

# Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Policy Brief



## Responsive Pedagogy and Functional Literacy: Enhancing Learning and Well-Being for Internally Displaced Children in Benue and Plateau States, Nigeria

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## Executive Summary

Children living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and host communities in Benue and Plateau States face profound learning disruptions because of the incessant spate of violent attacks, displacement, trauma, and grinding poverty. The primary schools where these children study operate under serious constraints, including overcrowded classrooms, limited teaching or learning materials, weak psychosocial support systems, and linguistic diversity that is rarely reflected in instructional practice. As a result, many pupils complete primary grades without acquiring foundational literacy and numeracy skills, a reality that undermines both educational development and long-term socioeconomic outcomes.

This policy brief summarises findings from a mixed-methods study that tested whether responsive pedagogy combined with functional literacy can improve foundational learning and selected socioeconomic and psychosocial outcomes for internally displaced children (IDCs) in Benue and Plateau State, Nigeria. For the purpose of this study, responsive pedagogy in the one hand refers to instruction that is sensitive to trauma, culturally and linguistically attuned, and differentiated to learners' needs, while functional literacy in the other hand emphasizes the practical application of reading, writing, and numeracy to everyday life.

The study involved 488 pupils (Grades 4–5) and 18 teachers across selected IDP camp and host-community schools in Benue and Plateau States, drawn from a target population of 749 participants. Using a quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test non-randomised design complemented by focus group discussions, the intervention was conducted over eight weeks.

Key findings show that pupils taught using responsive and functional literacy pedagogy consistently outperformed those taught using conventional approaches. Intervention-group pupils recorded stronger gains in reading, writing, and numeracy, alongside measurable improvements in selected socioeconomic and psychosocial indicators. Survey results further indicate that IDP pupils experience high to very high-unmet needs clustered around five domains:

- Psychological and emotional support,
- Adaptability and flexible learning pathways,
- Cultural and linguistic considerations,
- Safety and stability and,
- Access to learning and basic services (including health, WASH, and play resources).

Qualitative evidence underscores the mechanisms behind these outcomes. Teachers reported that trauma-sensitive classroom relationships, flexible lesson routines, and the use of learners' lived experiences and home languages increased participation,

confidence, and persistence in learning tasks. As such, the pupils were better able to connect literacy skills to real-life problem solving related to health, safety, and daily survival or livelihood.

However, the study also highlights structural constraints limiting sustainability and scale. These limitations include: limited pre-service and in-service teacher preparation on responsive pedagogy, rigid curricula insufficiently adapted to emergency contexts, large classroom sizes, and weak institutional support for pedagogical innovation.

Overall, the evidence suggests that foundational learning and psychosocial wellbeing are mutually reinforcing in crisis-affected settings. Therefore, policies that prioritize curriculum flexibility, sustained teacher coaching, language-responsive instruction, and coordination between education and protection actors are critical to improving learning outcomes for displaced children.

## Background Context

Decades of ethno-religious conflict, farmer–herder violence, and armed banditry in Benue and Plateau States have resulted in widespread displacement and protracted humanitarian need. Many primary schools have either been destroyed or repurposed as shelters or even rendered inaccessible. Others have been struggling to absorb displaced learners into already overstretched systems. Consequently, internally displaced children often experience trauma, disrupted schooling, loss of family support, and chronic insecurity.

Instructional practice in these contexts is typically characterized by teacher-centred methods focused on syllabus completion rather than learner needs. Linguistic diversity is rarely considered, and psychosocial dimensions of learning receive limited attention. These conditions contribute directly to the growing gaps in foundational literacy and numeracy, reinforcing cycles of marginalization and poverty. Understanding how pedagogy can be adapted to these realities is therefore central to the development of a robust education policy in fragile and conflict-affected settings.



## Research Methodology

The study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitative components combined a descriptive survey with a quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test non-randomised groups design using intact classes. The target population comprised 749 participants (713 pupils and 36 teachers or school heads). The study engaged 488 pupils (274 male, 209 female) in Grades 4–5 and 18 teachers across selected IDP camp and host-community schools.

Data collection instruments included literacy and numeracy ability tests, internally displaced children learning-needs scale, and a socioeconomic and psychological issues instrument. The pedagogical intervention lasted eight weeks and focused on trauma-sensitive, culturally responsive, and functionally oriented literacy instruction. Qualitative data were generated through focus group discussions with teachers and school managers to interpret quantitative results and document implementation experiences.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and comparative techniques, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. Ethical standards, including informed consent and confidentiality, were observed throughout.

## Key Findings

### Finding 1: Responsive Pedagogy Improves Foundational Learning Outcomes

Pupils in intervention classes recorded stronger gains in reading, writing, and numeracy than those taught using conventional strategies.

*“Pupils taught with responsive and functional literacy pedagogy achieved stronger gains than those taught with conventional strategies.”*

Table 1: Pre- and Post-Test Literacy & Numeracy Gains

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Conventional</b>	<b>Responsive</b>	<b>Relative Gain</b>
<b>Reading</b>	Moderate	High	Higher under responsive pedagogy
<b>Writing</b>	Low–Moderate	High	Substantially higher
<b>Numeracy</b>	Moderate	High	Consistently higher

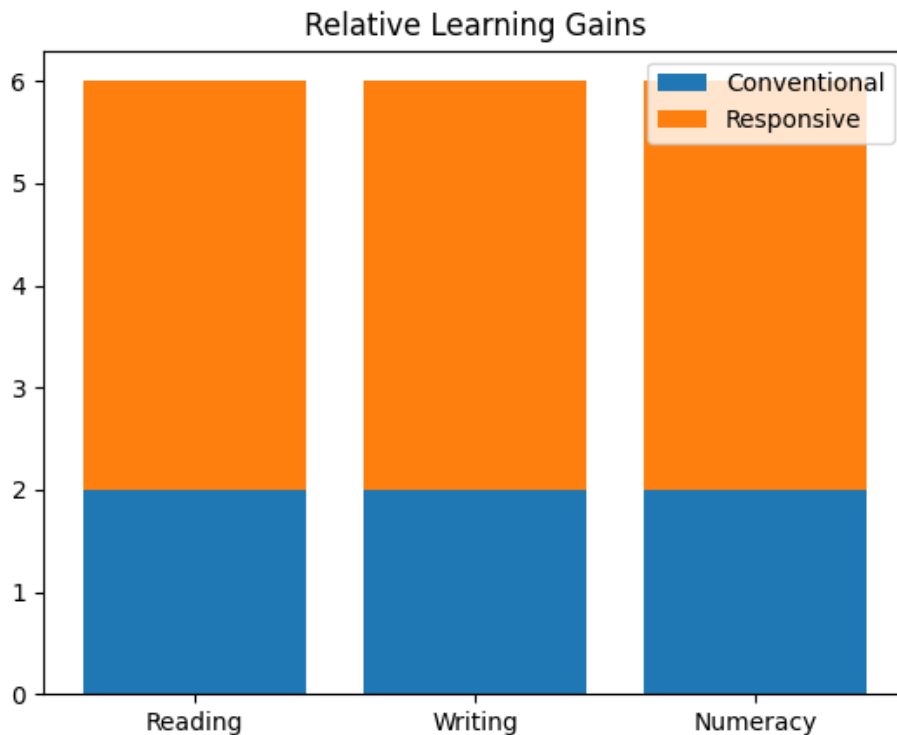


Figure 1: Pre- and Post-Test Literacy & Numeracy Gains

## Finding 2: Psychosocial and Learning Needs Are Interlinked

Survey results show high to very high-unmet needs across five clusters: psychological and emotional support; adaptability and flexibility; cultural and linguistic considerations; safety and stability; and access to learning and basic services.

Table 2: Clusters of IDP Pupils' Unmet Needs

<b>Need Cluster</b>	<b>Level of Need</b>	<b>Illustrative Examples</b>
<i>Psychological &amp; Emotional Support</i>	High-Very High	Trauma, anxiety, loss
	High	Interrupted schooling
<i>Adaptability &amp; Flexibility</i>	High	Language mismatch
<i>Cultural &amp; Linguistic Considerations</i>	Very High	Insecurity, displacement
<i>Safety &amp; Stability</i>	High	Learning materials, WASH, play resources
<i>Access to Learning &amp; Basic Services</i>	High	

### Finding 3: Trauma-Aware and Contextualised Teaching Drives Engagement

Teachers reported that trauma-aware classroom relationships, structured but flexible routines, and the use of learners' lived experiences increased participation and confidence.

*Literacy instruction is more effective when it is responsive to trauma and context, and when it connects classroom tasks to everyday problem-solving.*

### Finding 4: Teacher Capacity and System Constraints Limit Sustainability

While teachers valued responsive pedagogy, many reported limited preparation and ongoing support, constraining consistent application.

Table 3: Enablers and Constraints to Responsive Pedagogy (Table)

Enablers	Constraints
Trauma-aware teaching	Large class sizes
Use of learners' lived experiences	Rigid curriculum
Teacher motivation and classroom coaching	Limited training on responsive pedagogy
Flexible lesson routines	Inadequate teaching and learning materials

## Key Recommendations

1. Adapt curriculum for emergency contexts by integrating or embedding flexibility that allows contextualised and functional literacy instruction.
2. Strengthen teacher training and coaching by integrating responsive and trauma-aware pedagogy into pre-service and in-service programmes.
3. Support language-responsive instruction through strategic use of learners' home languages, particularly in early grades.
4. Promote flexible learning modalities (accelerated, catch-up, and transitional learning models) for displaced learners.
5. Enhance education–protection coordination so literacy programming aligns with psychosocial and child-protection services.

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**To read the full report visit <https://code.ngo/tlfcresearch/>**

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