



Standard Operating Procedures for Student Retention in Conflict-Affected Areas of Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract. Protracted armed conflict in Benue State, Nigeria, characterised by farmer–herder clashes, communal violence, militia attacks, banditry and kidnapping, has resulted in school closures, population displacement and persistent disruption to educational continuity. Despite these conditions, conflict-affected schools continue to operate without context-specific Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for student retention, leaving attendance monitoring, learner reintegration, crisis communication and staff responsibilities largely dependent on individual initiative. This study developed empirically grounded recommendations for SOPs to strengthen student retention in public primary and secondary schools across seven conflict-affected Local Government Areas of Benue State. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and resilience theory, the study adopted a descriptive survey design. A sample of 380 teachers and school administrators, selected using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, completed the researcher-developed Standard Operating Procedures for Student Retention Questionnaire (SOPSRQ). The instrument was validated by experts and yielded an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.80. Data were analysed using mean and standard deviation with a criterion mean of 2.50. The findings revealed that insecurity, parental fear, displacement, economic hardship and institutional disorganisation were perceived as major challenges to student retention. Schools employed adaptive strategies such as teacher-led catch-up support, community engagement and attendance monitoring, but these remained largely informal and dependent on individual initiative. Respondents further identified procedural gaps requiring formalisation and endorsed documentation systems, policy-aligned written procedures, early identification of at-risk learners, defined staff responsibilities, reintegration procedures and crisis communication protocols as essential SOP components. The study recommends that school administrators develop and implement written SOPs, the Benue State Ministry of Education

provide standardised templates aligned with national and international frameworks, and development partners strengthen school capacity for SOP implementation. The study provides context-specific evidence for institutionalising student retention practices in conflict-affected schools in Benue State.

Keywords: Standard Operating Procedures; student retention; armed conflict; education in emergencies; resilience; Benue State.

1. Introduction

Benue State has, over the past decade, attained an ignominious height at the centre of operations associated with a spectrum of armed violence in Nigeria. This violence stems from farmer–herder clashes, communal conflicts, militia incursions and coordinated raids by armed groups – often involving sophisticated weaponry and operating with apparent impunity across rural and border areas (Ojewale & Onuoha, 2025). A particularly devastating episode unfolded in mid-June 2025 in Yelewata, Guma Local Government Area, when gunmen let themselves loose on a sanguinary spree, killing between 100 and 200 inhabitants – burning many alive, shooting or mutilating others and displacing thousands (Odeh James & Ekani, 2025). A presidential visit was prompted by the attack, and directives for intensified security measures were issued, yet violence persisted in surrounding communities such as Udei, Ukohol and Daudu. Additional lives were reportedly claimed in subsequent incidents in late June and July 2025, including over 50 residents and 10 security personnel, through ambushes and raids, alongside widespread arson that destroyed homes, barns and infrastructure (Ekani, 2025).

Similar patterns of violence have occurred across Ukum, Kwande, Gwer West, Agatu, Otukpo, Katsina-Ala and Logo Local Government Areas, with many attacks launched in border areas

adjoining Nasarawa and Taraba States. These incidents involve night raids, reprisals, abductions, and territorial incursions amid competition over grazing land, ethnic tensions, and criminal exploitation. These attacks have persisted into 2026, with reports of further killings in communities such as Tse-Kaseve and Otobi Akpa, contributing to ongoing instability (Barnabas Aid, 2026; Olikita, 2026). The violence has resulted in over 2.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), leading to estimates that rank Benue State second only to Borno State in IDP figures in Nigeria (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2025; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2026). A significant proportion – around 60% – of these IDPs are children, many of whom reside in camps or host communities where access to basic necessities remains limited. In specific episodes, such as attacks in areas like Guma, Gwer West, Agatu and Ukum, thousands have been forcibly uprooted, with over 3,000 displaced in single incidents in recent years (Amnesty International, 2025). This displacement has directly contributed to educational instability, as families flee their homes, often abandoning schooling amid immediate survival priorities.

This pattern of recurrent, multi-actor violence has triggered widespread school closures, heightened absenteeism, and plummeting enrolment rates, particularly in Sankera (Katsina-Ala, Ukum, Logo), where statistical analyses reveal significant negative shifts in student engagement ($t=26.108$, $p<0.001$) and teacher motivation ($t=17.654$, $p<0.001$) (Jato & Iornumbe, 2025). Displacement compounds these issues, blocking children from access to formal education while inflicting psychological trauma on these very children. For instance, in Guma Local Government Area alone, as of 2023, more than 50 schools remained closed, with over 90% non-functional due to persistent insecurity, teacher flight to urban centres, and overgrown, unused classrooms like those at Inudu Local Government Educational Authority (LGEA) Primary School (Admin III, 2024). UNESCO estimates nearly 20 million Nigerian children out of school nationally, with Benue's conflict zones contributing markedly through surges in dropouts, as seen in fluctuating enrolments in Agatu, Guma and Logo amid ongoing banditry (Admin III, 2024).

In the face of ongoing security challenges to the continuity of schooling for children in Benue State, temporary learning arrangements aimed at student retention are often established in schools. However, these retention measures often collapse due to resource shortages, teacher unavailability, or renewed insecurity, thereby revealing the inadequacy of fragmented, reactive measures. Analyses from scholars and organisations indicate

that such protracted, identity-linked violence in Nigeria's fragile Middle Belt regions undermines immediate safety and long-term societal development through interconnected mechanisms: physical destruction of facilities, educator flight or demotivation, widespread psychosocial harm, and eroded institutional trust (Jones & Naylor, 2022; International Crisis Group assessments). Informal community or school-level adaptations frequently falter against the coordinated scale and duration of threats, exposing systemic shortcomings in the maintenance of educational access and continuity.

The entrenched and intensifying character of insecurity in Benue State compels the exigency for the establishment of formalised standard operating procedures – defined as step-by-step instructions designed to ensure the safety of learners and the continuity of education by providing predictable, coordinated responses to security threats and resource instability (Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies [INEE], 2024). Such procedures have the potential to transform fragmented coping mechanisms into coherent institutional strategies, embed resilience within school governance structures, and systematically address multidimensional retention challenges. This study, by grounding procedural development in empirical realities and stakeholder perspectives, seeks to contribute to a contextually responsive framework capable of sustaining educational participation amidst protracted insecurity. In so doing, it addresses a pressing need to move from reactive adaptation to structured preparedness in safeguarding the right to education within conflict-affected schooling contexts.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite persistent armed conflicts and displacement in Benue State, schooling in many affected communities continues to operate without formally articulated, context-specific standard operating procedures designed to safeguard student retention during periods of insecurity. While schools frequently reopen after attacks or temporary closures, the absence of institutionalised operational frameworks means that decisions relating to attendance continuity, learner reintegration, staff redeployment, safety coordination, and academic recovery are often improvised at the discretion of individual administrators. This procedural vacuum creates variability in operational realities across schools and Local Government Areas: there is no unified structure to direct preparedness, response and recovery efforts specifically focused on retaining learners. Although national and international education-in-emergencies frameworks exist – such as the Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, Recovery

developed by the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2024) and Nigeria's National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools issued by the Federal Ministry of Education Nigeria (FME, 2021) – their translation into school-level operational mechanisms within conflict-affected communities in Benue remains unclear and uneven. There is limited empirical evidence on how schools currently structure their internal responses to insecurity, what elements of those responses are systematic or merely ad hoc, and the extent to which existing practices are sufficient to sustain continuous enrolment and progression. In particular, there is no consolidated body of knowledge documenting how frontline educational actors conceptualise retention risks during conflict, how they prioritise competing administrative demands, and what procedural components they consider essential for institutional stability. This study seeks to address this problem by reporting findings to inform empirically grounded, formalised standard operating procedures designed to systematically strengthen student retention in conflict-affected schooling contexts of Benue State.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The study had one broad objective and four specific objectives, derived from the research concerns and aligned with the diagnostic, evaluative, prescriptive and participatory dimensions of the inquiry.

Broad Objective

To develop informed, context-specific recommendations standard operating procedures that enhance student retention in conflict-affected schools in Benue State, Nigeria, by drawing on the experiences and insights of teachers and school administrators.

Specific Objectives

Diagnostic Objective: To identify challenges to student retention during conflicts in Benue State that teachers and administrators consider as justification for developing Standard Operating Procedures.

Evaluative Objective; To examine existing school-based strategies for student retention during armed conflicts that teachers and school administrators regard as central to informed establishment of standard operating procedures in Benue State's schooling context.

Prescriptive Objective: To determine factors affecting student retention during conflicts in Benue State that teachers and school administrators identify as inadequately addressed by existing practices, thereby requiring formalisation through Standard Operating Procedures.

Participatory Objective: To explore components that teachers and school administrators rate as central to effective standard operating procedures for maximising student retention during conflicts in Benue State.

1.4 Research Questions

- What challenges to student retention during conflicts in Benue State do teachers and administrators consider as justification for the development of Standard Operating Procedures?
- What existing school-based strategies for student retention during armed conflicts do teachers and school administrators regard as central to informed establishment of standard operating procedures in the schooling context of Benue State?
- Which factors affecting student retention during conflicts in Benue State do teachers and school administrators identify as inadequately addressed by existing practices and therefore requiring formalisation through Standard Operating Procedures?
- What components do teachers and school administrators rate as central to effective standard operating procedures for maximising student retention during conflicts in Benue State?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a socio-ecological resilience framework that integrates Urie Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model of human development with resilience theory as applied to education in emergencies. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological model conceptualises educational outcomes as products of dynamic operations across nested systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. The microsystem includes classroom practices, peer relations, and family support, which interact with the mesosystem of school–family linkages, the exosystem of community insecurity and administrative policies, the macrosystem of socio-cultural norms and conflict dynamics, and the chronosystem representing the temporal dimension of protracted or recurrent violence. In conflict-affected contexts, exosystemic shocks – such as displacement, attacks on communities, or infrastructural destruction – cascade downward, destabilising microsystem processes including regular attendance, psychosocial safety, and instructional continuity. Empirical research demonstrates that such systemic disruptions significantly undermine sustained educational participation (Burde et al., 2017). Student retention,

therefore, cannot be reduced to individual motivation; it is shaped by structurally mediated ecological interactions.

Resilience theory complements this perspective by emphasising positive adaptation in the face of adversity (Masten, 2014). Within educational systems, resilience encompasses absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities that enable institutions to withstand shocks, adjust operationally, and implement structural improvements (Duchek, 2020). In EiE contexts, protective processes often emerge informally at micro- and mesosystem levels—for example, teacher-led outreach, flexible scheduling, or community partnerships. While such adaptations reflect local ingenuity, their ad hoc character limits consistency, scalability, and sustainability, particularly in settings of chronic instability (Novelli et al., 2015).

The critical analytical progression from ecological disruption to formal procedural codification lies in the process of institutionalisation. Organisational resilience literature underscores that adaptive practices achieve durability only when embedded within structured routines and governance mechanisms (Duchek, 2020). Formalised standard operating procedures operate primarily at the meso- and exosystem levels as regulatory and coordinating instruments that stabilise microsystem practices amid exosystemic volatility. Through the codification of roles, response protocols, communication pathways and monitoring processes, standard operating procedures translate experiential knowledge into replicable institutional standards. In doing so, they reduce reliance on individual improvisation, enhance accountability, and facilitate systematic learning and refinement over time.

This orientation aligns with global EiE principles, including those articulated in the Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, Recovery developed by the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2024), which emphasise structured preparedness and continuity mechanisms. Within a socio-ecological resilience lens, standard operating procedures are therefore not merely administrative artefacts but strategic instruments for institutionalising protective processes across ecological layers. They function to coordinate stakeholder action, embed resilience within school governance structures, and sustain student retention amid recurrent conflict. By synthesising ecological systems theory with organisational and educational resilience scholarship, this framework provides a coherent theoretical foundation for examining how stakeholder-informed standard operating procedures

can systematically strengthen student retention in conflict-affected schooling environments.

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Concept of Standard Operating Procedures

Standard operating procedures can be defined as codified, repeatable protocols that guide institutional responses to recurring or complex scenarios (Higgins & Walker, 2012). In education contexts, standard operating procedures formalise informal strategies into structured routines that enhance consistency, accountability and continuity – particularly in crises where disruption is frequent. Globally, standard operating procedures for schools’ cover emergency preparedness, hazard-specific response measures, and coordination with community actors such as first responders (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC], n.d.; U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013). Within education in emergencies (EiE), formalised standard operating procedures are integral to embedding protective processes across ecological layers and strengthening organisational resilience (Duchek, 2020; Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies [INEE], 2024).

3.2 The Concept of Student Retention

Student retention is defined as sustained enrolment, attendance, and academic progression within formal schooling. In conflict-affected contexts, retention is shaped by protective factors spanning individual, relational, and systemic levels, including safe learning environments, psychosocial support, and adaptive pedagogy (Masten, 2014; Burde et al., 2017). Retention is undermined by armed conflict, displacement, and economic shocks through the disruption of classroom continuity, the increase in absenteeism, and the triggering of withdrawal from school (Akresh & de Walque, 2008; Jones & Naylor, 2022). This literature recognises that retention in fragile settings is not only a function of learner motivation but also of schools’ capacity to sustain operations and coordinate adaptive responses amid instability.

3.3 Conflict-Affected Context of Schooling

Education in conflict settings experiences multifaceted disruptions. Direct impacts are manifested in attacks on school infrastructure, school closures, and the use of school buildings for non-educational purposes, while indirect impacts are reflected in trauma, household economic losses, and community displacement (Burde et al., 2017; Novelli et al., 2015). In Nigeria, reduced school

attendance, teacher shortages, and disrupted learning continuity have been caused by farmer–herder clashes, communal violence, and insurgency in the North Central and North East regions (Adeyi et al., 2024; Jones & Naylor, 2022). In Benue State specifically, school closures and the displacement of learners and educators have been brought about by flooding, communal violence, and recurring insecurity, thereby eroding established patterns of school participation and engagement. Across Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems, these disruptions cascade, and microsystem interactions – such as classroom engagement and family–school linkages – that are critical for retention are weakened. Schools often respond through informal adaptive measures, including teacher-led outreach, flexible timetables, temporary learning spaces, and psychosocial support. While these strategies reflect local resilience, their ad hoc nature limits consistency, scalability, and sustainability, particularly in protracted conflict contexts (Novelli et al., 2015; Duchek, 2020).

3.4 Global and Local Standards for Schooling Continuity

Global standards for schooling continuity prioritise safe, inclusive, and equitable access to learning in crisis contexts. The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2024) Minimum Standards for Education establish benchmarks across preparedness, response and recovery, including safe facilities, psychosocial support, and coordination mechanisms designed to sustain educational continuity. Complementary global frameworks such as the Safe Schools Declaration (adopted in 2015) reinforce protection of learners and educational infrastructure in situations of armed conflict and advocate alignment of national responses with international commitments (Safe Schools Declaration, 2015). Recent UNESCO reporting (2024) highlights a global spike in attacks on schools, students, and teachers, with thousands of incidents recorded worldwide and increasing recognition of the need for systematic protective measures in educational settings. Similarly, the Education Under Attack reports by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA, 2022, 2024) document tens of thousands of attacks, military use of schools, and interference with learning continuity, reinforcing the global imperative for institutionalised protective and continuity frameworks.

In the Nigerian context, the National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021) provides a national framework mandating comprehensive safety planning, early warning mechanisms, and conflict response processes at school and system levels. The

policy prohibits militarisation of schools, outlines procedures for violence prevention, and emphasises community involvement in safety efforts. Despite these frameworks’ alignment with global standards, evidence suggests that many Nigerian schools lack fully operationalised standard operating procedures tailored to recurrent conflict scenarios.

3.5 The Formalisation Gap in Conflict-Affected Schooling Context of Benue State

Despite global and national standards advocating structured responses, a formalisation gap is observed in Benue State’s schooling system. In conflict-affected communities, reactive strategies have been developed by schools to sustain learning amid farmer–herder violence, communal clashes, and displacement, including the establishment of temporary learning spaces, the implementation of community outreach efforts, and the adoption of adaptive timetables. However, these practices are largely informal, fragmented, and vulnerable to disruption by resource shortages, leadership turnover, or renewed violence (Adeyi et al., 2024; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2023).

Although the INEE Minimum Standards (2024) and national policy frameworks emphasise institutionalised planning and coordinated action, few studies have examined school-level codification of retention-focused standard operating procedures in Benue’s conflict-affected communities. Informal strategies often lack monitoring, evaluation and integration across ecological layers, limiting institutional resilience and restricting the ability of schools to maintain long term continuity of learning. A context-specific, stakeholder-informed framework of standard operating procedures would bridge this gap by translating experiential knowledge into structured protocols, improving coordination between micro, meso, and exosystem actors, and embedding adaptive capacities within school governance structures (Duchek, 2020; Novelli et al., 2015).

The need for empirically grounded standard operating procedures capable of strengthening student retention in conflict-affected schooling contexts such as Benue State is underscored by this synthesis, and it is demonstrated how global and local standards can inform an actionable, school-level procedural framework.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine the perceptions of teachers and school administrators regarding challenges to student retention in conflict-affected schools, existing school-based retention strategies,

inadequately addressed retention factors requiring formalisation, and essential components of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for improving student retention. The study was conducted in conflict-affected Local Government Areas of Benue State, Nigeria, where recurrent farmer–herder clashes, communal violence, militia attacks, banditry and kidnappings have caused displacement, school closures and widespread educational disruption. The target population comprised all teachers and school administrators in public primary and secondary schools across seven high-conflict Local Government Areas – Guma, Gwer West, Ukum, Agatu, Kwande, Katsina-Ala and Logo – with an estimated population of 24,890 educators (19,700 primary and 5,190 secondary). Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, a sample of 380 participants (approximately 300 primary and 80 secondary educators) was determined to provide adequate representation while accommodating the logistical realities of conflict-affected communities. Data were collected using a researcher-developed instrument, the *Standard Operating Procedures for Student Retention Questionnaire* (SOPSRQ), comprising 40 items organised into four sections assessing: (i) challenges necessitating SOP development, (ii) existing school-based retention strategies, (iii) inadequately addressed retention factors requiring formalisation, and (iv) essential components of effective SOPs. Responses were rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (4). The

instrument was developed from established literature on education in emergencies, student retention and conflict-sensitive school management. Face and content validity were established through the evaluation of three experts in educational research methodology and conflict-affected education, whose recommendations were incorporated before the final administration. Reliability was established through a pilot study involving 30 educators from a conflict-affected Local Government Area outside the study area using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients meeting the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70 for each section and exceeding 0.80 for the overall instrument. The questionnaires were administered by the researcher and trained research assistants during school visits, cluster meetings and other safe locations over a six-week period. Completed questionnaires were retrieved on-site where possible, while follow-up visits addressed non-response. Data were analysed using mean and standard deviation, with mean scores ranked to identify the most and least endorsed challenges, strategies, implementation gaps and SOP components. Cross-tabulations and subgroup means were also computed to describe variations in perceptions. A criterion mean of 2.50 served as the decision benchmark, with items scoring 2.50 or above interpreted as accepted and recommended for inclusion in the proposed standard operating procedures.

5. Presentation of Results

Research Question One: What challenges to student retention during conflicts in Benue State do teachers and administrators consider as justification for the development of Standard Operating Procedures?

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Challenges to Student Retention During Conflicts in Benue State

Rank	Challenge to Student Retention During Conflicts	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Insecurity in the community reduces students' regular attendance.	3.49	0.95	Accepted
2	Fear of violence discourages parents from sending their children to school consistently.	3.18	1.20	Accepted
3	Displacement of families increases student dropout.	3.15	0.62	Accepted
4	Economic hardship caused by conflict forces students to leave school.	3.14	0.96	Accepted
5	Damage to school facilities disrupts students' continuity of learning.	3.07	1.04	Accepted
5	Emotional stress caused by insecurity affects students' willingness to remain in school.	3.07	0.55	Accepted
7	Irregular teacher attendance due to insecurity affects student retention.	2.99	0.82	Accepted
8	Unsafe routes to school reduce student attendance.	2.96	0.99	Accepted
9	Poor communication between school and parents during crises contributes to dropout.	2.72	0.94	Accepted
10	Lack of organised school response during crises worsens student dropout.	2.50	1.20	Accepted

Note. Criterion mean = 2.50. Mean scores of 2.50 and above were accepted, while mean scores below 2.50 were rejected.

Table 1 shows that all ten identified factors recorded mean scores equal to or above the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating that respondents agreed that each constituted a challenge to student retention during conflicts in Benue State.

Research Question Two: What existing school-based strategies for student retention during armed conflicts do teachers and school administrators regard as central to informed establishment of standard operating procedures in the schooling context of Benue State?

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Existing School-Based Student Retention Strategies During Armed Conflicts in Benue State

Rank	Existing School-Based Student Retention Strategy	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Teacher support for students to catch up after missed classes.	3.53	0.90	Accepted
2	Regular monitoring of student attendance.	3.22	1.17	Accepted
3	Engagement of community leaders to support student attendance.	3.20	0.64	Accepted
4	Communication with parents during crisis situations.	3.18	0.96	Accepted
5	Staff discussions on student dropout-related issues.	3.16	0.54	Accepted
6	Teacher follow-up of students with prolonged absenteeism.	3.09	1.05	Accepted
7	Collaboration with community members to improve student safety.	3.08	0.95	Accepted
8	Identification of students at risk of dropping out.	3.05	0.85	Accepted
9	Provision of emotional and counselling support to conflict-affected students.	2.92	0.87	Accepted
10	Adjustment of academic activities during periods of insecurity.	2.60	1.21	Accepted

Note. Criterion mean = 2.50. Mean scores of 2.50 and above were accepted, while mean scores below 2.50 were rejected.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for existing school-based strategies for promoting student retention during armed conflicts in Benue State. The results indicate that all ten identified strategies recorded mean scores equal to or above the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating that respondents agreed that these constitute existing school-based strategies for promoting student retention during periods of armed conflict.

Research Question Three: Which factors affecting student retention during conflicts in Benue State do teachers and school administrators identify as inadequately addressed by existing practices and therefore requiring formalisation through Standard Operating Procedures?

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Factors Affecting Student Retention During Conflicts Requiring Formalisation Through Standard Operating Procedures in Benue State

Rank	Factor Requiring Formalisation Through Standard Operating Procedures	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Limited documentation of interventions for at-risk students.	3.44	1.00	Accepted
2	Absence of written guidelines for handling student dropout during conflict.	3.13	1.22	Accepted
2	Undefined written staff roles in student retention management.	3.13	0.54	Accepted
4	Absence of a written crisis communication plan.	3.07	0.97	Accepted
5	Lack of a written process for responding to prolonged student absence.	3.06	1.03	Accepted
6	Inconsistent implementation of student retention efforts across the school.	3.02	0.56	Accepted
7	Lack of a written coordination plan with community or security groups.	2.93	0.82	Accepted
8	Absence of a written procedure for reintegrating displaced students.	2.87	1.00	Accepted
9	Dependence on individual staff initiative for student retention efforts.	2.86	1.04	Accepted
10	Absence of a standard record-keeping system for tracking at-risk students.	2.54	1.21	Accepted

Note. Criterion mean = 2.50. Mean scores of 2.50 and above were accepted, while mean scores below 2.50 were rejected.

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for factors affecting student retention during conflicts that respondents identified as inadequately addressed by existing school practices and therefore requiring formalisation through Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). The results indicate that all ten identified factors recorded mean scores equal to or above the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating that respondents agreed that each factor requires formalisation through written Standard Operating Procedures.

Research Question Four: What components do teachers and school administrators rate as central to effective Standard Operating Procedures for maximising student retention during conflicts in Benue State?

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Components of Effective Standard Operating Procedures for Maximising Student Retention During Conflicts in Benue State

Rank	Component of Effective Standard Operating Procedures	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Provision of standard forms for documenting student retention cases.	3.51	0.96	Endorsed
2	Alignment of written procedures with state education policies.	3.39	0.63	Endorsed
3	Establishment of an early identification system for at-risk students.	3.28	1.03	Endorsed
4	Development of clear written procedures for student retention during conflict.	3.21	1.21	Endorsed
5	Inclusion of an attendance monitoring system in written procedures.	3.13	0.67	Endorsed
6	Inclusion of procedures for reintegrating displaced or returning students.	3.12	0.99	Endorsed
7	Definition of staff responsibilities for preventing student dropout.	3.06	1.07	Endorsed
8	Inclusion of referral guidelines for emotional or psychosocial support.	2.97	0.86	Endorsed
9	Regular review of written procedures by school management.	2.93	1.03	Endorsed
10	Inclusion of parent communication procedures during crises.	2.72	0.94	Endorsed

Note. Criterion mean = 2.50. Components with mean scores of 2.50 and above were endorsed for inclusion in the proposed Standard Operating Procedures, while those with mean scores below 2.50 were not endorsed.

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for components of effective Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for maximising student retention during conflicts in Benue State. The results indicate that all ten proposed components recorded mean scores equal to or above the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating that respondents endorsed each component for inclusion in effective Standard Operating Procedures for promoting student retention during periods of conflict.

6. Discussion of Findings

6.1 Challenges to Student Retention Justifying the Development of Standard Operating Procedures

All ten identified factors were accepted as challenges to student retention during periods of armed conflict. The prominence of insecurity in the community reducing students' regular attendance ($M = 3.49$) underscores the extent to which physical insecurity remains the principal barrier to educational continuity in Benue's conflict-affected communities. Burde et al. (2017) identified proximity of violence as one of the strongest predictors of reduced attendance, establishing the foundational empirical basis for this pattern, while Jato and Iornumbe (2025) provide more recent and geographically specific corroboration through statistically significant negative shifts in student engagement ($t = 26.108$, $p < .001$) and teacher motivation ($t = 17.654$, $p < .001$) recorded in Benue's Sankera sub-region. Jones and Naylor (2022) further documented in the Nigerian context how recurring farmer-herder clashes generate attendance disruptions that persist well beyond the immediate episode of violence, a pattern directly applicable to the multi-actor insecurity characterising the seven Local Government Areas studied here. The high ranking of fear of violence discouraging parental enrolment decisions ($M = 3.18$) indicates that caregiver risk perception operates as an independent retention barrier, distinct from the direct effects of physical insecurity on learners themselves. UNESCO (2024) documented that communities frequently withdraw children even when schools have not been directly targeted, confirming that perceived rather than actual threat is sufficient to suppress attendance, while the International Rescue Committee (2018) established that safety assurance for parents is a prerequisite for consistent enrolment rather than a supplementary intervention. The ranking of displacement as a driver of dropout ($M = 3.15$) reflects the acute IDP profile of Benue State, where the International Organisation for Migration (2026) recorded over 2.1 million displaced persons, approximately 60% of them children. Adeyi et al. (2024) found that multiple-relocation displacement

events produce cumulative educational setbacks that are difficult to reverse in the absence of structured reintegration mechanisms, situating the present finding within a well-documented pattern of compounding disadvantage.

Economic hardship ($M = 3.14$) and facility damage disrupting learning continuity ($M = 3.07$) were similarly accepted as significant challenges. The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (2024) identifies conflict-induced livelihood disruption as one of the most persistent indirect retention barriers, while the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (2022, 2024) documented infrastructure damage as functioning both as a direct barrier through school closures and as a symbolic one, communicating to communities that schools are no longer safe or functional spaces. The acceptance of poor crisis communication as a challenge ($M = 2.72$) is noteworthy because, read alongside Research Questions Two and Three, it reveals that frontline educators are already cognisant of the institutional inadequacies that formalised standard operating procedures would systematically address. Even the lowest-ranked item – lack of organised school response worsening dropout ($M = 2.50$) – reached the decision threshold, indicating that institutional disorganisation itself is perceived as an active contributor to retention failure rather than a neutral condition. Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides the theoretical scaffolding for this cascading pattern: exosystemic shocks destabilise mesosystem and microsystem processes, and the absence of stabilising governance structures at meso and exosystem levels intensifies the disruption experienced at the level of classrooms, family-school relationships and individual learners' daily routines.

6.2 Existing School-Based Strategies Perceived as Central to Informed Standard Operating Procedure Development

All ten identified practices were perceived as existing school-based student retention strategies. The primacy accorded to teacher support for catch-up after missed classes ($M = 3.53$) indicates that individual teacher responsiveness to learner absence is widely regarded as the most available retention mechanism in Benue's conflict-affected schools. Jones and Naylor (2022) identified the same practice as a primary differentiating factor between schools that maintained functioning operations and those that collapsed during insecurity episodes in North Central Nigeria, and Adeyi et al. (2024) similarly found that teacher-level initiative constitutes the frontline of retention effort where institutionalised support structures are absent. The data indicate,

however, that this practice is perceived to operate without the procedural frameworks that would render it consistent, monitorable and sustainable – a limitation with clear structural implications. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model accounts for this vulnerability: protective processes operating exclusively at the microsystem level, without embedding within meso and exosystem governance structures, remain exposed when exosystemic shocks intensify. Duchek (2020) captures the same constraint in organisational terms by distinguishing between absorptive capacity, which enables organisations to improvise responses to shocks, and transformative capacity, which entails structural restructuring for sustained performance under chronic adversity. The pattern of findings for this research question suggests that schools demonstrate the former but lack the institutional architecture required for the latter.

Community leader engagement ($M = 3.20$) and parent communication during crises ($M = 3.18$) were both perceived as established strategies, indicating that schools regard community partnerships and family communication as practical mechanisms for sustaining student participation during insecurity. The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (2024) endorses community engagement as a preparedness benchmark rather than merely a crisis response, and the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (2023) found that timely family-school communication during insecurity significantly increases the likelihood of prompt re-enrolment following disruption, lending empirical weight to the recognition of these practices. The comparatively lower means for at-risk student identification ($M = 3.05$) and psychosocial support ($M = 2.92$) suggest that these practices are perceived as less consistently implemented. Adeyi et al. (2024) found early identification systems to be among the most structurally under-developed features of Nigerian EiE practice, and the United Nations Children's Fund (2025) established that unaddressed trauma translates directly into prolonged absence, indicating that the inconsistency reflected in these ratings carries direct consequences for retention outcomes.

The lowest-ranked accepted strategy – academic activity adjustment during insecurity ($M = 2.60$) – indicates that flexible scheduling is perceived as the least embedded of the existing practices. Burde et al. (2017) noted that adaptive scheduling is among the most difficult EiE strategies to sustain without institutional backing, and Novelli et al. (2015) established that ad hoc adaptive practices are inherently limited in scalability and sustainability under conditions of chronic insecurity. Taken together, the findings across this research question

reflect a pattern of locally generated resilience that, in Duchek's (2020) terms, has not yet been institutionalised into the replicable governance routines necessary for durability.

6.3 Factors Inadequately Addressed by Existing Practices and Requiring Formalisation Through Standard Operating Procedures

All ten identified factors were accepted as procedural gaps requiring formalisation through standard operating procedures. The ranking of limited documentation of interventions for at-risk students as the most critical gap ($M = 3.44$) indicates that the absence of systematic tracking mechanisms is perceived as the most consequential institutional deficit in Benue's conflict-affected schools. Adeyi et al. (2024) found that where such mechanisms are absent, schools reinvent responses without institutional learning, producing cyclical improvisation rather than cumulative improvement. The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (2024) specifies learner monitoring as a minimum preparedness standard, and Jones and Naylor (2022) documented the same documentation deficit as a systemic feature of conflict-affected Nigerian schools, confirming that the present finding reflects a recognisable national pattern rather than an isolated local shortcoming.

The equal ranking of the absence of written dropout guidelines and undefined staff roles in retention management (both $M = 3.13$) indicates that the absence of written role clarity is perceived as generating precisely the operational variability that the study's problem statement describes. Ouchi (1977) established that role ambiguity and the absence of codified procedures are primary mechanisms through which institutional inconsistency is produced, while Bush (2011) argued in educational management contexts that clearly defined staff responsibilities are a prerequisite for accountable governance. The Federal Ministry of Education Nigeria's (2021) national policy envisions such structures at school level, yet Jones and Naylor (2022) documented that this intent has not been operationalised in conflict-affected communities across Nigeria, situating the present gap within a broader systemic failure of policy translation.

The absence of a written crisis communication plan ($M = 3.07$) acquires particular significance when read against Research Question Two's finding that parent communication was among the most widely recognised existing strategies ($M = 3.18$). The gap between performing a practice and having a documented procedure for it is precisely the formalisation deficit that Novelli et al. (2015) identify as the mechanism through which informal

adaptation breaks down under sustained pressure, because practices sustained through individual initiative cannot be monitored, corrected or maintained when those individuals are displaced or unavailable. The acceptance of dependence on individual staff initiative as an inadequately addressed gap ($M = 2.86$) is given further contextual force by Jato and Iornumbe's (2025) evidence of significant teacher motivation decline in Benue's conflict zones, indicating that schools are perceived to rely on individual initiative as their primary retention mechanism in an environment of diminishing staff capacity. Bronfenbrenner (1979) accounts for the structural vulnerability this produces – protective processes unsupported by meso and exosystem governance structures are fragile under sustained exosystemic pressure – while Duchek (2020) frames the institutional implication: without systematic monitoring and learning mechanisms embedded in formal procedures, organisations cannot develop the transformative resilience required for sustained performance under chronic adversity.

6.4 Components Endorsed as Central to Effective Standard Operating Procedures for Maximising Student Retention

All ten proposed components were endorsed above the criterion mean. The prominence of standard forms for documenting student retention cases ($M = 3.51$) indicates that respondents regarded documentation infrastructure as the foundation of any effective procedural framework. The Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (2023) found that schools in conflict-affected contexts with formalised documentation systems demonstrate greater consistency in retention outcomes than those relying on informal records, and the International Rescue Committee (2018) identified case documentation as the basis for accountable and replicable intervention in fragile settings. The primacy of this component reflects an assessment by educators living with the operational consequences of its absence: no other SOP component can function effectively without the tracking and accountability infrastructure that documentation provides.

The endorsement of alignment with state education policies as the second most important component ($M = 3.39$) indicates that respondents regarded vertical policy coherence as essential to procedural legitimacy and sustainability. Jones and Naylor (2022) observed that EiE interventions in Nigeria lacking such alignment tended to atrophy when external support was withdrawn, lending direct empirical grounding to this perception. The endorsement of an early identification system for at-risk students ($M = 3.28$) and clear written retention

procedures ($M = 3.21$) confirms a preference for proactive over reactive mechanisms. The Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (2023) documented early warning systems as among the most cost-effective features of conflict-sensitive education, and Jones and Naylor (2022) argued that effective Nigerian EiE practice embeds these systems into governance structures before crises intensify. Attendance monitoring ($M = 3.13$) and reintegration procedures for displaced students ($M = 3.12$) extend this proactive orientation, supported by the United Nations Children's Fund's (2025) finding that structured reintegration pathways are among the most consistently absent yet most urgently needed components of EiE practice in Nigerian displacement contexts. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework reinforces the systemic logic of these endorsements: proactive meso-level governance mechanisms stabilise the microsystem processes – daily attendance, classroom engagement, family-school relationships – that protracted exosystemic shocks progressively erode.

The endorsement of defined staff responsibilities ($M = 3.06$) indicates that respondents regarded explicit role assignment as necessary for accountability in retention management. Bush (2011) argues that clearly articulated responsibilities within governance structures are the mechanism through which educational organisations translate policy intentions into consistent practice, and Ouchi (1977) established that accountability is achievable only when roles are codified rather than assumed. The comparatively lower endorsement of psychosocial support referral guidelines ($M = 2.97$) most plausibly reflects a tension between recognised importance and perceived capacity for operationalisation in settings with limited mental health infrastructure. Masten (2014) established psychosocial wellbeing as a prerequisite for sustained academic engagement, and the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (2024) lists psychosocial support as a minimum EiE standard; Novelli et al. (2015) documented a parallel tension in their analysis of EiE implementation gaps in fragile states, suggesting this is a recurring structural challenge rather than a context-specific shortcoming. The endorsement of regular procedural review ($M = 2.93$) embodies what Duchek (2020) identifies as the transformative dimension of organisational resilience – the institutional capacity to learn from responses and continuously refine practice rather than repeating the same reactive improvisations across successive crises.

Parent communication procedures during crises, though the lowest-endorsed component ($M = 2.72$), complete a coherent empirical narrative that runs

across all four research questions. Poor crisis communication was accepted as a significant retention challenge in Research Question One; caregiver communication was perceived as an existing informal strategy in Research Question Two; the absence of a written communication plan was accepted as a critical formalisation gap in Research Question Three; and communication procedures were endorsed as a necessary SOP component here. This convergence is substantively significant. It demonstrates that the path from recognised challenge to formalised procedural response is traceable in the perceptions of frontline educators themselves, and it reinforces the central argument of this study: that conflict-affected schools in Benue State possess meaningful adaptive practices broadly consistent with global EiE principles, but that these practices remain fragile, inconsistent and vulnerable to collapse without the codification, role clarity and governance embedding that contextually grounded standard operating procedures can provide.

7. Conclusion

Conflict-affected schools in Benue State operate within a protracted security environment in which informal, reactive retention practices are no longer sufficient to sustain educational continuity. Although schools have developed adaptive strategies in response to insecurity, these practices remain largely dependent on individual initiative, inconsistently implemented, and insufficiently supported by formal institutional structures. Consequently, the procedural gaps identified by respondents highlight the need to move beyond ad hoc responses towards the systematic institutionalisation of student retention practices through clearly defined Standard Operating Procedures. The SOP components identified by frontline educators provide a contextually grounded and stakeholder-informed framework for strengthening student retention in conflict-affected schools. Their consistency with the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (2024) Minimum Standards and the Federal Ministry of Education Nigeria's (2021) national policy framework demonstrates that the proposed procedures are both empirically supported and aligned with existing policy expectations. The findings therefore provide an evidence base for the Benue State Ministry of Education, Local Government Education Authorities, school administrators and development partners to develop, adopt and implement Standard Operating Procedures that assign clear responsibilities, establish written protocols, strengthen documentation and monitoring systems, and embed institutional accountability for student retention. Ultimately, safeguarding the right to education

during conflict requires not only resilient educators and communities but also resilient institutional systems designed to sustain learning despite prolonged insecurity.

8. Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

School administrators in conflict-affected Local Government Areas of Benue State should develop and implement written Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for student retention that clearly define staff responsibilities, establish procedures for attendance monitoring, crisis communication, learner reintegration and documentation of at-risk students, and provide for periodic review to ensure continued relevance under changing security conditions.

Local Government Education Authorities should establish formal coordination mechanisms involving school administrators, community leaders and relevant security agencies to strengthen community participation in student retention efforts. Existing informal collaboration should be institutionalised through clearly defined roles, communication channels and accountability arrangements.

The Benue State Ministry of Education should develop and disseminate standardised SOP templates for use in conflict-affected schools and ensure that school-level procedures are aligned with the National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools (Federal Ministry of Education Nigeria, 2021) and the Minimum Standards for Education of the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (2024). Compliance with SOP implementation should form part of routine school supervision and quality assurance activities.

The Benue State Government, in collaboration with relevant development partners, should strengthen psychosocial support services in conflict-affected schools through the deployment or training of school counsellors, establishment of referral pathways and provision of resources that enable schools to respond effectively to the emotional and psychological needs of conflict-affected learners.

Development partners and non-governmental organisations supporting education in Benue State should complement infrastructure support with sustained capacity-building programmes that equip school administrators and teachers with the knowledge and skills required to implement, monitor and periodically review Standard Operating Procedures for student retention in conflict-affected schools.

Researchers should undertake implementation and evaluation studies to examine the effectiveness, adaptability and sustainability of the proposed

Standard Operating Procedures across different conflict-affected educational contexts, with particular attention to differences between primary and secondary schools and to changes in conflict intensity over time.

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