

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Research Paper



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

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ABSTRACT

This study examined classroom practices and teacher-learner interactions that support foundational literacy, resilience, and socio-emotional learning among young children in refugee and host-community settings in Palabek, Lamwo District, Uganda. A mixed-methods design combined a literature review, classroom observations in 8 classes, focus group discussions in 8 schools, and interviews with 24 teachers, caregivers and head teachers.

Findings showed that effective early literacy practice integrates structured phonics, storytelling, songs, play, group work, writing activities, familiar-language support and positive teacher-learner relationships. Multilingual mediation helped learners connect familiar meanings to English literacy, while praise, acceptance and protection from ridicule strengthened confidence and participation.

Scalable strategies included continuous school-based coaching, peer learning, low-cost locally produced materials, co-teaching, teaching assistants and stronger parent and community engagement.

Major barriers included poor pre-school training preparedness, overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, limited materials, weak infrastructure, irregular attendance, language diversity, disability-related support gaps and unstable teacher employment conditions.

The study concludes that a good classroom in refugee settings depends on the combined quality of instruction, relationships and enabling school conditions. Sustainable improvement requires integrated support for teacher development, multilingual teaching, structured literacy, resilience and socio-emotional learning, safeguarding, inclusive education, classroom resources and learner retention systems.

Key words: Early literacy, refugee education, multilingual education, phonics instruction, resilience and socio-emotional learning

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INTRODUCTION

Background to the study

Global and regional scholarship underscores the importance of quality teacher-learner interactions in promoting foundational literacy and socio-emotional learning, particularly in conflict and displacement settings. Studies highlight the effectiveness of classroom practices that integrate phonics-based teaching methods and child-centered pedagogies in improving literacy outcomes. For example, programs such as Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) and Jolly Phonics have shown promising results in enhancing early years reading and writing skills in Sub-Saharan African countries (Fontana, Ariapa, & Atuheire, 2020). Research shows that TaRL is a flexible approach that benefits children in their early years the most in literacy (Rahmawati et al., 2024). Developed by Pratham in India, TaRL has now been scaled across the world, especially in low- and middle-income contexts, to improve literacy outcomes in early years, among others (UNICEF, 2023).

Hicks and Maina (2018) have argued that in Ugandan refugee settings, classroom strategies that adopt familiar language, multi-lingual teaching, translanguaging, TaRL, and English support classes often provide valuable opportunities for minimal disruptions to quality classroom interactions and learning for refugee children (Ball, 2011). In the process, the learners develop literacy skills and effectively use English as a language of instruction.

Studies also show that the focus on familiar language in literacy interventions in Ugandan refugee settings draws from the national language policy, which stipulates that children in pre-school and Primary 1 to 3 should learn in a familiar local language. Furthermore, Hicks and Maina (2018) highlighted the importance of translanguaging for classroom practice in refugee settings. In Ugandan schools, especially, this is a component of classroom practice that can revolutionize literacy development for refugee learners in early years if applied strategically. In the refugee context, this approach offers opportunities for refugee learners to learn English and strengthen literacy skills in their mother tongues as well.

However, evidence points to persistent challenges in literacy development and classroom practice within refugee communities. Hicks and Maina (2018) identified low reading levels, limited language skills, and inadequate phonics awareness among early-grade learners. They also reported that classroom practice was weakened when classroom assistants transitioned into full-time teaching roles without adequate preparation. In response to some of these challenges, the Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports developed the Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities, which emphasised addressing teacher shortages and strengthening teachers' capacity for classroom practice, including in the early years (MOES, 2018). Despite these efforts, Uwezo Uganda (2023) reported continued underachievement in

literacy among refugee learners, although children from refugee and host communities experienced similar barriers to literacy development.

Problem Statement

Despite the growing investments and support for education and learning in refugee settings, see for instance, Street Child, (2025), there are still gaps around the scalability of successful interventions, insufficient focus on integrating socio-emotional learning and citizenship education into literacy programmes, and inadequate adaptation of curricula to refugee contexts, especially regarding Early years learning (Uwezo, 2023; UNEB, 2024). While much of the existing research focuses on refugee education at the policy level, fewer studies have systematically examined classroom-level practices and their implications for learning outcomes. This study, therefore, contributed to the field by addressing these gaps through an exploration of classroom practices in Uganda's refugee-hosting schools. It aimed to expand the understanding of how teacher-learner interactions, conflict-sensitive teaching methodologies, and classroom materials influence literacy and resilience in socio-emotional learning (RSEL) in crisis contexts.

Study objectives

The study aimed to generate evidence on classroom practices and teacher-learner interactions that support foundational literacy, resilience and socio-emotional learning in refugee and displacement contexts. It examined current classroom practices, identified barriers and opportunities, and assessed strategies with potential for wider application in crisis-affected education settings.

The study pursued three objectives:

1. To assess classroom practices and teacher-learner interactions in early years for enhancing literacy skills of learners in refugee and displacement contexts.
2. To identify scalable strategies to improve classroom practices and learning outcomes in literacy and RSEL for learners in crisis-affected areas.
3. To identify the challenges and opportunities for implementing scalable, inclusive teaching-learning strategies for literacy and RSEL in crisis contexts.

Study research questions

The stated objectives were addressed through the following research questions:

1. What are the classroom practices and teacher-learner interaction patterns in early years for enhancing literacy skills of learners in refugee-hosting schools in Palabek?
2. What are the scalable strategies that can improve classroom practices and learning outcomes in literacy and RSEL for learners in crisis-affected areas?

3. What are the challenges and opportunities for implementing scalable, inclusive teaching-learning strategies for literacy and RSEL in crisis contexts?
4. How can classroom practice be improved/strengthened to support literacy education in displacement settings?

Conceptual framework

This study employed a conceptual framework that explains how classroom practices and wider contextual factors influence foundational literacy, resilience, and socio-emotional learning among young learners in crisis and displacement settings. The study is guided by the question: If learners are not achieving the expected outcomes, which factors within the classroom, school, household, and community contribute to this?

The framework draws on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Vygotsky emphasises learning through interaction with teachers, peers, and caregivers. Bronfenbrenner highlights the influence of interconnected environments, including the classroom, family, school, community, and education system. Together, these theories support examination of how teacher-learner interaction, language support, participation, feedback, and the wider learning environment shape learner outcomes.

The framework also incorporates conflict-sensitive education and trauma-informed teaching. These perspectives help explain how displacement, violence, family separation, cultural differences, and emotional distress affect participation, concentration, and relationships. The study, therefore, examines key factors such as infrastructure and learning resources, language and cultural barriers, teacher preparation, household poverty, mental health support, and the quality of early childhood education.

These factors influence how teachers support literacy, inclusion, emotional safety, and learner participation. The expected outcomes include improved literacy skills, confidence, communication, resilience, positive relationships, and socio-emotional well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Study design

The study used a multi-method qualitative design that combined a literature review, classroom observations, focus group discussions, and interviews. Quantitative data was collected through classroom observations. This design supported the examination of early literacy practices, teacher-learner interactions, resilience, and socio-emotional learning from both empirical and contextual perspectives. The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved a review of literature on early literacy interventions implemented in Uganda and other refugee-hosting countries in Sub-Saharan Africa

between 2014 and 2025. The second phase involved classroom observations, focus group discussions, and interviews with pre-primary teachers, learners, parents, local government, and senior education leaders in the research district.

Study setting and participants

The study was conducted in Lamwo District, specifically within Palabek Refugee Settlement and surrounding host communities. Twelve pre-schools were identified in consultation with the District Education Officer, District Inspector of Schools, Refugee Desk Officer, and other education stakeholders. The number of schools was balanced between refugees and host communities. The data collection reached eight pre-schools purposively selected from the refugee settlement and schools in host communities. The selection was informed by location, learner demographics, geographical coverage, and performance. Participants included head teachers, caregivers, and teachers working across baby, middle, and top classes in the pre-primary in Lamwo district.

Data collection

The systematic literature review examined peer-reviewed studies, evaluation reports, education-sector papers, and organisational publications. Searches covered academic and grey literature databases and focused on early literacy, phonics, play-based learning, learner-centred teaching, teacher professional development, multilingual education, trauma-informed teaching, and resilience and socio-emotional learning. Eligible studies focused on children aged three to six years in refugee or crisis-affected settings in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Classroom observations were conducted in the six selected pre-schools; of these, three were from the refugee and three from the host community settings. Two additional interviews were done with other pre-school heads to provide comparative views about the sector. The observations examined teacher-learner interaction, learner participation, use of learning materials, instructional approaches, assessment practices, and support for resilience and socio-emotional learning. Field notes captured additional information on classroom atmosphere, teacher responsiveness, and school culture.

Four focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers and head teachers/caregivers from refugee-settlement and host-community schools. The discussions explored teachers' experiences of literacy instruction, multilingual classrooms, learning materials, learner participation, and the feasibility of approaches such as phonics, storytelling, learning through play, and TaRL. The discussions also enabled teachers to explain practices observed during classroom visits and identify barriers and enabling conditions.

Data analysis

Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and qualitative classroom observation data were analysed thematically, guided by the study questions and the identification of recurring patterns and themes. Findings from the literature review, classroom observations, focus group discussions, and interviews were triangulated to identify areas of convergence, divergence, and contextual explanation. Given the limited number of classroom observations, quantitative data from the structured observation tool were not subjected to statistical analysis; however, qualitative observation data were incorporated into the analysis and reporting.

Data quality assurance

Research Assistants with education and classroom research experience received training on the study objectives, research ethics, informed consent, classroom observation, safeguarding, and data-quality procedures. The research team reviewed the data-collection tools for clarity, relevance, and contextual appropriateness before fieldwork. Field supervisors monitored data collection and reviewed completed tools to identify missing or inconsistent information.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought from the Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee and the National Council for Science and Technology. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, data-collection procedures, possible discomfort, and their right to withdraw. Personal identifiers were removed from the study records, and findings were reported without identifying individual participants or schools. Electronic data were stored in password-protected files with restricted access, while consent forms and other paper records were kept securely. Data management followed applicable confidentiality and data-protection requirements.

FINDINGS

Introduction

The first section of the research findings presents the literature review. This examines existing evidence on literacy instruction, multilingual education, teacher professional development, phonics-based approaches, learner-centred teaching, learning through play and curriculum adaptation in refugee and crisis-affected contexts. The second section presents the thematic analysis of the focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and classroom observation notes. Findings are organised according to the four research questions and supported by the direct voices of teachers, caregivers and school leaders. This section also contains descriptive summaries of the findings of the classroom observations. This report provides evidence on teacher-learner interactions,

literacy teaching strategies, language use, learner participation, instructional materials, classroom management, assessment and classroom conditions.

Summary findings from the literature review

A literature review was conducted to identify effective teaching and learning strategies for strengthening early literacy and resilience and socio-emotional learning among children in Sub-Saharan Africa, with particular attention to refugee and displacement contexts. The review covered literature published between 2014 and 2025 and focused on children in early childhood and the transition to early primary education. The findings were organised around four themes: teacher professional development, phonics-based instruction, learner-centred pedagogy, and curriculum adaptation in refugee and displacement contexts.

Teacher professional development

Teacher professional development emerged as a central factor influencing the quality and effectiveness of early literacy instruction. The reviewed studies showed that teachers who received sustained and practice-oriented support were more likely to use structured literacy methods, formative assessment and interactive classroom practices. These improvements in teaching practice were associated with better learner outcomes in phonological awareness, decoding, reading fluency and comprehension.

Classroom-based coaching and mentoring produced stronger results than one-off workshops or centralised training. Coaching allowed teachers to practise new methods, receive feedback and address challenges arising from their classrooms. Professional development was most effective when linked to teachers' daily work and supported through lesson observation, peer learning and follow-up assistance.

The effectiveness of teacher training was influenced by classroom conditions. Large classes, inadequate instructional materials, limited preparation for multilingual teaching and rigid timetables restricted teachers' ability to apply the approaches introduced during training. The evidence also showed that many professional development initiatives depended on external funding and were not fully integrated into national teacher support systems. Sustaining improvements therefore requires institutionalised coaching and mentoring structures rather than short-term project-based training.

Phonics-based and structured literacy instruction

The review found consistent evidence supporting systematic phonics instruction during the early stages of literacy development. Explicit teaching of letter-sound relationships, blending, segmentation and decoding strengthened word recognition, reading accuracy and fluency. Structured programmes such as Jolly Phonics and other early-grade reading interventions produced positive outcomes when teachers received adequate training and had access to suitable instructional materials.

The effectiveness of phonics instruction depended on the language and context in which it was implemented. Learners achieved stronger results when the sounds, spelling patterns and examples used during instruction corresponded with the language they understood. Where the language of instruction differed from the learner's home language, literacy development was slower and less consistent. The findings support the use of familiar languages during the early stages of learning, followed by a planned transition to additional languages.

Phonics instruction alone did not address all aspects of literacy development. Effective programmes combined decoding with oral language development, vocabulary, comprehension, writing and opportunities to use language meaningfully. This suggests the need for a balanced literacy approach that provides structured instruction while supporting communication, understanding and expression.

Learner-centred and interactive pedagogy

Learner-centred approaches strengthened learner participation, motivation and interaction. Strategies identified in the literature included play-based learning, storytelling, songs, discussion, group activities, peer learning and the use of culturally familiar stories and materials. These approaches created opportunities for children to speak, listen, explore ideas and practise literacy skills in meaningful situations.

Storytelling supported vocabulary development, comprehension and narrative skills. Play-based learning strengthened oral language, phonological awareness, sentence construction, memory and interest in print. Evidence from refugee-hosting schools in Uganda showed that learning through play increased participation, understanding and inclusion. It also allowed learners with different abilities and language backgrounds to engage with classroom activities.

The quality of teacher-learner interaction was more important than the physical presence of learning materials. Learners benefited when teachers asked open questions, encouraged discussion, provided constructive feedback and allowed them to explain their thinking. In contrast, classrooms dominated by repetition, copying and teacher talk offered fewer opportunities for language development.

Several barriers limited the use of learner-centred methods. These included overcrowded classrooms, inadequate play and reading materials, limited teacher preparation, examination-focused teaching and pressure to complete the curriculum. The evidence indicates that learner-centred approaches require teacher guidance, classroom organisation and adequate time. They should therefore be embedded within teacher preparation, school support and curriculum planning.

Language-responsive teaching and curriculum adaptation

Language mismatch was identified as a major barrier to literacy development in multilingual and refugee classrooms. Learners often entered school with limited

knowledge of the official language of instruction. This restricted their comprehension, participation and ability to build new literacy skills. Mother tongue-based multilingual education and translanguageing helped learners use familiar language knowledge to understand new concepts and develop literacy in an additional language.

Translanguageing allowed learners and teachers to draw on more than one language during teaching, discussion and explanation. This improved participation and supported learners who had not yet developed sufficient proficiency in the formal language of instruction. Effective implementation required teachers who understood multilingual teaching strategies and access to materials in the languages spoken by learners.

Refugee and displacement contexts required flexible and context-responsive curriculum approaches. Learners frequently experienced interrupted schooling, mobility, trauma, language changes and differences in previous educational experiences. Accelerated learning programmes helped some learners recover missed instructional time.

Localised materials increased the relevance of literacy activities, while psychosocial support strengthened learners' readiness to participate and learn.

The review showed that literacy and socio-emotional development are closely connected in crisis contexts. Fear, distress and insecurity affected learners' concentration, motivation and classroom participation. Classroom routines, supportive relationships, cooperative activities and safe opportunities for expression promoted both literacy learning and emotional well-being. The findings therefore support the integration of resilience and socio-emotional learning within literacy instruction rather than treating them as separate areas.

Findings from the discussions, interviews, and classroom observations

The findings are organised by research question. Themes overlap because literacy, classroom participation, RSEL, teacher support, and school conditions were closely connected in participants' accounts.

Classroom practices and teacher-learner interaction patterns

Across the discussions, interviews, and observations, effective early years practice was described as active, relational, and responsive to learners' language and developmental levels. As shown below:

Multilingual mediation linked familiar language to English literacy: Teachers described moving between English and familiar local languages to make content understandable. Translation was combined with objects, drawings, modelling, and display materials. This approach allowed children to name the same object in different languages and then connect familiar meanings to English vocabulary, as described by one of the teachers:

Yes, sometimes we use English, sometimes we even mix it together with our local language, because, like KG1, you cannot start. (Teacher Focus Group Discussion)

Caregivers who participated in the interviews said:

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

We have very many languages ... we either draw or we mould, and we show to them ... we have 4 languages (Lead Caregiver Interview).

English remained an important outcome. Participants reported that parents valued seeing children express themselves in English and write. The combined evidence, therefore, presents familiar-language use as a bridge to English literacy rather than as a competing goal, as commented by one teacher:

The most single important factor [...] is when parents see their children expressing themselves in English, and they are able to write (Teacher Interview)

To reinforce this language-bridging approach, some teachers were observed using interactive activities that encouraged learners to communicate verbally. Through back-and-forth conversations, small-group interactions, and play-based discussions, learners were given opportunities to practise both familiar languages and English. Teachers intentionally introduced new vocabulary, modelled language use, and expanded learners' responses through questioning and elaboration, helping children connect existing linguistic knowledge to new English words and expressions. These interactions supported the development of expressive language skills while strengthening the transition from familiar language use to English literacy.

Structured phonics, stories, songs and writing practice supported foundational literacy: During observations, teachers were seen using a range of activities to support the development of foundational literacy skills. These included helping learners recognise letters and their corresponding sounds, practise letter and word formation, and develop an understanding of basic language concepts such as vowels and consonants. Teachers also provided opportunities for repeated practice through oral, written, and play-based activities. Consistent with these observations, interviews and focus group discussions identified letter-sound instruction and Jolly Phonics as the most widely used structured literacy approaches across the schools. Participants frequently linked mastery of letter sounds to learners' ability to read and write, suggesting that phonics-based instruction formed a central component of early literacy teaching.

Storytelling and the Weekly Foundation Story were also used to sustain learners' attention, stimulate participation, and extend language development. In addition, teachers incorporated rhymes, songs, actions, slates, and dictation exercises to connect oral language, sound-symbol knowledge, and early writing skills. These approaches created opportunities for learners to actively engage with language while reinforcing literacy concepts through repetition and practice. Lead Caregivers and a Headteacher commented:

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

In the Jolly Phonics class, we make rhymes, we make actions, and so you find them enjoying class. We write on slates ... especially in a dictation moment (Headteacher Interview).

If you mix up with some stories ... they will be more interested ... this story is also ... language development (Lead Caregiver Interview).

Some teachers reported combining Jolly Phonics with TaRL, while others described adopting Jolly Phonics specifically to address learners' reading difficulties. Taken together, these accounts suggest that structured literacy routines had become embedded in practice across several schools. However, the depth, consistency, and quality of implementation varied across classrooms, reflecting differences in teacher capacity, resources, and instructional support.

Playful and concrete learning sustained attention and made meaning visible: Play was described as essential to early years participation. Songs, dancing, movement, and playful transitions reduced boredom and helped learners remain attentive. Teachers also used real objects, outdoor activities, modelling, and locally available materials to connect words and concepts to children's surroundings. Teachers from the focus group discussions said:

If you are not to use play ... they will lose all their attention ... they will be bored. So, you make them to be like they are playing, but meanwhile they are picking some concepts (Teacher Focus Group Discussion).

If I am teaching about the grass, I can bring them outside here ... then I show them the grass (Teacher Focus Group Discussion).

Concrete pedagogy also supported vocabulary and concept formation. Teachers described counting bottles, moulding a jerrycan, planting flowers and trees, and displaying teacher-made materials. These activities positioned literacy as part of meaningful interaction with the environment rather than as isolated copying or recitation.

Group work and peer support widened participation: Group work was used to involve shy learners, allow peer explanation and distribute classroom roles. Participants recognised that a learner who did not understand the teacher might understand another learner. Teachers therefore mixed confident and less confident children, assigned roles and asked groups to select representatives. A teacher from the focus group discussion and a Lead Caregiver mentioned:

That group activity caters for all, those who are shy, those who are not shy ... you mix them up so that when this one is shy, that one will be able to explain (Teacher Focus Group Discussion).

Sometimes our learner cannot get you well as a teacher, but can learn more from fellow learners (Lead Caregiver Interview).

Inclusion was also linked to emotional safety. Teachers described randomly inviting quieter learners, preventing classmates from laughing at mistakes, and rewarding group effort. This reduced the risk that participation would be dominated by the same confident learners. As mentioned by one of the school leaders,

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)

Affirmation, acceptance and a peaceful classroom supported RSEL: During observations, teachers were frequently seen guiding learners towards appropriate behaviour, including reminding them to sit properly, establishing and reinforcing classroom rules, and maintaining routines that supported a conducive teaching and learning environment. In some instances, learners appeared initially resistant to instructions; however, through a combination of gentle correction, playful interaction, and consistent guidance, teachers were able to refocus attention and sustain engagement in learning activities.

Interview and discussion data further emphasised that positive teacher–learner relationships were central to fostering cooperation, confidence, and self-expression. Teachers used praise, learners' names, gestures of appreciation, and verbal encouragement to recognise effort and reinforce positive behaviour. A head teacher highlighted acceptance as foundational to confidence-building, describing the school environment as peaceful and supportive of learners' social development:

When you bring them together... that is where they will know how to cooperate. Then also ... they will build their confidence to express themselves [...] to build confidence, number one is acceptability. You accept this child, you embrace this child ... you appreciate the learner at every effort (Headteacher Interview).

Overall, the accounts suggest that literacy participation and RSEL were mutually reinforcing. Learners were more willing to speak, attempt responses, and collaborate with peers when mistakes were treated as part of learning and when classrooms provided a sense of acceptance and belonging.

Planning, assessment, and co-teaching strengthened instructional responsiveness

where conditions allowed: Planning for learner-centred literacy instruction began with the preparation of schemes of work and detailed lesson plans. Observations showed that teachers commonly arrived with multiple lesson plans for the day, and in some cases demonstrated effective use of these plans in guiding classroom instruction.

Interview and discussion data further indicated that teachers and school leaders set learning targets, organised daily learning activities, and monitored learner progress through continuous observation and questioning. Learner practice was frequently used both as a teaching strategy and as an informal means of assessing understanding. As one participant explained: *"You give one example, you do it. The second example, you let them do it by themselves ... Where is the weak area? Where is the strength area?"* (Lead Caregiver Interview). Similarly, another noted the role of active support and shared instructional responsibility in class: *"As this one is on the blackboard teaching ... you who is behind ... are also teaching ... you will help in class control, and where needed to participate also, you come in."* (Teacher Focus Group Discussion). A headteacher also emphasised structured monitoring, stating,

We set targets for each given class ... by this time the children should have learned what they are supposed to learn, and then close supervision. (Headteacher Interview).

Where staffing conditions allowed, co-teaching strengthened classroom management and instructional responsiveness. However, these practices were unevenly distributed. While better-staffed classrooms benefited from shared instructional roles, several settlement schools operated with a single teacher per class and no teaching assistant. Consequently, the extent of instructional responsiveness was shaped not only by teacher planning and skill, but also by staffing availability.

Strategies for literacy, resilience and socio-emotional learning with potential for wider application

The focus group discussions, interviews and observations revealed practices that could be potential for scale whilst relying on accessible resources.

A structured literacy package with contextual flexibility: Jolly Phonics, letter-sound work, story-based learning, songs, rhymes, writing practice and TaRL formed a practical set of literacy approaches. Their potential for wider application rested on combining structure with adaptation. Teachers needed to connect sounds and stories to familiar languages, local objects, learner age and current skill level as reported by one of the teachers,

[Teachers] also use Jolly Phonics to reinforce sounds as part of reading ... The teachers also use TaRL as a method of making children understand during their lesson."
(Teacher Interview)

A scalable package would therefore avoid presenting phonics, storytelling, TaRL and play as separate projects. Participants' accounts support a coherent classroom routine in which teachers introduce sounds and vocabulary, use stories and songs, provide concrete examples, group learners for guided practice and check understanding through participation and demonstration.

Low-cost, locally produced materials and experiential activities: Teacher-made materials were repeatedly described as feasible and useful. Moulded objects, paper materials, bottles, charts, slates, displays and outdoor examples reduced dependence on purchased textbooks and made abstract content concrete. Training in material production had an observable value for teachers:

It has helped me so much because at first I did not know how to make these learning materials, like moulding materials ... but now I can mould as many as possible (Teacher Focus Group Discussion).

You need real materials ... engage them in doing it, like modelling ... planting trees, planting flowers ... to make the learning real (Lead Caregiver Interview).

Scale-up would still require a minimum supply of durable basics, including paper, glue, colour, storybooks, slates, mats and play materials. Local production was a complement to core provision, not a substitute for all resources.

School-based professional learning, coaching and peer exchange: Participants preferred continuous, practical learning over isolated workshops. Existing mechanisms included learning circles, internal peer training, refresher courses, supervision, internet access and teacher research. These approaches used school-based expertise and allowed teachers to focus on immediate classroom problems:

This training we always get when the partners come is short... It is not good because the training should be done step by step (Caregiver Interview).

If I spot out a teacher that is very good in handwriting, he comes and teaches the rest (Headteacher Interview).

One school secured Wi-Fi so teachers could research and build their knowledge. Such examples point to a blended professional learning model: short technical inputs, demonstration, peer practice, classroom follow-up and access to simple digital resources.

Co-teaching, teaching assistants and manageable learning groups: Staffing patterns were central to the feasibility of child-centred methods. The strongest enabling example reported no more than 35 learners per class and two teachers per class. In contrast, several schools had three teachers for the entire preschool section, no assistants and classes of 50 to 62 learners; one school reported a ratio of 1:120. A teacher reported: *"In our school we have only three teachers without the teaching assistant. Each teacher handles a class and teaches all the learning areas which makes work tiresome."* (Teacher Interview)

Teaching assistants and co-teaching therefore emerged as scalable organisational strategies, especially where rapid recruitment of fully qualified teachers was difficult. Assistants would need defined roles, basic preparation, supervision and a progression route rather than being treated as unsupported replacements.

Parent, community and partner engagement linked access to learning: Participants treated attendance and retention as preconditions for literacy improvement. Feeding, communication with parents, flexible responses to fees, community awareness and partnerships with health or support organisations helped children remain in school. Strong school-community relationships also supported social cohesion:

We have implemented the feeding program in order to retain the learners at school ... we give them porridge (Caregiver Interview).

Good relationship between the school and the community attracts the parents to bring in more children in preschools, hence enhancing social cohesion (Teacher Interview).

These strategies are scalable only when schools are not expected to finance them alone. Participants repeatedly referred to government, donors, development partners or non-governmental organizations, school proprietors and community contributions. A shared support model was therefore implicit in the data.

RSEL embedded in routine pedagogy and school culture: RSEL was strongest when embedded in daily practice rather than delivered as a separate lesson. Acceptance, encouragement, group roles, positive behaviour, peaceful relationships, play and protection from ridicule created conditions for confidence and cooperation. School values and staff orientation reinforced these routines. *"This is a peaceful environment ... we want them to have acceptable behaviour and be able to interact with others."* (Headteacher Interview)

For wider application, RSEL content would need to be translated into observable teacher practices: welcoming learners, naming and praising effort, modelling respectful interaction, supporting turn-taking, responding to distress, preventing humiliation and using positive rather than harmful discipline.

Challenges and opportunities for scalable and inclusive implementation of literacy, resilience and socio-emotional learning

Staffing shortages and high ratios restricted individual support: Staffing was the most consistent structural constraint. Reported conditions ranged from two teachers for no more than 35 learners to one teacher for 120 learners. Three schools each reported only three teachers for the preschool section, with no teaching assistants. Large classes reduced opportunities for individual feedback, differentiated support, close observation and active group facilitation:

The teacher learner ratio is like 1 to 120. One teacher, 120 learners (Caregiver Interview).

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

The variation across schools is an important finding. Some schools had organisational conditions that supported active pedagogy, while others relied on teacher effort to compensate for staffing levels that made the same practices difficult to sustain.

Long distance, family disruption and violence affected retention: Participants linked dropout and irregular attendance to school fees, long walking distances, loss of a parent or guardian, transfers, and domestic violence. These conditions interrupted exposure to literacy instruction and placed additional pastoral demands on teachers and school leaders:

The reasons why learners drop out ... long walking distance to school, lack of school fees, shortage of food, sicknesses among some children, domestic violence (Teacher Interview).

The reasons why pupils leave are... domestic violence at home, financial constraints, long walking distances, and inadequate support from the donors (Teacher Interview).

Gender-based violence was described as common in the wider refugee community and as a recurring concern reaching school leadership. Several participants also described children living with mothers without fathers. These accounts position learner wellbeing and safeguarding as conditions for learning, not as separate welfare issues.

Learner diversity created inclusion demands that exceeded available support: Classrooms included learners with different home languages, ages, prior exposure to school and support needs. School X reported children as old as ten in preschool and used rapid progression after a term. School Y described learners with autism, speech, hearing and vision difficulties. School Z obtained hearing aids through a nearby support service, showing the value of referral links:

In refugee settlement, some pupils are above the age to be in preschool ... some pupils are ten years old ... we allow them to study for a term and later take them to KG 2 or KG 3 (Teacher Interview).

Some children wanted to drop out from school because they had hearing problems. We reached out ... and they were able to support those learners by giving them hearing aid (Headteacher Interview).

At the same time, a report from School Z indicated that some children might be referred elsewhere when the school judged that it could not support them. This reveals a tension between commitment to inclusion and limited specialist capacity. Scalable inclusive practice must therefore combine teacher differentiation with assessment, referral and specialist support.

Learning materials and infrastructure were uneven and sometimes fragile: Resource conditions differed sharply. Some participants reported adequate books, water,

electricity, solar power, play materials or internet access. Others reported torn mats, damaged learning aids, limited textbooks, no computers, no journals, no skills laboratories, limited space and no basic equipment. In shared primary and preschool premises, older pupils sometimes destroyed early years displays and materials:

The challenge is the sitting materials, which is a torn mat, and also destruction of learning aids by primary pupils since the classes are accessible by them (Teacher Interview).

We do not have technical rooms like skills lab ... we do not have computer rooms. We have internet (Headteacher Interview).

In several of the observed classes, storybooks were not used during instruction. Instead, teachers largely relied on self-made handwritten materials. This was further reflected in a post-observation debrief, where one teacher noted: "We only have the learning framework which is in the office. We rely only on our creativity to teach" (Teacher, KG2; Observation Debrief).

This finding suggests limited availability or accessibility of structured reading materials in classrooms, with teachers compensating through improvised resources and personal instructional strategies. A resource package should therefore consider the physical environment for local production and better storage, not only the number of textbooks.

Teacher preparation and employment conditions were inconsistent: Participants reported certificate and diploma qualifications, but also schools relying on unqualified assistants or senior four leavers because qualified ECD teachers were difficult to afford. Professional development was irregular, often dependent on development partners or non-governmental organizations. Employment concerns included low pay, absence of holiday pay, limited career pathways, rural security, accommodation, feeding and the difficulty of returning after maternity leave:

The recent teachers graduate teacher training colleges are poorly prepared to teach at preschool levels ... They are poorly prepared to work in the rural or remote areas. They are prepared for the urban (Headteacher Interview).

The school administration always pays us in time, only during holidays we do not get any pay ... there is a need to improve on our payment (Teacher Interview).

Some schools offered positive exceptions, including paid maternity leave, comparatively better remuneration, staff benefits, savings schemes, orientation and supervision. These practices illustrate feasible retention mechanisms, though their availability depended on school resources and leadership.

Teacher commitment, school trust and existing routines created a platform for improvement: Despite constraints, participants described teachers as committed, passionate and willing to prepare materials. Parents were attracted by friendly teaching, good performance, safe or values-based environments and confidence in the school.

Several schools already used national learning frameworks, Jolly Phonics, play, storytelling, group work and teacher collaboration:

Our teachers are good. They have love and passion for teaching and also helping children. They always prepare their teaching materials in time with less supervision (Lead Caregiver Interview).

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

These assets matter because improvement does not begin from an absence of practice. It begins from uneven but existing knowledge, commitment and institutional routines that require strengthening, resourcing and more consistent supervision.

Priorities for strengthening classroom practice to support literacy education in displacement settings

This final research question brings the different themes together as an improvement agenda. Six priorities emerged from participants' accounts and the cross-source analysis.

Priority 1: Provide continuous, practice-based teacher development and coaching

Professional development should move from occasional workshops to a cycle of training, demonstration, classroom practice, peer observation, reflection and follow-up. Content for workshops on literacy enhancement should include phonics, storytelling, TaRL, familiar-language scaffolding, play, formative assessment, inclusive participation, RSEL, safeguarding and low-cost material production:

There should be more training on what we are not doing well. There is need for more training on what we are not getting well (Teacher Focus Group Discussion).
We need continuous in-service refresher courses (Headteacher Interview).

School-based learning circles and peer instruction should form part of the model. External partners can provide specialist inputs, but school leaders need tools to continue coaching teachers after partner-supported activities end.

Priority 2: Improve staffing, teacher support and employment conditions

Schools need more trained ECD teachers and teaching assistants, especially where one teacher manages 50 to 120 learners. Staffing improvements should be accompanied by induction, role clarity, supervision and pathways for assistants to upgrade. Teacher retention also requires timely and adequate pay, holiday arrangements, maternity protection, career progression and incentives for rural or remote service.

There is a need to add in more teachers and their assistants if possible (Lead Caregiver Interview).

We need to increase pay for the teachers, to attract and retain them ... Career pathways could also really motivate teachers (Headteacher Interview).

Priority 3: Institutionalise multilingual, differentiated and inclusive teaching of literacy

Teachers need clear routines for moving from familiar language to English, using visual supports and checking understanding. Differentiation should respond to learners' current literacy level, age, language background and disability, as one of the teachers said: *"The first and the second language should be considered. That is very important ... for the child to pick up."* (Lead Caregiver Interview). Schools also need access to screening, referral and specialist services so inclusion does not depend only on individual teacher effort. TaRL offers one reported approach for adjusting instruction to learner level, but the transcripts indicate uneven awareness and training. Scale-up should therefore include practical grouping and progression guidance, not the programme name alone.

Priority 4: Establish a minimum classroom resource and infrastructure package

Every early years classroom should have safe seating or mats, protected display space, storybooks, phonics and alphabet materials, writing surfaces, slates, counting and sorting objects, play materials, paper, glue and colour for teacher-made resources. Schools also require clean water, basic first-aid arrangements and safe, accessible space.

If these materials are supplied, they will help us in carrying out the activities in the school ... when the textbooks are not there, sometimes the services that are given may not be of good quality (Headteacher Interview).

Resource planning should include replacement and maintenance. Torn mats and destroyed learning aids show that one-time distribution does not ensure continued availability.

Priority 5: Embed RSEL, positive discipline and safeguarding in literacy instruction

Literacy lessons should intentionally build confidence, cooperation, communication and a sense of safety as one of Headteachers said: *"You do not allow the friends to laugh at him or her ... it is okay to make a mistake."* Teachers need guidance on encouraging effort, responding to mistakes, distributing roles, recognising distress and preventing ridicule. School orientation and supervision should reinforce positive discipline and clear procedures for responding to domestic violence, gender-based violence and other protection concerns. This priority reflects the strong connection between emotional safety and willingness to speak, answer questions, read, write and participate with peers.

Priority 6: Strengthen learner retention through family, community and service linkages

Schools need structured parent engagement on the value of early childhood education, literacy support and regular attendance. Feeding, flexible responses to fees, follow-up of absent learners, health referrals and links to protection or disability services were repeatedly identified as practical supports.

What we can do to retain learners, number one, we normally educate parents, tell them the importance of this level here so that they may understand (Headteacher Interview).

There is need to emphasize the feeding program in school, and also bring in play materials that would make them concentrate inside and outside the classroom (Teacher Interview).

Community trust and social cohesion should be treated as part of the classroom improvement strategy because they influence enrolment, attendance and continuity.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings show that a “good classroom” in a refugee context is formed through the interaction of instructional practices, teacher-learner relationships and enabling school conditions. No single literacy method was sufficient. Effective practice combined structured phonics, familiar-language support, storytelling, songs, play, group work, concrete materials, writing practice, assessment and positive teacher-learner interaction. This supports the literature review's conclusion that effective early literacy programmes are multidimensional and depend on the quality of instruction, teacher capacity and contextual adaptation.

The reported use of letter sounds, Jolly Phonics, rhymes, actions, slates and dictation reflects evidence supporting systematic phonics instruction during the early stages of literacy development. Structured teaching of letter-sound relationships supports word recognition, decoding and reading fluency when teachers receive adequate preparation and appropriate materials (Fontana et al., 2020; Buckingham et al., 2019). The field findings also show that phonics worked best when integrated with stories, oral language, vocabulary, writing and meaningful interaction. This supports the literature review's position that phonics alone does not provide a complete literacy programme. Learners need opportunities to understand, discuss and apply language rather than repeat sounds and words without meaning.

Language-responsive teaching emerged as another central feature of effective classroom practice. Teachers and caregivers used familiar languages, English, visual materials, modelling and real objects to help learners understand new concepts. Familiar languages were used as a bridge to English literacy rather than as an alternative to English. This finding is consistent with Gobana (2025), who argues that learning through a child's first language enhances academic performance, strengthens cultural identity, and supports cognitive and socio-emotional development. The findings therefore suggest that multilingual teaching should be planned and supported through practical classroom routines, teacher preparation and suitable materials.

Play, storytelling, songs, movement, group work and peer learning widened participation and sustained learners' attention. These practices allowed children to speak, listen, explain, cooperate and connect classroom content with familiar

experiences. The findings correspond with evidence from refugee-hosting schools in Uganda showing that learning through play supports vocabulary, sentence construction, comprehension and participation (Ezati & Odele, 2022). Group work also enabled shy learners to participate and receive support from more confident peers. Yet large classes and limited staffing reduced teachers' ability to organise groups, observe individual learners and provide timely feedback. Learner-centred pedagogy therefore depends on classroom organisation and manageable teaching conditions, rather than the teacher's knowledge of interactive methods alone.

The findings further demonstrate that literacy and resilience and socio-emotional learning are closely connected. Learners were more willing to speak, read, write, answer questions and work with others when teachers praised effort, accepted mistakes, prevented ridicule and created peaceful classroom relationships. Confidence, cooperation and persistence were therefore conditions for literacy participation, rather than separate outcomes pursued outside literacy lessons. This interpretation is consistent with evidence from the *Healing Classrooms intervention*, which linked psychosocial support and classroom quality with learner participation and academic well-being (Torrente et al., 2015). RSEL should therefore be embedded in routine literacy practices through respectful communication, positive discipline, group participation, encouragement and appropriate responses to learner distress.

Teacher commitment was a major strength across the schools. Teachers adapted language, produced local materials, used stories and songs and supported learners with different abilities. Their efforts demonstrate considerable professional agency. Yet teacher commitment did not remove structural barriers. Reported class sizes ranged from manageable groups supported by two adults to ratios of one teacher for 120 learners. Some teachers also worked without assistants, adequate materials, safe seating, protected classroom displays or specialist support for learners with disabilities. These differences help explain why similar teaching approaches produced uneven classroom experiences.

The literature review identified continuous, practice-focused teacher development as a key condition for improving early literacy. Classroom-based coaching produces stronger improvements in teaching practice than centralised, one-off training (Cilliers et al., 2018; Kraft et al., 2018). This agrees with participants' preference for step-by-step training, learning circles, peer instruction, supervision and classroom follow-up. Scaling literacy interventions should therefore institutionalise school-based coaching that links training with demonstration, practice, observation, feedback and reflection.

Scalability of promising literacy approaches also requires a minimum package of enabling conditions. This includes trained teachers, teaching assistants in large classes, structured but adaptable literacy routines, multilingual support, core learning and play materials, safe classrooms, safeguarding procedures and links to health and disability services. Teacher-made materials reduce costs and strengthen contextual relevance, but they do not replace storybooks, writing materials, mats, secure learning spaces or

essential infrastructure. Context-responsive curriculum adaptation also requires attention to learner displacement and mobility, interrupted schooling, age and prior learning levels, language diversity, and psychosocial well-being, consistent with the principles and guidance outlined in the INEE Minimum Standards for Education (INEE, 2024).

Parent and community engagement influenced attendance, retention and continuity of learning. Feeding programmes, communication with parents, flexible responses to fees, follow-up of absent learners and referrals to health and protection services supported children's access to classroom instruction. These findings show that classroom quality extends beyond instructional technique. Family conditions, school leadership, community trust and service linkages influence whether learners attend regularly and participate effectively (Balikoowa et al., 2023).

Overall, the study defines the good classroom as an integrated system of structured literacy instruction, responsive relationships and adequate support. The findings confirm the literature review while adding classroom-level evidence from Palabek. Effective scale-up should strengthen existing teacher practices while addressing staffing, materials, multilingual support, professional development, RSEL and learner retention together. Since the study primarily examined reported and observed practices, further assessment of learner outcomes over time would help establish how these combined strategies influence literacy development and socio-emotional well-being.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The study shows that effective literacy development in refugee and host-community early years classrooms depends on the interaction between structured instruction, responsive teacher-learner relationships, and supportive learning conditions. Practices such as phonics, storytelling, songs, play, group work, writing activities, familiar-language support and the use of concrete materials strengthened learner participation and understanding. Positive relationships, encouragement, acceptance of mistakes, and protection from ridicule also supported confidence, cooperation, resilience, and socio-emotional well-being. These findings show that literacy and resilience, as well as socio-emotional learning, should be addressed together within daily classroom practice.

Sustainable improvement requires more than introducing individual teaching methods. Schools need continuous, practice-based teacher development, school-based coaching, adequate staffing, teaching assistants, multilingual teaching support, safe classrooms, suitable learning materials and stronger links with families, communities, and specialist services. Attention is also needed to learner attendance, feeding, safeguarding, disability inclusion and teacher employment conditions. Strengthening these areas together would support the wider application of effective classroom practices and

improve both literacy learning and learner wellbeing in refugee and displacement settings.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Institutionalise continuous, school-based teacher coaching

The Ministry of Education and Sports, teacher education institutions, and district education offices should establish continuous, school-based professional development for pre-primary teachers and caregivers. The coaching should focus on phonics, storytelling, guided play, multilingual teaching, formative assessment, inclusive education, positive discipline and resilience and socio-emotional learning. Training should include classroom demonstrations, peer observation, supervised practice, reflection and follow-up support. School leaders should establish teacher learning circles through which teachers regularly share experiences, review learner progress and address classroom challenges.

2. Improve staffing, strengthen teaching-assistant roles and ensure sustainable financing

Government, school proprietors and education partners should recruit more trained early childhood education teachers, especially in schools with large classes and high teacher-learner ratios. Schools should introduce teaching assistants to support group work, classroom management, individual learner attention and assessment. Teaching assistants should have clear responsibilities, basic preparation, regular supervision and opportunities to upgrade their qualifications. Districts and teacher education institutions should establish recognised training and progression pathways for assistants who wish to qualify as early childhood teachers.

Government and education partners should also establish sustainable financing arrangements for early literacy interventions in refugee-hosting areas. National, district and school budgets should provide for teacher recruitment, coaching, teaching assistants, learning materials, feeding programmes and specialist support. Teacher retention measures should address pay, maternity protection, accommodation and incentives for service in remote refugee-hosting areas. These interventions should be integrated into existing education systems rather than depend mainly on short-term projects.

3. Strengthen multilingual and differentiated literacy instruction

Curriculum developers and teacher-support institutions should provide practical guidance on using familiar languages as a bridge to English literacy. Materials should show teachers how to introduce vocabulary in a familiar language, connect the meaning to English, use visual and concrete examples and gradually increase English use as learner understanding develops. Teachers should also receive guidance on grouping learners according to their current literacy level, age, language background and support

needs. TaRL, guided group activities and regular formative assessment should support learners who enter school with different levels of prior learning.

4. Provide and maintain a minimum classroom resource package

Districts, schools and education partners should provide every pre-primary classroom with a minimum package of essential materials and facilities. The package should include safe seating or mats, age-appropriate storybooks, phonics and alphabet materials, slates, writing materials, play materials, paper, glue, colours and locally relevant learning aids. Schools should also have clean water, basic first-aid supplies, accessible learning spaces and protected storage for books and teacher-made materials. Resource plans should include replacement, repair and maintenance because one-time distribution does not ensure continued availability.

5. Integrate learner wellbeing, protection and retention into literacy improvement

Schools should include positive discipline, safeguarding, family engagement, feeding and attendance follow-up within literacy improvement plans. Teachers and school leaders should create safe classrooms where learners receive encouragement, participate without fear and view mistakes as part of learning. Schools should establish clear procedures for identifying and responding to domestic violence, gender-based violence, neglect, disability and emotional distress. Strong referral links should be developed with health facilities, disability-support organisations and child-protection services. Schools should also engage parents and communities on regular attendance, early literacy support at home and the importance of early childhood education. Feeding programmes and follow-up of absent learners should receive priority in areas where hunger, poverty and long distances contribute to irregular attendance and dropout.

6. Monitoring and accountability

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. Findings should guide coaching, resource allocation and school improvement planning.

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A photograph of a woman and a man in a classroom. The woman is holding a yellow banana. The man is leaning over a table. There are various items on the table, including a yellow bag and a bowl.

A group of children are sitting on the ground in front of a large white tent. Some children are sitting on small plastic chairs, while others are sitting on the ground. The children are wearing colorful clothing. The tent is set up on a dirt area, and there are trees in the background.



Figure 5 Class in session



Figure 6 Co-teaching



Figure 7 Focus group discussion with teachers



Figure 8 Writing time