

PHOTO BY UMARU NSUBUGA

## Ugandan schools leading a skills revolution



Pupils of a school in Luwero district demonstrating their carpentry skills during the speech day celebrations last year. The competence-based curriculum emphasises such skills

## Solution to unemployment

Across Uganda, a quiet but significant transformation is taking place in school compounds. Classrooms are no longer defined only by chalkboards, textbooks and examinations. Instead, they are increasingly becoming spaces of creativity, innovation and practical learning, where children across all age groups are encouraged to use their hands and minds to solve real-world problems, writes **UMARU NSUBUGA**.

**F**rom early childhood centres to secondary schools, Ugandan learners are being introduced to vocational skills and entrepreneurship as part of a broader effort to prepare them for life beyond formal education.

On school open days and exhibitions across the country, parents now encounter pupils confidently explaining projects in construction, carpentry, tailoring, painting, agriculture and basic manufacturing. These exhibitions, once rare, are becoming common, reflecting a shift in mindset among educators and policymakers.

Muhammad Nsereko, an

educationist, says schools are moving away from purely theory-based instruction towards a learner-centred approach that values creativity, problem-solving and self-reliance.

This shift is closely linked to Uganda's new competence-based curriculum, which places emphasis on practical skills, critical thinking and innovation.

The goal is no longer just to produce good exam performers, but well-rounded individuals equipped with abilities that can translate into livelihoods and entrepreneurship.

### LEARNING BY DOING

In many schools, practical

learning is no longer treated as an extracurricular activity, but as a core part of education. School administrators argue that children understand concepts better when they can see and apply them in real life.

"Education has to become practical if we are to develop faster, when children engage in practical activities, learning becomes meaningful and memorable. They stop seeing education as abstract and begin to understand its value" Nsereko, who is involved in promoting hands-on learning in schools, says.

He explains that even learners who are not directly involved in a specific activity benefit by observing their peers.

Exposure to ideas, teamwork and creativity helps children discover interests and talents they might otherwise never explore.

"These experiences inspire confidence and curiosity. Many of these pupils will grow into innovative entrepreneurs and professionals," Nsereko says.

He notes that practical learning nurtures confidence in ways traditional examinations cannot. A child who successfully builds a simple structure, designs a product

or grows a crop gains a sense of achievement and self-belief.

"When learners mix sand and cement or lay bricks, they are not just building walls, they are building confidence and problem-solving skills," Nsereko adds.

### FROM THEORY TO ENTERPRISE

The emphasis on hands-on skills is also gaining ground in secondary schools, where entrepreneurship education is increasingly linked to community needs.

At institutions, such as Kigezi High School, students are encouraged to develop business ideas rooted in real economic activities around them.

"Our students come up with business concepts ranging from agribusiness ventures like mushroom growing, yogurt processing and sweet potato flour, to recycling waste. They explain the start-up capital required and how they would manage the business," Abraham Akampurira, the headteacher, says.

He says the emphasis on skills was inspired by the gap between classroom theory and real-life application.

"Many learners leave school knowing definitions, but not knowing

## CHARITY Zirirema empowers Lwengo PWDs

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## PARENTING HAVE YOU PREPARED YOUR CHILD FOR SCHOOL?

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how to apply them. We, therefore, take students into the community so they can see how people earn a living," he explains.

Beyond business ideas, learners also acquire transferable skills, such as public speaking, research, teamwork and digital presentation. These competencies are increasingly important in a globalised world.

Akampurira believes more schools should embrace this approach.

"There are many individuals and organisations willing to support entrepreneurship in schools. Institutions need to open up and collaborate," he says.

George Turyasiima, an agriculture teacher at the same school, says this approach prepares students for both self-employment and changes in the national curriculum.

"Education must be practical if we want faster development. We are preparing learners not just for jobs, but for life," he notes.

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## ROLE OF PARENTS

While schools are leading the transformation, educators stress that parents play a critical role in sustaining practical learning. Skills development, educationists argue, should not end at the school gate.

"When learners go home for holidays, they need the same encouragement they receive at school, parents should support their children's talents, business ideas and hands-on skills", Nsereko says

However, many young people face resistance at home. Some parents still associate success strictly with white-collar employment and discourage alternative paths.

Nsereko believes this mindset must change.

"Parents must believe in their children and allow them to explore their interests," he says.

Haspha Nassolo, a senior nursing officer and a parent, agrees that the new approach is reshaping perceptions.

"Traditionally, children imagined their future only in offices, this approach is opening their eyes to opportunities in business and practical skills," she says.

## PRODUCTIVE HOLIDAYS

During school holidays, many parents worry about how to keep their children productively engaged. In the past, holidays were often marked by idleness, excessive screen time or risky behaviour. Today, some parents report a positive shift.

"Because of the new curriculum, some children are now engaged in bricklaying, carpentry and basic architectural skills during holidays. They are applying what they learn in class to real



Pupils of a primary school in Luwero demonstrate their building skills last year. Such skills are in high demand

situations," Nsereko observes.

Ali Kasule, a parent from Wobulenzi in Luwero district, has seen this change firsthand.

"My son used to spend most of his holidays watching television, now he is learning construction skills. It has given him discipline and practical knowledge that will benefit him in the future," he says.

## ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION

At St Kizito High School in Namugongo, Wakiso district, learners are engaged in innovative recycling projects. Melisa Lanyero, a Senior Three student, explains the school's waste management efforts. She says organic waste, once decomposed, is transformed into briquettes, providing a sustainable alternative to charcoal.

Students also collect grass and tree leaves, crush them and mix them with cassava flour to produce nutritious animal feed.

Adasa Mugisha, a Senior Two student at the same school, describes how plastic waste and discarded

buveera (polythene bags) are repurposed into artistic animal sculptures, such as crocodiles.

Because of the innovations, St Kizito High School won the Zayed Sustainability Prize in February last year. The Zayed Sustainability Prize recognises

innovative and sustainable projected led by young people. The awards ceremony took place in Abu Dhabi in February.

## GOVERNMENT POLICY

The growing focus on practical

skills and entrepreneurship aligns closely with the Government's vision for education and youth employment. Uganda's youthful population presents both an opportunity and a challenge, especially in the face of limited formal employment.

By supporting skills-based learning, the Ministry of Education and Sports can strengthen implementation of the competence-based curriculum.

Educators argue that with proper policy support, teacher training and infrastructure, hands-on learning can be scaled up nationwide to produce a critical mass of skilled workers.

## BUILDING SKILLS FOR LIFE

At its core, the shift towards hands-on skills and entrepreneurship is about redefining success in education. It recognises that not every child will follow the same academic path, but every child deserves skills that enable them to survive and thrive.

"Children need skills that can help them in any environment. The curriculum is changing, and we must prepare this generation to be self-reliant", Nsereko says.



Natalie Kemigisha, a Senior Four student at Kigezi High School preparing her yoghurt for sale at school