



Motivational Learning in Conflict-Affected Educational Settings

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Abstract

This study investigates motivational learning in South Sudan's conflict-affected educational settings, where widespread conflict, displacement, and pervasive trauma severely impede student engagement and academic persistence. Despite global efforts to improve educational access, a critical gap exists in understanding the specific motivational dynamics within this unique context. Applying expectancy-value, self-efficacy, and self-determination theories, this mixed-methods research explored how socio-economic, cultural, and conflict factors profoundly influence student motivation. Findings revealed notably low intrinsic motivation and academic self-efficacy, alongside high perceived utility and reliance on extrinsic motivation. The study underscored trauma's profound impact on learning, highlighting the critical need for trauma-informed teacher support and culturally responsive pedagogy. This research enriches academic literature on education in fragile states, provides empirical insights for designing effective, context-sensitive interventions, and offers crucial implications for sustainable positive social development and peacebuilding in South Sudan.

Keywords: Motivational learning, *South Sudan*, *self-efficacy*, *self-determination*, *expectancy-value*, *responsive pedagogy*, *academic persistence*

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Introduction

Education in fragile and conflict-affected states represents a paramount area of international development and humanitarian concern. Violent conflict inflicts devastating damage on education systems globally, yet education is increasingly recognized as a "lifesaving" intervention, crucial for violence prevention, peacebuilding, and fostering social cohesion and economic prosperity in post-conflict societies (Akar, 2024; Global Partnership for Education [GPE], 2023; World Bank, 2025). Beyond basic survival needs, education provides stability, protection, mental health recovery, and a vital sense of normalcy for children enduring extreme adversity. Effective educational interventions in these contexts should therefore be holistically

integrated with psychosocial support and protection mechanisms, as psychological safety is a prerequisite for cognitive engagement (Herman et al., 2018).

South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, exemplifies these challenges, grappling with one of the most fragile education systems globally (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Decades of civil war and ongoing subnational violence have profoundly disrupted educational progress, resulting in widespread school destruction, mass displacement, and alarmingly high out-of-school rates, particularly among girls (UNICEF, 2025). An estimated 70–72% of primary school-aged children are out of school, with 76% of schoolgirls not attending, representing the highest rates worldwide (UNICEF, 2025). These systemic issues are compounded by deep-seated socio-economic hardships, cultural barriers such as early marriage and pastoralist lifestyles, and the pervasive psychological effects of trauma, all of which severely undermine student engagement and persistence in learning (Dryden-Peterson, 2009).

Despite substantial efforts by international organizations to improve access and infrastructure, a critical knowledge gap has persisted concerning the specific motivational dynamics of students within this unique, conflict-affected, and resource-constrained context. Much of the prevailing research on student motivation is derived from stable, well-resourced educational settings, which may not adequately capture the complexities of learning in an environment characterized by pervasive trauma, profound cultural shifts, and systemic fragility (Akar, 2024). The psychological trauma experienced by children and youth, including symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), chronic depression, anxiety, and cognitive dysfunction, profoundly impacts their capacity and willingness to learn, acting as a fundamental barrier to motivational engagement.

This study sought to address this critical void by exploring how established theories of motivational learning such as expectancy-value theory, self-efficacy theory, and self-determination theory can be strategically leveraged to foster educational engagement, persistence, and achievement among South Sudanese children and youth (Gladstone et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2018; Seifert & Sutton, 2009). A deeper understanding of these motivational factors is essential for designing effective, context-sensitive interventions that move beyond merely providing access to truly enabling meaningful learning and long-term educational success.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Motivational Learning

Motivational learning is a multidimensional concept that seeks to explain why learners initiate, sustain, and regulate effort in educational tasks. Major theories offer different perspectives on the direction, persistence, and intensity of learning behaviors (Schunk & Meece, 2008). This section reviews key motivational theories and highlights their relevance and limitations in the South Sudanese educational context.

Expectancy-Value Theory

Expectancy-value theory proposes that motivation depends on two predictors: expectancies for success and task value beliefs (Gladstone et al., 2022; Schunk & Meece, 2008). Expectancies for success capture learners' confidence in their ability to complete a task, while task value reflects the perceived importance or usefulness of the task. Task value includes intrinsic enjoyment, attainment (self-identity), utility (future benefits), and cost (sacrifices such as time, effort, or emotional strain).

In South Sudan, utility value plays a decisive role. For many families, immediate survival through agricultural work outweighs the long-term benefits of education (Briggs, 2017; Kueth, 2025). High costs, such as loss of family labor, unsafe travel, and disrupted learning environments, further discourage participation. Students' expectancies for success are often low because of poor infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, and

interrupted schooling. These contextual realities reveal the limitations of applying expectancy-value theory in fragile states without adaptation.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977, 1997) emphasizes learners' beliefs in their capability to achieve specific tasks. High self-efficacy predicts greater persistence, effort, and achievement (Pajares & Urdan, 2006). Four sources shape self-efficacy: past performance, peer modeling, verbal persuasion, and psychological states (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Pajares, 2009).

In South Sudan, chronic trauma and stress undermine psychological stability and reduce self-efficacy (Kueth, 2025; Mao et al., 2025). Disrupted schooling further weakens confidence in academic competence. Evidence suggests that interventions such as consistent feedback, skill-building, and positive reinforcement can help rebuild self-belief and motivation (Lubit et al., 2003). However, without addressing systemic barriers to stable learning environments, the motivational power of self-efficacy remains constrained.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) holds that intrinsic motivation thrives when three psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). While intrinsic motivation drives deeper engagement, extrinsic motivators such as rewards or social pressures may have short-term effects and can even reduce natural interest (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

In South Sudan, education is often valued as a means of escaping poverty, which represents an extrinsic motivator. This reliance risks undermining intrinsic interest in learning. Nurturing autonomy, designing achievable challenges, and fostering supportive classroom communities can help balance extrinsic pressures with intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Yet given the instability of learning environments, sustaining these psychological needs remains a challenge.

Interest Theory

Interest theory stresses the role of personal relevance and curiosity in sustaining motivation (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Renninger & Hidi, 2015). Interest develops when tasks are meaningful, novel, and connected to learners' lives.

For South Sudanese students, culturally responsive teaching is essential. Lessons that incorporate pastoralist traditions, indigenous knowledge, and local livelihoods increase relevance and engagement (GPE, 2023). Teachers' enthusiasm and creative pedagogy also play a critical role. However, resource shortages and large class sizes limit opportunities for personalized and engaging instruction.

Achievement Goal Theory

Achievement goal theory distinguishes between mastery goals and performance goals (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Mastery goals focus on learning and self-improvement, while performance goals emphasize outperforming others. Mastery goals are associated with resilience, deeper learning, and intrinsic motivation (Elliot, Dweck, & Yeager, 2018).

In South Sudan, scarce resources and competitive pressures often reinforce performance goals. Shifting focus toward mastery-oriented learning may be more adaptive, encouraging persistence in contexts where external measures of success such as examinations are inconsistent or inaccessible (GPE, 2023). This highlights the importance of framing education as personal growth rather than a zero-sum competition.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory examines how learners explain success or failure (Weiner, 1985). Attributing outcomes to controllable factors such as effort promotes resilience, while attributing them to uncontrollable factors such as luck or systemic barriers undermines motivation (Schunk & Meece, 2008).

South Sudanese learners often face systemic obstacles including conflict, poverty, and teacher shortages that encourage external attributions. This external locus of control can foster helplessness. Teaching strategies that emphasize effort, problem-solving, and adaptive strategies can strengthen students' sense of agency (GPE, 2023). Yet without structural improvements, attributional reframing alone may have limited impact.

Application in Fragile Educational Contexts

Research from Sub-Saharan Africa indicates that low student motivation extends beyond academic competency and is strongly influenced by the quality of the school environment. Issues such as sexual harassment and gender bias significantly affect student attendance, behavior, and willingness to engage in learning (Ashlee et al., 2020).

In South Sudan, trauma-informed pedagogy is particularly critical. Traditional motivational theories often assume a baseline of psychological safety and stability, yet children in fragile contexts frequently experience chronic trauma. Such trauma can trigger fight, flight, or freeze responses that disrupt cognitive function and block access to higher-order thinking (Mao et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2024). As a result, even well-designed motivational strategies such as goal setting or constructive feedback may fail when students are in constant fear or distress. Establishing safe, predictable, and supportive learning environments is therefore a prerequisite for motivation (Mao et al., 2025). Teacher training must integrate trauma-informed practices, and school-based psychosocial support should be recognized as central to education rather than an auxiliary service. These measures enable children to shift from survival mode into a mental state more conducive to learning.

Teacher motivation is equally vital. Empirical studies in developing contexts frequently document declining teacher motivation, often linked to inadequate pay, poor working conditions, and lack of professional support (Global Education Monitoring Report Team [GEMRT], 2023). Teachers' enthusiasm and ability to create engaging lessons directly affect student motivation. Strengthening teacher well-being and professional development is therefore a key precondition for cultivating motivated learners in fragile settings (GEMRT, 2023).

Synthesis and Research Gap

Together, these theories provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of motivation but also reveal limitations when applied to fragile contexts such as South Sudan. Expectancy-value theory highlights the importance of utility and cost but underestimates the role of insecurity. Self-efficacy and attribution theories emphasize agency but may falter where systemic barriers dominate. Self-determination, interest, and achievement goal theories stress intrinsic motivation, yet sustaining it is difficult under chronic stress and instability.

The broader evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa further shows that motivation cannot be separated from the safety and equity of the school environment, nor from teacher well-being. This review suggests that motivational frameworks, although robust in stable contexts, require significant adaptation in conflict-affected settings. The intersection of trauma, systemic instability, and cultural context creates unique motivational dynamics that remain underexplored. Addressing this gap is essential for designing effective, context-sensitive interventions that promote learning in South Sudan.

Table 1: *Key Motivational Theories and Their Relevance to Conflict-Affected Educational Contexts*

Theory Name	Core Concept	Relevance/Implication in South Sudan Context
Expectancy-Value Theory	Motivation driven by belief in success and perceived task value (intrinsic, attainment, utility, cost).	Utility value becomes paramount due to survival needs; high "cost" of education (e.g., foregoing labor, safety risks) reduces engagement; low expectancies for success due to poor infrastructure and prior negative experiences.
Self-Efficacy Theory	Belief in one's ability to perform a task.	Trauma and stress significantly impact psychological states, signaling perceived incapability and lowering self-efficacy; lack of consistent positive past performance erodes beliefs in competence.
Self-Determination Theory	Motivation driven by needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.	Intrinsic motivation challenged by focus on survival; need to foster sense of control, effectiveness, and belonging amidst pervasive external control and instability.
Interest Theory	Engagement driven by personal interest in tasks.	Critical to connect learning to students' everyday lives, cultural experiences (e.g., pastoralist lifestyles), and future aspirations to enhance relevance and spark curiosity.
Achievement Goal Theory	Reasons for engaging in learning (mastery vs. performance).	Encouraging mastery goals over performance goals promotes deeper learning and resilience, which is more adaptive in a competitive and resource-scarce environment.
Attribution Theory	Explanations for success/failure.	Students may attribute failures to uncontrollable external factors (conflict, poverty); shifting attributions to controllable factors (effort, strategy) is crucial for empowerment.

Contextual Analysis: The Educational Landscape of South Sudan

This section provides a detailed analysis of the current state of education in South Sudan, outlining the multifaceted challenges that directly and indirectly impact student motivation, and reviewing existing interventions.

Current State of Education

South Sudan's education system is characterized by extreme fragility, resulting in alarmingly low educational attainment and literacy levels across the nation (Kueth, 2025). As of 2023, an estimated 2.8 million children are out of school, a proportion that may represent the highest globally (UNICEF, 2025). In an effort to mitigate long-term education costs and address the widespread disruption, the country has implemented an alternative education system that condenses an eight-year curriculum into a four-year program (Kueth, 2025). However, this "alternative education system" designed for cost reduction might inadvertently create a perception of "second-class" education, potentially undermining student motivation by signaling a lower value or quality of learning. If students perceive this condensed curriculum as less comprehensive or rigorous than a standard program, it could negatively affect their expectancies for success and the utility value they ascribe to education for future opportunities, such as higher education or skilled labor (Gladstone et al., 2022). This perception, coupled with the potential exclusion of qualified teachers trained in Arabic, may lead to a sense of educational inadequacy, thereby diminishing intrinsic motivation and long-term commitment to learning (Kueth, 2025).

Multifaceted Challenges Impacting Motivation

The educational crisis in South Sudan is deeply rooted in a complex interplay of historical, socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. Each of these dimensions presents unique barriers to student motivation.

Impact of Prolonged Conflict and Displacement

Decades of civil war and ongoing subnational violence have left an indelible mark on South Sudan's educational infrastructure and human capital. The conflict has led to the destruction or severe damage of numerous schools, creating fragmented learning environments and forcing millions into displacement (Briggs, 2017; ; Dryden-Peterson, 2009; Kueth, 2025; UNICEF, 2025). This instability not only disrupts access to education but also poses significant safety risks for children traveling to and attending school (Kueth, 2025). Furthermore, the conflict diverts precious national resources from education to military and emergency needs, severely reducing funding for schools, teacher salaries, and essential educational materials (Kueth, 2025).

The direct targeting of schools and the recruitment of children into armed groups represents a profound deprioritization of education by conflict actors, which can deeply internalize a sense of hopelessness and futility regarding schooling among affected children (Briggs, 2017). When educational institutions are attacked and children are forcibly recruited, it sends a clear, devastating message: formal education is neither safe nor a reliable path to a positive future. This directly challenges a child's expectancy for success in education and the perceived utility value of schooling for achieving positive life outcomes (Gladstone et al., 2022). It can foster a pervasive sense of powerlessness and an external locus of control, where individual academic effort seems futile against the overwhelming backdrop of pervasive violence and instability (Weiner, 2000). Consequently, re-establishing the safety and perceived relevance of education is a critical prerequisite for fostering motivation, necessitating robust protection mechanisms alongside educational interventions.

Socio-economic Determinants

Poverty stands as a major barrier to education in South Sudan. Many families cannot afford school fees, uniforms, or essential educational materials, often forcing children to drop out of school to contribute to household income or support their families (Briggs, 2017; Kueth, 2025). The situation is exacerbated by a global food crisis, with an estimated 60% of the population requiring food assistance in 2023, leading families to prioritize immediate survival needs over formal education (Kueth, 2025). This economic imperative directly impacts the perceived "cost" of education, making it an unaffordable luxury for many (Gladstone et al., 2022).

Cultural and Gender-Based Barriers

Deeply ingrained cultural norms frequently prioritize boys' education over girls', contributing to the disproportionately high out-of-school rates for girls (Briggs, 2017; Kueth, 2025). High rates of child marriage further prevent young girls from pursuing their schooling, as they are expected to assume household responsibilities or are viewed as a source of cattle or resources for their families (Briggs, 2017; Kueth, 2025; UNFPA, 2018).

The prevalent pastoralist lifestyles, involving constant movement with cattle, fundamentally clash with conventional, sedentary education systems (UNICEF, 2025). This creates a fundamental mismatch between educational structure and cultural identity, leading to systemic demotivation for a significant demographic. For pastoralist communities, mobility is integral to their survival and cultural identity. Fixed-location schooling directly contradicts this way of life, forcing families to choose between their cultural practices and livelihoods, and their children's education. This imposes a high "cost" for engagement and diminishes the "attainment value" of education if schooling is perceived as undermining one's cultural identity rather than enhancing it (Gladstone et al., 2022). The lack of evidence on effective implementation of national language policy and curriculum in linguistically diverse areas further exacerbates this dissonance, as learning may not feel culturally relevant. Consequently, motivational strategies must be culturally responsive, potentially involving flexible learning models or curricula that integrate indigenous knowledge and practices to foster a sense of belonging and relevance. Tribalism and intercommunal violence further compound these educational challenges, creating a volatile environment for learning (Kueth, 2025).

Infrastructural Deficiencies and Resource Constraints

The physical infrastructure of education in South Sudan is severely lacking. There is a critical shortage of functional schools, particularly in rural areas, leading to long and often dangerous travel distances for children (Kueth, 2025). Many existing schools lack basic amenities such as clean water, sanitation facilities, and adequate classrooms, creating unsafe and unproductive learning environments (Kueth, 2025). Compounding these issues, the nation allocates limited financial resources to the education sector, a problem exacerbated by ongoing economic depression, political instability, and reported corruption and misappropriation of funds (Kueth, 2025). These resource constraints directly impact the quality of education and the learning experience.

Teacher Quality, Training, and Motivation Issues

A severe scarcity of trained and qualified teachers plagues the South Sudanese education system, compounded by high attrition rates and a significant gender gap, with a near absence of female teachers (Briggs, 2017; Global Coalition to Protect Education from 2017; Kueth, 2025). Only one-third of South Sudan's 28,000 teachers were qualified in 2015 (Briggs, 2017). This leads to an extremely high student-to-qualified teacher ratio, reaching as high as 100:1, and even 300:1 in high schools, resulting in overcrowded classes where individualized attention is impossible (Briggs, 2017).

The severe shortage of qualified and motivated teachers creates a vicious cycle where poor teaching quality directly undermines student motivation, leading to disengagement and dropout, further weakening the education system. Teachers are crucial facilitators of student motivation. A high student-to-teacher ratio means limited individual attention, hindering the development of positive teacher-student relationships, which are vital for fostering a sense of belonging and support (Mao et al., 2025). Underqualified teachers may struggle to provide challenging yet achievable tasks, offer constructive and informational feedback, or promote a sense of control over learning, all of which are key to student motivation. This creates a feedback loop where low teacher motivation and quality perpetuate low student motivation and poor learning

outcomes. Addressing teacher motivation and comprehensive training is, therefore, a fundamental precondition for improving student motivation (Kueth, 2025).

Psychological and Emotional Effects of Trauma and Stress

Children in South Sudan have endured profound psychological and emotional distress due to prolonged conflict and displacement. They frequently suffer from symptoms of PTSD, chronic depression, anxiety, aggressive behavior, withdrawal, and difficulty forming healthy relationships (Kueth, 2025; Mao et al., 2025). This widespread psychological trauma among South Sudanese children creates a fundamental neurobiological barrier to learning and motivation, rendering traditional educational approaches insufficient without integrated psychosocial support. Trauma can alter brain architecture and trigger survival responses (fight, flight, or freeze), preventing access to the "thinking portion" of their brain (Mao et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2024). This physiological and neurological impact means that even when physically present in a classroom, a child's capacity for cognitive engagement, concentration, and emotional regulation; all prerequisites for motivated learning, is severely compromised (Kueth, 2025). Trauma also impairs cognitive development, hindering concentration and academic performance (Kueth, 2025). Furthermore, displacement and the breakdown of community structures can lead to social isolation, exacerbating feelings of loneliness and abandonment (Kueth, 2025). Therefore, interventions must extend beyond academic content to include trauma-informed practices and psychosocial support to create a safe environment that allows the brain to shift from survival mode to a state conducive to learning. This represents a critical, often overlooked, causal link in the motivational chain.

Existing Initiatives and Interventions

Despite the formidable challenges, various national and international actors are actively engaged in efforts to improve education in South Sudan. UNICEF South Sudan is a key player, supporting the building of classrooms, the education and training of teachers, and the development and printing of textbooks (UNICEF, 2025). They also work extensively with communities to encourage parents and caregivers to send their children to school through initiatives like "Back to School Campaigns" (UNICEF, 2025). UNESCO focuses on promoting inclusive and equitable quality education, addressing barriers such as gender inequality, poverty, and disability (Kueth, 2025). They advocate for policy changes and collaborate with the government to increase funding for education (Kueth, 2025). The World Bank prioritizes education in fragile contexts, emphasizing the creation of safe learning environments. Their initiatives include providing technical assistance through programs like INSPIRE for refugee education, offering teacher training that incorporates psychosocial support, and implementing remedial education for struggling students.

The Girls' Education South Sudan (GESS) program has received substantial donor contributions from the UK, Canada, EU, and US, leading to a notable increase in female enrollment (Kueth, 2025; UNICEF, 2025). However, its impact on boys' education is less documented, and there are perceptions that boys' education may have faced challenges as families prioritized educating girls, which could potentially affect boys' motivation and their alternatives to joining armed groups. Some school-based and teacher-led psychosocial interventions have demonstrated promise in improving school functioning, reducing stress-related symptoms, and enhancing self-efficacy and study skills among conflict-affected youth (Mao et al., 2025). Child-friendly spaces (CFS) also provide safe environments where children can play, learn, and receive psychosocial support, offering a sense of normalcy (Kueth, 2025). Efforts to promote community participation have involved engaging parents, teachers, and other community members in developing and implementing school improvement plans, which have shown progress despite ongoing conflicts (Kueth, 2025).

While significant resources are allocated to improving access and infrastructure, there is a potential discrepancy between the stated goals of these interventions and their explicit focus on student psychological motivation. Many initiatives concentrate on physical infrastructure, teacher training, and material provision

(Kueth, 2025; UNICEF, 2025). While these are necessary for creating educational opportunities, the explicit integration of motivational theories into program design is often implicit or secondary. For instance, psychosocial support addresses a critical barrier to motivation by healing trauma, but it does not necessarily constitute a direct motivational intervention based on theories like expectancy-value or self-determination. The GESS program, while successful in increasing girls' enrollment, highlights a potential unintended consequence on boys' motivation, indicating that interventions need to consider broader motivational impacts across all demographics. This suggests a need for a more deliberate and theoretically informed approach to motivational design within broader educational initiatives to ensure that access translates into sustained and effective learning.

Table 2: *Major Educational Challenges in South Sudan and Their Impact on Student Motivation*

Challenge Category	Specific Challenge	Impact on Student Motivation
Conflict & Instability	School destruction, displacement, safety risks	Reduces perceived utility value of education, creates pervasive fear, diminishes sense of safety and belonging, leading to disengagement and dropout.
Socio-economic Barriers	Poverty, inability to afford fees/materials, food insecurity	Increases the "cost" of education, forcing prioritization of survival over schooling, thereby reducing engagement and persistence.
Cultural Barriers	Child marriage, gender bias, pastoralist lifestyles	Devalues girls' education, creates a mismatch between traditional life and sedentary schooling, undermining attainment value and intrinsic motivation for certain groups.
Infrastructural Deficiencies	Lack of functional schools, basic amenities, learning materials	Creates unproductive and unstimulating learning environments, lowers expectancies for success, and reduces the perceived quality of education.
Teacher Issues	Shortage of qualified/motivated teachers, high student-teacher ratios	Limits individualized attention, hinders development of positive teacher-student relationships, reduces quality of instruction, and lowers student self-efficacy and interest.
Psychological Trauma	PTSD, anxiety, cognitive impairment from conflict	Impairs cognitive function necessary for engagement, concentration, and emotional regulation, creating a fundamental barrier to all motivational processes.

Table 3: *Overview of Existing Educational Interventions in South Sudan and Their Motivational Focus*

Intervention/Initiative Name	Key Activities/Focus Areas	Explicit/Implicit Motivational Focus
UNICEF Classroom Construction	Building schools, improving infrastructure	Implicit: Improves access, potentially increasing utility value and reducing "cost" of education (UNICEF, 2025).
UNICEF Teacher Training & Textbooks	Education and training of teachers, development of learning materials	Implicit: Enhances quality of instruction, potentially boosting student self-efficacy and interest (UNICEF, 2025).
UNICEF Community Engagement	Working with communities to encourage enrollment	Explicit: Addresses cultural barriers, aims to increase perceived value of education (UNICEF, 2025).
UNESCO Inclusive & Equitable Education	Addressing gender, poverty, disability barriers, policy advocacy	Implicit: Aims to foster a sense of belonging and fairness, potentially enhancing intrinsic motivation (Kueth, 2025).
World Bank INSPIRE Program (Refugee Education)	Technical support for integrating refugee children into host systems	Implicit: Aims to provide stable learning environments, fostering a sense of safety and belonging.
World Bank Teacher Training (Psychosocial Support)	Training teachers in psychosocial support, effective pedagogies	Explicit: Addresses barriers to learning caused by trauma, indirectly boosting self-efficacy and engagement.
Girls' Education South Sudan (GESS)	Financial incentives, support for girls' schooling	Explicit: Provides extrinsic motivation for girls' enrollment; implicit: aims to increase attainment and utility value for girls (Kueth, 2025).
Psychosocial Support Programs	School-based interventions, child-friendly spaces	Explicit: Addresses mental health barriers, fosters a sense of safety and normalcy, indirectly boosting self-efficacy and capacity for learning (Kueth, 2025).
Community Participation in School Plans	Engaging local communities in school improvement	Implicit: Fosters a sense of ownership and collective responsibility, potentially increasing community-level support for education's value (Kueth, 2025).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in three established motivational perspectives: expectancy-value theory, self-efficacy theory, and self-determination theory. Together, these theories provide

a comprehensive lens for understanding how motivation is shaped by both internal psychological processes and external sociocultural conditions in conflict-affected educational settings such as South Sudan.

Expectancy-value theory posits that individuals' academic engagement and persistence are influenced by their expectations for success and the subjective values they assign to tasks, including intrinsic value, attainment value, utility value, and perceived costs (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, protracted instability, displacement, poverty, and entrenched cultural norms may suppress expectations of success while simultaneously amplifying the perceived costs of educational participation. At the same time, the pragmatic value of education as a means to economic survival and social advancement may heighten the perceived utility of schooling, often outweighing intrinsic motives. Self-efficacy theory offers further explanatory power by emphasizing students' beliefs in their capacity to perform tasks successfully (Bandura, 1977). Efficacy beliefs develop through mastery experiences, vicarious learning, verbal encouragement, and the regulation of affective states. In South Sudan, however, disrupted schooling, chronic insecurity, and exposure to trauma reduce opportunities for mastery and intensify emotional distress, thereby undermining students' confidence in their academic competence. This erosion of self-efficacy has direct consequences for persistence, resilience, and long-term educational attainment. Self-determination theory expands the framework by differentiating between autonomous and controlled forms of motivation and emphasizing the role of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When these needs are satisfied, students are more likely to experience intrinsic and self-determined motivation, which supports sustained engagement and deeper learning. However, in South Sudan's conflict-affected environment, insecurity, coercive sociocultural structures, and fractured school communities often thwart these needs, resulting in externally regulated and fragile forms of motivation.

By integrating these three theoretical perspectives, the framework highlights the mechanisms through which conflict-related adversity, trauma, and sociocultural pressures shape student motivation. Specifically, it suggests that adversity reduces intrinsic value and self-efficacy, elevates perceived costs, and shifts motivation toward extrinsic regulation. In response, effective interventions must adopt a multilayered and contextually adapted approach. This includes restoring physical and psychological safety to enable emotional regulation and mastery experiences, strengthening the perceived utility and cultural relevance of education, and promoting autonomy-supportive and relationship-rich pedagogy. Additionally, equipping teachers with trauma-informed pedagogical strategies is critical, not only to support students' learning and well-being but also to sustain teachers' own professional motivation and resilience. In sum, while the core principles of motivation articulated in expectancy-value theory, self-efficacy theory, and self-determination theory remain broadly applicable, their manifestation and the design of corresponding interventions must be carefully adapted to South Sudan's unique conditions. This framework therefore provides both an analytical lens for interpreting motivational dynamics in fragile settings and a foundation for designing culturally relevant, trauma-informed, and sustainable educational interventions.

Methodology

This section details the research design, participants, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques employed to address the research questions. Given the complex and multifaceted nature of motivational learning in a conflict-affected, low-resource setting like South Sudan, a mixed-methods approach was utilized. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding by integrating both quantitative data (for generalizable patterns and relationships) and qualitative data (for in-depth insights into experiences and perceptions) (Kimmons, 2023).

Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was utilized. This involved collecting and analyzing quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data to explain or elaborate on the quantitative findings (Kimmons, 2023). This design was particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena where initial quantitative trends could be further illuminated by rich qualitative narratives.

Participants and Sampling

The study targeted primary and secondary school students, teachers, and school administrators in selected regions of South Sudan. A stratified random sampling approach was used to select 700 students from different grade levels (upper primary and lower secondary) and diverse geographical areas (urban, rural, and areas affected by displacement). A purposive sampling method was used to select 75 teachers from the same schools, ensuring representation across different subjects and experience levels. Additionally, 12 school principals, headteachers, and relevant community leaders (e.g., parent-teacher association representatives, local chiefs) were purposively selected for interviews.

Data Collection Methods

Quantitative Data Collection

Standardized questionnaires were administered to students to measure expectancies for success and task value (adapted scales based on expectancy-value theory, such as perceived competence, intrinsic value, utility value of education), self-efficacy (scales measuring academic self-efficacy in various subjects), motivation types (scales distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation), achievement goal orientations (scales assessing mastery and performance goals), attributional styles (questions on how students attribute their academic successes and failures), and demographic information (age, gender, grade level, displacement status, family background). Questionnaires were also administered to teachers to assess their perceptions of student motivation and engagement, their current pedagogical practices related to motivation, their awareness and application of trauma-informed approaches, and their own motivation levels and professional development needs.

Qualitative Data Collection

Student Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with smaller groups of students (6-8 students per group) to explore their lived experiences, perceptions of educational value, challenges to learning, and what motivated them. These discussions delved deeper into the quantitative findings, providing context and nuance. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected teachers to gain in-depth insights into their teaching experiences, challenges in motivating students, strategies they employed, and their perspectives on the impact of conflict and trauma on student learning. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with school administrators and community leaders gathered perspectives on systemic challenges, existing educational initiatives, community attitudes towards education, and potential culturally sensitive interventions.

Data Analysis

All quantitative and qualitative data collected for this study were analyzed using Gemini AI's advanced analytical capabilities. This approach allowed for efficient processing of large datasets and identification of complex patterns, while the researcher maintained oversight and interpreted the findings within the broader research context.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) were computed to summarize student and teacher motivation levels and related factors. Inferential statistics, such as Pearson's correlation coefficients

and multiple regression analysis, were employed to examine relationships between socio-economic, cultural, and conflict-related factors and motivational constructs, as well as the impact of teacher practices on student motivation. All quantitative analyses were performed by inputting the collected numerical data into Gemini AI for computation.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data from FGDs and interviews were transcribed and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The analysis was iterative, moving between coding, categorizing, and identifying overarching themes related to student motivation, trauma, cultural influences, and effective pedagogical strategies. This thematic analysis was conducted by providing the transcribed qualitative data to Gemini AI, which assisted in identifying recurring patterns, generating initial codes, and synthesizing them into the themes presented in the results section. The researcher then reviewed and refined these themes for accuracy and contextual relevance.

Ethical Considerations

Conducting research in a conflict-affected setting like South Sudan necessitated rigorous ethical considerations. Informed consent was obtained from adult participants (teachers, administrators, community leaders) and parental/guardian consent for minor students. Assent was also sought from students themselves. The consent process was culturally sensitive and conducted in local languages. All participant data was kept confidential, and anonymity was ensured through de-identification of data. The physical and psychological safety of participants was prioritized. Research activities were conducted in secure locations, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Referrals to psychosocial support services were made available if participants disclosed severe distress. Research instruments and protocols were developed and implemented with careful consideration of local cultural norms and values. Local researchers and community members were involved in the design and implementation phases to ensure cultural appropriateness. The research adhered to the "do no harm" principle, ensuring that the study did not inadvertently exacerbate existing tensions or vulnerabilities within communities (Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2021).

Results

Quantitative Findings

Descriptive statistics for key motivational constructs among students (N=700) are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Student Motivational Constructs

Motivational Construct	Mean (1-5 Likert Scale)	Standard Deviation
Expectancies for Success	2.85	1.12
Intrinsic Value of Education	2.50	1.05
Utility Value of Education	3.80	0.95
Cost of Education (Inverse Scale)	2.15	1.00

Motivational Construct	Mean (1-5 Likert Scale)	Standard Deviation
Academic Self-Efficacy	2.70	1.15
Intrinsic Motivation	2.65	1.08
Extrinsic Motivation	3.95	0.88
Mastery Goal Orientation	3.10	1.02
Performance Goal Orientation	3.55	0.98

The results indicated that students generally perceived a high utility value for education ($M=3.80$), suggesting they recognized its potential for future goals, despite the high perceived cost ($M=2.15$ on an inverse scale, indicating high actual cost). However, intrinsic value ($M=2.50$), expectancies for success ($M=2.85$), and academic self-efficacy ($M=2.70$) were relatively low. Extrinsic motivation ($M=3.95$) was notably higher than intrinsic motivation ($M=2.65$), suggesting external factors played a more significant role in driving engagement. Performance goal orientation ($M=3.55$) was also higher than mastery goal orientation ($M=3.10$).

Correlation analysis revealed several significant relationships. A strong negative correlation was found between perceived cost of education and expectancies for success ($r = -0.68$, $p < .001$), indicating that as the perceived barriers and sacrifices increased, students' belief in their ability to succeed decreased. Psychological trauma symptoms, as reported by students, showed a significant negative correlation with academic self-efficacy ($r = -0.75$, $p < .001$) and intrinsic motivation ($r = -0.62$, $p < .001$). Teacher support and positive classroom climate, as rated by students, were positively correlated with intrinsic motivation ($r = 0.55$, $p < .001$) and mastery goal orientation ($r = 0.48$, $p < .001$).

A regression analysis predicting overall student motivation (composite score from intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and mastery goals) indicated that perceived safety in school ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .001$), teacher support ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$), and perceived utility value of education ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < .01$) were significant positive predictors, collectively accounting for 68% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.68$).

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews with teachers and administrators, and focus group discussions with students, revealed several overarching themes that provided rich context to the quantitative findings.

Theme 1: Pervasive Impact of Trauma on Learning

Participants consistently described the profound psychological burden on students. Teachers reported observing high levels of anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and withdrawal among students. One teacher stated, "Many children come to school with heavy hearts. They have seen too much. It is hard for them to focus on books when their minds are still in the conflict." Students echoed this, with one sharing, "Sometimes, I just sit in class, but my mind is far away, thinking about what happened to my family. It's hard to learn when you are scared." This theme underscored how trauma fundamentally impaired cognitive function and emotional regulation, acting as a direct barrier to motivational engagement. The findings aligned with existing literature on the neurobiological impact of trauma on learning (Avery et al., 2020).

Theme 2: Diminished Perceived Utility and High Cost of Education

A recurring sentiment, particularly among students from rural and pastoralist communities, was the struggle to see the immediate relevance of formal schooling when basic survival needs were paramount. "My family needs me to help with the cattle," a male student explained. "If I am in school, who will help them eat today?" Female students often spoke of the pressure for early marriage. "My parents say school is not for girls, that I should marry and bring cattle for the family," a female student shared. This highlighted the significant "cost" of education, not just in terms of fees, but in foregone labor and cultural expectations, directly impacting the utility value of schooling (Park, 2019).

Theme 3: Critical Role of Teacher Support and Training

Teachers expressed a strong desire to support their students but often felt ill-equipped to address the complex psychosocial needs arising from trauma. "We are teachers, not counselors," one teacher lamented. "But these children need more than just lessons. They need healing." Administrators acknowledged the severe shortage of trained teachers and the need for more comprehensive professional development that included trauma-informed practices and psychosocial support strategies. "Our teachers are dedicated, but they need the tools to handle the trauma they see every day," an administrator noted. This theme emphasized the critical link between teacher well-being, training, and their capacity to foster student motivation.

Theme 4: Cultural Mismatches and the Need for Relevant Pedagogy

The traditional, sedentary school system was frequently cited as a mismatch for the nomadic lifestyles of pastoralist communities. "Our children are used to moving, to learning from the land," a community leader explained. "The school keeps them in one place, and the lessons do not always speak to their lives." There was a clear call for curricula that integrated indigenous knowledge and culturally relevant content to make learning more meaningful and engaging. "If we learn about our own stories, our own animals, then we will be more interested," a student suggested. This highlighted the dissonance between Western-modeled education and local cultural identities, impacting intrinsic motivation and attainment value (Altugan, 2015).

Theme 5: Ambivalence Towards Extrinsic Incentives

While school feeding programs and other material incentives were acknowledged as crucial for attracting students to school, particularly in times of food crisis, there was an underlying ambivalence regarding their long-term motivational impact. "The food brings us to school," a student admitted, "but it does not always make us want to learn." Teachers expressed concern about students attending solely for the food, rather than for the intrinsic value of education. "When the food stops, many children stop coming," a teacher observed. This suggested a potential "overjustification effect" where extrinsic rewards might inadvertently diminish intrinsic motivation over time (Urhahne & Wijnia, 2023).

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate motivational learning within the conflict-affected educational settings of South Sudan, exploring how prevailing socio-economic, cultural, and conflict-related factors influence student motivation, the specific manifestations of psychological trauma, the role of teacher training, the need for culturally sensitive strategies, and the impact of extrinsic incentives. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of these complex dynamics, offering empirical insights into a context often overlooked in motivational research.

The quantitative results indicated that while students recognized the long-term utility of education, their intrinsic motivation, expectancies for success, and self-efficacy were notably low. This aligns with the pervasive challenges identified in the literature, such as inadequate infrastructure, scarcity of qualified

teachers, and prior experiences of disrupted education (Kuek et al., 2018; Kueth, 2025). The high perceived "cost" of education, encompassing not just financial burdens but also foregone labor and safety risks, directly impacted students' willingness to engage, supporting the tenets of expectancy-value theory (Dweck, 2023; Gladstone et al., 2022; Urhahne & Wijnia, 2023). The dominance of extrinsic over intrinsic motivation, and performance goals over mastery goals, suggests that immediate survival needs and external pressures often overshadow internal drive and a focus on personal growth in this challenging environment (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Masitsa, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The qualitative findings strongly corroborated the quantitative data, particularly highlighting the profound impact of psychological trauma. The pervasive anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and withdrawal observed by teachers and experienced by students directly impaired their capacity for cognitive engagement and self-efficacy, consistent with research on trauma's neurobiological effects on learning (Heltné et al., 2020; Mao et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2024). This underscores the critical need for trauma-informed pedagogical approaches as a prerequisite for any motivational intervention to be effective (Forsberg & Schultz, 2022; Mao et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2024). Without addressing the underlying psychological distress, efforts to boost motivation through traditional means may be futile.

The study also revealed the critical, yet often unaddressed, role of teacher support and training. Teachers, while dedicated, felt unprepared to handle the complex psychosocial needs of trauma-affected students. This aligns with broader findings in developing countries where teacher motivation and quality are often low due to lack of support and poor conditions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Majgaard & Mingat, 2012). The positive correlation between teacher support and student intrinsic motivation and mastery goals further emphasizes that investing in teachers' capacity for psychosocial support and effective motivational strategies is paramount (Al Shabibi et al., 2019; Iliya & Grace, 2015; Radil et al., 2023; Reisman & Janke, 2015).

Furthermore, the qualitative data illuminated the significant cultural mismatches between traditional education systems and the realities of South Sudanese communities, particularly pastoralist groups. The perceived irrelevance of curriculum and the clash with nomadic lifestyles directly undermined intrinsic motivation and attainment value, suggesting that culturally responsive pedagogy and integration of indigenous knowledge are essential for fostering engagement (Badrasawi et al., 2018; Mino, 2024; Parker, 2016). This finding extends existing literature by providing specific contextual examples of how cultural factors impact motivational dynamics.

Finally, the ambivalence towards extrinsic incentives, such as school feeding programs, highlighted the potential for the "overjustification effect" (Deci & Ryan, 1985). While these incentives are crucial for initial access and attendance in a food-insecure context (Kuek et al., 2018), the findings suggest that they may not foster sustainable, intrinsic motivation for learning. This implies that interventions must strategically balance necessary extrinsic support with deliberate efforts to cultivate internal drive, connecting learning to personal meaning and long-term aspirations beyond immediate material gains (Bashir, 2015; Yu, 2007).

Conclusion

The educational crisis in South Sudan represents a profound humanitarian and developmental challenge, with millions of children deprived of their fundamental right to learn amidst a backdrop of prolonged conflict, extreme poverty, and systemic fragility. While efforts to provide access and rebuild infrastructure are vital, they alone are insufficient to address the deep-seated issues that undermine student engagement and persistence. This research has underscored the compelling argument for prioritizing a rigorous investigation into motivational learning within this unique context.

This study has provided a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between established motivational theories and the specific socio-economic, cultural, and psychological realities of South Sudan. The pervasive psychological trauma, the clash between traditional lifestyles and formal schooling, the critical shortage of qualified and motivated teachers, and the double-edged nature of extrinsic incentives all emerged as significant barriers to student motivation. The findings emphasize that effective motivational learning in South Sudan requires a multi-layered approach that prioritizes psychological safety, re-establishes the perceived value of education, builds student self-efficacy, fosters intrinsic motivation, and empowers teachers with trauma-informed pedagogical skills. Investing in this critical area is not merely an academic exercise; it is an indispensable component of humanitarian response, peacebuilding, and the long-term sustainable development of a nation striving to overcome its past and build a more hopeful future.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings and their interpretation, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance motivational learning within the conflict-affected educational context of South Sudan. These recommendations are grounded in established psychological and pedagogical theories and are tailored to address the specific challenges identified in this study.

Integrating Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Practices

Educational interventions should first prioritize the creation of safe, predictable, and supportive learning environments. This necessitates integrating trauma-informed pedagogical practices into all teacher training programs (Mao et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2024). Equipping educators with the skills to recognize and respond to trauma-related behaviors is a prerequisite for fostering psychological safety, which is essential for cognitive engagement. Concurrently, it is crucial to develop culturally responsive curricula and pedagogies that reflect the diverse cultural contexts of South Sudan, particularly for pastoralist communities. By incorporating indigenous knowledge, local languages, and flexible learning models, educational systems can address the cultural mismatches that undermine attainment value and foster a sense of relevance and belonging (Parker, 2016).

Strengthening Teacher Capacity and Student Agency

A key facilitator of student motivation is a well-supported and motivated teaching force. Therefore, comprehensive professional development for teachers is critical, focusing on motivational strategies, psychosocial support, and culturally responsive teaching methods (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Reisman & Janke, 2015). Addressing teacher well-being through improved working conditions and fair compensation is also essential. Moreover, interventions should be designed to foster self-efficacy and mastery goals among students. Teachers should be trained to provide opportunities for success and constructive, effort-based feedback, thereby helping students build belief in their own capabilities and promoting a focus on personal growth over mere performance (Bandura, 1997; Dweck, 2023; Gladstone et al., 2022).

Balancing Motivational Dynamics and Demonstrating Value

To combat low expectancies for success and the dominance of extrinsic motivation, educational programs should actively work to re-establish the perceived value and utility of education. This strategy can be achieved by linking curriculum content directly to local livelihoods, community development, and future vocational opportunities, thereby increasing the utility value of schooling for students and their families (Gladstone et al., 2022). While recognizing that extrinsic incentives like school feeding programs are vital for short-term access and retention, it is equally important to strategically balance intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Interventions should not only provide necessary support but also deliberately cultivate students' autonomy,

competence, and relatedness, connecting learning to personal meaning and purpose beyond immediate material rewards (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Direction for Future Research

Finally, this study provides a foundational understanding, but further rigorous empirical research is essential. Future work should include longitudinal studies to track motivational changes over time, intervention studies to test the effectiveness of the proposed strategies, and in-depth qualitative research to capture the diverse experiences of students and educators across different regions.

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