews with teacher educators across Turkey, the United States, and Hong Kong, is particularly instructive here: even in structurally constrained contexts, teacher educators actively sought pathways for integrating refugee education content, suggesting that prepared educators can expand what is institutionally possible even when structural conditions are unfavorable.

These competing perspectives suggest that preservice teacher preparation cannot be understood in isolation from the structural environments in which it operates. Instead, effective preparation must account for the realities of constrained systems while also equipping teachers with the capacity to respond in flexible and context-sensitive ways. Without this integration, efforts to address the preparation gap risk either overstating what teacher preparation alone can accomplish or understating the difference that prepared educators can make within structurally challenging contexts. Ruben and Kasner's (2025) geometry lesson study offers an instructive illustration of this balance: by embedding refugee camp spatial planning as the mathematical problem-solving context in a preservice lesson, the authors demonstrate that structural awareness can be meaningfully integrated into existing teacher education coursework without requiring wholesale program redesign – suggesting that structural conditions, while significant, need not preclude meaningful preparation reform.

DISCUSSION

Collectively, the four themes identified in this review reveal a coherent and mutually reinforcing picture of where the field stands with respect to preservice teacher preparation for refugee and displacement-affected learning environments and the answer this review offers to its guiding research question is both clear and sobering: preservice teachers are, across most contexts, not systematically prepared for these settings, and the gap between what the literature shows is required and what programs currently provide remains structurally embedded. Studies across different contexts and time periods continue to emphasize that while the demands of teaching in EiE settings are well documented, particularly in relation to linguistic diversity, psychosocial complexity, and disrupted learning trajectories, preservice preparation has not evolved at the same pace (Brandt et al., 2026; Kirk & Winthrop, 2022; Mendenhall et al., 2021; Pherali et al., 2020). This misalignment is further supported by studies that show teacher preparation remains underdeveloped both in curriculum design and research attention, despite increased recognition of the importance of these contexts (Garrity et al., 2025; Molla, 2024; Palik & Østby, 2023). The core issue, therefore, is not the absence of knowledge about teaching in displacement settings, but rather the limited translation of that knowledge into preservice teacher education systems.

The central contribution of this review is not simply the documentation of missing curriculum content, a finding that prior studies have established, but rather the identification of a deeper structural misalignment between how teacher education systems are designed and the realities of the contexts in which growing numbers of teachers are expected to work. This distinction matters: curriculum gaps can be addressed through content additions, but structural misalignment requires coordinated reform across program design, institutional policy, field experience structures, and the conceptual frameworks that govern what counts as legitimate teacher preparation knowledge (Anumenechi, 2025; Damaschke-Deitrick et al., 2023; Pherali et al., 2020). As explained earlier, the four thematic areas reveal a layered, interconnected understanding of the problem. The persistent preparation gap (Theme 1), consistently documented from Sinclair (2006) through Brandt et al. (2026), reflects an enduring structural failure of teacher education systems to integrate refugee education into their core frameworks. The community and experiential engagement approaches documented in Theme 2 represent the field's most evidence-based response to this gap, yet their uneven institutionalization limits their systemic impact. Theme 3 maps the specific competencies – relational, psychosocial, and ideologically aware that the literature identifies as essential for effective teaching in displacement contexts, while simultaneously revealing that these competencies remain largely absent from formal preservice programs. Theme 4



contextualizes all three preceding themes within the structural conditions that shape both the need for prepared teachers and the constraints on how that preparation is designed and delivered. Crucially, these themes are not parallel but sequential: the structural conditions of Theme 4 explain why the gap of Theme 1 persists; the community engagement pathways of Theme 2 represent efforts to work within and around those structures; and the competency framework of Theme 3 defines what success in those efforts would look like. Reading the themes in this sequence, the literature collectively argues that closing the preservice preparation gap requires not a single intervention but a coordinated response across curriculum design, program structure, institutional policy, and structural advocacy.

A significant and consistent pattern in the distribution of this literature is that research remains concentrated where displacement is least prevalent and absent where it is most acute – a geographic and methodological imbalance that limits the field's ability to speak to the contexts where the preparation gap matters most. A substantial portion of studies focuses on in-service teacher experiences or program-based interventions, with significantly fewer studies examining preservice teacher education directly (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010; Garrity et al., 2025; Molla, 2024; Palik & Østby, 2023). Research is geographically concentrated in high-income and Global North contexts, particularly within the United States, Canada, and Australia, while displacement settings in the Global South remain underrepresented (Ferfolja, 2009; Naidoo, 2010; Walker, 2023). Methodologically, the field is dominated by qualitative, descriptive, and program-focused studies, with limited large-scale or longitudinal research examining how preservice preparation translates into teaching practice over time (Ruben & Kasner, 2025; Wessels et al., 2024). These patterns indicate that the field is still emerging, with uneven coverage across contexts and methodologies.

Mapping the literature highlights several significant gaps that remain underexplored. First, there is limited research explicitly focused on preservice teacher education in EiE contexts, despite repeated calls for greater attention in this area (Brandt et al., 2026; Molla, 2024; Palik & Østby, 2023). Second, there is a persistent disconnect between conceptual discussions of required competencies and their integration into teacher education programs, with many studies identifying needs that are not reflected in training structures (Garrity et al., 2025; Kirk & Winthrop, 2022; Mendenhall et al., 2021). Third, the geographic concentration of studies limits broader applicability, as the majority of research does not represent displacement contexts in the Global South (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2025; Pherali et al., 2020). Additionally, variation in terminology across studies – including the use of “education in emergencies,” “refugee education,” and “displacement contexts” complicates efforts to build a cohesive body of knowledge and may have resulted in relevant literature being missed in systematic searches. These gaps underscore the need for more focused, globally representative, and theoretically integrated research.

Taken together, the findings of this review demonstrate that preservice preparation for refugee and displacement-affected contexts requires coordinated reform across curriculum design, field experience structures, competency frameworks, and institutional policy rather than isolated program additions and that achieving this coordination is the defining challenge facing teacher education systems in an era of accelerating global displacement (Brandt et al., 2026; Molla, 2024; Retamal, 2025).

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this review suggest several important implications for research, policy, and practice. For teacher education programs, there is a clear need to integrate refugee and EiE content more systematically into preservice curricula, including structured opportunities for experiential learning and community engagement (Ferfolja, 2009; Naidoo, 2010; Walker, 2023). Evidence from Theme 2 indicates that this integration is most effective when community engagement is framed as a co-learning process rather than a service-learning or observation model, and when it is paired with structured critical reflection that links field experiences to pedagogical frameworks (Hefflin, 2002; Wessels et al., 2024). Additionally, programs must incorporate relational and psychosocial competencies into their training frameworks, ensuring that teachers are prepared to address the complex realities of displacement contexts (Kirk & Winthrop, 2022; Mendenhall et al., 2021). The uncommon pedagogies framework proposed by Anumenechi (2025) offers a promising theoretical foundation for this reorientation, providing teacher educators with a conceptual model for designing coursework and field



experiences explicitly structured around the demands of unconventional and displacement-affected learning environments.

At the research level, future studies should focus more explicitly on preservice teacher education, particularly through longitudinal and cross-context designs that examine how preparation influences teaching practice over time (Molla, 2024; Wessels et al., 2024). There is also a critical need for studies conducted in Global South displacement contexts, where the majority of displaced learners are located but where preservice preparation research remains almost absent. At the policy level, greater alignment is needed between teacher education, policy frameworks, and the structural realities of displacement-affected systems (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2025; Retamal, 2025). Specifically, national teacher education policies must begin to treat preparation for EiE contexts as a core rather than peripheral concern – a shift that would require not only curriculum reform but also changes to accreditation standards, practicum requirements, and professional development frameworks for teacher educators themselves (Damaschke-Deitrick et al., 2023).

LIMITATIONS

This review is limited by both the scope of the search process and the nature of the existing literature on preservice teacher education in refugee and displacement-affected contexts. Although broad search strategies were used to capture a wide range of studies, the review included only peer-reviewed articles published in English between 2002 and 2026. This restriction may have excluded relevant studies conducted in other languages or published in grey literature, particularly in regions where displacement contexts are most prevalent. In addition, the variability in terminology across the field, such as “education in emergencies,” “refugee education,” and “displacement contexts,” may have limited the ability to capture all relevant studies despite iterative refinement of search terms (Molla, 2024; Palik & Østby, 2023). To assist future researchers navigating this terminological variability, it may be worth considering the adoption of a more precise and context-specific term, such as “displacement education” or “refugee-context teacher preparation” as a preferred anchor term when searching specifically for literature on preservice teacher preparation, given that such terms are more narrowly scoped and less likely to retrieve studies from adjacent fields such as COVID-19 emergency remote teaching or general crisis management. Establishing greater terminological consistency across the field would not only improve search precision but also facilitate the building of a more cumulative and coherent body of knowledge (Molla, 2024; Palik & Østby, 2023).

Future iterations of this review could address several of the limitations identified here through a number of concrete strategies: expanding the search to non-English-language databases and grey literature repositories would capture research from displacement-prevalent regions currently underrepresented in the literature; establishing collaborative partnerships between researchers across different geographic and cultural contexts including those working in Arabic, French, and Swahili-language publication environments would reduce the systemic bias toward English-language and Global North scholarship; and integrating professional translation services into the review process would open access to locally produced knowledge that is currently invisible to English-only scoping searches (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2025; Pherali et al., 2020).

A further limitation relates to the characteristics of the available evidence. Much of the literature is descriptive, qualitative, or program-based, and a significant proportion of studies focus on in-service teachers or field-based experiences rather than preservice education specifically, which limits the extent to which conclusions can be drawn about initial teacher preparation (Mendenhall et al., 2021; Pherali et al., 2020). These constraints reflect broader gaps in the field rather than limitations of this review alone. Additionally, as a single-researcher review, this study did not involve a second reviewer for screening or selection decisions, which introduces the possibility of selection bias. Future iterations of this review would benefit from dual screening to improve methodological rigor. Finally, as a scoping review, this study is designed to map the breadth and range of existing literature rather than to evaluate the effectiveness or quality of individual studies. The findings should therefore be interpreted as an overview of patterns, trends, and gaps rather than as evidence of best practices or causal relationships.

CONCLUSION

This scoping review of the current landscape of research on preservice teacher preparation for refugee and displacement-affected learning environments and its central finding is as clear as it is consistent: the field has extensively documented what teaching in these contexts requires yet has not translated that knowledge into systematic preservice teacher preparation. The literature shows that research in this area has expanded across contexts and disciplines yet remains uneven in its development and focus (Garrity et al., 2025; Molla, 2024; Pherali et al., 2020). The findings suggest that while there is growing recognition of the complex demands of teaching in EiE contexts, including the need for relational, psychosocial, and context-sensitive competencies, these insights have not been consistently translated into structured preservice teacher preparation (Brandt et al., 2026; Kirk & Winthrop, 2022; Mendenhall et al., 2021). The literature further highlights that although experiential and community-based approaches offer promising pathways for preparing teachers, their implementation remains uneven and dependent on specific program contexts rather than systematic institutional integration (Ferfolja, 2009; Naidoo, 2010; Walker, 2023).

In summary, the four themes identified in this review collectively answer the guiding question: how are preservice teachers prepared to teach in refugee and displacement-affected learning environments? – by revealing that such preparation is persistently absent (Theme 1), unevenly attempted (Theme 2), inadequately oriented (Theme 3), and structurally constrained (Theme 4)." This review contributes by mapping how research in this area is currently distributed, identifying key patterns, the persistence of preparation gaps, the emergence of experiential approaches, the recognition of essential competencies, and the influence of structural conditions, and by showing how these patterns interconnect rather than operate independently. These insights highlight the importance of more coordinated and contextually grounded approaches to preservice teacher education, as well as the need for future research that directly examines preparation processes across diverse geographic and institutional settings. By clarifying the current scope and limitations of the literature, this review provides a foundation for advancing both research and practice in preparing teachers for refugee and displacement-affected learning environments.

Next Steps

As a scoping review conducted within a graduate coursework context, this manuscript represents a substantive but necessarily bounded engagement with literature. Several areas remain incomplete or in development, and identifying them is part of the intellectual work that a scoping review process demands. Below are what I consider my next steps:

First, the thematic synthesis in this review would benefit from deeper engagement with the methodological diversity of the included sources, where I might need to include the table metrics for each theme development. In addition, while the four themes are grounded in 21 peer-reviewed sources, a more rigorous scoping review for publication would typically involve a dual-reviewer screening process and a PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews) flow diagram documenting the full screening process from initial database results to final inclusion. These elements would strengthen the transparency and methodological credibility of the review for a journal submission audience.

Second, the geographic scope of the included literature skews toward high-income, English-speaking contexts. A meaningful extension of this review would involve broadening the search to include non-English-language countries or sources, as it were, and specifically targeting research from Global South displacement contexts, including sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, where the majority of displaced learners are located. This would require collaboration with researchers with regional expertise and access to databases and publication outlets not captured in the current search.

Third, the four themes identified in this review provide the organizational foundation for what could become a conceptual or theoretical contribution to the field. Specifically, the convergence of Themes 2 and 3 community engagement approaches and relational/psychosocial competencies suggests the possibility of developing an integrated framework for preservice teacher preparation in EiE contexts, building on Anumenechi's (2025)



uncommon pedagogies framework and extending it through the empirical evidence surveyed here. Developing this framework more explicitly would represent a meaningful next step toward a journal-ready manuscript with a clear theoretical contribution if I want to tilt it into a theoretical paper.

Finally, this review would benefit from formal consultation with subject librarians to verify search string completeness. These steps, standard in scoping review methodology, would move this manuscript from a strong coursework draft to a submission-ready piece of scholarship.

Data Availability Statement

All data generated or analyzed in this study are contained within the article. No external datasets were generated.

Ethics Statement

This study is based on personal reflection, teaching, and research experience of the author. It did not involve external human participants. Therefore, formal ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

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