

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Research Summary



Trauma-informed pedagogy

In 2024 and 2025, the Canadian NGO CODE commissioned a series of African research studies in partnership with Global Affairs Canada, to help build the regional evidence-base on what works to improve literacy and learning outcomes for children in refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) communities. Some of these studies looked at the role of a trauma-informed pedagogy in supporting children’s education in emergencies.



Across many crisis-affected communities in Africa, children arrive at school carrying the emotional effects of conflict, displacement, and instability. These experiences shape how children behave and learn in the classroom. Research in **Rwanda’s** Mahama Refugee Camp found that many displaced learners struggle with trauma-related symptoms such as anger, withdrawal, and anxiety, which can make it difficult for them to engage in lessons. As researcher Dr. Alphonse Uworwabayeho explains, “widespread emotional distress... negatively affected classroom behavior and academic engagement.” His study also found that trauma is often reinforced by difficult home environments, including family instability and insecurity, highlighting the importance of involving parents and communities in supporting children’s recovery and learning.

Research from **Nigeria** shows similar challenges for children living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. According to Dr. Rahila Gowon, “children attempt to learn in extremely difficult conditions like crowded classrooms, with limited learning materials, emotional trauma from conflict, and unstable living environments.” Her research demonstrates that responsive pedagogy—teaching methods that adapt to students’ cultural, emotional, and real-life experiences—can significantly improve learning. Gowon found that when teachers use trauma-sensitive approaches and link literacy lessons to practical life skills, students become more engaged, gain confidence, and show improvements in reading, writing, and numeracy.

Environmental crises can create similar disruptions to learning. Research in the flood-affected Volta Region of **Ghana** found that repeated disruptions also increased pressure on teachers and school leaders who were not always prepared to respond. As Fr. Raymond Tangonyire notes, “destruction of teaching and learning resources, overcrowded and poorly lit classrooms negatively affected literacy and numeracy.” His study recommends that education systems include trauma-informed pedagogy and psychosocial support training in teacher preparation so educators can better support students during crises.



In conflict-affected eastern **Democratic Republic of Congo**, research also shows that schools can play an important stabilizing role for displaced children. Even in the midst of conflict, schools often provide one of the few structured and predictable environments available to children. However, learning materials rarely reflect students’ lived experiences of displacement. Dr. Justin Sheria Nfundiko’s research highlights this gap, noting that “most existing materials are not adapted to displacement contexts, rarely reflecting children’s lived experiences of conflict, trauma, and mobility.” He suggests that literacy materials that integrate peace education and reflect children’s realities could help strengthen both learning and social cohesion between displaced learners and host communities.

Taken together, these studies show that literacy programs in crisis contexts must go beyond traditional teaching methods. Trauma-informed and responsive pedagogy can help teachers recognize the emotional realities students face and adapt learning to their needs. When classrooms become safe, supportive spaces, they can help children rebuild confidence, reconnect with learning, and begin to recover from the disruptions of crisis.

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