

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Research Paper



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

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Plain Language Summary

Teaching and learning Literacy in Conflict-Affected Basic Schools in Bawku, Ghana

This study explored how education stakeholders experienced prolonged conflict in Bawku Municipality and their agentic efforts sustaining the teaching and learning of literacy in basic schools in Upper East region of Ghana. In this municipality, the violent disruptions, insecurity, and socio-economic challenges severely undermine schooling.

The study sought to understand the lived experiences and agency of teachers, learners, headteachers, parents, and school improvement support officers (SISOs) as stakeholders in sustaining literacy education amidst the protracted ethnic chieftaincy conflict. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do education stakeholders articulate their lived experiences of accessing quality literacy education during conflict-induced disruptions?
2. What specific agentic strategies do education stakeholders employ to sustain literacy education during adversities?
3. How do school-based PD programmes enhance (a) human agency and (b) teaching efficacy of basic schoolteachers in the challenging environment of Bawku?

Researchers collected and analysed interview and focus group discussion data from a diverse sample of 58 participants, including 10 teachers, 30 learners, 10 headteachers, 5 parents, and 3 SISOs from five schools in different communities in Bawku Municipality.

The study's findings reveal that conflict-induced disruptions, such as violent disruptions, school closures, psychological distress, resource scarcity, and socio-economic inequalities, severely undermine literacy education access and quality in the region. Despite these challenges, the research identifies several agentic strategies employed by stakeholders to sustain literacy education. These strategies include adaptive instructional methods, such as extending contact hours, decentralised and home-based learning, protective classroom practices, the use of technology and innovative approaches, and cultural/spiritual coping mechanisms. The study further highlights the importance of relational and community-based agency, where active parental involvement, PTA mobilisation, collaboration with community leaders and local authorities, volunteer teacher recruitment, and moral/emotional leadership play crucial roles in sustaining education. The research also underscores the role of professional development (PD) programmes in enhancing teacher agency and teaching efficacy in the challenging environment of Bawku. Context-sensitive PD and professional learning communities (PLCs) have been instrumental in fostering teacher confidence, pedagogical innovation, emotional resilience, and accountability. However, the study

also notes that conflict severely restricts the frequency and scope of PD, limiting sustained capacity building. The interplay of agency and disruption in literacy education is evident, as stakeholders demonstrate resilience and proactive efforts to maintain educational activities within fragile socio-educational environments.

The findings mean that in conflict zones like Bawku, sustaining literacy education depends on proactive collective agency and adapted, flexible teaching methods and resilience of local educators and communities rather than formal systems and stable infrastructure alone. These require support for decentralised, community-driven education policies. Policies for education in emergencies should provide clear guidelines for sustaining quality literacy education for all.

The study recommends the institutionalisation of flexible, conflict-responsive education frameworks, formal recognition of parent-teachers association, community leaders, and local authorities as key partners, sustained funding and logistical support for PLCs and context-sensitive PD, comprehensive psychosocial support strategies within schools, and strengthened intersectoral collaboration between education, security, and social welfare agencies. Basic schools are also encouraged to adopt adaptable timetables, implement protective safety protocols, expand the use of digital and media resources, foster active parental participation, promote teacher motivation and emotional resilience, and enhance recruitment and retention of volunteer and local teachers.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and Context

The study on which this report is based investigates how education stakeholders experience and sustain literacy education amid the protracted ethnic chieftaincy conflict in Bawku Municipality, Upper East Region of Ghana, where violent disruptions, insecurity, and socio-economic challenges severely undermine schooling. Despite Ghana's relative peace and commitment to quality education outlined in its 1992 Constitution and Education Strategic Plan 2018-2030 (Ministry of Education, 2018), Bawku Municipality has faced unique challenges due to entrenched ethnic conflicts. Bawku's fragile context presents acute obstacles, such as frequent school closures, psychological trauma, scarce resources, and deepened inequities, that jeopardise literacy outcomes, especially among vulnerable learners.

Approach

The research explores the lived experiences and proactive strategies of key stakeholders, teachers, learners, headteachers, parents, and SISOs, in sustaining literacy education, applying Bandura's social cognitive theory of human agency. We utilised a qualitative phenomenological case study design, collecting data through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, involving 58 participants from five basic schools, communities, and the municipal education directorate. Our thematic analysis foregrounds stakeholder experiences, meanings, and agency as a dynamic, collective process supporting education continuity despite systemic adversity.

Summary of Key Findings

1. Ongoing violent conflict in Bawku led to school closures, abrupt lesson interruptions, psychological distress, resource scarcity, and exacerbation of socio-economic inequalities, all undermining literacy education access and quality.
2. Stakeholders implemented adaptive instructional methods (extended contact hours, decentralised and home-based learning), protective classroom practices, technology use, and cultural/spiritual coping to sustain literacy.
3. Active parental involvement, PTA mobilisation, collaboration with community leaders/local authorities, volunteer teacher recruitment, and moral/emotional leadership underpin collective agency to sustain education.
4. Context-sensitive approaches to PD and PLCs enhanced teacher agency and teaching efficacy, supporting pedagogical innovation, emotional resilience, and accountability in conflict conditions.
5. Notwithstanding the benefits of PD, conflict severely restricted its frequency and scope, limiting sustained capacity building.
6. Literacy education is maintained not primarily through stable and consistent structures, but rather through the determined and proactive efforts of

individuals operating within fragile and often disrupted socio-educational environments, particularly in contexts of conflict. In other words, it is the resilience and agency of educators, learners, and communities that uphold literacy education, despite the instability and challenges posed by such adverse conditions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion, the following policy and practice recommendations are proposed:

Policy Recommendations

1. The Ministry of Education should institutionalise flexible, conflict-responsive education frameworks in decentralised learning modalities and home-based literacy support. This ensures that education delivery remains accessible and adaptable despite disruptions caused by conflict, allowing learners to continue their studies in safer, community-based settings.
2. Policies must formally recognise and integrate PTAs, community leaders, and local authorities as key partners in sustaining education and promoting peace. Involving local stakeholders fosters trust, co-ownership, and collaboration crucial for maintaining educational continuity and building peaceful communities in conflict-affected areas.
3. Ensure sustained funding and logistical support for PLCs and context-sensitive PD tailored to conflict environments. Ongoing investments in PLCs enable educators to develop relevant skills and coping strategies suited to the challenges of teaching in volatile settings, improving instructional quality and teacher wellbeing.
4. Develop and implement comprehensive psychosocial support strategies within schools to address trauma and psychological distress. By supporting students' mental health, schools can improve learners' capacity to engage academically and socially, mitigating the long-term impacts of conflict-related trauma.
5. Strengthen inter-sectoral collaboration between education, security, and social welfare agencies to secure safe learning environments and timely conflict mitigation. The coordinated efforts within sectors promote proactive safety measures and ensure rapid responses to threats, thereby protecting learners and staff and minimising interruptions to schooling.

Practice Recommendations

1. Schools should adopt adaptable timetables with extra and weekend classes during periods of calm to compensate for lost instructional time. The flexible scheduling will maximise learning opportunities when security conditions allow, helping students catch up and maintain academic progress despite intermittent disruptions.

2. Implement protective safety protocols within classrooms and larger school environments to safeguard learners and staff during episodes of violence. Establishing clear safety measures reduces risk, builds a sense of security, and enables a more conducive atmosphere for teaching and learning amidst ongoing conflict.
3. Expand use of digital and media resources (where accessible) to supplement literacy teaching and home learning. Leveraging technology provides alternative avenues for instruction and engagement, especially when physical attendance is compromised due to insecurity or displacement.
4. Foster active parental participation through regular PTA meetings and sensitisation campaigns on the value of education in conflict contexts. Engaging parents raises awareness, strengthens community support for education, and encourages shared responsibility for children's continued learning and protection.
5. Promote teacher motivation and emotional resilience through small incentives, peer support, and recognition of their vocational commitment. Addressing teachers' emotional needs and recognising their dedication helps reduce burnout, improve morale, and sustain quality teaching in challenging environments.
6. Enhance recruitment and retention of volunteer and local teachers by offering appropriate support and compensation. Providing adequate support and fair incentives ensures a stable teaching workforce capable of delivering education consistently despite conflict-related hardships.

Finally, while focused on Bawku Municipality, these insights offer valuable guidance for other conflict-affected regions striving to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4's vision of inclusive and quality literacy education amidst instability. Future research should adopt longitudinal and comparative approaches and assess integrated psychosocial interventions to further strengthen educational resilience in fragile contexts.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CODE	Canadian Organisation for Development through Education
GES	Ghana Education Service
MoE	Ministry of Education
NTC	National Teaching Council
PD	Professional Development
PLCs	Professional Learning Communities
PTA	Parent-Teachers' Association
SDG 4	Sustainable Development Goal 4
SISOs	School Improvement Support Officers
UCC	University of Cape Coast

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INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

Research shows that children possess an innate drive for knowledge and flourish in learning environments at home, community, and school that are safe and offer choice and purpose (MacBeath et al., 2018). However, while global educational access has improved, Miningou et al. (2022), Adonteng-Kissi et al. (2019), and Alhassan et al. (2017) highlight that quality teaching in safe environments remains a challenge in Sub-Saharan Africa due to conflict-induced factors. According to Mwareya (2022) and UNESCO (2019), 90% of children in Sub-Saharan schools are classified as 'learning poor,' indicating they are unable to read or comprehend age-appropriate simple passages by age 10. Without effective teaching, education fails to eradicate extreme poverty or promote shared opportunity and prosperity (World Bank, 2019). Persistent learning poverty risks causing a human capital crisis and undermines Sustainable Development Goals, especially those targeting education. Conflicts provoke fear, insecurity, displacement, and exile for millions, including children (UNHCR, 2024).

Our study focuses on the intractable chieftaincy conflict of Bawku Municipality in Ghana's Upper East region, exploring human agency in sustaining literacy education. Ghana, a relatively peaceful country committed to accessible, quality education, as shown in its 1992 Constitution and Education Strategic Plan 2018-2030 (Ministry of Education, 2018), faces challenges in fragile areas like Bawku. Here, ethnic conflicts have not only rendered schools unsafe, but also families were displaced, lost livelihoods and lived in fear. Situated on the north-eastern border with Burkina Faso and Togo, Bawku is a major arms trafficking hub (Tahiru, 2024). Its dominant Kusasi and Mamprusi ethnic groups have engaged in deadly chieftaincy disputes since the 1930s, revolving around rightful paramount chieftaincy (Dramani et al., 2023; Awedoba, 2009; Bukari & Guuroh, 2013). Violence annually escalates around elections into lethal confrontations, fuelled by widespread gun ownership linked to local arms trafficking (Global Initiative to Combat Trafficking, 2024).

As former President Akufo-Addo in 2024 highlighted, Bawku suffers destruction and distrust, squandering resources better deployed toward development, and attracting mischief makers from volatile neighbouring areas (GNA, 2024). The conflict has caused loss of life, displacement, destruction of property, and educational infrastructure (Ferris & Winthrop, 2010; Shields & Paulson, 2015; Tahiru, 2024). Local testimonies suggest media underreport the conflict's true impact. Violent conflicts disrupt education through school destruction, attacks on learners, teachers, and parents, heightened fear and uncertainty, and altered family and economic structures (UNESCO, 2011; Dramani et al., 2023). Economic hardships limit school enrolment and retention, while psychological trauma prevents students from attending school, undermining quality education (Adonteng-Kissi et al., 2019; Bawku Education Directorate, 2017). For instance, in the Bawku Municipality's 2018-2021 Medium-Term Development Plan, ten basic schools scored zero in the 2017 Basic Education Certificate Examination. This alarming trend contradicts SDG 4's vision of inclusive, quality education in safe environments, which

schools uniquely provide as centres for learning, socialisation, and identity formation (CODE, 2024).

While extensive research exists on the causes and negative impacts of the conflict in Bawku on education, there is limited scientific inquiry into how stakeholders actively sustain teaching and literacy education in basic schools despite these challenges. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the lived experiences and agency of education stakeholders, such as teachers and learners, in maintaining educational activities within the conflict-affected Bawku Municipality. Using Bandura's social cognitive theory of human agency, the research explores how individuals and groups exercise personal and collective efficacy to overcome adverse conditions (Bandura, 2018). This theory views human agency as the belief in one's ability to influence experiences and environments, rather than being passive victims of circumstances. Such efficacy beliefs shape how stakeholders think, set goals, make decisions, persevere through difficulties, and achieve success. By focusing on these agentic initiatives, the study aims to highlight the resilience and proactive efforts that sustain literacy education in a conflict zone, offering a hopeful perspective amid the prevailing instability.

Human agentic efforts are gauged through forethought, self-reactiveness/self-regulation, and self-reflectiveness to transcend the dictates of their immediate environment and to shape competing values and regulate the present to realise desired futures (Bandura, 2018). Therefore, this study adopts CODE's (2024) theorisation of agency as the capacity of individuals (personal efficacy) or groups (collective efficacy) to make choices and act to effect positive change in the classroom and beyond.

Aims of the Study

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences and agency of education stakeholders regarding the quality of literacy education in the conflict-laden Bawku municipality of the Upper East Region of Ghana. Specifically, the research sought to: (1) explore how stakeholders articulate experiences of accessing literacy education amid conflict; (2) understand agentic strategies employed by stakeholders to sustain literacy education in the face of adversity; and (3) describe how school-based PD programmes enhance (a) human agency and (b) teaching efficacy of basic schoolteachers living in Bawku's conflict environment.

Research Questions

To achieve the stated objectives, the following three research questions were answered:

1. How do education stakeholders articulate their lived experiences of accessing quality literacy education during conflict-induced disruptions?
2. What specific agentic strategies do education stakeholders employ to sustain literacy education during adversities?
3. How do school-based PD programmes enhance (a) human agency and (b) teaching efficacy of basic schoolteachers in the challenging environment of Bawku?

Theory of Change

This study focuses on exploring the lived experiences and agency of education stakeholders regarding the quality of literacy education in the conflict-affected Bawku municipality of Ghana's Upper East Region. The study's theory of change posits that engaging education stakeholders through research activities will generate actionable insights and increased awareness, which in turn will inform improved educational practices and policies, ultimately sustaining quality literacy education and enhancing learner outcomes and community resilience in conflict-affected Bawku. Table 1 presents the logic model for the study.

Table 1 Logic Model for Study

Component	Description
Goal	Explore the lived experiences and agency of education stakeholders regarding the quality of literacy education in the conflict-laden Bawku municipality of the Upper East Region of Ghana
Inputs	• Research Funding • Stakeholder Engagement • Research Team
Activities	• Facilitate stakeholder engagement • Conduct in-depth interviews • Facilitate focus group discussions • Analyse data and write report • Validate and disseminate findings
Outputs	• Comprehensive report on agentic efforts of education stakeholders in sustaining literacy education in conflict situations • Policy briefs for authorities • Community workshops to share findings
Outcomes	• Increased awareness of stakeholders' experiences and agency in conflict affected Bawku • Better understanding of dynamics of PD in sustaining quality literacy education • Improved educational practices based on research insights
Long-Term Impact	Sustained access to quality literacy education in conflict-affected schools in Bawku, leading to improved educational outcomes for learners and strengthened community resilience.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological case study design to explore stakeholders' lived experiences and agentic strategies in sustaining quality literacy education in conflict-prone Bawku. Phenomenology was chosen to capture participants' subjective experiences and meanings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Larkin & Thompson, 2011), while the case study approach allowed in-depth contextualisation within the socio-political dynamics of Bawku (Tahiru, 2024; Yin, 2018). Guided by Bandura's Theory, the research focused on interpreting lived experiences and agentic efforts. This methodology facilitated rich, idiographic insight into education stakeholders' complex experiences in a conflict-affected environment (Guihen, 2019). This design was selected because it delves into the subjective experiences of participants, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how the conflict impacts learners' access to literacy education.

Research Team Positionality

The research team consists of experienced male and female senior researchers specialising in educational planning and leadership, each holding a PhD and several years in qualitative research and professional learning. Employed as university lecturers in educational leadership, policy, curriculum, and teacher development, they collaborated with trained enumerators to conduct interviews and focus groups. No prior relationships existed between researchers and participants. Rapport was established through introductions and clarification of the study's aims. Participants were informed about the researchers' academic backgrounds and interests in stakeholders' experiences within conflict settings purely for research purposes. To reduce potential biases from their professional involvement in educational reform, the team employed open-ended questions, peer debriefing, data triangulation, and reflexivity.

Research Setting and Sample

The study took place in Bawku Municipality in the Upper East Ghana, an area experiencing prolonged chieftaincy conflicts. This setting allowed exploration of how education stakeholders exercised agency to maintain quality literacy education amid instability. Data were collected in familiar and safe spaces, including school offices and meeting rooms, ensuring participant comfort. Sessions involved only facilitators and participants, with researchers sometimes observing. Participants varied in gender, teaching experience, and subject specialisation, representing diverse perspectives.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Participants were purposively selected to represent diverse school contexts within the conflict-affected Bawku Municipality. Invitations were sent through school administrators and professional networks, followed by email and face-to-face

communication to encourage participation. The study involved 58 stakeholders, including headteachers, teachers, learners aged 9 to 13, parents, and SISOs, drawn from five basic schools (primary and junior high), communities, and municipal education directorate that maintained literacy education despite ongoing conflict. The criteria for inclusion emphasised leadership roles, direct involvement in literacy education, length of service, gender, age, English proficiency, and availability, while exclusion applied to those lacking these qualifications or unwilling to participate. This purposive approach ensured a representative and engaged sample capable of providing rich, first-hand perspectives on stakeholder efforts to achieve quality literacy education in the municipality. Participant distribution across basic schools is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2 Sample Distribution of Schools and Participants in Bawku Municipality

School	Headteacher	Teachers	Learners	Parents	SISOs
A (St Anthony)	2	2	6	1	3
B (Daduri)	2	2	6	1	
C (Zabugu)	2	2	6	1	
D (Mognori)	2	2	6	1	
E (Methodist)	2	2	6	1	
Total	10*	10*	30	5	3

Note: N = 58. *Increased by 50% from initial sample of five.

The participants' demographic characteristics include category, gender, and experiences with conflict, and efforts to maintain quality literacy education in Bawku municipality's basic schools. The participants group consists of 10 headteachers (6 males, 4 females), 10 teachers (8 males, 2 females), 30 learners (15 males, 15 females), 3 SISOs (all males), and 5 male parents. These diverse profiles provided credible, context-specific insights essential for addressing the study's research questions, reflecting varied perspectives from key stakeholders involved in sustaining literacy education amid challenging conditions.

Data Collection Tools and Procedures

This phenomenological study used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to gather rich, detailed data from stakeholders involved in literacy education within conflict-affected schools in the Bawku Municipality. Interview guides, developed based on the theoretical framework. Two teachers, 1 headteacher, 2 learners, 1 SISO, and 1 parent, participated in the pilot testing of the instruments, since each category of participants responded to questions unique to that category. This helped improve the clarity, appropriateness, convenience and acceptability of the instruments by the participants. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, while focus groups averaged 90 minutes. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent, accompanied by detailed field notes to capture contextual and non-verbal information. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, notably after the fourth focus group with no new themes emerging. Although transcripts were not returned to participants, member checking was conducted through summary feedback sessions to validate preliminary findings. The research team recruited and trained ten field assistants from local educational institutions, focusing on qualitative data collection, ethical considerations, and participant engagement protocols. Continuous supervision of the research assistants by the research team on-field enhanced data quality and research rigour. Data collection occurred over a month, allowing sufficient time for participant recruitment, interviews, and focus groups to ensure a comprehensive understanding of each stakeholder's experiential landscape. Collectively, these procedures ensured the collection of rich, subjective insights into stakeholders' agentic efforts to achieve quality literacy education amid conflict. The data collection tools can be found in Appendix A.

Data Analysis and Management

The study employed a rigorous iterative phenomenological thematic analysis following Creswell's (2013) data analysis spiral to explore stakeholders' lived experiences of sustaining literacy education amid conflict in Bawku Municipality. Interviews were transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai software and refined with AI tools before analysis in Microsoft Excel. Researchers practiced bracketing to minimise bias, engaging deeply with the transcripts to identify significant statements related to agency. Themes were developed through iterative coding, informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, capturing the complex interaction between conflict and stakeholder agency. Themes emerged through initial coding phases, which were refined through discussions among the research team, ensuring a collaborative approach to defining and understanding participant experiences. We used member checking to validate the findings, which were contextualised within Bawku's socio-political milieu. Following the preliminary analysis, participant feedback sessions were organised where summaries of findings were presented, allowing stakeholders to provide clarifications and validate interpretations. To further mitigate biases, the researchers engaged in reflective journaling throughout the study, documenting their thoughts and assumptions to promote transparency in the research process. This approach preserved participants' authentic voices, representing both shared and unique experiences, and grounded interpretations in

their narratives. Direct quotations enriched the findings, supporting ethical commitments to respect and faithfully convey diverse perspectives. We presented the findings addressing each research question by providing an overview of refined themes and sub-themes, a detailed articulation of each sub-theme supported by curated and representative participant quotes, an interpretive commentary following each sub-theme, and a summary interpretation consolidating insights from the main theme. Data management adhered strictly to the Ghana Data Protection Act (2012, Act 843), ensuring secure storage, controlled access, anonymisation, and long-term preservation at the University of Cape Coast Library, safeguarding confidentiality and enabling future research.

Ethical Clearance

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Cape Coast Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was secured from all participants, including teachers, headteachers, and learners, with headteachers granting permission to engage learners. This was followed by a formal permission letter from Ghana Education Service, which enabled us to gain access to the schools. To protect participant anonymity and confidentiality, identifiers replaced names in reporting. Given the sensitive context of the Bawku conflict, ongoing ethical reviews and safety measures, including community consultations, ensured researcher and participant welfare and data protection throughout the research. In addition to receiving ethical clearance, community stakeholders were consulted throughout the research process to address any ethical concerns and ensure the research aligned with local values and norms.

FINDINGS

This chapter presents findings from stakeholder interviews and focus group discussion conducted in conflict-affected basic schools in Bawku. The analysis explored stakeholders' lived experiences of accessing quality literacy education, the agentic strategies employed to sustain literacy during conflict, and the role of PD in enhancing teacher agency and efficacy. The thematic framework used generated four major themes and associated sub-themes across the three research questions. Table 3 summarises the themes and sub-themes according to the research questions:

Table 3 Summary of Main Themes and Sub-Themes by Research Questions

Research question (RQ)	Main theme	Sub-theme(s)
RQ1: How do education stakeholders articulate their lived experiences of accessing quality literacy education during conflict-induced disruptions?	Conflict-Induced Disruption of Literacy Education	- Violent Disruptions and School Closures - Psychological and Emotional Burden on Stakeholders - Resource Scarcity and Infrastructure Limitations - Equity and Disadvantage Amidst Conflict
RQ2: What specific agentic strategies do education stakeholders employ to sustain literacy education during adversities?	Adaptive Instructional and Organisational Strategies	- Extending and Recovering Contact Hours - Decentralised and Flexible Learning Arrangements - Home-Based Literacy Continuity - Protective Classroom Practices During Active Conflict - Use of Technology and Innovative Approaches - Cultural and Spiritual Convictions as Coping Mechanisms
	Relational and Community-Based Agency	- Mobilising Parents and PTA Structures - Collaboration with Community and Local Authorities - Volunteerism and Local Recruitment - Leadership as Moral and Emotional Stewardship - Safety and Security Measures
RQ 3: 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	- PLCs and Collaborative Peer Learning as Capacity Builder - Context-Sensitive PD and Training - Motivation, Professional Identity, and Emotional Support - Accountability, Monitoring, and Reflective Practices - Limitations and Disruptions to PD Due to Conflict

Research Question 1

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

Conflict-Induced Disruption of Literacy Education

This theme encapsulates the lived experiences of stakeholders in the ongoing violent conflict, and highlights how they make sense of the experiences regarding accessing and sustaining literacy education. The theme embeds lived experiences of participants, articulating the detrimental effects of the conflict on literacy education, including disruptions and school closures, psychological and emotional burdens on educators and learners, resource scarcity, and exacerbating the already pitiable conditions of the vulnerable and disadvantage learners from accessing literacy education. These factors collectively reflect the realities that participants live through amidst the conflict that undermine effective literacy teaching and learning in Bawku.

Violent disruptions and school closures

This sub-theme refers to the disruption of education caused by conflict or violence, resulting in temporary or prolonged shutdowns of schools that hindered students' learning and development. The headteachers, teachers, learners, and SISOs who looked visibly distraught described sudden eruptions of gunfire, curfews, and violent threats causing immediate cessation of literacy lessons. According to them, lessons were often abruptly stopped mid-session as pupils and staff fled for safety, resulting in postponed lessons and extended school closures lasting days or weeks. For one female headteacher, *"When school is in session and the conflict suddenly starts, everything is disrupted. If we are in the middle of lessons and gunshots begin, the pupils run away. Nobody will stay"* (Headteacher B, School E). According to one parent from School E, *"... Because of the conflict, there are days when the children cannot go to school. When there are gunshots, they have to run home for their safety. That does not help their education at all."* The following quotes from his counterparts further support this sub-theme:

Sometimes you come and there are only a few pupils in class. This disruption results in unavoidable postponements of literacy lessons. Then 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 shooting here and there, in a week we may come to school only two or three times. We do not spend the whole day in school, and we do not get the full eight hours of sessions we are supposed to (Headteacher B, School B).

The situation in Bawku has affected the children seriously. Sometimes, when they come to school, gunshots begin and the children have to run home. Teachers also have to leave the school. This makes the children's learning very difficult, especially their reading and writing (Parent, School A).

One teacher said: *"The conflict...is having a negative effect. Many times, you will be in class teaching, and before you realise, there will be a gunshot and you have to leave"* (Teacher B,

School B). A female colleague also said: *"The conflict makes us lag behind, because we can be in literacy lessons, and suddenly they start shooting and the children have to run out. That day is wasted"* (Teacher A, School E). The learners corroborated these claims during the focused group discussions. For example, Learner C of FG 1 shared the following during the focused group discussion: *"Sometimes, when we are on our way to school, and they start shooting guns, we have to run into nearby houses for safety"*. Similarly, in school, the learners were not safe: *"When we are in school and they start shooting, we have to run home"* (Learner D, FG 1). This highlights psychological stress on both learners and teachers, because as the SISOs articulated, *"When there are gunshots, some children become frightened and may even be afraid to come out of their houses. Teachers also become afraid"* (SISO 1). *"The teachers sometimes abandon the students because of the shooting incidents"* (SISO 3). Other participants who corroborated these experiences narrated incidents of teachers who collapsed in an attempt to flee from sudden gun shots, and a headteacher dying of stray bullets en route school.

These accounts illustrated acute conflict-induced physical and emotional insecurity, disrupting not only school attendance, but also the possibility of uninterrupted literacy instruction. Learning environments became unpredictable and unsafe, fracturing the educational day, and compounding cumulative learning losses. The constant threat led to cyclical patterns of attendance volatility and forced lesson postponements, deeply destabilising literacy education. These findings support previous research showing that conflict leads to loss of life, displacement, and damage to property and educational infrastructure (Ferris & Winthrop, 2010; Shields & Paulson, 2015; Tahiru, 2024).

Psychological and emotional burden on stakeholders

Across participant groups, conflict-induced fear, anxiety, and trauma emerged strongly as barriers to engagement. Teachers report stress-induced health problems; learners described distraction, fear of stray bullets, and emotional distress that sabotaged concentration and participation in literacy activities. The following quotes provide deeper reflection of stakeholders' psychological and emotional burden during conflicts. According to one female headteacher, *"The gunshots have brought me high blood pressure, which I did not have before. Immediately I hear the gunshots, my BP rises"* (Headteacher A, School A). *"Students feel insecure and... it is a brutal distraction. The emotional wellbeing of students is not guaranteed"* (Headteacher B, School B). Resonating with Headteacher A of School A's experience, Headteacher B of School C said, *"Yes, definitely. If your mind is not settled, you will not be able to give your best"*. According to a female teacher, *"Teaching in this part of the country... is something we do not like to talk about much... We are not at liberty, and we do not enjoy full time school activities"* (Teacher A, School B).

One female learner whose view reflected the views of other learners said:

Sometimes when they start shooting, we lie on the floor to keep ourselves safe. ...Some children do not even think of going to school. They think the solution is to sit at home and find any work to do for a living. We would like to read and write more... to help the community (Learner B, FG 5).

Her colleague, a grade 10 boy from School A, also posited that, *"When we are at school, we cannot concentrate on our learning. Our minds are somewhere else because of the violent and persistent gunshots"* (Learner E, FG 1). SISO 3 described the conflict situation and its effect on life and education as *"very disheartening"*

Beyond physical safety, the mental and emotional toll of the conflict weighed heavily on all stakeholders, hindering cognitive engagement essential for literacy acquisition. Besides, anxiety disrupts concentration and causes absenteeism, while teacher stress and trauma undermine instructional efficacy. The psychological burden thus serves as both a direct and indirect inhibitor of literacy education quality and access. These findings confirm earlier research indicating that violent conflicts disrupt education by damaging schools, targeting students, teachers, and parents, increasing fear and uncertainty, and changing family and economic dynamics (UNESCO, 2011; Dramani et al., 2023).

Resource scarcity and infrastructure limitations

Participants narrated that even prior to the violent conflict, schools also faced chronic shortages in furniture, textbooks, teaching and learning materials, and access to technology, which limited literacy lessons quality. The conflict-exacerbated economic hardship only further degraded resource availability, including teachers. As one of the headteachers remarked regarding teachers, *"The conflict situation has forced many teachers to seek transfer from Bawku Municipality, resulting in an acute shortage of teachers across the municipality. So, we need more teachers in the district"* (Headteacher A, School C). This view was supported by one of the SISOs, saying: *"Most children usually seek transfers. There is a mass exodus of teachers from Bawku to other safer areas, and most children also seek transfers away from Bawku"* (SISO 3). Headteacher A of School C added that *"Our classrooms also have problems with furniture and other basic things like exercise books, pens, pencils, phone credit and electricity"* (Headteacher A, School C). Another headteacher stated that *"despite all these efforts, resources remain limited"* (Headteacher B, School B). *"Pupils lie on their stomachs to write because of lack of furniture"* (Headteacher B, School C)

Similarly, the teachers also recounted as follows: *"Most of the time we need hard copy texts to guide the learners so they can read by themselves"* (Teacher B, School B). *"Teaching is also affected because of the lack of teachers and teaching and learning materials"* (Teacher A, School C). The learners and SISOs also recounted, saying: *"Because of the conflict, our parents find it difficult to get money to buy books for us to study at home when we are not in school"* (Learner D, FG 1).

Clearly, the material and human resources deprivation compounded educational instability by constraining learning resources essential for literacy acquisition. Without adequate teachers and instructional materials and furniture, both teaching effectiveness and student engagement deteriorate. The economic constraints in conflict-affected areas exacerbated these limitations, deepening inequity. These findings reinforce earlier studies indicating that economic hardship reduces school enrolment and retention, while psychological trauma hinders attendance, both

compromising education quality (Adonteng-Kissi et al., 2019; Bawku Education Directorate, 2017).

Equity and disadvantage amidst conflict

Equity, either in gender or material sense, in educational spaces, is already difficult to achieve, specifically for the disadvantaged, such as learners with disabilities. Evidence from the Bawku conflict only confirmed how it exacerbated existing inequalities, disproportionately impacting marginalised groups and deepening social and economic exclusions. In line with this sub-theme, structural inequalities, especially poverty intensified by conflict-driven livelihood disruptions, undermined equitable access to literacy education. Many families struggle to pay levies, provide uniforms, and support home study, leaving vulnerable learners behind. One of the female headteachers revealed that *"Many of my pupils find it difficult even to get proper school uniforms and sandals."* (Headteacher B, School E). Another headteacher also said:

One major challenge is that most parents are poor. They are mainly peasant farmers. When we ask them to pay levies, it is very difficult for many of them. Not every pupil can pay any levy we introduce (Headteacher A, School D).

Learners and SISOs also expressed similar sentiments regarding equity and the disadvantaged in the conflict situation. A female learner said: *"Our parents cannot travel and trade as before, and it is hard to buy books for us to study at home"* (Learner D, FG 1). *"Most children go to school without proper learning materials. Some parents are not serious about their children's education"* (SISO 1). The conflict amplified pre-existing socio-economic barriers to literacy education, generating inequities in resource provision and familial support. Again, the disruption of livelihoods due to the violent conflict limited parents' financial and material support, contributing to uneven or disproportionate educational opportunities, particularly for learners from poor socioeconomic home.

Overall, the lived experiences articulated by education stakeholders revealed that conflict induces deep fragmentation and destabilisation of literacy education in Bawku. Violent interruptions and school closures led to acute learning discontinuities and cumulative instructional deficits, which jeopardised literacy outcomes. This disruption worsened psychosocial distress, which undermined learners' and teachers' ability to engage effectively. Concurrently, structural limitations, teacher shortages, scarce learning resources, inadequate infrastructure, and entrenched socio-economic inequalities intersect and intensify these challenges. These challenges do not merely unfold independently; they interlace to exacerbate educational deprivation, particularly for vulnerable populations. Thus, access to quality literacy education during conflict is mediated by a complex interplay of violence-induced disruption, psychological distress, resource scarcity, and inequity. However, the dispositions and actions of the research participants were axiomatic of people who believed the conflict situation was an opportunity for creative action to ensure that children of Bawku were not left behind regarding literacy education. So, they implemented some agentic strategies to sustain literacy education amidst the conflict

Research Question 2

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

Preamble Quotes

I believe that even with the conflict, we still have to learn. We must find strategies, because our children will write the same Basic Education Certificate Examination as those in peaceful places across the country (Teacher A, School E)

The children are our future leaders; they depend on us, teachers, to grow. We see this difficult conflict situation as an opportunity to educate ourselves and learners about the value of peace, so that they can cherish it and grow for lasting peace (Teacher A, School C). The positive spirit underpinning these quotes informed concrete agentic efforts of education stakeholders to sustain literacy education in the conflict-laden context of Bawku. Our analysis of the data unearthed two main themes and corresponding sub-themes that encapsulate the strategies deployed by education stakeholders to sustain literacy education in the face of conflict-related disruptions. The first theme, *Adaptive Instructional and Organisational Strategies*, encompasses the sub-themes namely, extending contact hours, decentralising learning, facilitating home-based literacy, and utilising technology. These were pedagogical adjustments and organisational efforts to counteract learning loss amidst the conflict. The second theme, *Relational and Community-Based Agency*, highlights the essential agentic strategies, such as collaboration of parents, community leaders, and local authorities, volunteerism, and moral and emotional stewardship, which contributed to literacy education during the conflict crisis.

Adaptive Instructional and Organisational Strategies

This theme articulates how education stakeholders creatively and proactively reconfigure instructional delivery and school routines to sustain literacy learning despite ongoing disruptions. The practices reflect agency by transforming constraints into actionable opportunities.

Extending and recovering contact hours

The sub-theme focuses on strategies and approaches to increase instructional time and effectively regain lost contact hours in educational settings due to the conflict. The data clearly revealed that education stakeholders, including school leaders and parents, arranged extra and weekend classes, organised intensive teaching during calm moments, and distributed reading materials for home use to compensate for time lost because of the conflict. The following quotes from the participants support the claim. For example, regarding the organisation of efforts to regain lost contact hours, Headteacher B of School D recounted that:

We try our best to increase contact hours during the days when the conflict is calm. We also organise extra classes. On some weekend, we invite the students... Especially in literacy, we give them reading books to take home, so that... they can still read at home.

Resonating with the efforts of his colleague, another headteacher was more specific, clarifying that *"Sometimes we call for one-hour extra classes after school hours to cover lessons lost during difficult days"* (Headteacher B, School E).

Additionally, teachers, learners and SISOs shared similar views regarding the agentic efforts deployed to sustain learning: *"We give children more readings, more spellings, and engage them in activities that help them remember lessons"* (Teacher A, School B). *"I give advanced exercises to take home... They use their parents' phones to search Google or ask relatives"* (Teacher A, School E). The learners corroborated these claims. *"Sometimes I use the computer my father gave us to watch educational videos or use the dictionary to learn more"* (Learner B, FG 5). *"Me and my friends learn together; we do dictation, read stories, and answer questions"* (Learner B, FG 3). *"We encourage teachers and headteachers to organise extra classes after school or on weekends. There are reading competitions in the circuit to improve reading capabilities"* (SISO 1). Similarly, a parent from School E noted that:

We met with the staff and discussed the situation with them. We advised them to add a little more of their time to help our wards. So, after school closes, they add some extra time, on their own, to do a little more teaching for the children. ... with the cooperation of the teachers, we can improve the learning of literacy and numeracy (Parent, School E).

The stakeholders display practical agency by seizing windows of relative calm to intensify literacy instruction. The use of extra classes and weekend sessions mitigated contact-hour losses. The distribution of reading materials for home use and the encouragement of peer study groups at school and home further extended learning beyond disrupted school hours. The learners' engagement with technology and collaboration indicated self-directed learning efforts that reinforced instruction. These tactics reflect deliberate agentic efforts by education stakeholders to "recover time" lost due to the conflict.

Decentralised and flexible learning arrangements

The data also revealed that introducing decentralised and flexible learning arrangements empowered learners by providing them with adaptable educational opportunities outside the traditional centralised settings, accommodating diverse needs and schedules. For example, schools implemented community-based classes and safe meeting points, decentralising instruction to maintain continuity when centralised schooling that involved educators and learning aggregating in normal school environments was unsafe. This strategy which schools adopted was succinctly articulated by one of the headteachers as follows: *"When gunshots persist for many days, I ask teachers who live near or with pupils' same communities to organise their own classes at safe meeting points. Pupils still get literacy lessons and do not completely lose contact"* (Headteacher B, School E). Indeed, the decentralised instruction in safe spaces not only sustained learning but diminished or averted mobility constraints and security risks. This typified individual and collective agency and it demonstrates adaptive creativity. It also reflects a strategic acknowledgment of contextual volatility and utilises community proximity of educators and learners to keep literacy learning accessible and unabated.

Home-based literacy continuity

Home-based literacy continuity denotes the consistent and ongoing support for children's reading and writing development within the home-specific environment to reinforce and extend learning beyond the classroom. The creative initiative of schools, especially teachers to distribute reading books and assigning take-home exercises to learners constituted a critical means of maintaining literacy skills during school absenteeism due to the conflict. The following quotes from the participants further explicate this agentic effort: *"I give reading books to the children to take home for continuous reading during school closure"* (Headteacher B, School D). *"Parents support by helping children with homework and encouraging reading"* (Teacher A, School C). *"My family buys textbooks and encourages me to read and write"* (Learner F, FG 5). Thus, the stakeholders leveraged home environments and parental involvement and children's proclivity for learning (MacBeath et al., 2018) to sustain literacy education beyond classroom walls amidst conflict situations. Providing reading materials and take-home exercises embeds a culture of learning resilience, where learners are empowered to continue their literacy practice autonomously and with family support.

Protective classroom practices during active conflict

The data revealed that headteachers and teachers also adapted classroom practices that protected the children and safeguarded learning. These practices involved implementing strategies and creating a safe, supportive learning environment to help students cope with trauma and maintain educational engagement amid ongoing violence or instability. The strategies include locking classrooms and sheltering pupils; pausing lessons and resuming them when safe. This was a common strategy among the headteachers, and the strategy was well articulated by a female Headteacher B of School B whose school was situated in the borderline between the two warring factions:

Our school is on sandwiched by the armed factions so when they begin exchanging gunshots, we are caught up and bullets hit our walls so what we do in such situations is to gather the children together in one corner of the classroom until the situation is safe and then we continue with lessons or dismiss the learners (Headteacher B, School B).

As part of their protection in the classroom during gun exchanges, Learners added that they closed the windows and doors of the classrooms before gathering together in a safe corner of the classroom (Learner G, FG 1).

Teachers across the schools also shared that in the heat of the conflict it was crucial to ensure the socio-emotional wellbeing of the learners. For example, *"During periods of conflict in the classroom, you first have to encourage the students and talk to them and calm them down to reduce the panic"* (Teacher B, School E). His female colleague from another school added that, *"We also get local security officers like the prison officers to come around to help. They talk to the students so that they will calm down, and then teaching and learning can go on."* Cognisant of the telling effects of the conflict-induced trauma and fear on learners, teachers adopted the pedagogy of constant deliberate repetition, practice and memory support, for learners during lesson delivery. As one of the teachers articulated:

Because of the trauma, in everyday classroom work, what we try to do is to give our children readings, more readings, more spellings, and to engage them in activities that will help them remember whatever we taught in the previous lessons (Teacher A, School E).

These protective practices illustrated the situational responsiveness and care-oriented agency of educators and learners. They balanced safety and instructional continuity, refusing to relinquish literacy education entirely despite immediate threats, thus embodying adaptive agency and professionalism under duress.

Use of technology and innovative approaches

Another agentic effort of education stakeholders, including learners and parents to sustain literacy education amidst the conflict in Bawku involved them leveraging technological tools and creative or innovative strategies. The recurrence of the deadly Kusasi-Mamprusi conflict coincided with not only recent advances in digital communication technology but also on the heels of the post-COVID- 19 pandemic. To sustain learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, Government and other education actors collaborated to create virtual learning opportunities on Television and Radio Stations. Findings of this study show that learners, parents, teachers and school heads leveraged these opportunities and other digital communication tools including mobile phone-based Internet to sustain literacy education. This implied that they used internet-sourced materials, digital devices, and media to supplement learning, and compensate for resource scarcity and instructional disruptions.

From the perspective of teachers, including Teachers 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, for instance, they did not only rely on these opportunities to support the learning of students but roundly encouraged learners to use such tools from home to sustain their learning. As Teacher B of School E opined:

I always tell the learners to take their parents' phones to search for answers on Google to the questions given, or to ask any elderly educated person around them, such as their sisters, brothers, uncles or neighbours who are educated. When pupils return to school, we meet in class, discuss the questions and arrive at the answers together.

Headteacher A of School D whose view captured the views of his colleagues agreed with the teachers when he said that:

We sometimes get reading materials online to use in teaching reading and writing and encouraged parents to let their children use their laptops and mobile phones to access learning materials electronically.

During the focused group discussions, learners repeatedly referred to leveraging technology, especially Television programmes, mobile phones and laptops to learn. As one learner said, *"What motivates me to continue learning is that I always watch Joy Learning on television. Joy Learning teaches me a lot, so that motivates me to continue learning (Learner D, FG 5)."* The reason why Joy Learning motivated learners was because they enjoyed the programme and it made them happy: *"I enjoy watching Joy Learning on television; it makes me happy when I am performing in school"* (Learner F, FG

5). Regarding online learning, Learner B of FG 2 said: *"Sometimes I use the computer my father gave us to watch educational videos, google materials or online dictionary to learn more."*

Although, challenges including lack of televisions, electricity, internet connectivity, and access to Android phones in some households left some learners unable to leverage technology for learning, those who could access it found it helpful in sustaining literacy education. Technology and innovative media offered alternative avenues to sustain literacy learning, especially when conventional resources and classroom time are compromised because of the conflict. This usage reflects stakeholder ingenuity and creative agency to bridge resource and learning gaps through digital means.

Cultural and spiritual convictions as coping mechanisms

The research participants, especially headteachers, teachers, parents and SISOs believed that culturally and spiritually, difficulties, including conflicts were not occasions to slip into fatalism but opportunities for honest reflection and creation of holistic solutions. No wonder Teacher B of School B insisted: *"I believe that even with the conflict we still have to learn. We must find strategies because, our children are going to write the same [...] exams as those in peaceful places across the country."* Thus, *"...we see this difficult conflict situation as an opportunity to educate ourselves. The conflict classroom is an opportunity to educate ourselves and the learners about the value of peace"* (Teacher A, School C).

Learner D of FG 1 corroborated the views of the teachers when he stated that, *"We live with frequent gunshots, killings and police chases, which repeatedly disturb school and home life yet we continue to go to school because we want a better future"*. His colleagues from another school said that because culturally they were enculturated not to run away from challenges but persevere and find solutions, their parents ensured they went to school despite the conflict-induced security fragility: *"Our parents force us to come to school. ...They beat us or physically bring us if we refuse to come"* (Learner E, FG 1). However, Learner B attributed learners' initiative to go to school amidst gunshots to fidelity to personal resolve: *"Sometimes I am on my way to school, then they start shooting but I still try to follow my timetable as much as I can and I only return when it is impossible to continue the journey to school."*

Resonating with the teachers and learners, Headteacher A of School C opined that *"Despite hearing gunshots throughout the night, seeing pupils around gives me the urge to keep coming to school and to the school running"* (Headteacher A, School C). Teacher A of School D believed that with prayer, there was light at the end of the tunnel: *"We keep praying for better days, more teachers, and a stable school"* (Headteacher B, School D). A parent from School A, also said: *"We are only praying that the place will become calm so that things can return to normal."* Thus, the data revealed that participants leveraged on traditional beliefs and practices to find comfort, meaning, and resilience during times of stress or adversity. They believed that maintaining morale through faith, prayer, and community encouragement was crucial for sustained commitment to literacy education amidst conflicts. This implied that spiritual and cultural resilience contributed to psychological endurance among the education stakeholders, supporting their emotional

well-being, and enabling continued educational engagement in hardship contexts. Therefore, adapting instructional and organisational strategies demonstrated dynamic, context-sensitive agency by education stakeholders to sustain literacy education. Through intensified teaching during calm periods, decentralised classes, home literacy support, protective classroom measures, technology use, and cultural and spiritual resilience, stakeholders actively sustained literacy education amid conflict ruptures. This reflects a pragmatic, multifaceted response to preserving educational continuity in an unstable environment.

Relational and Community-Based Agency

This theme foregrounds the collective and relational dimensions of agency, illustrating how partnerships with parents, community leaders, volunteerism, and moral stewardship underpinned literacy education during adversities.

Mobilising parents and parent-teacher association structures

Analysis of the data revealed that schools understood that collaborating with parents, and PTAs and School Management Committees (SMCs) was critical to sustaining literacy education and school development during the conflict (Headteacher B, School E). Thus, schools actively engaged parents, PTAs, SMCs, and opinion leaders through meetings and sensitisation campaigns to support learners and literacy education (Headteacher A, School D). The support involved parents' providing educational resources, creating a learner-friendly home environments for children and supervision of learning. Parental cooperation enabled schools to promote initiatives, including home-based learning supervision, home visitations, that proved helpful to literacy education in Bawku (Headteacher B, School E; Headteacher A, School C). A female teacher substantiated the claims of the Headteachers with the following explanation:

At parent meetings, we talk to parents, explain how the conflict has affected contact hours, and ask 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 of School C).

This parental cooperation motivated teachers not only to give learners homework but also inspired them to introduce what the 'book borrowing or circulation' initiatives to ensure that children did not lack learning materials to engage themselves at home. For example:

They even take homework home for their parents to help them, so that they will not be idle at home. That is something we are doing our best to sustain, so that, despite the conflict, the children will continue to read and write (Teacher B, School D).

Relatedly, Teacher A of School D explained that:

We also have a lot of small reading books that the children can read. I asked the headteacher for permission, and he has given me the go ahead to share them with the children. We write their names and give each child a book to take home. They are to

read it, and when they are reading it well, they bring it back and change it for a different one.

Quite impressively, literally all the learners who participated in focused group discussions praised their parents and relatives for their material, emotional and supervisory support for their literacy education. The following quotes were few cases in point: *"My father normally buys storybooks for me. When I finish reading one, he buys another. My mother also supports me."* (Learner F, FG 2). *"My mother normally writes something and asks me to read it or write it, to see whether I can do it. She checks my exercise books and asks me what subjects I learnt that day. She acts like my examiner"* (Learner F, FG 5). *"My parents provide books, uniforms, and encourage me to focus on learning despite the conflict"* (Learner A, FG 5). For some learners, their parents went the extra mile to organise extra classes for them at home: *"My father and some other fathers organise extra classes for us. They get a teacher to come and teach"* (Learner E, FG 1).

These forms of parental or community cooperation also motivated some teachers to build personal relationships that allowed for teachers to visit homes and share their agentic efforts to support learners' literacy education. The following quotes represented the experiences of some teachers regarding such strategies. One female teacher said: *"I contact parents and relatives, explain the situation and ask for their support so that I can give the children extra tuition outside normal school hours"* (Teacher B, School C). This female teacher added that: *"I sometimes visit them at home. Some pupils have stopped school because of the conflict. At one time the school even closed down. I had to trace the learners to their homes, plead with them, and bring them back."* Perhaps the most detailed explication of how teachers mobilised parents to sustain learning amidst the conflict was from Teacher B of School E:

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 and make sure the homework is done. 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 come in to support. Most of the time, when I call them, parents are motivated to ask the children, when they come home, whether they have been given any homework.

Thus, mobilising parental and PTA support for literacy education reflects collective as well as individual agency, leveraging social capital and community structures to mitigate the conflict's impact on learning. This relational engagement extends education beyond formal institutions into the home and community, reinforcing literacy continuity.

Collaboration with community and local authorities

Partnering with community members and local authorities represented another relational agency that fostered literacy education. Thus, schools in collaboration with the Ghana Education officials engaged chiefs, assembly members, and local institutions to support literacy, and address conflict's educational impacts. This evidence is supported by the following quotes from the stakeholders: *"We go to the chiefs and local leaders to sensitise them about the importance of children's education and reducing conflict"*

(Headteacher A, School D). *"Assembly members assist in recruiting volunteer teachers. The Ghana Immigration Service assisted with furniture provision"* (Headteacher B, School D). *"Schools engagement with community and local structures have helped communities to listen and respond better to efforts towards sustaining literacy in Bawku"* (SISO 2). Typical of the agentic nature of stakeholders, participants especially headteachers and SISOs shared that they organised inters school reading competitions to celebrate reading amidst conflict disruptions of education:

I can remember in 2023 and 2024 we organised inter school reading competitions between the schools in the same circuit and even outside the circuit. That was supervised by the SISO staff of the Ghana Education Service in Bawku, the college teachers and the pupils themselves. The competitions were designed to motivate and celebrate reading (Headteacher B, School D).

An interesting insight shared by one of the Learners regarding community related to how the invitation of illiterate elders in his community to read things for them inspired here to sustain literacy education:

In our community, elders sometimes call me to help read out names for them. If they want someone to read for them, they call me. I enjoy it so I try to learn to read better. If they call me, I go and do it properly (Learner C, FG 2).

Thus, collaboration with local leaders represented a strategic school-community-based agency, situating schools within broader socio-political networks to garner support, address shortages, and create safer, resource-enriched learning environments for children.

Volunteerism and local recruitment

Amidst the conflict-induced crisis in Bawku which led to acute teacher shortages, education stakeholders deployed the strategy of recruiting or sourcing volunteers locally to sustain literacy education. Schools recruited volunteer teachers, often locally, supported by community fundraising and stipends. The following participant quotes support this evidence: *"We use funds from levies to hire volunteer teachers"* (Headteacher A, School D). *"The assembly member promised to work on recruiting volunteers"* (Headteacher B, School D). *"Volunteers help fill classes and sustain literacy teaching"* (Headteacher B, School C). Both teachers and SISOs alluded to this by emphasising the necessity of volunteer youths, especially those who completed senior high schools and had not yet enrolled in tertiary education. For example, one female teacher said that, *"Many teachers have left, so volunteers are vital"* (Teacher A, School D).

From the analysis, volunteerism is a critical agentic response to workforce instability. It evidences community commitment and collective action to sustain literacy teaching capacity. However, retention challenges indicate limits to voluntary contributions.

Leadership as moral and emotional stewardship

The headteachers and teachers articulated a moral commitment to children's futures and provided emotional support and encouragement to staff and learners. They saw their role as moral and emotional stewardship to the children and their learning. Thus,

the headteachers emphasised variously: *"Children are our future; we must do everything possible to keep them learning"* (Headteacher B, School E). *"I encourage teachers not to give up and pray for better days"* (Headteacher B, School D). *"Despite few teachers, we sacrifice and encourage one another. A teacher's reward is in heaven"* (Headteacher A, School A). Additionally, teachers and SISOs said: *"I have a passion for literacy and reach out to parents for extra tuition support"* (Teacher B, School C). *"Teaching is a vocation that brings joy and fulfilment despite challenges"* (SISO3). Accordingly, leadership practices reflected moral agency, providing emotional sustenance which undergirds persistence amidst adversity. These narratives show how committed stewardship sustains collective hope and educational sustainability.

Safety and security measures

Education stakeholders, especially Headteachers believed that ensuring physical safety for teachers and pupils was an essential strategy for sustained engagement with learning. Thus, schools and communities strove for safer learning environments. According to the participants, *"Stakeholders need to provide security for teachers and pupils; if safe, attention is not divided. ... Some schools are inaccessible, resulting in dropouts and enrolment decline"* (Headteacher A, School E). *"We protect classrooms and coordinate with security agencies"* (Headteacher B, School E). *"... They [Headteachers] emphasise that we need safety first before anything else"* (Teacher B, School D). *"There are frequent gunshots, and when that happens, everybody is running for safety"* (Teacher A, School C). Relatedly, one SISO had this to say:

Students must feel safe before they can learn. We try as much as possible to make the environment friendly for the learner ... One effort I would like to share is creating a safe space and a safe environment for learners. Learners need to be educated and informed... about sexual harassment. When the environment is safe, they are able to construct knowledge. When a pupil feels harassed psychologically, the pupil's mind is not settled. The learner is not able to concentrate or construct knowledge properly (SISO 3).

A parent from School A talking about security said that,

One important thing is security. There should be security around the school to help protect the children and teachers, so that teaching and learning, especially literacy, can continue effectively.

From the participants' narrative, safety is foundational to enabling agency. Without secure environments, all other efforts struggle. Thus, safeguarding initiatives are critical and underscore the interdependency of educational agency and wider peacebuilding. Taken together, agentic strategies extend beyond classrooms into relational mobilisation and collaborative networks involving parents, community leaders, and local authorities. The volunteerism and moral leadership complement these by addressing human resource gaps and fostering emotional resilience. These forms of collective and moral agency form a social fabric that collectively sustains literacy education amidst systemic adversity and insecurity.

Research Question 3

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

The theme highlights how targeted professional development (PD) efforts empowered educators by strengthening their sense of agency and enhancing their teaching efficacy. This theme underscores the critical role of ongoing learning opportunities in fostering teachers' confidence and effectiveness in the classroom. The theme encompasses five sub-themes that articulate how PD initiatives empower educators to exercise a sense of agency and instructional effectiveness amidst adversity. The data revealed that PLCs were the most common medium for the implementation of professional development initiatives. The PD initiatives contributed to enhancing teacher agency and pedagogical efficacy by serving as spaces for:

- Capacity development
- Context-sensitive training
- Motivation and emotional support
- Accountability and reflective practices
- Identifying conflict-imposed limitations on PD

PLCs and collaborative peer learning as capacity builders

Professional learning communities a collaborative peer learning was identified by the research participants as media for sharing expertise and continuous development among educators, enhancing collective capacity, efficacy and agency thereby improving teaching practices. Participants consistently foregrounded PLCs and peer collaboration as vital platforms for professional support, adaptive knowledge sharing, and pedagogical innovation. This is because PLCs provided spaces where teachers exchanged strategies specifically tailored to literacy instruction in conflict-affected environments. These venues facilitated teacher motivation and collective problem solving, enhancing both agency and instructional practices. For example, the following quotes throw more light on this claim: *"We have had professional learning that focused on phonics. This training was to help us teach the sounds and support early reading"* (Headteacher A, School B). *"Professional learning activities and development programmes help us a lot; They refresh our minds. ... We learnt about mental health. We learnt about cyber security and about coaching and monitoring"* (Headteacher A, School C). *"We have organised PLCs for our teachers. During these PLC sessions, teachers share their experiences and learn together. These discussions help us to improve our teaching of literacy in these difficult conditions"* (Headteacher A, School D). *"The PLC has helped us a lot. During PLC sessions we share ideas. One example is the use of the L1, the local language. When we teach and a child is not able to understand... we switch to L1 to explain for the child to understand"* (Headteacher B, School C).

Teachers also expressed similar views as the Headteachers. For instance, two teachers had these to say:

The PLC helps us. When we go for workshops, we discuss how a teacher can facilitate even during hard times in terms of the conflict. We discuss the strategies and how to handle students when things are not in a good state. Through the collaboration and experience we gain from colleagues when we meet, we learn methodologies for handling students when conflict is ongoing or when things are not right. It helps us to gain experience and to know the strategies we can use in order to make sure teaching and learning of literacy is achieved (Teacher B, School E).

Yes, PLC is a good initiative, which is organised by the NTC [National Teacher council]. It motivates me. During PLC sessions, we are able to learn new things about twenty-first century methods of teaching, which we then use with our students to improve their literacy and Mathematics skills (Teacher B, School C).

The SISOs further corroborated the claim. One SISO said: *"During our professional learning communities, teachers are taught how to teach. Teachers are guided and taught to employ new methods of teaching literacy and numeracy ... The approach is more learner centred than teacher centred"* (SISO 3). Another also said that:

Because of the PLCs, they [teachers] now have lead teachers who support them. Differentiated learning was something new to many of them. Through these PD activities, they are now able to teach better and some have acquired new skills for teaching. We group pupils by ability and teach them in those groups before we move on to the main class activities (SISO 2).

Thus, PLCs emerged as crucial collaborative structures that reinforced teacher agency by enabling peer knowledge exchange, mutual support, and shared problem solving. They embed responsive, learner-centred pedagogies, boosting teachers' confidence and ability to adapt instruction under conflict pressures.

Context-sensitive PD and training

The PD initiatives allowed for designing and delivering learning experiences that are tailored to the specific cultural, organisational, and situational needs of professionals to enhance their effectiveness and relevance. From the analysis, PD that attended specifically to the realities of conflict and local instructional challenges strengthened teacher efficacy. This includes in-service training on literacy strategies (e.g., phonics), differentiated instruction, use of teaching and learning materials, and mental health awareness. As two headteachers explicated:

I try, as much as possible, to organise in-service training for the teachers, especially in literacy. We organised an in-service training on basic language skills. We invited an expert to come and assist the teachers. That training has helped us. It gave the teachers more confidence and strategies for teaching literacy (Headteacher B, School D).

Sometimes we organise in-service training in the school. We revise with teachers the challenges they face... including literacy. We discuss methods they can use to overcome those challenges and to teach more effectively. ... We also attend professional

development day meetings or workshops organised at the district education office. These workshops have helped us to improve our methods in the classroom (Headteacher B, School E).

In corroboration, one teacher said:

The professional development activities have helped me a lot. They have equipped me with some basic skills and teaching methods that have made my work easier. I have acquired a lot of knowledge through in-service training, which has helped me to handle the pupils better. We have had in-service training on issues such as differentiated learning and the use of teaching and learning materials (Teacher A, School C).

From the analysis, school- and district-level PD facilitates the acquisition of context-responsive pedagogies and coping mechanisms attuned to literacy challenges in conflict-affected schools. This targeted support fosters teacher confidence and capacity to deliver meaningful learning despite adversities.

Motivation, professional identity, and emotional support

Evidence from analysis of the data has shown that PD initiatives contributed to human agency and teacher efficacy by being media for motivation, professional identity development and accessing emotional support. Teachers and Headteachers who enjoy motivation, emotional support and growth in professional identity tended to exhibit confidence/efficacy, resilience and commitment to their professional roles. The analysis revealed that PD initiatives and leadership cultivated a sense of mission and emotional resilience among teachers, reinforcing their commitment in difficult circumstances. Motivational efforts and shared professional identity helped teachers to persist with teaching even when external conditions were uninviting. This is evident by the following participants quotes: *"We have tried to motivate teachers by helping them understand their role. We remind them that at the end of the month they receive a salary, so they cannot sit at home while the pupils are left alone" (Headteacher A, School D). "The truth is that we know the children are our future. ...We try our best to do what is necessary, by any means possible, to keep them learning" (Headteacher B, School E).*

Additionally, another headteacher said: *"We encourage the teachers. ...I know teachers' rewards are in heaven. Saying these things gives them inner motivation. It is my profession. One reason is that this is our place. We cannot leave" (Headteacher A, School A).* A colleague Headteacher shared how sharing material gifts constituted another form of motivation for teachers:

As a head, I also try to motivate the teachers in any way I can. I sacrifice to buy watermelon and keep it in the office for the teachers. I use these small gestures to motivate them and keep their spirits up (Headteacher B, School A).

A teacher and a SISO said the following in support of the headteachers:

I have a passion for literacy. I want to help my students to develop their reading and Mathematics skills, even in these difficult conditions. I contact parents and relatives,

explain the situation and ask for their support so that I can give the children extra tuition outside normal school hours (Teacher B, School C).

What inspired me to take these 'actions' [use of social media or digital tools] is my desire and my love for teaching. I see teaching and imparting knowledge more as a vocation than as a profession. I draw a lot of joy, satisfaction and fulfilment from helping learners to learn during these difficult times (SISO 3).

Indeed, professional identity and emotional support gained through PD initiatives sustained teacher agency by fostering motivation, resilience, and a sense of moral purpose. This intrinsic drive enabled teachers to persist and exercise leadership amid challenging conditions that induced stress and uncertainty.

Accountability, monitoring, and reflective practices

This sub-theme focuses on the importance of holding individuals and organisations responsible for their actions through systematic monitoring and the use of reflective practices to promote continuous improvement. Ongoing supervision, documentation, and reflective discussions were central aspects of school-based PD activities which enhanced teaching efficacy and quality control. For example, transitioning from traditional inspection to supportive monitoring encouraged a culture of collegiality, continuous improvement, and shared responsibility for literacy outcomes. Taking accountability and monitoring as a case in point, participants revealed that *"Any time there are disturbances, some parents quickly inform us. When the children leave the school premises, we normally call parents to ask whether they have arrived home safely"* (Headteacher A, School B). *"We also keep records of these activities"* (Headteacher B, School D). Additionally, regarding supervision and reflective practice, one SISO said:

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 and where they see their weaknesses. We discuss those weaknesses together, and I share my own inputs. We also ask the pupils questions. Then we take time to go through their books to see how many exercises they receive in a week, how the teacher marks and records them, and whether corrections are done. If what we see is not up to standard, we encourage the teacher to step up. In the past we were seen as inspectors, but now we are school support officers. We do not come to victimise anybody (SISO 2).

This engagement was crucial for building a culture of teacher accountability and reflective practice. Thus, reflective and supportive supervision embedded in school-based PD initiatives reinforced teacher accountability and informed their agency and professional growth. These practices cultivated a non-threatening environment conducive to pedagogical refinement and sustained literacy teaching efficacy in the midst of conflict.

Limitations and disruptions to PD due to conflict

Analysis of the data revealed that although schools strove to sustain as well as initiate PD programmes because of the crucial role they play in enhancing human agency and teacher efficacy, the ongoing conflict imposed disrupted and limited PD opportunities. The conflict hindered PD by causing interruptions, limiting access to training opportunities, and creating unstable environments that dangerous teachers to gather for professional learning. This implies that the conflict severely limited the regularity and scope of PD programmes, compromising their potential impact. As participants articulated: *"We used to have cluster of schools [PLC] programmes until 2021, when the conflict worsened and all of that stopped"* (Headteacher A, School C). This claim was supported by Headteacher A of School E who stated that, *"Professional learning activities are not something we do regularly". "Because of the conflict, the professional learning activities we were having have reduced, but we always have in-service training. We were doing it, but now we have stopped since the conflict intensified. There is no time"* (Headteacher A, School A). However, some headteachers, teachers and SISOs revealed resulted in devising some strategies to keep PD activities. For example, one of the headteachers whose school is sandwiched by the warring factions explained that:

Because our school is situated on the border line between the two factions, it is dangerous to gather for any PLC or PD activity. So, what we have done is to ask teachers to join PLC or PD activities in schools that are relatively safe and easily accessible to enhance their pedagogical effectiveness (Headteacher A, School C).

For example, one of the SISOs (SISO 3) whose jurisdiction was relatively safe confirmed that teachers from other schools joined PD activities in schools located in the education circuit where he supervises teaching and learning. Headteacher B of School D corroborated this claim as follows:

The conflict has made certain schools too dangerous for teachers to sit together for professional learning. But our school is a bit away from the centre of the conflict so from time-to-time teachers from such schools participate in our professional learning community sessions.

From the analysis, the conflict conditions disrupted PD initiatives and delivery, limiting continuity and reducing opportunities for teacher capacity building. This presented a critical challenge to sustaining and scaling PD interventions within fragile contexts.

The findings illustrate that PD programmes, especially those grounded in collaborative and context-sensitive approaches, functioned as central catalysts for enhancing teacher agency and efficacy in conflict-affected Bawku. Through PLCs and peer learning, teachers acquired adaptive pedagogies, knowledge, and emotional support that enabled them to persist and innovate despite ongoing adversity. Professional identity and motivational frameworks sustained engagement, while accountability and reflective supervision facilitated continuous improvement. However, persistent conflict undermined the regularity and scope of PD activities, constraining their potential benefits and exposing a need for more sustained and conflict-responsive support. Nonetheless, where PD was sustained, it provides critical tools and psychosocial resources to maintain literacy instruction and teacher professionalism under duress. Table 3 presents summary of key insights for Research Question 3.

Table 4 Summary of Key Insights for Research Question 3

Aspect	Synthesis
Human Agency	PD fosters agency by enabling peer learning, adaptive strategies, and emotional resilience among teachers.
Teaching Efficacy	Context-sensitive training builds confidence, pedagogical skill, and learner-centred practices.
Motivation and Identity	Leadership and recognition nurture professional commitment and emotional endurance.
Accountability and Reflection	Supportive supervision drives continual teaching quality improvements.
Challenges	Conflict disruptions reduce PD frequency and accessibility, limiting impact but they also inspired creative ways to sustain professional learning and development.

Summary of Key Findings

1. Ongoing violent conflict in Bawku led to school closures, abrupt lesson interruptions, psychological distress, resource scarcity, and exacerbation of socio-economic inequalities, all undermining literacy education access and quality.
2. Stakeholders implemented adaptive instructional methods (extended contact hours, decentralised and home-based learning), protective classroom practices, technology use, and rely on cultural/spiritual coping to sustain literacy.
3. Active parental involvement, PTA mobilisation, collaboration with community leaders/local authorities, volunteer teacher recruitment, and moral/emotional leadership underpin collective agency to sustain education.
4. Context-sensitive PD and PLCs enhanced teacher agency and teaching efficacy, supporting pedagogical innovation, emotional resilience, and accountability in conflict conditions.
5. Notwithstanding the benefits of PD initiatives, conflict severely restricted PD frequency and scope, limiting sustained capacity building.
6. Literacy education was sustained more by agentic resilience embedded in fragile socio-educational systems amidst conflict.

These findings demonstrate that education stakeholders actively exercised agency to sustain literacy education amid conflict, highlighting education as a site of resilience rather than mere vulnerability. By identifying adaptive and relational strategies, the study offers practical approaches to ensure education continuity in fragile settings, aligned with SDG 4. Furthermore, it emphasises the crucial role of PD tailored to conflict contexts for sustainable education. Importantly, the findings reveal the complex impact of conflict on education, signalling the need for interventions that address psychological, material, and community factors.

Consistent with MacBeath et al. (2018) and UNESCO (2019), this study confirms that safe, resource-rich environments are essential yet vulnerable in conflict settings, where disruptions deepen learning poverty. The findings align with Bandura's (2018) social cognitive theory, illustrating how teacher and community agency manifest at personal, collective, and moral levels through self-efficacy, collaborative partnerships, and leadership as stewardship. Additionally, the study supports existing research on social capital and community engagement's critical role in educational resilience, particularly through the mobilisation of local leaders and institutions within socio-political frameworks. Professional development and PLCs are shown to enhance instructional quality and emotional support, although conflict-related interruptions underscore the need for adaptive interventions, as noted by Miningou et al. (2022). Overall, the study advances Bandura's agency theory by demonstrating the complex interrelation of individual, collective, relational, and moral agency in fragile educational contexts, emphasising resilience as a socially situated process.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of the study hold several implications for policy and practice. Education policies must be conflict-sensitive, prioritising continuity through flexible, decentralised, and home-based literacy initiatives. It is essential to formalise and adequately fund community engagement structures such as PTAs and local leaders, recognising them as key stakeholders in sustaining education and mitigating conflict. Furthermore, PD for teachers in fragile contexts should be continuous, contextually relevant, and supported by contingency plans to ensure continuity of professional growth during crisis. Resource allocation must address infrastructural and material deficiencies exacerbated by conflict to promote equity and inclusive literacy education. Additionally, integrating psychosocial support and mental health services within education policies is critical to address the psychological impacts on learners and educators. Coordination between education authorities and local law enforcement is required to enhance security and safeguard learning environments.

During periods of calm, extended and weekend classes should be implemented to compensate for lost instructional time. Additionally, home literacy must be supported through the distribution of reading materials and parental engagement initiatives. Further, protective classroom practices, including strict safety protocols, are necessary during active conflicts. Moreover, the creative use of technology and media can help supplement resources and sustain learner engagement. Besides, strengthening PLC will facilitate peer support, collaborative problem-solving, and knowledge exchange among teachers. Again, local recruitment and volunteerism, incentivised appropriately, are vital to maintaining workforce stability. Finally, incorporating cultural and spiritual coping strategies can enhance morale and emotional resilience among all education stakeholders.

Limitations

The study's focus on five basic schools and communities within Bawku Municipality restricts the generalisability of its findings to other conflict-affected regions with

differing social contexts. Utilising qualitative phenomenological methods and purposive sampling may have introduced selection bias, potentially excluding more marginalised perspectives. Although participant validation was limited to summary feedback without transcript review, this partially addressed accuracy concerns. The absence of longitudinal data constrains understanding of changes in agency and conflict dynamics over time. Despite reflexivity and triangulation, researcher positionality bias may have influenced interpretations. Nevertheless, the study's methodological rigour and contextual depth provide valuable insights into educational experiences in conflict settings.

CONCLUSIONS

This study illuminates the complex and fragile interplay between violent conflict and literacy education in Bawku Municipality, Ghana. While conflict engenders severe disruptions, displacing learners, fragmenting instructional time, and compounding psychological and material challenges, education stakeholders demonstrate remarkable human agency. Through adaptive instructional strategies, community collaboration, and targeted PD, teachers, learners, parents, and local authorities collectively sustain literacy education despite adversity. Bandura's social cognitive theory effectively frames these agentic responses, revealing resilience as an active process of forethought, self-regulation, and collective action. Nonetheless, persistent conflict constrains PD and undermines structural support, signalling the urgent need for contextually responsive, conflict-sensitive educational policies and practices. This research emphasises the critical role of human and social agency in ensuring continuity of learning in fragile situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are proposed:

Policy Recommendations

1. The Ministry of Education should institutionalise flexible, conflict-responsive education frameworks incorporating decentralised learning modalities and home-based literacy support. This ensures that education delivery remains accessible and adaptable despite disruptions caused by conflict, allowing learners to continue their studies in safer, community-based settings.
2. Policies must formally recognise and integrate PTAs, community leaders, and local authorities as key partners in sustaining education and promoting peace. Involving local stakeholders fosters ownership, trust, and collaboration crucial for maintaining educational continuity and building peaceful communities in conflict-affected areas.
3. Ensure sustained funding and logistical support for PLCs and context-sensitive PD tailored to conflict environments. Ongoing investments in PLCs enable educators to develop relevant skills and coping strategies suited to the

challenges of teaching in volatile settings, improving instructional quality and teacher wellbeing.

4. Develop and implement comprehensive psychosocial support strategies within schools to address trauma and psychological distress. By supporting students' mental health, schools can improve learners' capacity to engage academically and socially, helping to mitigate the long-term impacts of conflict-related trauma.
5. Strengthen intersectoral collaboration between education, security, and social welfare agencies to secure safe learning environments and timely conflict mitigation. Coordinated efforts among sectors promote proactive safety measures and ensure rapid responses to threats, thereby protecting learners and staff and minimising interruptions to schooling.

Practice Recommendations

1. Schools should adopt adaptable timetables with extra and weekend classes during periods of calm to compensate for lost instructional time. Flexible scheduling may maximise learning opportunities when security conditions allow, helping students catch up and maintain academic progress despite intermittent disruptions.
2. Implement protective safety protocols within classrooms and larger school environments to safeguard learners and staff during episodes of violence. Establishing clear safety measures reduces risk, builds a sense of security, and enables a more conducive atmosphere for teaching and learning amidst ongoing conflict.
3. Expand use of digital and media resources (where accessible) to supplement literacy teaching and home learning. Leveraging technology provides alternative avenues for instruction and engagement, especially when physical attendance is compromised due to insecurity or displacement.
4. Foster active parental participation through regular PTA meetings and sensitisation campaigns on the value of education in conflict contexts. Engaging parents raises awareness, strengthens community support for education, and encourages shared responsibility for children continued learning and protection.
5. Promote teacher motivation and emotional resilience through small incentives, peer support, and recognition of their vocational commitment. Addressing teachers' emotional needs and recognising their dedication helps reduce burnout, improves morale, and sustains quality teaching in challenging environments.
6. Enhance recruitment and retention of volunteer and local teachers by offering appropriate support and compensation. Providing adequate support and fair incentives ensures a stable teaching workforce capable of delivering education consistently despite conflict-related hardships.

Future Research Directions

Future research should prioritise longitudinal studies to track the development of stakeholder agency and literacy outcomes amidst evolving conflict dynamics in Bawku and comparable settings. Comparative analyses across multiple conflict-affected regions in Sub-Saharan Africa will illumine both context-specific and generalisable agentic educational strategies. Additionally, evaluating the effectiveness of integrated psychosocial interventions is essential to understanding their impact on learners' psychological wellbeing and literacy attainment in conflict-impacted schools. These approaches collectively strengthen evidence-based educational responses in volatile environments.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Data Collection Tools

University of Cape Coast
Institute for Educational Planning and Administration
CODE Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts Study

Stakeholders' Experiences and Agency in Achieving Quality Literacy Education in Conflict Situations

Informed Consent Form

[Ask each participant to sign below if they agree to take part in this discussion]

Title of Project: A Phenomenological Exploration of Stakeholder Agentic Efforts Towards Achieving Quality Literacy Education in the Conflict-Laden Bawku Municipality of the Upper East Region of Ghana

Lead Researcher

Name: Dr Wisdom Kwaku Agbevanu

Contact: 050 731 7474

1. I have read and understood the attached information sheet giving details of the project.
2. I have had the opportunity to ask the researcher any questions that I had about the project and my (participant) involvement in the project.
3. I give consent on behalf of the learners/pupils who have been selected to take part. Their participation is entirely voluntary, and I understand that they are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
4. I understand that data gathered in this project may form the basis of a report or other form of publication or presentation.
5. I understand that my name or the learner's name will not be used in any report, publication, or presentation, and that every effort will be made to protect my confidentiality.

Participant's name (in CAPITALS)

Signature

Researcher's signature:

Date:

School Heads' Interview Guide

Opening script for interviewer

Thank you for meeting with us. This interview aims to understand how literacy teaching and learning are sustained during the conflict in Bawku. Your participation is voluntary, and you may skip any sensitive questions. We assure you of anonymity and confidentiality. With your permission, we will audio record the interview for accuracy. The interview will last 45-60 minutes.

Interview logistics

- Date and time: _____
- Faith-based school: Yes/No
- Venue: _____
- Interviewer's name: _____
- Participant code: _____
- Consent to audio record obtained: Yes / No

Section A: Context

1. Please tell me about your work and how long you have served as head of this school.

Section B: Research Questions and Items

RQ1: Lived experiences of accessing quality literacy (reading & writing) education during conflict induced disruptions

2. How have conflict conditions affected participation in literacy (reading & writing) learning at your school? [**Probe:** *What sense do make from your experience as far as your child's/children's education in concerned?*]
3. What have been your experiences regarding the quality of teaching and learning of literacy in your school during periods of conflict in Bawku? [**Probe:** *What do these experiences mean to you?*]

RQ2: Agentic strategies that sustain literacy

4. What actions have you and your staff taken to keep literacy learning going when school routines are disrupted? [**Probe:** *What inspired you to carry out these actions? How did you go about these actions/interventions? In reflecting on your experience, what meaning do you attribute to your efforts? Can you describe what challenges or supports you encountered as you made these efforts?*]
5. How have you involved other stakeholders (e.g., parents, opinion leaders, NGOs) in supporting quality literacy education (reading and writing) during difficult periods? [**Probe:** *Give an example of how you worked others. How did your actions affect others involved?*]

RQ3: School based professional development, teacher agency, and teaching efficacy

6. How have professional learning activities at your school supported teachers to feel capable and motivated to teach literacy under conflict conditions? [**Probe:** *Could you share some examples of professional development activities you have participated in?*]

Section C: Closing

7. Is there anything important we have not talked about?

Thank you

We appreciate your time and insights.

Teachers' Interview Guide

Opening script for interviewer

Thank you for meeting with us. The purpose of this interview is to understand how literacy teaching and learning are sustained during conflict in Bawku. Your participation is voluntary, and you may skip any question that you think is sensitive. With your permission, we will audio record the interview to ensure accuracy. The interview will last 45-60 minutes.

Interview logistics

- Date and time: _____
- Venue: _____
- Interviewer's Name: _____
- Participant code: _____
- Consent to audio record obtained: Yes / No

Section A: Context

1. Please tell me about your work and years of experience in teaching literacy (reading and writing) in your school.

Section B: Research Questions and Items

RQ1: Lived experiences of accessing quality literacy education during conflict disruptions

2. How have conflict conditions affected the teaching and learning of literacy (reading and writing) in your school? [**Probe:** *What does your experience of the conflict and the teaching and learning of literacy (reading, writing, & mathematics) mean to you? How do you feel about the situation? Why?*]
3. What have been your experiences regarding the quality of teaching and learning of literacy during periods of conflict?

RQ2: Agentive strategies to sustain literacy education

4. What deliberate self-initiated actions/interventions have you taken to keep literacy teaching and learning going when school routines are disrupted? [**Probe:** *What inspired you to carry out these actions? How did you go about these actions/interventions?*]
5. How do you work with other stakeholders (e.g., teachers, heads, or parents) to support literacy in difficult times? [**Probe:** *Give an example of how you worked with others*]

RQ3: Professional development, teacher agency, and teaching efficacy

6. How have school professional development activities helped you feel capable and motivated to teach literacy in conflict conditions? [**Probe:** *Can you provide examples?*]

Section C: Closing

7. Is there anything important we have not talked about?

Thank you

We appreciate your time and insights.

Parents' Interview Guide

Opening script for interviewer

Thank you for meeting with us. The purpose of this interview is to understand how literacy teaching and learning are sustained during conflict in Bawku. Your participation is voluntary, and you may skip any question that you think is sensitive. With your permission, we will audio record the interview to ensure accuracy. The interview will last 45-60 minutes.

Interview logistics

- Date and time: _____
- Venue: _____
- Interviewer's Name: _____
- Language used: _____
- Participant code: _____
- Consent to audio record obtained: Yes / No

Section A: Context

1. Please tell me briefly about yourself and what you do.

Section B: Research Questions and Items

RQ1: Lived experiences of accessing literacy education during conflict disruptions

2. From your experience, how has the conflict in Bawku affected your children in learning to read and write? [**Probe:** *What does your experience mean to you as far as your child's/children's education is concerned? How do you feel about the situation? Why?*]

RQ2: Agentic strategies to sustain literacy education

3. What deliberate self-initiated actions/interventions have you taken to ensure that your children keep learning how to read and write in the conflict situation? [**Probe:** *What inspired you to carry out self-initiated actions? How did you go about these actions/interventions?*]
4. In what ways do you work with other stakeholders (e.g., school heads, teachers, heads, or parents) to support children's learning to read and write in conflict situations? [**Probe:** *Give examples of how you worked with others.*]

Section C: Closing

5. Is there anything important we have not talked about?

Thank you

We appreciate your time and insights.

School Improvement Support Officers' Interview Guide

Opening script for interviewer

Thank you for meeting with us. The purpose of this interview is to understand how literacy teaching and learning are sustained during conflict in Bawku. Your participation is voluntary, and you may skip any question that you think is sensitive. With your permission, we will audio record the interview to ensure accuracy. The interview will last 45-60 minutes.

Interview logistics

- Date and time: _____
- Venue: _____
- Interviewer's Name: _____
- Participant code: _____
- Consent to audio record obtained: Yes / No

Section A: Context

1. Please tell me about your work and area of responsibility.

Section B: Research Questions and Items

RQ1: Lived experiences of accessing literacy education during conflict disruptions

2. From your experience, how has the conflict in Bawku affected schools in providing literacy education? [**Probe:** *What does your experience of the conflict and the teaching and learning of literacy (reading and writing) mean to you? How do feel about the situation? Why?*]

RQ2: Agentic strategies to sustain literacy education

5. What deliberate self-initiated actions/interventions have you taken to keep literacy teaching and learning going when school routines are disrupted? [**Probe:** *What inspired you to carry out these actions? How did you go about these actions/interventions?*]
6. How do you work with other stakeholders (e.g., school heads, teachers, heads, or parents) to support literacy in difficult times? [**Probe:** *Give an example of how you worked others.*]

RQ3: School based professional development, teacher agency, and teaching efficacy

6. How have professional development activities supported you to feel (a) capable and (b) motivated to support literacy education in schools? [**Probe:** *Share some examples of professional development activities teachers participate in?*]

Section C: Closing

7. Is there anything important we have not talked about?

Thank you

We appreciate your time and insights.

Learners' Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide

Recommended group and duration

- 6 learners per group
- 60 to 75 minutes

Opening script for facilitator

Thank you for joining this discussion. We want to learn how pupils keep learning to read and write when there is conflict in Bawku. There are no right or wrong answers. You can speak in the language you are most comfortable with. You may choose not to answer any question and you may stop at any time. We ask everyone to keep what is said here private. With your assent, and with permission from your parent or guardian, we will audio record so that we do not miss your ideas.

FGD logistics

- Date and time: _____
- School: _____
- Facilitator: _____ Note taker: _____
- Language(s) used: _____
- Group code: _____
- Assent to participate obtained: Yes / No
- Parent or guardian permission on file: Yes / No
- Consent to audio record obtained: Yes / No

Section A: Warm up and context

NB: Before you start, ask the participants to pick identification code/number which they will mention anytime each person wants to respond to a question. The participants should not mention their real names.

1. Tell us your code (e.g., Learner 1 or A, Learner 2 or B) and the class you are in. [**Probe:** *Could you share what you enjoy most about reading or writing?*]

Section B: Research questions and items

RQ1: Lived experiences of accessing literacy education during conflict disruptions

Please tell us your experiences about:

- a) the conflict
- b) the conflict and learning at school and at home [**Probe:** *What do your experiences of the conflict and your learning mean to you? How do you feel about the situation? Why?*]
- c) the conflict and you're learning to read and write [**NB:** *Give the participants sticky notes to write the title of book they read or three words they remember*]

RQ2: Agentic strategies to sustain literacy education

6. Please tell us what motivates you to continue learning to read and write in the conflict situation.
7. What did you or you and your friends do on your own to continue learning to read and write? [How did you do it?] [*Give each participant an A4 sheet to sketch what helped them to learn to read or write*]
8. How did your family or community support your learning to read and write?

Closing

Thank the participants for you for sharing their experiences.

Document Retrieval Checklist – Headteachers

We would like to review routine records such as attendance registers, timetables, lesson plans, and minutes of meetings. We will photograph or scan copies with your permission and will return originals immediately. Any names or private details will be covered. The information will be used only for research and reporting.

1. Screening and inclusion criteria

- Within the agreed window: the two most recent academic years, plus any peak disruption months that the head identifies.
- Official or routine school record kept in the normal course of work.
- Contains information that speaks directly to RQ1, RQ2, or RQ3.
- Exclude documents that reveal names or locations which cannot be safely redacted.

2. Retrieval checklist

Use this checklist during the school visit. Tick the items available and note the date range.

A. Accessing Literacy Education (RQ1)

ITEMS	NOTE
Class attendance registers and daily summaries (learners)	
Teacher attendance book	
Textbook and reader distribution lists	
Schemes of work and weekly lesson plans for literacy	
Children's exercise books	

B. Agentic Strategies (RQ2)

ITEMS	NOTE
Remedial or catch-up class registers and plans	
Evidence of radio, TV, or phone supported tasks (e.g., printed schedules, task slips)	
WhatsApp announcement printouts or screenshots with names covered	
Community information centre announcements or scripts, if available	
Lists of volunteers or reading circles, with roles and dates	

C. Professional development (RQ3)

ITEMS	NOTE
Professional learning communities' records	
School based workshop plans, attendance, and materials	

Appendix B: Project Work Plan and Timeline

Project Tasks	Timeline	Tools/Instrument s	Question s	Results/Outcom e	Responsibl e
A0. Inception Activities, May-July 2025					
A0.1: Sign grant contract	May 2025	NA	NA	Signed contract document	PI
A0.2: Constitution of a research team and discussion of research contract	June 2025	NA	NA	Competent and experienced researchers working in education	PI
A0.3: Organise inception meeting with stakeholders	July 2025	NA	NA	Inception meeting organised	PI, CoPIs, RAs
A0.4: Obtain ethical clearance from UCCIRB & IEPA Ethical Research Committee	July 2025	NA	NA	Ethical clearance letter	PI, CoPIs
A1. Development of Research Instruments, August-October 2024					
A1.1: Develop data collection instruments	2025	Semi-structured interview guides, focus group discussion guides, & checklist	RQ1 to RQ3	Research tools developed	PI, CoPIs, RAs
A1.2: Recruit and train field data collectors on research instruments	2025	Semi-structured interview guides, focus group discussion guides, & checklist	RQ1 to RQ3	Enumerators recruited and trained	PI, CoPIs, RAs
A2. Piloting of Research Instruments, October 2025					
A2.1: Pilot testing of research instruments with the participants	2025	Data collection tools	RQ1 to RQ3	Data collection tools tested and gaps for revision identified	PI, CoPIs, RAs
A2.2: Revision of research instruments	2025	Data collection tools	RQ1 to RQ3	Data collection tools finalised	PI, CoPIs, RAs
A3. Data collection and lessons, November-January 2025					
A3.1 Data collection with research participants/education stakeholders	2025	Qualitative data collection tools to collect interview, focus group and administrative data education stakeholders' lived experiences of accessing literacy education, agentic efforts and teacher professional learning and development for sustaining literacy education in	RQ1 to RQ3	Documented stakeholders' lived experiences, agentic efforts of literacy education and teacher's agency and professional learning in a conflict context	PI, CoPIs, RAs, Graduate student, & Enumerators

		conflict-laden Bawku.			
3.2 Collect interview data from basic school headteachers	2025	Audio recorders, Cell phones, Notepads, Pens	RQ1 to RQ3	Same as above	PI, Co-PIs & RAs
3.3 Collect interview data from basic school teachers	2025	Same as above	RQ1 to RQ3	Same as above	PI, Co-PIs & RAs
3.4 Collect focus group data from basic school learners	2025	Same as above	RQ1 to RQ3	Same as above	PI, Co-PIs & RAs
3.5 Collect administrative data in basic schools	2025	Same as above	RQ1 to RQ3	Same as above	PI, Co-PIs & RAs
3.6 Collect interview data from parents in school communities	2025	Same as above	RQ1 to RQ3	Same as above	PI, Co-PIs & RAs
3.7 Collect interview data from school improvement support officers (SISOs) in Municipal Education Directorate	2025	Same as above	RQ1 to RQ3	Same as above	PI, Co-PIs & RAs
3.8 Monitoring data collection activities	2025	Data collection monitoring tools	RQ1 to RQ3	Data collection and monitoring report	PI, Co-PIs & RAs
A4. Write and Submit Md-term Report, December 2025					
A4.1: Write and submit a mid-term report	December 2025	Data collection tools	RQ1 to RQ3	Mid-term reports	PI, Co-PIs & RAs
A5. Data Analysis, Synthesis and Writing, January-April 2026					
5.1 Data transcription, cleaning, coding, and analysis	January-March 2026	Data analysis software subscribed	RQ1 to RQ3	Transcripts, analytic memos, and analysis report	PI, Co-PIs & RAs
5.2 Write a draft report and research paper	March-April 2026	Writing tools	RQ1 to RQ3	Draft reports	PI, Co-PIs & RAs
A6. Knowledge Dissemination, Publication and Final Reporting, May-June 2026					
6.1 Validation and sharing of preliminary findings	May 2026	Discussion guide	NA	Feedback from stakeholders on preliminary findings	PI, Co-PIs & RAs
6.2 Prepare an article for publication	May 2026	Article writing guide	NA	Draft article	PI, Co-PIs & RAs
6.3 Dissemination of findings	May 2026	Dissemination plan	NA	Dissemination report	PI, Co-PIs & RAs
6.4 Prepare and submit final report	June 2026	Proofreading tools	NA	Final reports	PI, Co-PIs & RAs

Appendix C: Definitions of Key Terms

The following terms are defined operationally as follows:

- *Agentic strategies*: Proactive and intentional actions taken by individuals to exert influence over their circumstances and goals, such as a teacher implementing innovative pedagogies to engage learners more effectively.
-
- *Conflict-induced disruptions*: The localised tensions and violence that disrupt normal societal functions, particularly in the Bawku municipality, affecting the educational landscape. This can include armed conflict, ethnic tensions, and resultant instability, school closures or displacement of learners and teachers.
-
- *Education stakeholders*: Individuals or groups with an interest or investment in education, for example, learners, teachers, headteachers, parents, and district education officers.
-
- *Efficacy*: A person's belief in their ability to achieve a particular goal or outcome, essentially the confidence in one's own competence to act effectively.
-
- *Fragile contexts*: Places where there is an accumulation and combination of risks because of context-specific underlying causes combined with insufficient coping capacity of the state, system, and/or communities to manage, absorb, or mitigate those risks.
-
- *Human agency*: The capacity of an individual to make choices and influence their environment.
-
- *Quality education*: Education that helps learners acquire basic literacy and numeracy, enjoy learning without fear, and feel valued and included, irrespective of where they come from (UNICEF, 2018).
-
- *Literacy education*: Encompasses teaching and learning practices aimed at developing reading and writing skills, critical thinking, and comprehension, illustrated by a curriculum designed to enhance learners' abilities to analyse texts and communicate effectively.
-
- *Lived experiences*: The unique and personal perspectives shaped by an individual's interactions and experiences within their social, cultural, and educational contexts.
-
- *School-based professional development programmes*: Organised efforts (professional learning communities, training workshops, mentorship) within educational institutions designed to improve teachers' skills and pedagogies.

Appendix D: Permission Letter

GHANA EDUCATION SERVICE

*In case of reply,
the number and date of this
letter should be quoted.*

My Ref. No.: GES/S&ID/MSCI-2025/226

Your Ref. No.



HEADQUARTERS
Ministry Branch Post Office
P.O. Box M 45
Accra

3rd November, 2025

**THE REGIONAL DIRECTOR
GHANA EDUCATION SERVICE
UPPER EAST**

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN BAWKU MUNICIPALITY

Management of Ghana Education Service (GES) has granted approval to Dr. Wisdom Kweku Agbevanu and a team of co- investigators to conduct a research study entitled "A Phenomenological Exploration of Stakeholder Agentic Efforts Towards Achieving Quality Literacy Education in the Conflict- Laden Bawku Municipality of the Upper East Region of Ghana"

This research aims to investigate the lived experiences and agentic strategies employed by education stakeholders including school heads, teachers, learners, parents and school improvement officers in sustaining quality literacy education amid the ongoing chieftaincy related conflict in Bawku Municipality

The study will provide actionable recommendations to enhance educational outcomes and inform policy frameworks aimed at safeguarding quality literacy education in Bawku and comparable fragile environments. The study will purposively involve approximately fifty- two (52) participants drawn from five (5) basic schools within the Bawku Municipality. These participants include:

- School head teachers: providing leadership perspectives on sustaining education conflict
- Teachers: sharing institutional challenges and agentic strategies
- Learners (aged 9- 13 years): articulating their lived experiences of accessing literacy education
- Parents: offering insights into family and community support dynamics
- School Improvement Support Officers (SISOs): contributing supervisory and systematic views

By this letter, Dr. Wisdom Agbevanu and his co- investigators are directed to contact you for further directive and action

PRINCE C. AGYEMANG-DUAH (MR.)
DIRECTOR, SCHOOLS AND INSTRUCTIONS DIVISION
For: AG. DIRECTOR-GENERAL

cc: The Chairman, GES Council, Accra
The Ag. Director-General, GES HQ, Accra
The Ag. Deputy Director-General (MS), GES HQ, Accra
The Ag. Deputy Director-General (Q&A), GES HQ, Accra
Prof. Micheal Boakye- Yiadom, Director- General, IEPA, UCC
Dr. Wisdom Agbevanu and team, UCC