Digital Library Perspectives

From locked storerooms to learning hubs: reimagining community libraries for self-directed learning in rural Uganda

Fredrick Kiwuwa Lugya and Isaac Mukungu
Department of Library, Busitema University, Busitema, Uganda

Received 25 January 2026
Revised 10 March 2026
19 May 2026
Accepted 25 May 2026

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore how primary school learners in rural Uganda can be supported to engage in self-directed learning (SDL) within the competence-based curriculum (CBC), focusing on the potential of community libraries and low tech digital tools as enabling infrastructures.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative dominant mixed-methods design guided by Critical Incident Technique was used, using structured surveys ($n = 100$ pupils), semi-structured interviews (30 pupils, five teachers, five headteachers, one district education officer) and ten focus group discussions (three to five pupils each) across ten primary schools in Busia District, Uganda. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

Findings – While 97% of pupils receive homework, only 37% have textbooks at home; digital tools are absent. Only 16% identify parents as homework helpers; and 29% fail to complete homework due to domestic labour demands. School "libraries" function as locked textbook storerooms − 82% of pupils have visited, but access is teacher mediated and transactional. No facilitative services, diverse collections or conducive learning spaces exist.

Research limitations/implications – Findings are context specific to one Ugandan district. Longitudinal and intervention research is needed to test the proposed library reconfiguration model and its impact on SDL competency development over time.

Practical implications – This study recommends a multilevel strategy: transforming school book storerooms into curated resource and guidance hubs; adopting a "low tech first" digital approach (solar audio players, offline digital libraries); training community facilitator networks; and integrating library-based SDL support into national curriculum and policy frameworks.

Originality – This research addresses a critical gap by centring rural learner perspectives and positioning community libraries as dynamic, facilitative hubs within SDL discourse in a low-resource Sub-Saharan African context. It extends SDL theory by demonstrating that in contexts of extreme scarcity, Garrison's self-management dimension requires a "foundational" layer of basic resource provision.

Keywords Self-directed learning, Rural education, Community libraries, Competence-based curriculum, Digital tools, Uganda

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Uganda's education system is undergoing a significant transformation with the nationwide shift from a traditional, knowledge-based curriculum to a competence-based curriculum (CBC). Spearheaded by the National Curriculum Development Centre, this reform − a strategic pillar of Uganda Vision 2040 − aims to cultivate critical thinking, problem-solving and self-directed inquiry, envisioning a learner-centred model where students actively source information from diverse materials to become adaptable, lifelong learners [NPA (National Planning Authority), Uganda, 2015].

Digital Library Perspectives
© Emerald Publishing Limited
2059-5816
DOI 10.1108/DLP-01-2026-0027

Downloaded from http://www.emerald.com/dlp/article-pdf/doi/10.1108/DLP-01-2026-0027/11726038/dlp-01-2026-0027en.pdf by Consortium of Uga