

Trauma- Informed School Leadership for Holistic Recovery in Conflict-Affected Borno State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Borno State in Northeast Nigeria has suffered from over a decade of insurgency which has resulted in massive displacement, disrupted schooling, and has inflicted deep psychosocial trauma on teachers, students, and communities. In a situation as that experienced in Borno State, school leadership should go beyond conventional teaching and administrative functions to ensure the holistic recovery of the educational system. This opinion paper examines trauma-informed school leadership as a tool for promoting psychosocial well-being, ensuring sustained, continual education and rebuilding community resilience in the face of conflict. Drawing insights from qualitative data from existing literature, policy documents, and reports, this paper opines that school administrators should serve as agents of healing, resilience, and social reintegration. The discussion centres on three core elements of effective trauma-informed leadership: integrating psychosocial support into daily school life, promoting teacher well-being and capacity for trauma-sensitive methodology and establishing strong community partnerships for sustained recovery. This paper concludes with policy recommendations urging education authorities, training institutions, and humanitarian actors to instill trauma-informed practices into leadership preparation and school governance. By doing so, schools in Borno State can in addition to being places of learning become pillars of support for community stability and resilience in the face of recovery from conflicts.

Keywords: Trauma-informed leadership, Borno State, school governance, psychosocial recovery, conflict-affected education.

INTRODUCTION

Borno State which is located northeastern of Nigeria, has been faced with and made to endure more than a decade of insurgency, primarily driven by the Boko Haram sect, which has devastated the educational system in the state. Since 2009, insurgency has led to the death of more than 2,295 teachers, displaced approximately 19,000 persons and destroyed over 1,400 schools across the region (UNICEF, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2020). In addition to the aforementioned, traumatic events such as the abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok in 2014 go a long way to show the deep psychosocial scars borne by residents in the state be they students, teachers or administrators (Okafor, 2021; The Guardian, 2024). Some of the outcomes of insurgency in the state include: disrupted schooling, widespread displacement, and the lack of community trust in schools as safe and stabilizing institutions (Olanrewaju & Omotosho, 2020).

In these situations, discussed above, conventional models of school leadership which primarily focuses on administrative effectiveness and effective teaching are largely insufficient as they more often than not overlook the psychosocial wounds inflicted on

teacher and students as a result of violence, loss, and displacement. What is required in place of the regular leadership methods is a leadership type that inculcates healing and resilience into educational practice – trauma-informed leadership.

Trauma-informed leadership is an approach where leaders take into cognizance the emotional and cognitive impact of traumatic experiences (in students and teacher alike) and respond with empathy, psychological safety, and restorative practices (Koloroutis & Pole, 2021; Justice Institute of British Columbia [JIBC], n.d.). In educational contexts, these leaders (trauma-informed leaders) shift away from punitive discipline toward healing-centred, relationship-driven strategies that bring about trust, emotional safety, and oneness—a model summarized as ‘Heartleading’ by Bowerman (Edutopia, 2023) and supported by trauma-informed educational frameworks such as those developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network where trauma-informed approaches are defined as organizational changes and practices designed to:

- Realize the impact of trauma
- Recognize signs of trauma

- Respond using trauma-informed strategies

- Resist re-traumatization

These practices are implemented through school culture, workforce development, and policies, aimed at promoting academic performance, well-being, school climate, and teacher-student relationships (NCTSN, 2017; Wikipedia, 2025).

This paper is of the opinion that trauma-informed leadership comes handy and is indispensable for the recovery of education in the state under discussion. This paper takes ideas from existing literature, policy documents, and field reports, and aims to spur dialogue and inspire practice-oriented recommendations. The discussion is organized around three interrelated pillars of trauma-informed leadership approach:

- Integrating psychosocial support into everyday school life
- Promoting teacher well-being and trauma-sensitive methodology, and
- Establishing strong community partnerships for sustained recovery.

By projecting these strategies, the paper seeks to affirm the urgent need to reposition schools in Borno State as not only citadels of learning

but also hubs of psychosocial recovery, resilience, and community reintegration.

LITERATURE AND POLICY LANDSCAPE

Armed conflict has deep, lasting consequences on the educational system, often going beyond the destruction of physical infrastructure to ruining the psychosocial well-being of teachers and students. Research have revealed that children exposed to violence and displacement frequently display reduced concentration, heightened anxiety, and impaired cognitive development, all of which compromise their academic achievement (Wikipedia, 2025; UNICEF, 2017). Teachers in such environments are not left out as they are not only tasked with sustaining learning under dangerous conditions but are themselves ‘wounded teachers,’ carrying secondary trauma from exposure to violence while also bearing the suffering of their students. These compounded psychosocial effects buttress the urgent need for educational leadership that not only carries out administrative and teaching roles but also interweaves healing, resilience, and care into the school system. Universally, trauma-informed leadership in education has been recognized as an essential framework for rebuilding school communities in places that

are faced with conflict/wars. In post-genocide Rwanda and war-affected Sierra Leone for example, school administrators, teachers have been saddled with the responsibility of becoming community pillars responsible for curriculum delivery, psychosocial reintegration and building social trust amongst students, teacher and community members (Winthrop & Matsui, 2013; Manso, 2020). Trauma-informed leaders make use of relational, restorative, and inclusive practices to create safe environments where students and teachers can rebuild a sense of normalcy (Brunzell et al., 2019). In Nigeria, however, knowledge on educational leadership in emergencies remains largely sparse, although emerging evidence showcase the joint effort of school heads in restoring access to education and providing psychosocial support for displaced students in the Northeastern region of Nigeria (Olanrewaju & Omotosho, 2020). The Safe Schools Initiative (SSI) launched in 2014 after the Chibok girls' abduction incidence to help with the security and relocation of vulnerable students, is a move made by the government of the day to serve as a structural response to the conflict-related issue in the North (Federal Ministry of Education [FME], 2014). This initiative

though helpful is not free of limitations which includes the fact that it does not provide psychosocial needs to students and has ownership sustainability issues (Akpan & Ekpo, 2016). The ownership sustainability contention is further complemented by the limited guidance on trauma-responsive leadership in conflict affected areas by the National Policy on Education which emphasizes inclusive access to and equity in education (FME, 2013).

Humanitarian agencies, such as INEE and UNICEF, stress the need for the enmeshing of psychosocial support and the provision of safe learning spaces into education in emergencies—a perspective largely omitted from national policies in Nigeria (INEE, 2010; UNICEF, 2018). This omission creates an important policy vacuum around trauma-informed leadership and mental health support in schools recovering from conflict.

DISCUSSIONS: TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS

(a) Integrating Psychosocial Support into Daily School Life

Inculcating psychosocial support into daily activities in conflict-affected schools transforms such schools into spaces of

resilience and emotional restoration. Organizations such as the UNICEF and Save the Children advocate that integrating structured psychosocial activities like expressive art, storytelling, and breathing exercises into classroom situations and extracurricular programs are essential to promoting emotional regulation, peer bonding, and a sense of normalcy in conflict-afflicted schools (Save the Children, 2024; UNICEF Mali, 2023).

A good example from Nigeria is the Lafiya Sarari girls' school in Maiduguri, established by the Neem Foundation in 2017. At this school, students who witnessed grievous violence and survived abduction(s) receive daily trauma-informed support as part of their learning program. The trauma-informed support is not given as a standalone program but is woven into other learning activities or routines. Full-time counsellors at the school, facilitate resilience-building through the use of expressive therapy such as: drawing and music, and carry out peer support sessions, which has enabled many erstwhile withdrawn or violent students to become engaged in school with some succeeding academically (The Guardian, 2024).

UNICEF's *Makanna* centres in Sudan are yet another example that show that creating safe spaces, environments (psychosocial support), where children can voice their concerns, express emotions, and find comfort is vital in emergency and conflict situations. These centres (*Makanna*) render integrated services including psychosocial support, case management, and provide safe learning environments, enabling displaced children to learn, heal, and rebuild social connections with others (UNICEF Sudan, 2025).

(b) Promoting Teacher Well-Being and Trauma-Sensitive Methodology

Teachers in conflict-laden areas often serve as 'wounded healers' who, in spite of having their own personal trauma, go out of their way to support students who are in distress. Thus, prioritizing teacher well-being and trauma-sensitive methodology is essential to the sustainability of trauma-informed leadership.

UNICEF's training of Yemeni teachers and facilitators in psychosocial support has heightened their skills to identify trauma, adapt teaching practices suited for students with trauma, and incorporate safe, understanding interactions into classrooms full of trauma-laden students (UNICEF Yemen, 2022–2023). In the same vein, in Mali, education authorities

have incorporated psychosocial modules into in-service teacher training, embedding socio-emotional literacy tools and referral mechanisms within daily teaching (UNICEF Mali, 2023).

In India, the Saharaline initiative (an India-based WhatsApp-based helpline) provides collective social support to teachers facing emotional and teaching stress, making available to them localized, expert-mediated assistance in real time (Varanasi et al., 2024).

Administrators, principals play a protective and supportive role by facilitating access to counselling, nurturing team cohesion, and recognizing teachers as emotional caretakers which is imperative in environments where both staff and students carry collective trauma.

(c) Establishing Strong Community Partnerships

Schools can (and must) function as pillars of community cohesion in post-conflict recovery situations. Trauma-informed leaders interact with parents, religious figures, NGOs, and humanitarian actors to rebuild trust and reintegrate students. In Northeast Nigeria, the North East Children's Trust (NECT) exemplifies such partnership between leaders and NGOS/humanitarian actors. NECT has made a tangible step in rebuilding community-

school relationship by rehabilitating schools like the Maiduguri International School, providing scholarships and restoring infrastructure to support orphans and vulnerable children affected by insurgency (Wikipedia NECT, 2025).

Using international experiences to reinforce this approach, psychosocial support and educational resources are provided through collaboration between UNICEF, Caritas, and Education Cannot Wait, helping host-community and displaced children integrate socially and emotionally in war-thorn Ukraine (IPS News, 2024). Save the Children's *Safe Spaces* across crisis-affected areas also reveal how schools partnering with communities and NGOs can blend and bring about the well-being of students and teachers for comprehensive recovery (Save the Children, 2024).

In many emergencies, temporary learning spaces serve dual purposes – as places for academic content delivery and as safe, familiar environments that protect students from being re-traumatized thus, bringing about inclusion (War Victims Fund, 2025).

Trauma-informed leadership in conflict-affected regions demands a holistic strategy which includes the embedding of psychosocial

support in school activities, safeguarding teacher well-being through professional development and social support, and building collaborations that reintegrate schools within their communities. These interventions do not only restore education but also regenerate emotional safety, collective resilience, and hope.

POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATION

Education Authorities (Federal Ministry of Education, State Universal Basic Education Boards etc.) should:

- Integrate trauma-informed leadership into the National Policy on Education and Safe Schools Initiative.
- Establish school-based psychosocial support units and trauma-sensitive discipline guidelines.
- Allocate dedicated budget lines for mental health services in schools.

Teacher Training Institutions (Universities, Colleges of Education) should:

- Embed trauma-informed leadership and methodology into pre-service and in-service curricula.
- Introduce compulsory modules on child development under adversity, trauma-sensitive teaching, and teacher self-care.

- Partner with UNICEF, Save the Children, and NGOs to deliver professional development workshops.

Humanitarian Actors (NGOs, UN agencies, Civil Society) should:

- Partner with schools to establish safe learning spaces and strengthen guidance counselling services.
- Train teachers and peer mentors in psychosocial support.
- Collaborate with parents, religious leaders, and local groups for culturally sensitive reintegration of displaced learners and former child soldiers.

CONCLUSION

Schools in Borno should go past being academic centres to becoming hubs of healing and resilience. Without trauma-informed leadership, the recovery of education in the state will remain slow, fragile. By embedding psychosocial support, protecting teacher well-being, and kindling community collaborations, schools can become both learning and peacebuilding places where the hope of children and whole communities can be restored.

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