

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Policy Brief



Riding the Waves to Quality and Inclusive Education Amidst Displaced Learners through Trauma-Informed Teaching Approach: A case of Mahama Refugee Camp

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Executive summary

This policy brief presents key findings and actionable recommendations from the study titled “Riding the Waves to Quality and Inclusive Education Amidst Displaced Learners Through Trauma-Informed Teaching Approach: A Case of Mahama Refugee Camp.”

Specifically, the study intended to:

- identify traumatic symptoms found in refugee learners in the Mahama Refugee Camp,
- analyse the effect of traumatic behavior on effective learning for learners,
- explore causes of trauma-related behaviors among learners,
- investigate the teachers’ effectiveness in applying trauma-informed pedagogy, and
- investigate the teachers’ self-efficacy and preparedness in applying trauma-informed pedagogy.

Barriers to the implementation of trauma-informed pedagogy were also identified. This policy brief highlights how trauma-informed teaching can strengthen quality, equity, and inclusion in refugee education contexts. Data was collected in three phases (first term, mid-term, and end-term).

The initial data collected from the camp revealed symptoms of trauma-related issues, their application, and challenges affecting learners’ educational participation and performance. The most prevalent symptom reported was difficulty engaging in learning due to overwhelming stress (20.73%), followed by difficulty controlling emotions (19.51%), reflecting high emotional distress. Social and behavioral concerns were also evident, including challenges collaborating with peers (14.63%), loss of interest in enjoyable activities (13.41%), and anger/irritability (10.98%). Anxiety-related symptoms such as insomnia (6.10%) and being easily frightened (6.10%) were common, while indicators of post-traumatic stress, such as intrusive memories (4.88%) and hypervigilance (3.66%), were less frequent but notable.

This study examined the implementation of trauma-informed pedagogy among 29 teachers in Mahama Refugee Camp through lesson observation. Findings reveal meaningful progress, yet significant gaps remain in translating training into high-level classroom practice. Only 53% of teachers demonstrated high ability to recognize trauma signs, while 47% operated at moderate levels. Teachers show relative strength in fostering peer respect (48% very high) and fairness (34% very high). However, emotional expression remains underdeveloped, with only 7% reaching very high in facilitating student emotional expression, and 28% remained low in encouraging difficult emotional conversations.

During the end-of-term assessment, the progress revealed meaningful progress in the implementation of trauma-informed pedagogy at Mahama Refugee Camp, reflected in both quantitative and qualitative data. Student survey results show strong relational safety and emotional support in classrooms. Most students (83%) report feeling

comfortable sharing their feelings, 78% trust their teacher and feel cared for, and 84% feel more motivated due to their teacher's approach. Similarly, 86% feel safe and supported, and 86% believe all students are treated regardless of background. These findings suggest that most teachers successfully foster inclusive, respectful, and emotionally responsive learning environments.

Focus group discussions deepen this understanding. Students described teachers who notice emotional distress and respond with care. One student explained, *"One day, I cried because I missed my parents."* However, students also appreciated practical calming strategies: *"We learned to breathe in and out slowly. We sang a soft song. It made us feel happy again."* These testimonies illustrate how emotional validation and regulation strategies are embedded in classroom routines.

Teachers' self-efficacy data reinforce these positive perceptions. Most report high confidence in building trust (90%), promoting belonging (95%), adapting instruction for distressed learners (93%), and reducing anxiety (90%). As one teacher reflected, *"Now I try to understand the reason behind the students' behavior instead of getting angry."* Another added, *"I now try to look beyond the behavior and understand what might be causing it."* However, gaps remain. Only 64% of students feel teachers effectively calm them when upset, and 61% observe varied strategies during stressful academic moments.

Context

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and a powerful driver of social transformation, economic development, and individual well-being (UNESCO, 2021). However, refugee learners often face overwhelming barriers to accessing and benefiting from quality education. These include inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, language difficulties, economic hardship, and, crucially, the psychological impact of trauma (MINEMA & UNHCR, 2021). Globally, over half of all school-aged refugee children remain out of school, and only 6% go on to access higher education (MINEMA & UNHCR, 2021).

In sub-Saharan Africa, where many countries host large, displaced populations, education systems are frequently overstretched and under-resourced. Rwanda, with its own historical legacy of displacement, currently hosts over 126,000 refugees, mainly from Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022). There are also a few students from South Sudan, Pakistan, and Ethiopia. Mahama Refugee Camp, the largest in Rwanda, is home to more than 47,000 refugees, with a significant portion of whom are school-aged children. This made the findings more representative of the varied experiences of refugee learners. Despite Rwanda's inclusive education policies, schools in Mahama Camp continue to face severe challenges, including teacher shortages, limited psychosocial support services, and a lack of trauma-sensitive teaching strategies (Zraly & Kagoyire, 2021)

The study was carried out in five cluster schools that serve learners residing in Mahama Refugee Camp, in Kirehe district, one of the largest refugee settlements in Rwanda. The camp is in rural areas and in Kirehe District, Eastern Province of Rwanda. Although there are currently five schools serving learners in the study context, this was not the case initially. The education provision began with a single institution, known as Groupe Scolaire Paysannat L. The school enrolled in a very large student population exceeding 1,000 learners. To enhance school management and improve service delivery, the school was subsequently divided into two clusters, named Groupe Scolaire Paysannat LA and LB. As the number of refugee learners continued to increase rapidly over time, two schools were expanded to five clusters: GS Paysannat LA, LB, LC, LD, and LE. The first four schools are located within the same compound, while GS Paysannat LE is situated approximately 500 meters away from the main cluster of schools.

Methodology

Design

The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell et al., 2003), wherein quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and analyzed independently. Data was collected concurrently to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Data was collected in three phases (first phase, second phase, and third phase). During the first phase, quantitative data were obtained using a structured questionnaire administered to teachers. The questionnaire was designed to capture information regarding how teachers recognize the physical, social, emotional, and psychological effects of trauma on learners, the perceived causes of these challenges, and how such trauma manifests in classroom behavior and learning engagement. In the second phase, a classroom observation checklist was used to explore the teachers' preparedness for a trauma-informed teaching approach. Besides, qualitative data were gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) with learners. The FGDs were conducted in small groups of 7 learners to foster open dialogue and encourage participants to express their views with the support provided by teachers within the school setting. In the third phase, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from teachers to assess their insights on trauma-informed pedagogy after training on this learning pedagogy.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including the calculation of percentages, frequencies, means, and standard deviations. This analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel 2016, which facilitated the clear presentation and interpretation of learners' responses. Qualitative data collected from focus group discussions and interviews with parents and students were transcribed, systematically organized, and analyzed through thematic analysis. This method involved identifying, coding, and interpreting recurring patterns and themes within the data. The analysis

was supported by Taguette, open-source qualitative analysis software, which enabled rigorous and systematic coding of the textual data.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Rwanda, College of Education. In addition, permission to conduct the research was granted by the local authorities of Kirehe District. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained from both parents and teachers. For student participants, assent was also obtained. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Throughout the research process, confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and participants were assured that all responses would be used exclusively for academic purposes.

Key Findings

This methodological approach was chosen to ensure a comprehensive and balanced understanding of the educational experiences and perceptions of learners, teachers, and parents within the context of Mahama Refugee Camp. Below are the key findings.

Refugee learners show symptoms of trauma

The analysis of the data on traumatic symptoms among refugee learners in Mahama Refugee Camp reveals a range of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive challenges that negatively impact learners' educational participation and performance. The results in Figure 1 show different signs of trauma affecting refugee learners in Mahama Refugee Camp.

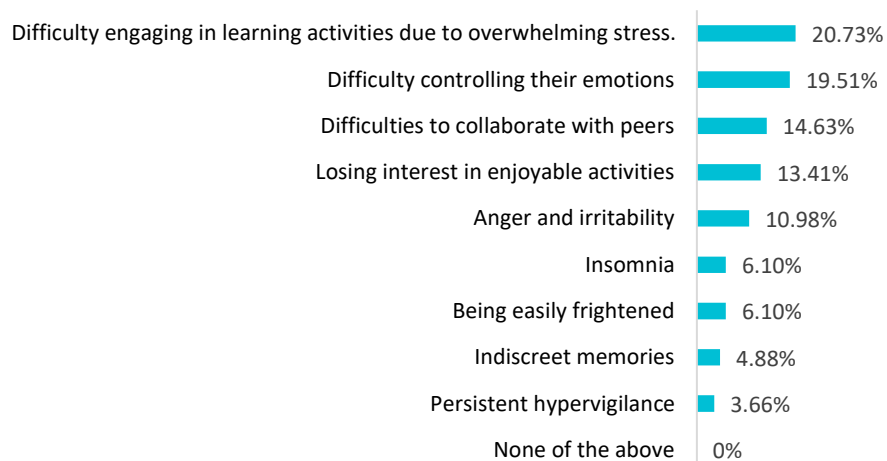


Figure 1. The identified signs of trauma in learners (in percentages)

The most reported difficulty is engaging in learning activities due to overwhelming stress (20.73%), closely followed by difficulty controlling emotions (19.51%), suggesting that emotional regulation and stress management are major concerns. Additionally,

14.63% of students report difficulties collaborating with peers, which may reflect the social impact of emotional distress in the classroom. A notable 13.41% indicate losing interest in enjoyable activities, while 10.98% experience anger and irritability, both of which can negatively influence academic performance and relationships. Sleep-related and anxiety symptoms are also present, with 6.10% reporting insomnia and another 6.10% being easily frightened. The findings highlight a widespread need for emotional support and stress management interventions among students.

During FGD, learners provided insights demonstrating traumatic symptoms. Learners argued that in the camp, they do not sleep well since they sometimes hear disputes outside their shelter. This also makes learners feel unsafe and disturbs their sleep. A learner 1 from school C witnessed: *"I feel scared at night when I hear people talking outside or fighting in the camp. One night, I woke up because two people were quarrelling (arguing loudly) outside. I spent many hours without sleeping because I was thinking that something bad would happen to us."*

Trauma affects refugee learner's behaviors

Figure 2 highlights the key factors that teachers believe contribute to trauma-related behaviors among refugee learners in Mahama Refugee Camp.

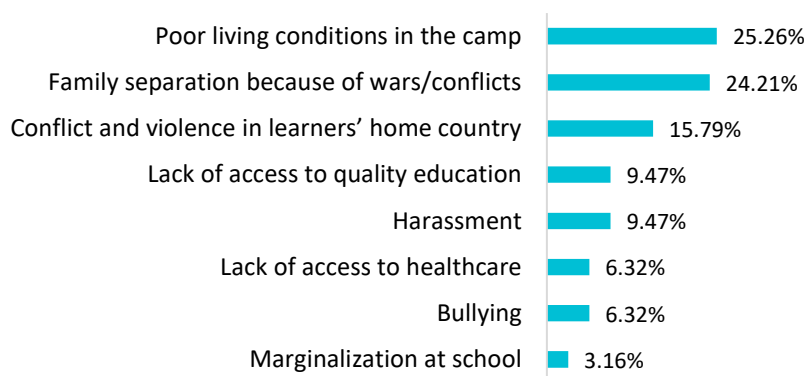


Figure 2. Causes of trauma-related behaviors among learners

The most cited causes were poor living conditions in the camp (25.26%) and family separation due to wars or conflicts (24.21%). Conflict and violence in learners' home countries was also significant (15.79%).

Data from FGD with learners showed that some of the causes of trauma in learners are rooted in bad memories of what happened during the war, like seeing the images of people being killed. Learners also feel anxious when hearing people talking about war. For instance, A learner 2 from School C argued: *"When we were fleeing our homeland, I saw people killing a person. I also felt I was the next to be killed. It reminds me also of what happened to my family, and I stop paying attention."*

Traumatic behaviors affect learning

The results in Figure 3 highlight the psychological and emotional effects of traumatic behavior on the effective learning of refugee learners.

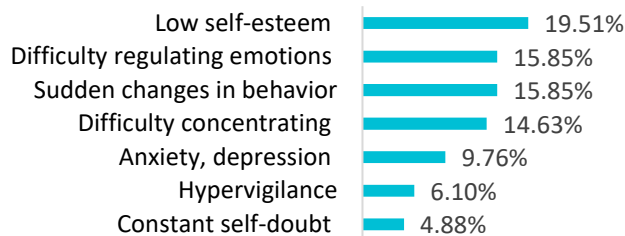


Figure 3. Psychological and emotional effects of traumatic behaviors

The most frequently reported impacts include low self-esteem (19.51%), difficulty regulating emotions (15.85%), and sudden changes in behavior (15.85%), all of which significantly hinder learners' capacity to engage and perform academically. Other notable effects include difficulty concentrating (14.63%), anxiety and depression (9.76%), hypervigilance (6.10%), and constant self-doubt (4.88%).

Teachers can apply trauma-informed pedagogy

Twenty-nine teachers were observed while teaching different subjects to Primary (Grade 5) students. Different observations were made. Data from lesson observation showed that teachers can identify trauma in students, promote peer support and positive social interaction, create a safe and inclusive classroom, and address social and emotional needs.

In the survey given to students, it was found that 86% of students feel safe and supported, and 83% believe their teachers promote respectful collaboration, which reflects strong classroom management and emotional safety. Additionally, 81% agree that their teacher helps improve peer communication, and 86% feel that all students are treated regardless of background, indicating equitable and inclusive practices. There is a need to reinforce consistency and extend these practices to ensure that all students feel equally included, respected, and supported.

Effective teachers provide active emotional support

Teachers were also assessed for their self-efficacy and their preparedness to apply trauma-informed pedagogy. Figure 6 represents data about the teachers' active emotional support and individualized responses.

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy for Refugee Learners

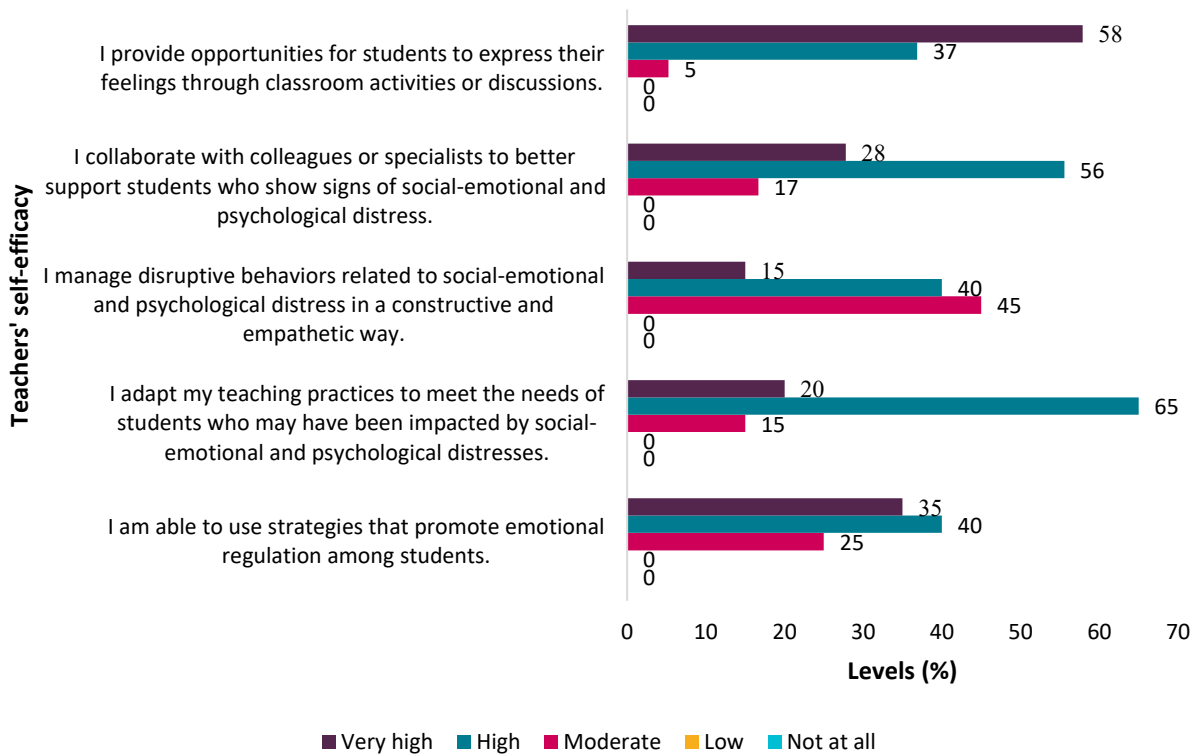


Figure 4. Teachers' active emotional support and individualized responses

The data in Figure 4 indicate that most teachers demonstrate strong capacities in providing active emotional support and individualized responses. Notably, 95% rate themselves to provide opportunities for students to express their feelings, reflecting a high commitment to emotional openness in the classroom. Similarly, 93% adopt teaching practices for students affected by emotional distress, and 84% use strategies that promote emotional regulation. However, managing disruptive behaviors empathetically shows a weaker area, with only 55% and 45% suggesting discomfort or uncertainty in handling emotionally driven disruptions. This points to a strong foundation in proactive emotional support, but also a need for focused training on trauma-informed behavior management strategies.

Limited resources affect trauma-informed pedagogy

Despite the positive outcomes, teachers faced several challenges. Overcrowded classrooms, lack of materials, and uneven training access across staff limited full implementation. During the interview, Teacher 1 argued, *"One challenge is the lack of resources. We don't have enough space or materials to create safe and quiet corners. Also, not all teachers in the school received the training. Therefore, this teaching approach is not common for all lessons in all classes."* Addressing these challenges requires investment in teacher-student ratios, resources like emotional regulation tools, and whole-school training models.

Key recommendations

The implementation of trauma-informed teaching practices within the target schools demonstrated promising initial outcomes in creating emotionally safe and supportive learning environments for learners, particularly those affected by trauma. Both teachers and students reported positive experiences, including improved classroom relationships, greater emotional awareness, and increased student engagement. To build on these initial successes, the following key recommendations are proposed:

1. Provide continuous professional development and mentorship for teachers to reinforce and expand trauma-sensitive instructional strategies.
2. Involve school leaders and parents more actively in trauma-informed initiatives to strengthen community-wide support for learners.
3. Integrate trauma-informed approaches into national teacher training programs to ensure widespread adoption and sustainability.
4. Develop monitoring tools and feedback mechanisms to track progress and guide ongoing improvement in trauma-informed education practices.
5. Encourage peer learning among teachers through professional learning communities or exchange visits to promote the sharing of effective practices.

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