

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Policy Brief

More Than Implementers: How Teacher Agency Drives Curriculum Reform in Kenya's Refugee Schools

Dr. Lucy Wangui Njagi
Prof. Loise Wambui Gichuhi
Dr. Charles Obiero
University of Nairobi



University of Nairobi

Executive Summary

Teachers in Kenya's refugee-hosting schools are not passive deliverers of curriculum policy — they are active, adaptive professionals who continuously mediate between national education reform and the lived realities of some of the most vulnerable learners in the world. This policy brief summarizes findings from a study examining how teachers exercise professional agency to implement Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in two distinct refugee-hosting contexts: Kakuma Refugee Camp in Turkana County and urban integrating schools in Nairobi.

The CBC, introduced as a transformative shift towards learner-centered, competency-driven education, was designed primarily for mainstream Kenyan classrooms. Yet many of the learners in refugee-hosting schools bring multilingual backgrounds, interrupted schooling histories, and psychosocial burdens shaped by displacement and trauma. The question at the heart of this research is whether teachers — and how teachers — bridge this gap between policy intent and classroom reality.

The answer is resounding: they do, and they do so through the exercise of professional agency. High Teacher Agency Index scores across both research sites confirm that the overwhelming majority of teachers make deliberate, reflective choices about their instructional practice, adapting CBC content, sequencing, language, and pedagogy to meet learner needs. This agency is not exceptional behavior — it is embedded in the daily work of teaching in these settings.

Key findings of the study include:

- **Agency is universal but contextually shaped:** Teachers across both Kakuma and Nairobi demonstrated high levels of agency, but its character and expression differ significantly between camp-based and urban settings.
- **Material hardship stimulates innovation:** Counterintuitively, regression analysis found a significant negative relationship between material deprivation and agency — teachers facing the most resource-constrained environments reported higher adaptive capacity, developing improvised teaching aids and redesigned activities.
- **School structures support, but systems constrain:** School-level leadership was broadly enabling, yet national policy frameworks, rigid assessment systems, and accountability mechanisms remain insufficiently responsive to the realities of multilingual, displaced classrooms.
- **Cultural and linguistic diversity demands skilled mediation:** Teachers employ translanguaging, culturally relevant examples, differentiated instruction, and peer learning to navigate classrooms where learners may speak five or more mother tongues and have widely varying literacy levels.
- **Teacher agency protects learner well-being:** In contexts marked by displacement and psychosocial vulnerability, teachers function not only as instructors but as mentors, counsellors, and trusted adults. Learners consistently associated teacher adaptiveness with improved confidence, participation, and motivation to learn.

The study concludes that teacher agency is the indispensable engine of curriculum reform in refugee-serving schools. Policies that ignore, undermine, or fail to invest in this agency do so at the cost of learner outcomes, inclusion, and well-being. Strengthening teacher agency — through professional development, adequate resourcing, curriculum flexibility, and institutional recognition — must be a priority for education systems serving displaced populations.

Context

Kenya hosts one of the largest refugee populations in Africa. Kakuma Refugee Camp, established in 1992 in Turkana County in northwest Kenya, shelters hundreds of thousands of displaced people, predominantly from South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Its schools serve a highly diverse, multilingual student population whose educational histories have frequently been disrupted by conflict, displacement, and migration. In Nairobi, an estimated tens of thousands of urban refugees live dispersed across informal settlements, with children attending host-community schools that integrate both Kenyan and refugee learners in the same classrooms.

In both settings, learners bring rich but varied linguistic repertoires, educational backgrounds ranging from no prior schooling to grade-level attendance, and experiences that include loss, trauma, and family separation. Kenya's CBC, introduced in 2017 as a landmark national education reform, emphasizes competency development, learner-centered pedagogy, and practical skills — but was designed without explicit consideration of the refugee or multilingual classroom. This disconnect between national curriculum design and the realities of refugee-hosting schools makes teacher mediation not merely useful, but essential.

Research Methodology

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey instruments with in-depth qualitative inquiry to develop a comprehensive picture of teacher agency across two distinct educational contexts in Kenya.

A Teacher Agency Index (TAI) was computed and validated specifically for this study, drawing on established frameworks in teacher agency research and adapted for refugee-hosting school settings. The TAI measures the degree to which teachers exercise professional autonomy, reflective practice, and adaptive decision-making in their instructional work. Three complementary sub-indices were developed to assess the contextual conditions shaping agency: a Material Factors Index, examining physical infrastructure, resources, and learning materials; a Structural Factors Index, assessing institutional support, leadership, and systemic policy conditions; and a Cultural Factors Index, measuring teachers' engagement with learner diversity, community expectations, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Quantitative data were collected through structured surveys administered to teachers across schools in both Kakuma Refugee Camp and urban Nairobi. Multiple regression analysis was

conducted to examine relationships between each contextual factor index and reported levels of teacher agency, controlling for school type and location.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews with teachers and school leaders and focus group discussions with learners. These provided contextually rich evidence of how agency is enacted in practice: the specific adaptations teachers make, the barriers they navigate, and the direct impact of their practice on learner experience. Learner perceptions of teacher support were systematically captured to triangulate and enrich teacher self-reports. Findings from both sites were analysed comparatively to illuminate how educational context shapes the expression and limits of teacher agency.

Key Findings

Teachers are Active Curriculum Mediators, Not Policy Recipients

The Teacher Agency Index recorded high scores across both research sites, confirming that teachers exercise considerable professional judgement in their daily classroom practice. An overwhelming majority reported making personal, deliberate choices about teaching approaches based on their assessment of learner needs — demonstrating that agency is not an exceptional quality but a routine feature of teaching in refugee-hosting schools.

In practice, this agency takes many forms. Teachers adapt CBC content to reflect the lived experiences of refugee learners, systematically replacing examples drawn from urban Kenyan middle-class contexts with scenarios familiar to learners in displacement settings — rural landscapes, cross-border journeys, camp community life. They modify learning sequences to accommodate learners entering mid-year with disrupted educational histories. They employ peer learning, collaborative group work, and inter-learner language support to bridge gaps between strong and struggling learners in the same classroom.

"I cannot teach about Nairobi traffic when my learners have never seen a city. I teach from what they know, what they have lived. That is the only way they will understand."

— Teacher, Kakuma Refugee Camp

Crucially, these adaptations are not workarounds or deviations — they are precisely the kind of responsive, learner-centered pedagogy that CBC aspires to promote. Teachers in refugee settings are, in many respects, already practising the spirit of CBC even where its letter cannot be delivered as written.

Material Deprivation Stimulates Rather than Suppresses Agency

Material conditions emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing teachers in this study. The Material Factors Index recorded the lowest scores across all sub-indices, with teachers reporting acute shortages of textbooks, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate or absent learning infrastructure, unreliable electricity, and severely limited access to instructional

materials. In some classrooms, learners share single textbooks among five or more students; in others, no printed materials are available at all.

Despite these conditions, the regression analysis produced a striking and counterintuitive finding: a significant negative relationship between material factors and teacher agency. Teachers working under the most challenging material conditions reported the highest levels of adaptive agency. Qualitative evidence reveals why: scarcity demands creativity. Teachers described making their own teaching aids from locally available materials, drawing maps and diagrams on chalkboards in the absence of printed resources, and redesigning CBC activities to work without the materials they were designed to use.

This resilience is admirable — but it must not be misread as evidence that resource shortages are acceptable. Sustained material deprivation places compounding burdens on teachers and risks eventual burnout. The finding speaks to teacher resilience, not to the adequacy of current resourcing.

Table 1: Summary of Index Findings Across Study Sites

Factor	Index Result	Relationship to Agency
Teacher Agency Index	High — both sites	Central outcome of study
Material Factors	Lowest scores overall	Negative → hardship drives innovation
Structural Factors	Positive at school level	Enabling locally; constrained systemically
Cultural Factors	Moderate to High	Enabling when actively leveraged

Camp-Based Teachers Report Higher Agency Despite Greater Hardship

One of the most significant and unexpected findings of the study is that teachers in Kakuma Refugee Camp reported significantly higher levels of agency than those in Nairobi's urban integrating schools — despite operating in materially harsher and more isolated conditions. Urban schools generally offer better infrastructure, more reliable access to materials, and stronger professional networks. Yet it is the camp-based teachers who demonstrate the highest adaptive capacity.

Qualitative evidence points to why: in Kakuma, the demands of the classroom are immediate, unpredictable, and cannot be deferred. Teachers must make rapid decisions with limited support. The cumulative effect of navigating these demands appears to strengthen teachers' sense of professional capability, autonomy, and resourcefulness. Agency, in other words, is not simply a product of favorable conditions — it can

"We are alone out here in many ways. But that also means we have learned to trust ourselves, to find the way when there is no map."

— Teacher, Kakuma Refugee Camp

be forged by the necessity of responding to unfavorable ones.

The finding carries an important caveat. Kakuma teachers also reported significantly higher levels of professional isolation than their Nairobi counterparts. While they demonstrate exceptional adaptive agency, many lack access to mentoring, peer collaboration, and professional development. This reveals a paradox that policy must address: the teachers exercising the greatest agency are doing so with the least support.

Teacher Agency is a Protective Factor for Learner Well-Being

The study demonstrates that teacher agency has direct and measurable implications for learner well-being, not only for curriculum delivery. Learners across both sites consistently described their teachers as supportive, patient, encouraging, and responsive to their individual needs. In focus group discussions, learners frequently identified specific teacher behaviors — providing additional explanations, creating space for group support, using examples from their own lives, and offering personal encouragement — as central to their engagement and confidence in school.

"The teacher supports you like this: if you don't know how to read, they find a time to meet you in the office, give you a book, and start teaching you; they guide you through everything... until you can have courage."

Refugee learner

Learners reported concrete educational improvements they attributed to teacher support: stronger reading ability, greater willingness to participate in class, and increased motivation to attend school regularly. These outcomes are particularly significant in refugee contexts, where learners may have experienced extended out-of-school periods, the trauma of displacement, family separation, and deep uncertainty about their futures.

In these settings, teachers do not only deliver content — they constitute a critical source of stability, belonging, and encouragement. Teacher agency, expressed through adaptive instruction and genuine relationship with learners, functions as a protective factor for psychosocial well-being alongside its role in driving academic progress.

"We discuss in groups during lessons... He explains to us. He shows us in the pictures/photos... we are allowed to give our own ideas and perspectives. The teacher explains for us so we feel confident and safe."

Refugee learner

Key Recommendations

The following recommendations are directed at education policy makers, curriculum developers, and school system practitioners working in refugee-hosting and crisis-affected educational contexts:

- **Formalize adaptive teaching in policy:** Ministries of Education and refugee education stakeholders should formally recognize teacher curriculum mediation in CBC implementation guidelines, legitimizing and supporting contextual adaptation in refugee-hosting schools rather than penalizing deviation from prescribed materials.
- **Create flexible CBC supplementary frameworks:** Curriculum developers should produce supplementary CBC resources specifically designed for multilingual, refugee-inclusive classrooms — including multilingual scaffolds, culturally diverse examples, and differentiated pathways for learners with interrupted schooling.
- **Invest in professional support for isolated teachers:** Education authorities and NGO partners should establish structured peer learning networks, remote mentoring programmes, and regular professional development opportunities — especially for camp-based teachers who demonstrate high agency but operate in significant professional isolation.
- **Reform assessment and accountability systems:** National assessment frameworks must be adapted to reflect the realities of refugee-inclusive, multilingual classrooms. Accountability mechanisms should recognize and reward adaptive practice, not only curriculum compliance measured against mainstream norms.
- **Resource schools adequately and sustainably:** Teacher resilience in resource-constrained environments must not become the justification for continued underinvestment. Sustained material improvement in refugee-hosting schools is essential to support the quality and long-term sustainability of adaptive teaching.

Acknowledgements

The research team expresses deep gratitude to the teachers, school leaders, and learners in Kakuma Refugee Camp and Nairobi who gave generously of their time, knowledge, and experiences. Their commitment to education in conditions of extraordinary hardship and uncertainty is both the subject and the inspiration of this work. The team also thanks the school communities, partner organizations, and field research assistants who made data collection possible.

This research was made possible through funding provided by CODE (the Canadian Organization for Development through Education) under the Teachers' Learning and Formative Change (TLFC) grants programme. The views expressed in this work are those of the creators and do not necessarily represent those of CODE, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) or the Government of Canada. This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from Global Affairs Canada.

References

- Biesta, G., & Tedder, M. (2007). Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39(2), 132–149.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2007.11661545>
- Biesta, G., Priestley, M., & Robinson, S. (2015). The role of beliefs in teacher agency. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 21(6), 624–640.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044325>
- Dryden-Peterson, S. (2016). Refugee education: The crossroads of globalization. *Educational Researcher*, 45(9), 473–482. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16683398>
- Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD). (2017). Basic education curriculum framework. Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development.
- Mendenhall, M., Dryden-Peterson, S., Bartlett, L., Ndirangu, C., Imonje, R., Gakunga, D., Gichuhi, L., Nyagah, G., Okoth, U., & Tangelder, M. (2015). Quality education for refugees in Kenya: Pedagogy in urban Nairobi and Kakuma refugee camp settings. *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, 1(1), 92–130.
- Ministry of Education, Kenya. (2019). Competency based curriculum: Sector policy for learners and trainees with disabilities. Government of Kenya.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher agency: An ecological approach*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Reyes, I., & Vallone, T. L. (2007). *Constructivist strategies for teaching English language learners*. Corwin Press.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2019). The Kakuma refugee camp and Kalobeyei settlement population statistics. UNHCR Kenya.

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