

Opinion

Want to perish as a school, ignore libraries



Oscar Ranzo

The recently issued minimum standards for education institutions by the Government were long overdue. The liberalisation of the education sector in the 1980s gave opportunity to many enterprising Ugandans to start schools, create jobs for thousands of teachers and drive up numbers of pupil enrolment and in effect the country's literacy rates.

However, the non-existence of revised strong guidelines combined with the laxity by the Government in the regulation of the education sector, led to the proliferation of schools that lack many of the standard amenities.

The most noteworthy of which are libraries, laboratories and sports grounds in the case of many Ugandan schools.

It is, therefore, a good thing that the Government has finally taken the appropriate measures to nip the problem in the bud. However, it is strange and baffling that the most important amenity for the overall development of a child in school does not feature among the minimum standards set by the

Government. That amenity is, of course, the library.

It is a proven fact that

libraries are important for the intellectual growth of a student, for they serve as information.

Besides facilitating the work of the classroom teacher, libraries also increase a learner's thirst for knowledge.

This is because each student has equitable access to resources, irrespective of home opportunities or constraints – since poor students, who cannot afford such materials, can borrow textbooks or storybooks from the library. This makes a school library integral to the teaching and learning process.

Several studies have provided compelling evidence that school libraries and library staff have a positive impact on student achievement. The most comprehensive research into school impact was conducted by the Colorado Department of Education in the US.

All studies showed that children perform better in exams if they have access to a library staffed with a full-time librarian. Apart from good students' performance, the studies also revealed that children who visited the library more often demonstrated better reading skills, higher academic achievement and positive attitudes towards learning. But this will remain true when variables, such as socioeconomic factors are accounted for.

Even studies done in our own backyard have proven how important the school library can be. In a 2006 research to study the impact of the library on rural schools in Uganda, researchers from the US collected data

over a period of two years from two different schools in the Masaka district. One

of the schools had a library



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school has a library and the other did not have the researchers found, at the end of the study, several areas where the presence of a school library had an impact including, but not limited to, students' reading habits, use of materials for non-school related activities, and academic performance.

Sadly, over 90% of schools in Uganda do not have a functioning library. I know because my work over the years has seen me going to hundreds of schools in various parts of the country.

I am not familiar with the situation in the other countries in the region, but I am certain the lack of libraries in our schools is

the primary reason Uganda

has for years trailed its East

TOP TIP ✓

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African counterparts in the literacy competence surveys conducted by UWEZO.

According to the UWEZO report of November, last year, titled *Are our children learning?* It was found that more Ugandan pupils are unable to read and count compared to their Kenyan

and Tanzanian counterparts, and that seven out of 10 children in primary school

cannot read and understand what they read.

These numbers are shocking, especially since our thematic curriculum has such subjects as literacy one, literacy two and oral literature that are aimed at improving literacy competencies.

These though would largely benefit from the presence of libraries in schools, but because most schools do not have them, we have children in schools that cannot even read in their mother language.

The question then is: why didn't libraries make it to the list of the Government's minimum standards for

schools? Is it because the policy makers are oblivious of their importance to

development of the child in school? Or is because there is a deliberate campaign by the Government to churn out half-baked learners from our school system?

I would like to think it was simply an oversight. And in the event that it was, I kindly request the Government to revise the minimum standards to include libraries, staffed with full-time librarians.

A wise man once said that 'a culture without books shall perish' and I am afraid that this seems to be the fate of Uganda if we continue to ignore the importance of libraries in schools.

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