

Pedagogical Methodologies and Their Influence on Students' Social Wellbeing in Refugee Hosting Secondary Schools of Lamwo District, Uganda

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Abstract: *The social wellbeing of students in refugee-hosting schools remains under-researched, particularly concerning the role of pedagogical methodologies. This study examined how teaching methods influence students' social wellbeing in secondary schools located within Lamwo District, Northern Uganda. The study was guided by social constructivist and relational learning theory by Vygotsy and social and emotional learning (SEL) theory. Using a mixed-methods design involving 325 students across four schools, the study applied descriptive statistics, one-sample t-tests, and logistic regression to analyze perceptions of teaching practices. Key findings showed that learner-centered pedagogical methods such as allowing students to ask questions, making lessons enjoyable, and timely class delivery significantly enhanced students' social wellbeing, particularly among refugee learners. However, rigid teacher-determined groupings negatively impacted peer and social relationships. These results suggest that pedagogical responsiveness and inclusive teaching are vital to fostering positive student experiences and social cohesion in refugee education contexts.*

Keywords: *pedagogical methodologies, social wellbeing, social-emotional learning, refugee students, inclusive teaching*

1. Introduction

Historically, education provision for displaced populations has moved from short-term, emergency learning to a longer-term commitment to inclusion and quality. Early humanitarian responses focused on access and basic literacy, but global policy attention has shifted increasingly toward ensuring continuity to secondary education and psychosocial support that sustain adolescents' social and emotional development. Secondary-level provision is a particular global challenge: refugee enrollment rates fall dramatically after primary school, leaving adolescents at high risk of marginalisation and interrupted life trajectories, an issue emphasized in recent UNHCR analysis and education reports (Adebayo et al., 2024). This shift in emphasis has driven research and programming that link pedagogy (how teachers teach) with wellbeing (how students feel, relate and function socially) rather than treating schooling and social support as separate arenas.

The development of trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed whole-school concepts and the mainstreaming of social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools has sought to translate research on trauma, resilience and social-emotional competences into classroom and school-wide pedagogical approaches (Adebayo et al., 2024). Systematic reviews of trauma-sensitive school concepts show these are increasingly proposed as a school-level response for students with refugee or trauma backgrounds, although empirical evidence about impacts for refugee adolescents remain limited and uneven (Lembke et al., 2024).

Student wellbeing is a critical foundation for learning and personal growth, particularly in high-risk environments such as refugee hosting secondary schools. Many refugee learners have faced trauma, displacement, and continuous uncertainty, which can hinder their ability to build relationships, feel safe, and succeed academically. Guided by social constructivist and relational learning theory by Vygotsy and PERMA model of wellbeing by Martin Seligman which emphasizes Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment theory this study investigates how different teaching approaches/pedagogical methods influence the social wellbeing of students in refugee-hosting schools in Lamwo District, Uganda. The central research question is *how do students perceive the pedagogical methods used in their schools, and in what ways do these methods shape their social wellbeing within the refugee context?*

2. Literature Review

Research has established a strong link between effective pedagogical practices and student wellbeing. Learner-centered pedagogies, collaborative learning, and teacher support are shown to enhance emotional security, engagement, and positive peer interactions. In refugee contexts, trauma-informed teaching becomes even more critical. Refugee students respond positively to structured,

culturally-sensitive, and participatory learning environments (Gimbert et al., 2023). However, gaps persist in the literature regarding Sub-Saharan African contexts, particularly Uganda, where both infrastructure and pedagogy face serious limitations.

Pedagogical practices are central not only to academic achievement but also to students' overall wellbeing. A growing body of evidence links learner-centered pedagogies, collaborative learning and strong teacher-student relationship with emotional security, classroom engagement, and the cultivation of positive peer interactions (Gimbert et al., 2023, Pianta et al., 2020). These pedagogical approaches emphasize active participation, respect for learner agency, and differentiated instruction that acknowledges students' social and emotional needs. Social-constructivist models of teaching have been shown to create inclusive classroom environments where learners develop resilience, empathy and problem-solving skills, which are essential for long-term wellbeing (Cornelius-White, 2007; OECD, 2021).

In refugee education contexts, the pedagogical question becomes even more critical given the intersection of disrupted schooling, psychosocial distress and social-cultural dislocation. Trauma-informed pedagogy, which incorporates recognition of students' prior experience of conflict, displacement, and loss has gained traction as an essential dimension of effective teaching in humanitarian settings (Mendenhall, 2019; Qambela, 2022). Evidence suggests that refugee learners respond positively to structured, predictable and participatory classroom practices that balance academic continuity with psychosocial healing (Dryden-Peterson, 2021). Culturally-responsive pedagogy also plays a vital role in ensuring that displaced learner's identities, languages and cultural background are respected and integrated into the learning process (Mayik, 2024). Such approaches foster belonging, mitigate alienation, and enhance both cognitive and emotional engagement.

Recent analyses highlight that pedagogy cannot be divorced from wellbeing, effective instruction and social support are mutually reinforcing. For example, adolescents' refugee learners who experience collaborative, relational pedagogy are more likely to report higher self-esteem, reduced anxiety, and greater motivation to persist in school (Beinomugisha et al., 2024; Séguin, 2025). Conversely, classrooms that rely heavily on rote methods or authoritarian styles often exacerbate trauma symptoms and increased dropout risks. This has shifted international discourse from viewing education and psychosocial support as separate interventions to recognizing them as integrated dimensions of holistic learning (Nemiro et al 2022).

Despite these global insights, significant gaps remain in the literature concerning Sub-Saharan Africa, and Uganda in particular. Much of the empirical research has focused on refugee contexts in the Global North, such as Europe, North America and Australia, or on Middle Eastern host countries (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Levi, 2019). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the region hosting some of the world's largest refugee populations, there is still limited evidence on how pedagogical practices directly shape refugee students' social and emotional wellbeing (Betts et al., 2021). Uganda, while lauded for its progressive refugee policies and integration models, continues to grapple with systemic challenges, under-resourced schools, large class sizes, inadequate teacher training in trauma-informed approaches, and infrastructural deficits (Ahimbisibwe, 2022; Global Education Monitoring Report (Benavot, & Williams 2024). These constraints undermine the translation of global pedagogical frameworks into meaningful practice.

Trauma-Informed and Trauma-sensitive pedagogies are critical in addressing the unique needs of refugee students who have experienced displacement and conflict. These pedagogies emphasize safety, trustworthiness, and empowerment, creating supportive learning environments that facilitate healing and resilience. Studies indicate that such approaches lead to improved emotional and mental wellbeing among refugee learners (Bintliff et al., 2024; Lin, & Williamson, 2024). Social-emotional learning (SEL) is integral to refugee education, aiding students in developing self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills. SEL programs have been found to enhance academic outcomes and provide protective factors against the challenges faced by refugee students. However, there is a need for SEL programs that are specifically tailored to the cultural and contextual realities of refugee populations (OECD, 2022).

Uganda hosts a significant number of refugees, with over 1.5 million individuals seeking refuge within its borders. Despite progressive education policies that allow refugee learners to study alongside Ugandan students, challenges persist in implementing effective pedagogical practices. Limited infrastructure, inadequate teacher training, and resource constraints hinder the delivery of quality education. Moreover, there is a paucity of research focusing on the application of learner-centered, trauma-informed, and SEL pedagogies within the Ugandan refugee context (UNHCR, 2024)

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture a comprehensive understanding of the influence of pedagogical methods on students' social wellbeing in refugee hosting secondary schools in Lamwo district. The quantitative component, through structured surveys, enabled the collection of measurable data on students' perceptions of teaching methods, classroom interactions, and wellbeing indicators. The qualitative component, involving focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) with students, teachers, and school administrators, allowed for an in-depth exploration of contextual factors, lived experiences, and nuanced insights that are often difficult to capture through surveys alone.

The mixed-methods approach was selected to triangulate data, enhancing the credibility, validity, and reliability of findings (Tahir, 2025). By combining numeric trends with rich qualitative narratives, the study aimed to identify patterns and relationships between pedagogical practices and social-emotional outcomes, while also understanding contextual and cultural nuances unique to refugee and host community students in Lamwo District. The cross-sectional nature of the study facilitated a snapshot of the current state of pedagogical practices and student social wellbeing at a single point in time, suitable for identifying associations rather than causal relationships.

The target population comprised secondary school students in Lamwo District, including both Ugandan nationals and refugee learners attending the four selected schools of Palabek Secondary School, Palabek Kal Secondary School, Paluda Secondary School, and Palabek Ogili Secondary School. These schools were purposively selected because they host both refugee and local populations, making them critical sites for examining inclusive pedagogical practices and their impact on social wellbeing.

A total of 325 students participated in the study, comprising 174 males and 150 females, reflecting a gender-balanced sample. To ensure representative and diverse participation, a combination of stratified and systematic sampling techniques was employed. Stratification was based on school, grade level, and gender, ensuring proportional representation of different subgroups within the population. Within each stratum, systematic random sampling was applied to select participants from class registers, reducing selection bias and enhancing the generalizability of the quantitative findings.

In addition, key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with school administrators and senior teachers who had insights into pedagogical practices and school-level social support mechanisms. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with groups of 6-8 students per session, stratified by gender and nationality, to encourage free expression of experiences and perceptions in a peer supported environment. This multi-layered sampling strategy ensured both breadth and depth of understanding, capturing diverse perspectives and triangulating quantitative and qualitative data for robust analysis.

An ethical approval letter was obtained from the Victoria University Institution of Education and Lifelong Learning Research committee, and permissions were granted by the Lamwo District Education Office and participating schools. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from students and guardians. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained, with pseudonyms used in reporting qualitative data to protect participants' identities.

The study adopted a mixed-methods design to capture both the breadth and depth of pedagogical influences on students' social wellbeing in refugee hosting secondary schools. Quantitative data was gathered through structured questionnaires administered to students across selected schools. The questionnaire items were developed based on literature reviewed by the researcher on educational and wellbeing research adapted to the Ugandan refugee education context to ensure cultural appropriateness. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*), enabling the capture of students' levels of agreement with statements concerning teaching methods, peer relationships, and emotional experiences in the classroom.

To enrich and triangulate these findings, qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) with students, as well as semi-structured interviews with head teachers and district education officials. FGDs were designed to elicit shared perceptions, peer dynamics, and experiential narratives of classroom practices, while interviews with education officials provided policy and systemic perspectives. All discussions and interviews were conducted in English, or local languages, with translation where necessary, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

This combination of quantitative surveys and qualitative narratives provided a robust dataset, allowing for both statistical generalization and in-depth exploration of how pedagogy shapes students' social wellbeing in displacement-affected settings (Tahir, S. R. (2025).

3.2 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were entered and cleaned before being analyzed using SPSS Version 23. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) were first generated to profile respondents' demographic characteristics and baseline responses to pedagogical items. To determine the extent to which students agreed with pedagogical statements, one-sample t-tests were conducted, comparing observed mean values against the neutral test value (3.0) on the Likert scale. This enabled the identification of statistically significant tendencies toward agreement or disagreement with specific teaching practices.

Further, binary logistic regression models were applied to evaluate the predictive influence of pedagogical variables (e.g., learner-centered methods, teacher support, collaborative learning) on dimensions of social wellbeing. These dimensions included peer relationships (e.g., cooperation, sense of belonging) and emotional comfort (e.g., perceived safety, reduced anxiety). Logistic regression was selected because of its suitability in modeling categorical dependent variables and its ability to estimate the odds of positive social well-being outcomes given specific pedagogical practices. Model fit was assessed using the Hosmer–Lemeshow test, while multicollinearity was checked through Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) statistics.

For the qualitative data, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, translated into English where necessary, and analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo. A hybrid coding strategy was employed, combining deductive codes (derived from the research objectives, e.g., “teacher support,” “peer relationships”) with inductive codes emerging from participants' narratives. Themes were refined through iterative comparison and peer debriefing, ensuring credibility and trustworthiness of interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Finally, data integration occurred at the interpretation stage, where quantitative trends were compared with qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of how pedagogical methodologies influence refugee students' social wellbeing. This triangulated approach strengthened the validity of findings and ensured alignment with rigorous standards in educational and social research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

4. Results

The study revealed several significant patterns linking pedagogical practices to students' social wellbeing in refugee-hosting secondary schools.

First, students strongly agreed that they were allowed to ask questions freely during lessons ($M = 4.84, p < .001$). This openness to inquiry was positively associated with improved peer relationships, suggesting that learner-centered approaches not only enhance academic engagement but also foster collaborative classroom climates where students feel supported by both teachers and peers.

Second, lessons that were perceived as enjoyable ($M = 4.42$) demonstrated a strong association with higher levels of student happiness. This finding indicates that affective dimensions of teaching such as creativity, relevance, and interactive methodologies play a central role in shaping positive emotional experiences, which are critical for students recovering from trauma or adapting to displacement contexts.

Third, teacher punctuality emerged as a significant factor in promoting students' social wellbeing. Students linked consistent teacher presence and timeliness with stronger feelings of safety, stability, and friendship. The reliability of the teacher as a role model contributed to a sense of trust in the learning environment, thereby reinforcing social security in contexts often marked by instability.

In contrast, teacher-determined groupings were negatively correlated with peer bonding, particularly among refugee students ($r = -0.178, p = .001$). While intended to facilitate classroom order, externally imposed group arrangements appeared to limit opportunities for organic peer connections, undermining the social integration of refugee learners. This finding highlights the importance of flexible grouping strategies that acknowledge learners' agency and social preferences in fostering inclusive peer networks.

Collectively, these results underscore that pedagogical practices ranging from questioning freedom and lesson enjoyment to punctuality and grouping methods have a direct and measurable influence on the social and emotional wellbeing of learners in refugee-hosting schools.

Table 1. Relationship Between Pedagogical Practices and Dimensions of Students' Social Wellbeing

Pedagogical Practice	Mean (M)	Correlation / Test Statistic	p-value	Associated Dimension of Wellbeing	Interpretation
Freedom to ask questions	4.84	Positive correlation	< .001	Peer relationships	Learner-centered classrooms foster collaboration and supportive peer networks.
Enjoyable lessons	4.42	Positive association	—	Happiness / emotional wellbeing	Creative, interactive lessons enhance students' positive affect and resilience.
Teacher punctuality	—	Positive correlation	—	Safety and friendship	Reliability of teachers builds trust, stability, and psychosocial security.
Teacher-determined groupings	—	$r = -0.178$	.001	Peer bonding (negative effect, esp. refugees)	Imposed groupings restrict organic social connections, hindering inclusion.

Source: Field, 2024

5. Discussion

The present study highlights the centrality of inclusive, student-centered, and culturally responsive pedagogies for promoting social wellbeing among learners in refugee-hosting secondary schools. Across the indicators examined, pedagogical conditions that support learner agency, meaningful participation, and predictable teacher behavior were associated with better social outcomes, while inflexible practices undermining autonomy had measurable negative effects particularly for refugee students.

The strong student endorsement of the freedom to ask questions ($M = 4.84$, $p < .001$) and its positive relationship with peer relationships align with research showing that dialogic classroom practices encourage participation, mutual recognition, and collaborative identity building (Nystrand, 2006; Boyd & Markarian, 2011). Open questioning invites multiple perspectives and positions students as active co-constructors of knowledge, this participation fosters interactional ties and reciprocal respect among classmates, mechanisms that support peer bonding and collective resilience in contexts of displacement (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Practically, results suggest that intentionally structuring lessons to include open, authentic questions and sustained classroom talk can simultaneously strengthen learning and the social fabric of the classroom.

The association between perceived lesson enjoyment ($M = 4.42$) and higher student happiness underscores the importance of affective dimensions of teaching creativity, relevance, and interactive methods in shaping emotional wellbeing. This finding resonates with literature on trauma-informed and student-centered approaches which argue that pleasurable, mastery-oriented learning experiences can support emotional regulation and positive identity reconstruction among displaced youth (Mendenhall et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In line with Self-Determination Theory, lessons that satisfy students' needs for competence and relatedness are likely to enhance intrinsic motivation and subjective wellbeing, a critical consideration where schooling is also a psychosocial intervention.

Teacher punctuality and consistent presence in the classroom emerged as important correlations of feelings of safety, stability, and friendship. In fragile contexts, predictable adult presence functions as a stabilizing factor; teacher reliability strengthens trust and reduces environmental uncertainty, thereby supporting both the emotional security and social openness necessary for peer relationship formation (Mitchell, 2025). This finding suggests that interventions which strengthen teacher attendance, reduce churn, and support teacher wellbeing may have downstream benefits for student psychosocial outcomes (Dreer et al., 2023).

Significantly, teacher-determined groupings were negatively related to peer bonding among refugee students ($r = -0.178$, $p = .001$). This result echoes empirical work showing that externally imposed grouping practices can constrain children's opportunities for choice and natural affiliation, thereby limiting the development of positive peer interactions (Kim et al., 2020). For refugee students whose social networks are already disrupted such constraints may exacerbate isolation and impede social integration. From a theoretical perspective, limiting autonomy and relatedness runs counter to the basic psychological needs identified by Self-Determination Theory, which are foundational to wellbeing and social engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Practically, flexible, student-informed grouping strategies (partner choice, rotating groups, or negotiated group composition) may better support inclusion and friendship formation.

Our overall pattern of findings supports calls from refugee education scholars for pedagogies of belonging approaches that intentionally cultivate learners' sense of membership, recognition, and future orientation within schools (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Dryden-Peterson, 2024). Basing on social constructivist and relational learning theory by Vygotsy, cultural responsive pedagogy provides complementary guidance, centering students' cultural knowledge and lived experiences not only improves academic relevance but also validates identities and fosters relational trust (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000). In the refugee-hosting school context, combining dialogic, effectively engaging instruction with culturally responsive content and flexible grouping can create classroom ecologies that promote both learning and social wellbeing.

6. Conclusion

This study reinforces the critical role that pedagogical methodologies play in shaping the social and emotional wellbeing of students in refugee-hosting secondary schools. The evidence demonstrates that learner-centered practices such as encouraging student inquiry, ensuring lesson enjoyment, and maintaining teacher punctuality, contribute significantly to students' sense of belonging, safety, happiness, and peer connectedness. These findings affirm that pedagogy in displacement contexts is not merely an instructional tool but also a mechanism of psychosocial support. In contrast, rigid, teacher-imposed structures, particularly in the form of predetermined groupings, were found to undermine peer bonding and disproportionately affect refugee students, who already face ruptured social networks and identity instability. In a nutshell, classrooms that emphasize learners' agency, cultural responsiveness, and relational teaching foster not only academic engagement but also the social resilience necessary for navigating trauma and displacement. Therefore, pedagogical decision-making must be viewed as integral to both educational outcomes and social inclusion in humanitarian and low-resource settings. By centering the emotional, cultural, and social needs of learners within the instructional process, schools can become spaces of healing, integration, and long-term social stability.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings, several strategic and policy-relevant recommendations are proposed to strengthen student social wellbeing through pedagogy in refugee-hosting schools.

1. Teacher professional development should be systematically redesigned to include trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and dialogic pedagogical approaches. Training should emphasize strategies that enhance learner agency, promote classroom dialogue, and integrate psychosocial awareness into daily instruction.
2. School leadership and education authorities should implement policies that support teacher reliability such as mechanisms for attendance tracking, supportive supervision, workload management, and teacher wellbeing initiatives to enhance student perceptions of stability and safety.
3. Classroom organization should intentionally prioritize student autonomy, particularly in group formation and collaborative tasks. Flexible, learner-informed grouping strategies foster organic peer relationships and increase social integration for refugee learners.
4. Curriculum design and instructional planning should incorporate enjoyable, interactive, and contextually relevant teaching methods that stimulate positive effect, intrinsic motivation, and emotional recovery.
5. Multi-stakeholder collaboration including district education offices, NGOs, teacher training institutions, and school administrators is essential in translating these pedagogical shifts into practice, with monitoring frameworks that track both wellbeing and learning outcomes. Collectively, these measures would move refugee education beyond access towards environments that promote belonging, social cohesion, and psychosocial resilience.

The findings underscore that pedagogical decisions matter for students' social and emotional lives in refugee-hosting schools. Practices that enable student agency, generate enjoyment, and ensure teacher reliability contribute positively to wellbeing, while rigid, externally imposed classroom structures can hinder peer bonding especially for displaced students. Educational policies and professional development that prioritise learner-centred, culturally conscious, and autonomy-supportive teaching are therefore critical to both educational quality and social inclusion in displacement contexts.

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