

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Policy Brief



Reimagining the “Good Classroom” in the Ugandan Refugee Context: Assessing Strategies for Enhancing Learners' Literacy Skills and Classroom Practice

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June 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children in refugee and displacement settings enter school with varied language backgrounds, interrupted learning experiences, and different levels of exposure to print, stories, and formal instruction. Their participation is also shaped by poverty, food insecurity, long travel distances, family disruption, disability, violence, and emotional distress.

This study examined what a “good classroom” should look like for young learners in Palabek Refugee Settlement and surrounding host communities in Lamwo District, Uganda. The study used a mixed-methods design. It combined a literature review of evidence published between 2014 and 2025 with classroom observations, six focus group discussions and interviews with teachers, caregivers and head teachers. Eight pre-primary schools took part in the field study. The literature search identified 1,360 records, of which 22 studies met the final inclusion criteria.

The findings show that no single method defines an effective classroom. Strong literacy learning results from a connected package of practices and enabling conditions. Teachers need structured literacy routines, including systematic phonics, sound-symbol work, storytelling, rhymes, songs, oral language, and writing practice. They also need flexibility to use familiar languages, visual supports, local objects, play, and grouping according to learners’ current abilities. Familiar-language teaching emerged as an important bridge to English literacy. Teachers used translation, drawing, modelling, and real objects to help children understand new vocabulary and concepts. English remained a valued outcome for families, but children participated and understood lessons better when teachers connected English to languages they already knew.

Positive relationships also shaped learning. Learners spoke, read, wrote, and worked with others more confidently when teachers welcomed them, praised effort, prevented ridicule and treated mistakes as part of learning. Resilience and socio-emotional learning should therefore sit within daily literacy instruction, classroom routines and school culture, rather than operate as a separate programme.

The main barriers were structural. Staffing ranged from two teachers for classes of no more than 35 learners to one teacher for 120 learners. Some classes had 50 to 62 learners with no teaching assistant. Schools also reported inadequate books, torn mats, limited play materials, damaged displays, weak referral services and inconsistent teacher preparation and pay. Teacher commitment and locally made resources supported learning, but they did not replace adequate staffing, core materials and system support.

Policy action should focus on continuous school-based coaching, improved staffing and teaching-assistant arrangements, multilingual and differentiated literacy instruction, a minimum classroom resource package, and stronger links between schools, families, health, protection and disability services.

CONTEXT

The Palabek Refugee Settlement and neighbouring host communities serve young children from diverse linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds. Some learners begin pre-primary school with little English, interrupted prior learning or no previous experience of formal education. Teachers therefore work with children of different ages, literacy levels, home languages, and support needs within the same classroom.

Learning is affected by conditions beyond school. Participants linked irregular attendance and dropout to long walking distances, school-related costs, food shortages, sickness, domestic violence, family separation, and reduced donor support. Schools also reported children with hearing, vision, speech, and developmental support needs, while access to screening and specialist services remained uneven.

Conditions differed across schools. Some had manageable classes, co-teaching, textbooks, internet access, and supportive leadership. Others had one teacher managing large groups, damaged materials, limited space, and few support services. These differences show why classroom improvement must combine good teaching with staffing, materials, safeguarding, family engagement, and service linkages.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed-methods design conducted in two phases. Phase one involved a systematic review of research and programme evidence on early literacy, resilience, and socio-emotional learning in Uganda and other refugee-hosting countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The review covered publications from 2014 to 2025 and focused on children in early childhood and the transition to primary education. Searches covered academic databases and specialist repositories, including PubMed, JSTOR, Google Scholar and the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies. Of 1,360 identified records, 22 studies met the inclusion criteria.

Phase two involved field research in six purposively selected pre-primary schools in Palabek Refugee Settlement and surrounding host communities in Lamwo District, and two other pre-schools in the community. Selection considered location, learner demographics, geographical coverage and school performance, with input from district and refugee education stakeholders. Classroom observations examined teacher-learner interaction, participation, language use, classroom organisation, instructional methods, learning materials, assessment and support for resilience and socio-emotional learning. Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with teachers, caregivers and head teachers explored literacy instruction, multilingual classrooms, phonics, storytelling, learning through play, Teaching at the Right Level, learner participation and barriers to implementation.

Qualitative data were analysed thematically against the research questions. Structured observation data were summarised descriptively. Findings from the literature review,

observations, discussions and interviews were triangulated to identify common patterns, differences and contextual explanations. Ethical approval was obtained from the Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary, based on informed consent and protected through confidentiality procedures.

KEY FINDINGS

1 Effective literacy instruction combines structure with contextual adaptation

Teachers used letter sounds, Jolly Phonics, rhymes, actions, stories, songs, slates, dictation, and early writing practice. These methods helped children connect oral language, sounds, symbols, reading, and writing. The literature review also supported systematic phonics for early decoding, word recognition, accuracy, and fluency. Phonics worked best as one part of balanced literacy instruction. Children also needed vocabulary, comprehension, writing, and opportunities to speak and listen. Teachers who linked structured routines to stories, local examples, play, and learner demonstrations created more opportunities for understanding than classrooms dominated by repetition and copying.

"We always use the letter sounds ... to guide them how to read and write. Then we use the rhymes and even songs." (Lead Caregiver Interview)

Table 1. Elements of an effective early literacy classroom

Practice	Contribution to learning	Policy implication
Systematic phonics and sound work	Supports decoding, word recognition, and early writing	Include structured literacy in teacher development
Stories, songs, and rhymes	Develop vocabulary, listening, comprehension, and memory	Provide story resources and model interactive storytelling
Play and real objects	Sustain attention and connect words to lived experience	Protect time for guided play and supply basic materials
Learner demonstration	Shows areas of strength and difficulty	Strengthen formative assessment
Group and peer learning	Increases participation and supports shy learners	Train teachers to organise inclusive groups

2 Familiar languages provide a bridge to English literacy

If you speak in English, you interpret in their mother tongue so that they can get the concept well.”
(Caregiver Interview)

Teachers moved between English and familiar local languages and supported meaning through drawings, modelling, objects and displays. This helped children connect known concepts to English vocabulary. The findings, however, revealed a need for teachers to gain practical guidance on translanguageing, visual scaffolding, and progression to English literacy. Materials should reflect the languages and experiences of refugee-hosting communities.

3 Emotional safety and participation are essential to literacy

Literacy requires learners to listen, speak, take turns, attempt answers, cooperate, and recover from mistakes. Participants linked participation to acceptance, praise, peaceful relationships, and protection from ridicule. Teachers supported quieter learners by inviting them to participate, mixing groups, and recognising effort. These practices strengthened literacy, resilience, and socio-emotional learning. Learners participated more confidently when the classroom felt safe. RSEL should translate into daily practices, including welcoming learners, using positive discipline, praising effort, supporting turn-taking, responding to distress, and preventing humiliation.

“You should accept that it is okay to make a mistake, it is okay not to know because you have come to learn.”
(Headteacher Interview)

4 Staffing and resources determine whether good practices are feasible

“My class KG2 has 62 pupils ... In our school, we have 3 teachers to handle the kindergarten.” (Teacher Interview)

Classroom conditions varied widely. The strongest reported arrangement had two teachers and no more than 35 learners per class. Other schools reported classes of 50 to 62 learners, three teachers for the entire preschool section, and no assistants. Large classes reduced individual feedback, differentiation, and active group facilitation. Co-teaching and teaching assistants improved classroom control and learner support, but were not widely available.

Some schools had books, electricity, water, play materials, or internet access. Others reported torn mats, limited textbooks, damaged displays, and weak first-aid provision. Teachers produced materials from paper, bottles, clay, and local objects, but local production did not replace durable core resources.

Table 2. Structural barriers and practical responses

Barrier	Effect on learning	Priority response
High teacher-learner ratios	Less feedback and differentiated support	Recruit teachers and introduce supervised assistants
Limited or damaged materials	Restricts play, reading, writing, and concrete learning	Maintain a minimum resource package
Uneven teacher preparation	Inconsistent literacy, language, and assessment practice	Provide coaching, demonstration, and peer learning
Interrupted attendance	Reduces exposure to literacy instruction	Strengthen feeding, parent engagement, and follow-up
Disability and protection concerns	Limits participation and retention	Build health, disability, and protection referral links

5 Teacher commitment provides a foundation, but system support is required

Teachers created learning materials, adapted language, used songs and stories, organised groups, and supported shy learners. Several schools used learning circles, peer training, supervision, and internet-based research. Participants preferred practical, continuous learning over isolated workshops. The evidence supports a coaching cycle of technical input, demonstration, classroom practice, observation, feedback, and peer reflection. Additionally, school leaders need simple tools to continue support after partner-funded activities end.

“When we try to motivate them [teachers] ... they feel like at least they belong to this school.” (Headteacher Interview)

Table 3. Minimum package for a good classroom

Component	Minimum expectation
Technical teacher capacity	Coaching in structured literacy, play, multilingual teaching, assessment, inclusion, and RSEL
Staffing	A trained teacher, plus co-teaching or assistant support in large classes
Instruction	Structured, flexible literacy routines linked to learner level and language
Materials	Storybooks, phonics materials, slates, play items, safe mats, and production supplies
Classroom culture	Positive discipline, participation, safeguarding, and protection from ridicule
Family and services	Parent engagement, attendance follow-up, feeding support, and referral pathways

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Ministry of Education and Sports, teacher education institutions and districts should institutionalise continuous, school-based coaching in phonics, storytelling, guided play, multilingual teaching, formative assessment, inclusion and RSEL.
2. Government and education partners should improve staffing in large pre-primary classes through recruitment, defined teaching-assistant roles, supervision and pathways for assistants to gain recognised qualifications.
3. Curriculum and teacher-support materials should provide clear routines for using familiar languages as a bridge to English and for grouping learners by current literacy level, age and support needs.
4. Districts and partners should provide and maintain a minimum classroom package covering safe seating, storybooks, phonics materials, slates, writing and play materials, water, first aid, and protected storage.
5. Schools should integrate positive discipline, safeguarding, family engagement, feeding, attendance follow-up and referral links to health, disability and protection services into literacy improvement plans.
6. The Ministry of Education and Sports and district education offices should establish a monitoring framework for early literacy and RSEL in refugee-hosting schools. The framework should track teacher practices, learner progress, attendance, inclusion, classroom resources, and the quality of teacher-learner interactions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Research Team thanks the teachers, caregivers, head teachers, learners' communities and participating schools in Palabek Refugee Settlement and surrounding host communities for sharing their experiences. Appreciation is extended to the Lamwo District Education Office, District Inspector of Schools, Refugee Desk Office and other education stakeholders who supported school selection and field engagement. The team also acknowledges the Research Assistants and supervisors who supported ethical and accurate data collection. CODE is recognised for funding the study, while Tuungane Foundation provided institutional and technical support.

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.

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

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