

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Policy Brief



Occupational Stress and Well-Being Among Teachers of Refugee Learners in Kakuma Refugee Camp

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Executive Summary

This study examined occupational stress and teacher well-being among refugee and national teachers in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya, where schools operate under severe resource constraints, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, and limited teaching and learning resources. Guided by the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) framework, the study employed a mixed-methods design, drawing on a sample of 256 teachers from 28 primary and 10 secondary schools, along with interviews with 26 key education stakeholders. The study explored how psychological resources and workplace support systems influence teachers' well-being in conflict and crisis contexts.

Key Findings

The findings show that multiple structural and workplace challenges drive teacher stress. Key stressors included inadequate teaching resources, low compensation and incentives, high workload demands, limited administrative support, and strained relationships with students and colleagues. Teachers also reported symptoms associated with poor mental health, including depressive symptoms and anxiety.

Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated relatively high levels of autonomy and self-efficacy, suggesting important psychological strengths that support resilience. The extent to which teachers fulfilled their psychological needs, particularly autonomy and social belonging, strongly influenced their experiences of stress and coping. In addition, self-efficacy as a psychological resource was found to be critical for protecting national teachers of refugees from poor mental health and burnout.

Policy Priorities

- Strengthen equitable and context-responsive teacher support systems in refugee schools.
- Harmonize teacher incentives and support structures across refugee, national, and intern teachers.
- Integrate psychosocial support and well-being interventions into teacher professional development programs.

Recommendations

- Harmonize teacher incentives and employment support across refugee and national teachers.
- Integrate psychosocial and trauma-informed support into Teacher Professional Development (TPD) programs.
- Strengthen supportive school leadership, peer support, and staff well-being mechanisms.
- Expand targeted pedagogical training for unqualified refugee-background teachers.

- Enhance short-term welfare and support packages for refugee-background teachers in Kakuma.

Context

The Kakuma refugee camps, located in Turkana County in north-western Kenya, host one of the largest and most protracted refugee populations in Africa. Established in 1992, the camps currently accommodate approximately 304,000 refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, alongside a growing host-community population in the surrounding areas. This prolonged displacement has exerted sustained pressure on essential public services, particularly education (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025). Educational provision in Kakuma is delivered through a coordinated humanitarian response led by the Government of Kenya and the UNHCR, with implementation support from organizations such as the Lutheran World Federation, Jesuit Refugee Service, and Finnish Church Aid. These organizations support the establishment and management of primary and secondary schools across both the refugee camps and neighboring host communities. Schools operate under highly constrained conditions characterized by overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, and limited teaching and learning materials. The teaching workforce comprises both nationally employed Kenyan teachers and teachers of refugee backgrounds, who often work under different employment arrangements, remuneration structures, and levels of job security. In this context, teachers are expected not only to deliver the national curriculum but also to respond to the psychosocial needs of learners affected by displacement and its associated traumatic experiences. As a result, teaching extends beyond instruction into caregiving, mentorship, and emotional support, thereby exposing teachers to sustained occupational and emotional pressures.



Methodology

The study sample comprised primary and secondary school teachers drawn from both refugee and neighboring host-community schools. A total of 256 teachers from 28 primary schools and 10 secondary schools participated in the study by completing a survey administered between 15 and 27 March 2025. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 26 education stakeholders within the camps, including 11 teachers, 10 headteachers, and five representatives from the Ministry of Education and education implementing partners operating in the refugee camps. The study was guided by the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) framework and aimed to examine the relationship between occupational stress and teacher well-being in crisis contexts in Kenya. Specifically, the study sought to investigate teachers' psychological resources as potential protective factors that may mitigate the negative effects of stressful experiences on their well-being. The study's main questions were as follows:

1. What key sources of teacher occupational stress exist in schools with refugee-background children in Kenya, and how do they impact their well-being?
2. How do workplace climate and teachers' psychological needs shape their resilience and well-being?
3. What policies and programs are needed to better support teacher well-being and development in crisis contexts?

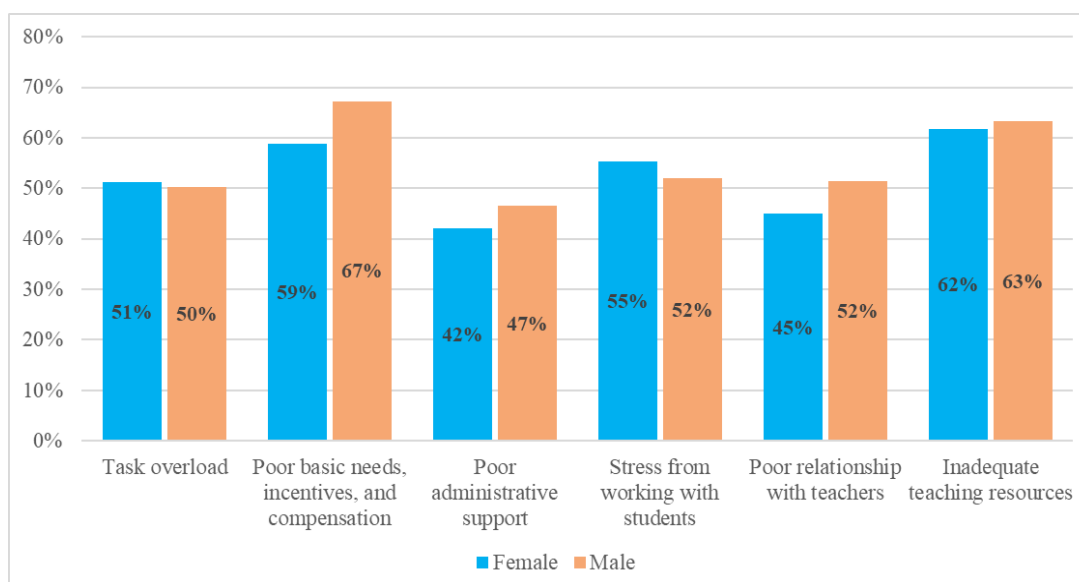
Key Findings

Sources of occupational stress among teachers who work with refugees in Kenya

Occupational stress among teachers in schools within the Kakuma refugee camps is driven by a combination of resource constraints, challenging working and living conditions, and substantial professional demands. Across the interviews, teachers consistently identified overcrowded classrooms, inadequate learning materials, and excessive workloads as major sources of stress that affect their daily responsibilities. Most teachers interviewed described managing classrooms of 100-150 learners, often with insufficient textbooks, stationery, and other essential teaching resources. One participant explained that, "I teach the two languages [English and Kiswahili], and they require set books, but they are not available... it's stressful to teach without these resources" (P1 Teacher). In addition, teachers reported spending extended hours marking large volumes of students' work, often late into the night, to meet assessment requirements. Beyond the school environment, difficult living conditions—including water shortages, inadequate housing, exposure to disease, and extreme heat—further intensified their stress. As one headteacher observed, "the amount of workload is significant... with over three thousand students but only 43 teachers, it is a cause for physical and mental strain" (P14 Headteacher).

Findings from the quantitative data corroborate the perspectives shared by teachers during the interviews. Participating teachers reported experiencing several work-related stressors, including inadequate teaching resources ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.99$), unmet basic needs, inadequate compensation and incentives ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.03$), which constituted the most significant sources of stress among teachers. In addition, higher work demand ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.36$), insufficient administrative support ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.21$), and strained relationships with students ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.06$) and colleagues ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.19$) were key contributing factors. Some gender differences were observed, with male teachers reporting comparably higher levels of stress regarding access to basic needs, incentives and compensation, support from the school administration, and relationships with fellow teachers (Table 1). Collectively, these stressors not only contribute to teachers' ill-being but also undermine their motivation and adversely affect the quality of teaching and learning in schools serving refugee learners.

Table 1: Level of occupational stress experienced by teachers of refugee learners in Kakuma Refugee

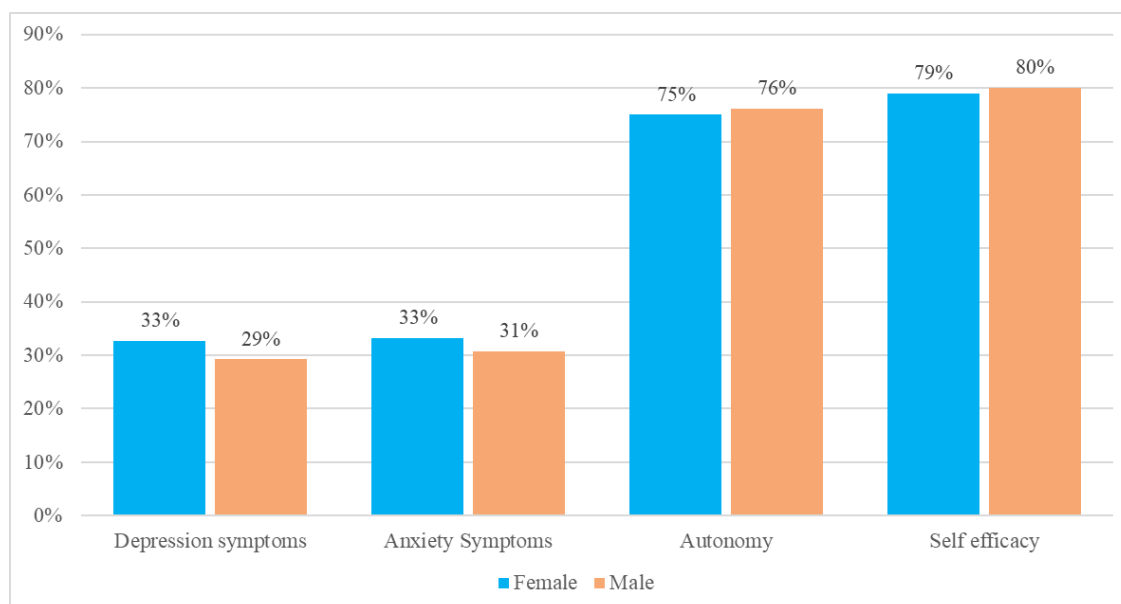


Mental health among teachers of refugee learners: The role of autonomy, social belonging and self-efficacy competencies

Signs of depression among teachers may often go unnoticed, as some individuals choose not to openly express their struggles. As noted by one headteacher, "Sometimes someone will just come from home and decide to keep quiet. You cannot know if he's sad or depressed or he has any other issues" (P2 Headteacher). Teachers working with refugee children in Kakuma refugee camp reported notable levels of depressive symptoms ($M = 2.24$, $SD = .89$) and anxiety symptoms ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .77$), with only minimal differences observed between male and female teachers (see Table 2). The teachers we spoke with explained that heavy workloads and overcrowded classrooms negatively impacted their mental health and well-being. One teacher reported that

teaching large classes and handling 28 lessons per week was “overwhelming mentally” (P9 Teacher), emphasizing the need for mental health support for teachers. These findings suggest that mental health challenges remain a significant concern among teachers working in conflict and crisis settings and highlight the need for targeted interventions to address their psychological well-being.

Table 2: Autonomy and self-efficacy competencies and mental health of teachers of refugees



Furthermore, teachers reported relatively high levels of autonomy ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.03$) and self-efficacy ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.53$). These psychological resources are considered essential for effective classroom instruction and teacher functioning. Existing empirical evidence has linked teacher autonomy to enhanced well-being (e.g., Ha et al., 2025), while self-efficacy has been identified as a significant predictor of job stress and burnout among teachers (e.g., Schwarz and Hallum, 2008). Taken together, these resources constitute vital protective and underlying mechanisms that could help explain the relationship between occupational stress and teachers' mental health.

Findings from interviews with teachers indicate that variations in how teachers experience and cope with stress in Kakuma are largely influenced by the extent to which their basic psychological needs, particularly autonomy, are satisfied, as well as by their access to workplace support. Teachers who reported unmet psychological needs were more likely to experience heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout. One teacher noted, “I don’t feel a sense of belonging... I fear that anytime I may be fired as I am not a trained teacher” (P9 Teacher). Such feelings of insecurity appeared to intensify stress responses and diminish teachers’ capacity to cope effectively. In contrast, teachers who reported stronger support systems, a more supportive school culture, and greater professional recognition experienced higher levels of resilience and engagement. The findings indicate that social belonging among refugee and national teachers in Kakuma is influenced by inclusion, recognition, and connectedness within the school community. Teachers who felt recognized and appreciated within the school community reported a

stronger sense of belonging and commitment. One teacher noted that being a “pioneering teacher during the rolling out of the junior secondary school” made their inputs “highly valued,” which enhanced their sense of belonging (P13 Teacher). However, experiences of belonging varied across individuals, with some participants observing that while certain teachers developed strong connections with colleagues and the community, others continued to struggle with integration due to past tensions and social challenges within the school environment.

Policy and Program Priorities for Strengthening Teacher Well-being and Development

Based on the research findings, three broad policy priorities for action to strengthen teacher well-being and development are proposed:

1. The findings underscore the need for **stronger, more equitable, and context-responsive teacher support systems within refugee schools**. Teachers consistently identified gaps in remuneration, professional development, and welfare support as critical areas requiring policy intervention. Although certain incentives and training opportunities are available, access remains uneven, with refugee teachers in particular reporting limited financial security, restricted opportunities for career advancement, and inadequate social protection. 
2. A major policy priority emerging from the findings is the **harmonization of teacher support mechanisms and incentive structures across national, refugee, and intern teachers** in order to reduce perceptions of inequity and enhance motivation. As one participant observed, “National teachers get housing, transport, the 13th-month salary... they feel it’s unfair, and they’ve told us so” (P22 FCA Education Officer). Addressing these disparities is essential for improving teacher morale and retention. 
3. The findings also highlight the importance of **strengthening structured professional development and psychosocial support** within Teacher Professional Development (TPD) programs. Teachers emphasized the need for more consistent, contextually relevant training opportunities that address everyday classroom challenges, alongside welfare systems that can respond effectively to stress and vulnerability. Overall, the findings suggest that policy responses should move beyond short-term, incentive-based approaches toward establishing sustainable systems that promote equity, well-being, and professional growth among teachers. 

Key recommendations

- The Ministry of Education (MoE) in Kenya, UNHCR, and implementing partners should work toward **harmonizing employment terms and incentive structures for refugee-background and national teachers** in line with the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework. Such harmonization would contribute to reducing inequalities in remuneration, benefits, and job security while promoting fairness, teacher motivation, and professional stability in protracted crisis contexts.
- The **integration of psychosocial support and trauma-informed pedagogical practices** into continuous teacher professional development programs should be prioritized by the Teachers Service Commission and implementing partners operating in Kakuma. Such interventions would contribute to addressing the well-being needs of both teachers and learners while fostering a more supportive and positive school climate in these contexts.
- School leadership, including headteachers and Boards of Management, should **strengthen supportive supervision and school-based well-being systems** through initiatives such as regular staff check-ins, team-building activities, and peer-support mechanisms. Such measures may enhance collaborative professional relationships among teachers and foster inclusive working environments in which all teachers experience a sense of belonging. In addition, headteachers should promote and nurture autonomy-supportive approaches to teaching and professional practice to strengthen teacher agency, motivation, and engagement.
- Given that the majority of teachers of refugee backgrounds lack formal pedagogical qualifications, the Ministry of Education and implementing partners should **strengthen targeted professional development initiatives** for this group of teachers. In particular, partnerships with higher education institutions and funding organizations should be established to support the delivery of sustainable and impactful teacher education programs that lead to recognized professional qualifications.
- Given the prevailing circumstances, the UNHCR and education partners should, in the short term, **strengthen support packages for teachers from refugee backgrounds**. Such measures could include transportation, health coverage, housing assistance, and more consistent incentive structures to reduce financial stress and enhance teacher retention in Kakuma refugee camps.

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

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