

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Policy Brief



Stakeholder Experiences and Agentic Efforts Towards Achieving Quality Literacy Education in the Conflict- Laden Bawku Municipality of the Upper East Region of Ghana

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Executive Summary

This policy brief synthesises findings from a qualitative phenomenological case study, which examined how education stakeholders sustain quality literacy education in the conflict-affected Bawku Municipality of Ghana's Upper East Region. Although Ghana has made progress in expanding access to education, Bawku remains a fragile and highly unstable context marked by recurring ethnic and chieftaincy conflicts. In this environment of war, schooling is repeatedly disrupted by gunfire, fear, displacement, teacher turnover, and material shortages. The study was conducted against the backdrop of this war, and focused on a critical but underexplored question: how do stakeholders actively respond to these conflict-inspired disruptions to sustain literacy education?

Using a phenomenological design informed by Bandura's theory of human agency, the study engaged 58 stakeholders, including headteachers, teachers, learners, parents, and School Improvement Support Officers (SISOs), across five basic schools. Data were mainly gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions.

The findings revealed that the conflict severely undermines literacy education through school closures, interrupted lessons, psychological distress, and shortages of teachers, furniture, and learning resources, intensifying inequalities among learners. Additionally, the research findings showed that stakeholders respond to these disruptions with strong agentic strategies – they extend contact hours, organise weekend and remedial classes, decentralise learning into safer community spaces, support home-based reading, leverage technology where available, and rely on faith, resilience, and cultural commitments to keep literacy education alive. Again, the data presented intentionally developed healthy and purpose-driven inter-stakeholder relationships among parents, teachers, chiefs, and local leaders resulted in active multi-stakeholder collaboration in supervising learning, providing resources, and recruiting volunteer teachers, which contributed to sustaining literacy education. The findings also indicated that although the conflict limits the frequency and reach of professional development (PD) opportunities for teachers, mutual support through the Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) initiative, enhanced teachers' confidence, emotional resilience, and instructional skills.

Based on these findings, we conclude that literacy education in the conflict-laden Bawku is sustained by determined, coordinated, and adaptive human efforts operating under severe constraints. Literacy education is sustained through agentic collaborations (i.e., a combination of individual, collective, relational, and moral efforts) that exercise initiative, creativity, and responsibility to protect children's learning futures.

Thus, we proffer the following recommendations to improve policy and practice regarding quality literacy education in the Bawku Municipality and other conflict-informed fragile contexts in Ghana:

1. The Ministry of Education (MoE) should adopt conflict-responsive policies that allow for flexible timetables, decentralised learning, and home-based literacy support for learners.
2. MoE, and the Ghana Education Service (GES) and its agencies should make concerted efforts to ensure that education policy formally integrates Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), chiefs, assembly members, and local leaders as partners in sustaining schooling and peacebuilding.
3. MoE should ensure that sustained funding for PLCs and context-sensitive teacher development programmes is prioritised for schools operating in fragile contexts, such as conflicts.
4. Education, security, and social welfare agencies must coordinate more closely with each other to protect schools, reduce disruptions and address traumas among learners and teachers, especially in fragile contexts.
5. To make up for lost instructional time, schools in fragile contexts, should expand extramural classes, weekend lessons, and catch-up instructions during periods of relative calm.

Context

Bawku Municipality offers a compelling case for understanding how prolonged chieftaincy conflicts weaken the conditions necessary for effective basic education provision and delivery. Recurrent violence, insecurity, displacement, and livelihood disruptions have repeatedly destabilised school routines, reduced attendance, and created a climate of fear for both learners and teachers (Adonteng-Kissi et al., 2019). These realities are axiomatic of teacher attrition, shortages of books, furniture, and thus, affect quality literacy education.

The situation frustrates Ghana's constitutional and policy commitments to inclusive, quality education as clearly stated in the Education Strategic Plan 2018–2030 (MoE, 2018). Yet, as our research evidence reveals, amidst conflict, schooling can be sustained through agentic efforts of teachers, headteachers, parents, learners, and local leaders who adjust to disruption and protect learning. Therefore, the significance of Bawku lies not only in



evidence of its conflict-inflicted educational fragility, but also in its demonstration of collective stakeholder responsibility and resilience that sustain schooling.

Research Methodology

Design

The study used a phenomenological case study design to capture the lived experiences of education stakeholders and the meanings they attach to their efforts to sustain literacy education in conflict-affected Bawku Municipality.

Sampling

The setting comprised five basic schools in Bawku Municipality, purposively selected because they continued literacy instruction despite recurring conflicts. Participants included headteachers, teachers, learners aged 9–13, parents, and SISOs who were selected based on role, experience and gender. In all, 58 stakeholders participated in the research.

Tools

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Separate interview guides were developed for each participant category, piloted for clarity, relevance, and appropriateness, and then administered. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, while focus groups ran for 60–75 minutes. Discussions were audio-recorded with consent, supplemented by field notes. To strengthen rigour, the team trained enumerators, used reflexive practices, and conducted member checking through summary feedback sessions. Ethical clearance was secured from the University of Cape Coast IRB, with additional permission from the GES. Informed consent, assent for learners, anonymity, and secure data management were strictly observed throughout the study.

Analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim, cleaned, and analysed thematically using Creswell's (2007) iterative approach and Braun and Clarke's (2006) coding framework. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns around conflict disruption, agentic responses, and the role of PD in sustaining learning in fragile contexts.

Key Findings

Lived Experiences of Disruption from Conflict

How do education stakeholders articulate their lived experiences of quality literacy education during conflict-induced disruptions?

Conflict-Induced Disruption of Literacy Education

The stakeholders described learning environments ones shaped by abrupt disruption and chronic insecurity. According to them, gunfire and violence regularly triggered school closures, forced lessons to stop mid-session, and reduced attendance, severely undermining literacy education. The consequences extended beyond instruction, affecting psychological and physical well-being of educators and learners who experienced fear and emotional stress. As one learner explained, *"When we are at school, we cannot concentrate on our learning. Our minds are somewhere else because of the violent and persistent gunshots"*

"... This disruption results in unavoidable postponements of literacy lessons." (Headteacher A, School C)

(Learner E, FG 1). A female headteacher added that, *"The gunshots have brought me high blood pressure ... Immediately I hear the gunshots, my BP rises"* (Headteacher A, School A). Another headteacher talked about the effects of the distractions to learning, while a learner lamented about the financial burden the conflicts had inflicted on families:

"This disruption results in unavoidable postponements of literacy lessons. When gunshots start, you cannot teach that day. ... If you miss about three lessons in a week, you know you have lost a lot" (Headteacher A, School C).

"Because of the conflict, our parents find it difficult to get money to buy books for us to study" (Learner D, FG 1). Focusing on how the conflicts affected teaching, one female teacher explained: *"Teaching is also affected because of the lack of teachers and lack of teaching and learning materials"* (Teacher A, School C). Despite these effects, education stakeholders actively collaborated to sustain literacy education.

"... We must find strategies because our children are going to write the same Basic Education Certificate Examination as those in peaceful places across the country." (Teacher A, School E)

Adapting to Sustain Literacy Education

What specific agentic strategies do education stakeholders employ to sustain literacy education during adversities?

Adaptive Instructional and Organisational Strategies

The findings showed that stakeholders exercised strong adaptive agency to keep literacy education going. The stakeholders responded to persistent insecurity by extending contact hours through extramural and weekend classes and scheduling intensive lessons during periods of relative calm. They also supported continuity by distributing reading materials and assigning take-home literacy tasks. Where possible, learning shifted to safer community-based meeting points, while protective classroom arrangements were used during active gunfire periods. Teachers reported television sessions, online and social media resources, faithful prayer, and cultural resilience as alternative strategies for sustaining literacy education. For example:

"When gunshots persist for many days, I ask teachers who live near or with pupils in same communities to organise their own classes at safe meeting points (Headteacher B, School E).

"I always tell the learners to take their parents' phones to search for answers on Google to the questions, or to ask any educated persons such as sisters, brothers, uncles or neighbours to help them" (Teacher B, School E).

"We had a meeting with the staff, discussed the situation and we encouraged them to add a little more of their time to help our children. So, after school closes, they add some extra time of teaching for the children to improve their literacy and numeracy" (Parent, School E).

Relational and Community-Based Agency

The study found that stakeholder collaboration is essential. Schools actively engaged parents, PTAs, community leaders, assembly members, and local authorities to support learners and reduce the burden on schools alone. Such collective actions were exemplified by shared responsibility between families, teachers, and community leaders. Parents monitored reading and homework, while teachers made home visits and follow-ups to maintain contact with learners. Communities supported with volunteer teacher recruitment, and interschool reading competitions to strengthen motivation. The following participants' quotes highlight these efforts:

"At parent meetings, we talk to parents, explained how the conflict has affected contact hours, and asked them to help us by supervising the children's reading and writing at

home. Through this collaboration, the children get more support with their literacy” (Teacher A, School C).

“I work with parents. I have their contacts and call them individually to inform them that their children have been given homework and that they should supervise it. I also call them to find out how things are going. If there is any special issue, I discuss it with another teacher or the PTA chairman, and they normally support” (Teacher B, School E).

Two learners also shared the arrangements that families have made to ensure that they continued learning: “My parents provide books, uniforms, and encourage me to focus on learning despite the conflict” (Learner A, FG 5). “My father and some other fathers organise extra classes for us. They get a teacher to come and teach” (Learner E, FG 1).

These responses show that literacy continuity in Bawku depends heavily on deliberate and adaptive collaborative actions by schools, families, and learners. This implies that stakeholders leveraged social capital and institutional routines.



Professional Development Enhances Teacher Agency

How do school-based professional development programmes enhance (a) human agency and (b) teaching efficacy of basic schoolteachers in the challenging environment of Bawku?

Enhancing Agency and Teaching Efficacy Through PD and Support

Our analysis reveals that PD strengthens teacher agency and teaching efficacy. School-based PD, especially through PLCs, emerged as a major enabler of teacher confidence and instructional effectiveness. Participants reported that PD through PLCs improved literacy pedagogy by strengthening phonics instruction, differentiation, and learner-centred teaching. It also equipped them to share trauma-informed strategies for conflict-affected classrooms. Further, PD reinforced emotional resilience, motivation, accountability, and reflective practice. For example: “We have organised PLCs for our teachers. During these PLC sessions, teachers share their experiences and learn

“... PD activities have helped me a lot. ... I have acquired a lot of knowledge and basic skills in teaching through in-service training, which has helped me to handle the pupils better.” (Teacher A, School C)

together. These discussions help to improve our teaching of literacy in these difficult conditions” (Headteacher A, School D).

“We do not only observe. When we go to a school, we sit with the teachers and discuss issues with them. Sometimes, we discuss the topics they are to teach before we go to the classroom to observe the lesson. After the lesson, we sit with the teacher and ask them to tell us how they think they performed” (SISO 2).

These notwithstanding, the participants observed that conflicts also constrained PD delivery. According to them, because of the conflicts, meetings became irregular, access was sometimes unsafe, and some schools were unable to sustain routine training. In several cases, teachers had to join PD activities in safer schools. This demonstrates the need for conflict-responsive PD delivery arrangements.

Key recommendations

Based on our study findings and practical realities, we propose the following recommendations to policymakers and practitioners:

1. The Ministry of Education should adopt conflict-responsive schooling policies that permit flexible timetables, decentralised classes, and home-based literacy support to reduce learning loss during insecurity.
2. District education authorities should formally engage PTAs, chiefs, and community opinion leaders as partners in peacebuilding and school protection. Shared responsibility strengthens trust, local ownership, and rapid response.
3. Education authorities should fund sustained, context-specific PD and PLCs for teachers in fragile settings to improve pedagogical confidence, resilience, and adaptability.
4. Schools should integrate structured psychosocial support for learners and teachers, including counselling, trauma-sensitive teaching, and referral pathways.
5. Government should strengthen school safety through coordinated action among education, security, and social welfare agencies, while supporting volunteer and local teacher recruitment with incentives.

Study limitations

While this study has employed rigorous methodology and provided nuanced insights into educational experiences within conflict-affected Bawku Municipality, it is constrained by its narrow geographical scope, potential selection bias due to qualitative phenomenological methods, thereby limiting the generalisability of its findings to other socio-political contexts.

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Download the full research report at: <https://code.ngo/tlfcresearch/>.

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