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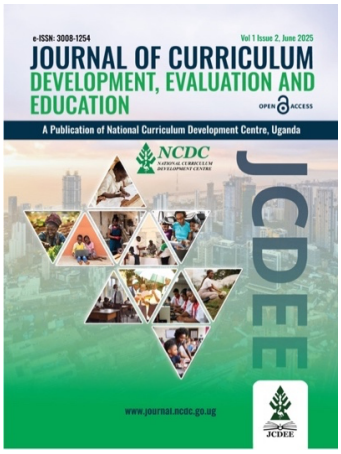
Barriers to Adopting Learner-Centred Methods: Implications for Curriculum Implementation in Gulu City's Private Secondary Schools



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Abstract

This study investigated the barriers to adopting learner-centred methods of teaching and proposed strategies to enhance their use in private secondary schools implementing Uganda's Lower Secondary Curriculum (LSC) in Gulu City. Although the LSC was introduced to promote meaningful, learner-centred learning, concerns have emerged regarding its practical classroom implementation. Utilising a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods research design, quantitative data were collected from 96 teachers through semi-structured questionnaires. In contrast, qualitative data were collected through interviews conducted across 10 purposively selected schools in the Laro-Pece and Bardege-Layibi Divisions of Gulu City. The quantitative results showed that learner-centred pedagogies, such as project-based learning, group discussions, and debates, were the most frequently employed methods of teaching in Gulu City's private schools under the new LSC (M = 2.69–2.63). However, resource-intensive methods, such as the flipped classroom (M = 0.73) and contextual learning (M = 0.82), were rarely employed. Second, the results showed that the most significant barriers to the adoption of learner-centred teaching methods include funding constraints (M = 3.95), limited access to educational technology (M = 3.73), insufficient institutional support (M = 3.71), and inadequate teacher training (M = 3.49). The qualitative findings reinforced these results, highlighting low teacher efficacy, lack of pedagogical support, large class sizes, limited instructional time, and weak administrative backing as additional barriers. The administrators further cited budget constraints and competing priorities as significant barriers, reflecting broader systemic and contextual challenges to the effective implementation of LSCs. The study recommends strengthening teacher professional development, increasing the provision of teaching and learning materials, and enhancing institutional support to drive sustained pedagogical innovation in private secondary schools in Uganda.

Keywords: *Curriculum Implementation, Diffusion of Innovation, Innovative Pedagogies, Learner Centred Instruction, Private Schools, Professional Development.*

Background

Across the globe, education systems are undergoing significant reforms aimed at equipping learners with 21st-century competencies, including critical thinking, problem-solving capabilities, teamwork, and flexibility (OECD, 2023). That is why universal policy documents, such as UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), place a high premium on learner-centred and competency-based approaches that promote those skills (UNESCO, 2021). Such skills have been deemed essential for preparing learners to thrive in increasingly complex social, technological, and economic

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environments. At the centre of these reforms is a pedagogic shift from passive memorisation and teacher-driven approaches to active, participatory, and inquiring learning, as demonstrated by evidence that improves both interest and long-term learning gains.

In line with these international trends, Uganda introduced the Lower Secondary Curriculum (LSC) in 2020 as part of a broader reform aimed at transitioning from a content-based to a competence-based pedagogy. LSC focuses on interactive and learner-centred teaching approaches to facilitate learners' development of 21st-century skills and enhance the overall quality of education. Yet, as elsewhere in much of the remainder of the low- and middle-income countries, its implementation has been challenging. Empirical evidence suggests that, despite the reform's revolutionary aims, Ugandan secondary school teachers' practice, particularly in private schools, remains characterised by traditional, teacher-centred approaches (Kidega et al., 2024).

Several scholars have investigated the barriers to the adoption of learner-centred pedagogies wherever the competence-based curriculum has been introduced. These studies have revealed a multitude of system-institutional obstacles hindering the widespread adoption of learner-centred pedagogy. They encompass sparse and sporadic coverage of long-term professional development of teachers, inadequate access to learning materials, organisational opposition to pedagogic change, and poor school-level professional learning frameworks (Kidega et al., 2024). Although most teachers in Uganda are familiar with the Lower Secondary Curriculum, systematic follow-up support—such as mentoring, peer networks, and ongoing professional learning—has been lacking, hindering the translation of policy into practice. This implementation deficit is a widely reported issue in education reform worldwide: curriculum quality won't be followed by better results unless there are effective plans for implementation (OECD, 2023).

In the case of Uganda, the continued use of teacher-centred pedagogies not only undermines the country's curriculum reform efforts but also threatens more common education goals of quality, equity, and inclusiveness. There is global research evidence that, without long-term support for implementation, reforms aimed at facilitating learner-centred pedagogy are likely to strengthen and consolidate existing inequalities, as learners from poorly resourced contexts are disproportionately denied the opportunity to master key 21st-century competencies (UNESCO, 2021). This scenario is particularly pronounced in private high schools, where disparities in infrastructure, teaching quality, and institutional support are more likely to be severe.

In this regard, context-specific research that examines challenges to the effective operation of the LSC and locally viable mechanisms for their transcendence is a matter of pressing necessity. Empirical information on how curriculum reforms get operationalised in the day-to-day life of classrooms does not exist, especially in rapidly ruralising environments such as Gulu City.

This study aimed to bridge this knowledge gap by exploring the barriers to the operationalisation of learner-centred pedagogy in private secondary schools in Gulu City and describing implementable strategies for enhancing implementation. In this way, it aimed to generate knowledge that would guide policy, inform school-level interventions, and improve the facilitation of more effective achievement of the LSC's vision of transformation, ultimately contributing to regional and global efforts to improve the quality and equity of secondary schooling.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What learner-centred pedagogies are recommended under the Lower Secondary Curriculum (LSC)?
2. To what extent are private secondary schools in Gulu City implementing learner-centred pedagogies?
3. What are the key barriers to the adoption of learner-centred teaching methods in these schools?

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4. What strategies can be employed to enhance the effective implementation of learner-centred pedagogies within the framework of the LSC?

Theoretical Framework

This study was underpinned by Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003) – a theory which offers a valuable framework for investigating how new practices are introduced, negotiated, and become routinised in social systems. The theory postulates that an innovation goes through five stages before it is accepted and adopted, including: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. These stages collectively describe how an innovation evolves from initial awareness to its actual use. Although these phases were initially formulated in situations where people have the freedom to adopt or not adopt innovations, they remain valuable for investigating teachers' experiences and reactions to obligatory reforms, such as curriculum change.

In this study, Uganda's Lower Secondary Curriculum (LSC), introduced in 2020, is considered an educational innovation. Although learner-centred pedagogies are state-of-the-art in global education discourses (UNESCO, 2021), their introduction in the Ugandan secondary school system under the LSC constitutes a radical break from long-standing traditions of content-laden, teacher-centred teaching. In this regard, the LSC represents an innovation at the regional level, introducing pedagogical practices that are new to Uganda's setting, even if they are aligned with international reform trends.

In the context of this study, the Diffusion of Innovations theory helps to describe the adoption of the LSC by private secondary school teachers. The knowledge phase, in this case, is comparable to when teachers are introduced to the new methods of teaching under the LSC through curriculum orientation and training. The persuasion phase is equivalent to that stage when the teachers begin to appreciate the use of learner-centred teaching methods based on self-realisation, orientation, and training. The recognition stage can lastly be defined as teachers' search for legitimation—via student success, peer recognition, or organisational sanction—that warrants continued application of the practices.

Conspicuously, in his theory, Rogers (2003) states that awareness or knowledge about an innovation alone does not necessarily facilitate its diffusion: it requires the availability and effective use of institutional resources and support, peer pressure, and prevailing cultural norms. In Gulu City's private secondary schools, the following conflicts are most pronounced: although teachers know that the LSC emphasises learner-centred approaches, they are constrained by insufficient resources, professional development needs, and strong teacher-centred tendencies, which hinder their progress through the adoption stages. Therefore, the application of diffusion theory provides this study with an analytical framework for examining system- and individual-level conditions that affect the operationalisation of LSC. It offers the opportunity to investigate why teachers may struggle to apply learner-centred pedagogies, and under what facilitating conditions, more effective curriculum implementation would occur.

Literature Review

This section reviews the literature on learner-centred pedagogies (LCPs) to establish global requirements and Ugandan contexts. All the sub-sections are aligned with the research goals and questions.

Learner-Centred Pedagogies in the Lower Secondary Curriculum (LSC)

Globally, several learner-centred pedagogies have been developed by different teachers and scholars. Various scholars have profiled pedagogies such as collaborative learning, project-based learning, and inquiry-based learning as essential methods of teaching to develop 21st-century skills, including problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking (UNESCO, 2021). The Lower Secondary Curriculum (LSC), launched in Uganda in 2020, demonstrates a similar international orientation by promoting participatory pedagogies facilitated by digital technologies (Arinaitwe et al., 2024). On paper, Uganda's reform aligns with the global competency-based approach.

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But to implement reform, contextualisation is essential. Global theorists caution that mimicking global models blind to context risks policy–practice disjunctures (OECD, 2023). Ugandan evidence supports the horror: an institutionalised culture of examination, teacher-focused institutional routines, and inadequate materials hinder the implementation of learner-focused practices (Makerere University, 2024). Group discussions or role-plays, the very foundations of the LSC, are reduced to superficial exercises in overcrowded classrooms with limited resources (Makerere University, 2024).

Additionally, reforms in low-resource contexts often become tokenistic, with pedagogic innovations invoked in rhetoric rather than being implemented in practice (O'Sullivan, 2006). There is a gap here: whereas the global rhetoric of learner-centredness has been adopted in Uganda, little empirical study has been conducted on how the ideals of the LSC are implemented in practice in private schools, under whose flags accountability pressures are proclaimed. Previous research has suggested that reforms have a widespread impact (O'Sullivan, 2006). This research responds to RQ1 by examining how LSC's learner-centred pedagogical vision is negotiated within schools in Gulu City.

Implementation of Learner-Centred Pedagogies in Schools

Several studies have examined the extent to which learner-centred pedagogies are being implemented in schools globally. Findings of studies on Sub-Saharan Africa reform reveal that learner-focused pedagogy is being introduced incrementally and patchily (Akyeampong et al., 2011). Although participatory learning within the LSC in Uganda is compulsory, classes continue to be predominantly traditional due to systemic barriers, including insufficient training, limited resources, and high student-teacher ratios (MoES, 2021). The Ministry of Education and Sports (2021) describes this as stemming from top-down designs of reforms that are incapable of supporting heterogeneity at the school level.

Shortcomings in teacher training also exacerbate these contrasts. Theory-based teacher training courses overlook context-sensitive measures for coping with overpopulation and scarcity (Makerere University, 2024). This view is supported by empirical research comparing Kenya and Tanzania, which shows that competency-based quality reforms were hindered by time constraints and budget limitations (Akyeampong et al., 2011). Uganda's LSC, therefore, is a broader pattern in poor-resource systems where classroom capacity lags behind policy intent.

One of the gaps, however, is that research tends to be cut short when describing system deficiencies and fails to explore teachers' micro-level sense-making. Researchers like Hardman (2009) and Schleicher (2023) are warning against stereotyping teachers as being implicitly oppositional; instead, they work ingenuously within constraints. However, Ugandan literature is unlikely to examine how teachers in private schools reify or reinterpret learner-centred policies once they are implemented in practice. This study bridges the research gap by examining such context dynamics in Gulu City and hence answers RQ2, inquiring about the extent and shape of LCP implementation in schools.

Challenges to the Implementation of Learner-Centred Pedagogies

Many scholars have also explored the challenges that affect the implementation of learner-centred methods of teaching in schools. The findings of most of these studies have repeatedly identified barriers to achieving LCP, which are both structural, cultural, and individual. Poor professional development, inadequate provision, and rigid institutional arrangements at a structural level hamper reform (Schleicher, 2023). At a cultural level, test-preparing school systems in most developing settings prioritise rote memorisation over problem-solving (UNESCO, 2021). Short pedagogical training for teachers, combined with prevailing assumptions about authority at an individual level, impedes change.

Some studies conducted in Uganda confirm that these barriers to the adoption of learner-centred pedagogies exist: structurally, enormous class sizes, scarce learning resources, and inadequate teacher training limit effective interaction (MoES, 2021). Culturally, exam culture permeates learning and forces teachers to emphasise rote memorisation (Makerere University, 2024). At the individual level, teachers'

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constructions of discipline and power underpin vertical models that violate participatory norms (Makerere, 2024). Private institutions exacerbate these barriers: school officials and parents pressure teachers to ensure success on tests, thereby suppressing experimentation further (Kidega et al., 2024).

Ultimately, comparative evidence underscores the significance of these contextual dynamics. Nigerian and Ghanaian competency-based reforms were also hindered by test designs that prioritised recall over higher-order thinking (Akyeampong, 2011). Ugandan research is limited; however, there is a need to question to what extent socio-cultural dynamics—such as parental expectations or teacher control—are shaping pedagogical uptake. This research thus answers RQ3 by examining how structural, cultural, and individual barriers unfold within private schools in Gulu City.

Learner-Centred Pedagogies Enrichment Strategies

Many scholars have also examined how the adoption of learner-centred pedagogies can be enhanced in schools. International evidence highlights the key factors required to address implementation problems, including prioritising ongoing professional learning, responsive curriculum design, the use of technology, and effective school leadership (OECD). There is evidence to suggest that ongoing professional learning communities, as opposed to point-in-time workshops, more easily enable pedagogical change (STiR Education, 2022). The strategies have to be implemented locally to be manageable.

Ugandan scholarship also envisions counterpart requirements, where iterative and context-dependent teacher and student co-curricular planning and training are necessary (Kidega et al., 2024). Earlier reform evaluations highlight student and teacher agency in relation to sustainability (SchoolNet Africa, 2023). In contrast, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES, 2021) highlights inadequate institutional facilitation, insufficient funding, and uneven material distribution, which hinder the scaling of reform. Hence, although multiple recommendations are available, structural coherence is not.

Critically, the extant literature is prescriptive, offering generic solutions rather than localised ones. In Gulu City's private schools, where resource constraints, cultural stratification, and examination pressure are the norms, means have to be localised (Kidega et al., 2024). Empirical literature on what works in this specific setting is scanty. RQ4 is addressed in this paper through the identification of strategies that balance global best practices with the real-life realities of private schools in Gulu City.

Methodology

Research Design

The research employed a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design to investigate barriers to implementing the Lower Secondary Curriculum (LSC) in private secondary schools in Gulu City, Uganda. In this approach, quantitative and qualitative data was collected simultaneously, analysed separately, and integrated during interpretation to verify and complement findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The choice of this design was informed by the need to obtain broad, quantifiable trends from a larger sample of teachers, alongside in-depth insights from school administrators responsible for implementing the curriculum. Quantitative data was gathered through a semi-structured questionnaire administered to teachers, while qualitative data was obtained from semi-structured interviews with school administrators. This dual approach facilitated an exploration of both the prevalent implementation challenges and the contextual and institutional factors influencing them, thereby enhancing the validity and depth of the findings (Johnson et al., 2007).

Study Location and Participants

The study was conducted in Gulu City, northern Uganda, which comprises two administrative divisions: Laroo-Pece and Bardege-Layibi. Both host several private secondary schools implementing the revised lower secondary curriculum introduced in 2020.

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From 24 private secondary schools, 10 were purposively selected based on their participation in LSC training programmes and their geographic distribution across the two divisions. This ensured representation of different administrative contexts and levels of curriculum familiarity.

Two groups of participants were involved. First, 96 teachers from the selected schools completed the semi-structured questionnaire. All had received LSC training and were knowledgeable about its opportunities and challenges. Second, nine school leaders, including headteachers and deputy headteachers, were purposively selected for in-depth interviews, providing leadership perspectives on systemic and administrative aspects of curriculum uptake.

Sampling Strategies

The study employed a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling was used to select schools and administrators with direct experience in LSC implementation, thereby ensuring the quality of the data (Etikan et al., 2016). Convenience sampling was employed to recruit teachers who were available and willing to participate during the data collection period. While this approach may limit generalisability, it enabled access to informed respondents in their natural school environment (Cohen et al., 2018).

For the administrators' interviews, a criterion-based purposive approach was adopted, selecting only those with active oversight of LSC implementation, thereby ensuring the credibility and richness of qualitative data (Yin, 2018).

Data Collection Methods

Two instruments were developed and administered concurrently. The semi-structured questionnaire had combined closed-ended items for quantitative analysis and open-ended questions to elicit qualitative insights. It was piloted in a non-participating school to enhance clarity, internal consistency, and content validity (Bryman, 2016). The questionnaire focused on three thematic areas:

1. Application of learner-centred teaching approaches.
2. Barriers to curriculum implementation.
3. Strategies for enhancing uptake.

Semi-structured interviews with nine school administrators explored issues such as resource constraints, teacher preparation, stakeholder engagement, and institutional policy support. This method was particularly effective in capturing both subjective experiences and organisational perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The simultaneous application of these methods enabled the integration of teacher- and school-level perspectives, thereby enhancing the interpretive depth of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, percentages) to identify trends in teachers' practices and perceptions. Qualitative data from interviews and open-ended questionnaire responses was analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, which involves transcription, coding, theme identification, and categorisation.

Findings from both databases were integrated during interpretation, allowing statistical patterns to be supported and explained through qualitative narratives, thereby enhancing the credibility of the conclusion (Fetters et al., 2013).

Ethical Considerations

The study complied with the established guidelines for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained after participants were briefed on the purpose, procedures, and their rights,

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including the option to participate voluntarily and withdraw without penalty. No incentives were provided to avoid coercion. Anonymity was maintained by assigning unique codes to participants, and all data were stored in password-protected files (Cohen et al., 2018).

Limitations

While the concurrent triangulation design enabled a comprehensive exploration of the research question, the use of convenience sampling for teachers may have introduced selection bias, thereby limiting the generalizability of the results. Additionally, focusing solely on private schools in Gulu City excludes perspectives from public schools and other regions. Nevertheless, the integration of multiple data sources and perspectives within the selected schools enhances the credibility and transferability of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Future research could expand to a broader range of schools and stakeholders, including learners and education officials.

Findings

Research Question 1

The first research question was: **"*What learner-centred pedagogies are recommended under Uganda's LSC?*"**

To address this, a review of government policy documents, peer-reviewed journal articles, educational media, and practitioner forums was conducted. The analysis identified several pedagogical approaches designed to support the implementation of LSC. These are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Learner-Centred Pedagogies Recommended Under Uganda's LSSC

Method	Description	Source
Project-Based Learning (PBL)	Engages learners in solving real-world problems through structured projects (e.g., sustainable gardens to explore ecology).	SchoolNet Africa (2023)
Research-Based Learning	Involves learners investigating topics using multiple resources before class, promoting independent thinking.	National Curriculum Development Centre [NCDC] (2019)
Debates and Group Discussions	Builds communication and argumentation skills through structured exchanges (e.g., "The Impact of AI in Education").	NCDC (2019)
Collaborative Learning	Promotes teamwork and interpersonal skills through group assignments and peer assessment.	STiR Education (2022)
Integration of Technology	Uses ICT tools (e.g., digital whiteboards, educational apps) for interactive activities such as virtual tours and quizzes.	SchoolNet Africa (2023)
Role-Playing and Simulations	Provides experiential learning through activities such as mock trials or system simulations.	SchoolNet Africa (2023)
Problem-Solving Approach	Develops analytical and solution-oriented thinking through authentic problems.	STiR Education (2022)

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Contextual Learning	Connects academic content to learners' everyday experiences (e.g., teaching mathematics through market scenarios).	NCDC (2019)
Active Learning	Encourages brainstorming, case studies, and reflective engagement.	NCDC (2019)
Flipped Classroom	Delivers core content outside class (e.g., videos), reserving in-class time for application and collaboration.	NCDC (2019)

The reviewed literature suggests that the LSC is grounded in a constructivist orientation, promoting learner autonomy, imagination, and critical thinking. Approaches such as PBL, research-based learning, and problem-solving highlight the curriculum's emphasis on experiential and inquiry-based practices. These methods engage learners in authentic tasks that connect theory with application.

Interpersonal and socio-emotional development are also prioritised. Collaborative learning, debates, discussions, and role-play foster communication, empathy, and teamwork—skills vital for diverse societies.

Technology integration and the flipped classroom promote digital literacy and personalised learning, shifting teachers' roles from transmitters of information to facilitators. Similarly, contextual and active learning link classroom content with real-life experiences, making learning more relevant.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these methods depends on adequate teacher training, sufficient resources, and assessments aligned with competency-based learning. Without these, the curriculum's innovations may remain aspirational.

Interviews with teachers and administrators confirmed general awareness of the recommended pedagogies, though implementation varied. For example, Teacher R07 stated:

"We have been encouraged to use a lot of project work—students are now making models, carrying out community surveys, and presenting findings in class".

Teacher R12 similarly noted:

"Before lessons, I usually distribute research tasks. Students come with some background and ideas, and therefore, our lessons become more cooperative".

These accounts demonstrate increasing use of learner-centred practices aligned with LSC principles.

However, barriers were also reported. Administrator R03 explained:

"The idea of a flipped classroom sounds good, but many of our students don't have smartphones or internet at home, so we can't do it effectively".

Teacher R15 added:

"Contextual learning is best, but in reality, we have crowded classrooms and limited resources. Sometimes we return to traditional methods simply to cover the syllabus".

These insights highlight the gap between curriculum policy and classroom realities in under-resourced contexts.

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Research Question 2

The second research question was: "***To what degree are these methods being implemented by teachers in private secondary schools in Gulu City?***"

Adoption levels of ten teaching strategies were assessed using four categories: Not Adopted, Slightly Adopted, Moderately Adopted, and Fully Adopted. Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated to determine levels of use. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Adoption Levels of Learner-Centred Teaching Strategies Among Teachers in Private Secondary Schools in Gulu City (N = 96)

Teaching Strategy	Not Adopted *n* (%)	Slightly Adopted *n* (%)	Moderately Adopted *n* (%)	Fully Adopted *n* (%)	Mean Score	SD (Approx.)	Interpretation
1. Project-Based Learning (PBL)	2 (2.1%)	4 (4.2%)	16 (16.7%)	74 (77.1%)	2.69	0.63	Very highly adopted
2. Research-Based Learning	5 (5.2%)	9 (9.4%)	16 (16.7%)	66 (68.8%)	2.49	0.80	Highly adopted
3. Learners' Debates & Discussions	4 (4.2%)	8 (8.3%)	8 (8.3%)	76 (79.2%)	2.63	0.78	Very highly adopted
4. Collaborative Learning	11 (11.5%)	14 (14.6%)	20 (20.8%)	51 (53.1%)	2.16	1.05	Moderately adopted
5. Integration of Technology	22 (22.9%)	50 (52.1%)	15 (15.6%)	9 (9.4%)	1.11	0.89	Slightly adapted
6. Role-Play & Simulations	6 (6.3)	22 (22.9%)	30 (31.3%)	38 (39.6%)	2.04	0.96	Moderately adopted
7. Problem-Solving Approach	12 (12.5%)	39 (40.6%)	30 (31.3%)	15 (15.6%)	1.50	0.96	Slightly to moderately adopted
8. Contextual Learning	50 (52.1%)	22 (22.9%)	15 (15.6%)	9 (9.4%)	0.82	0.89	Lowly adopted
9. Active Learning	32 (33.3)	32 (33.3%)	20 (20.8%)	12 (12.5%)	1.13	1.00	Slightly adapted
10. Flipped Classroom	53 (55.2%)	23 (24.0%)	12 (12.5%)	8 (8.3%)	0.73	0.91	Lowly adopted

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Findings show that PBL (M = 2.69) and debates/discussions (M = 2.63) are very highly adopted, while research-based learning (M = 2.49) is highly adopted. These methods are favoured because they require limited technical infrastructure and can be implemented in typical classroom settings.

Collaborative learning (M = 2.16) and role-play (M = 2.04) were moderately adopted, while contextual learning (M = 0.82), the flipped classroom (M = 0.73), and technology integration (M = 1.11) were the least adopted. Barriers include limited ICT resources, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient teacher training.

Interview evidence supports these findings. Teacher R09 observed:

"Project-based learning works well because students get to work in groups and present what they have learned. It keeps them engaged."

Teacher R14 added:

"We organise weekly debate sessions, especially in arts subjects. It improves confidence and critical thinking."

These accounts align with the highest adoption scores for PBL and debates. In contrast, Administrator R05 reported:

"We don't do flipped classrooms because many students lack internet access at home. Even in school, one computer lab is not enough for all classes."

Teacher R11 confirmed resource challenges:

"Contextual learning sounds good in theory, but we lack the environment and materials to make it happen. We often revert to the syllabus demands."

Such evidence illustrates why the adoption levels for ICT-dependent methods remain low.

Research Question 3

The third research question was: "***What are the major hindrances to the implementation of learner-centred pedagogies in these schools?".***

Data from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics. The results are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3

Significant Barriers to the Adoption of Learner-centred Methods of Teaching in Secondary Schools in Gulu City (N=96)

Questionnaire Items	Not at all F (%)	Slightly F (%)	Moderately F (%)	Very Much F (%)	Extremely F (%)	Mean	SD
Lack of Adequate Teacher Training	1 (1.2%)	9 (11.0%)	26 (31.7%)	41 (50.0%)	5 (6.1%)	3.49	0.820
Inadequate Learning Materials	6 (7.3%)	28 (34.1%)	20 (24.4%)	23 (28.0%)	5 (6.1%)	2.91	1.080

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Overcrowded Classrooms	4 (4.9%)	24 (29.3%)	20 (24.4%)	21 (25.6%)	13 (15.9%)	3.18	1.167
Resistance to Change by Teachers/Administrators	4 (4.9%)	4 (4.9%)	11 (13.4%)	59 (72.0%)	4 (4.9%)	3.67	0.847
Time Constraints to Cover the Curriculum	3 (3.7%)	25 (30.5%)	23 (28.0%)	27 (32.9%)	4 (4.9%)	3.05	0.993
Inadequate Support From the Ministry of Education	1 (1.2%)	4 (4.9%)	18 (22.0%)	54 (65.9%)	5 (6.1%)	3.71	0.711
Limited Access to Technology	2 (2.4%)	7 (8.5%)	6 (7.3%)	63 (76.8%)	4 (4.9%)	3.73	0.786
Parental Involvement	1 (1.2%)	6 (7.3%)	16 (19.5%)	55 (67.1%)	4 (4.9%)	3.67	0.738
Assessment and Evaluation Complexities	1 (1.2%)	5 (6.1%)	17 (20.7%)	54 (65.9%)	5 (6.1%)	3.70	0.732
Financial Limitations	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.2%)	8 (9.8%)	67 (81.7%)	6 (7.3%)	3.95	0.469

The most severe barrier was financial limitations (M = 3.95). Limited access to technology (M = 3.73) and inadequate support from the Ministry of Education and Sports (M = 3.71) also ranked highly. Other significant barriers included assessment complexities (M = 3.70), resistance to change (M = 3.67), and inadequate parental involvement (M = 3.67).

Qualitative interview data supported these findings. Administrator R02 noted:

“You can’t talk about innovation when schools can’t even afford textbooks or chalk. We’re always trying to do more with less”.

Teacher R08 highlighted policy gaps:

“The Ministry introduces policies, but doesn’t provide the resources or guidance needed. We have to figure it out ourselves.”

Teacher R10 cited infrastructure challenges:

“We’re instructed to use projectors and computers, but some schools don’t even have reliable electricity.”

Large class sizes were also a recurring concern. Teacher R18 said:

“Teaching 70 students in one room makes it nearly impossible to use group activities. You end up lecturing to maintain order.”

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These perspectives indicate that financial, infrastructural, and institutional barriers constrain implementation.

Research Question 4

The fourth question was: ***"What are the strategies to enhance the use of learner-centred pedagogies in curriculum implementation?"***

Teachers rated the helpfulness of different strategies using a five-point Likert scale. Results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Teachers' Perceptions of the Helpfulness of Different Strategies for Improving Learner-Centred Teaching Styles in Private Secondary Schools in Gulu City (N = 96)

Strategies	Not helpful	Slightly helpful	Moderately helpful	Very helpful	Extremely helpful	Mean	SD
Engaging in Continuous Professional Development Programmes	5 (6.1%)	20 (24.4%)	21 (25.6%)	24 (29.3%)	12 (14.6%)	3.220	1.155
Simplifying Instructional Methods	5 (6.1%)	4 (4.9%)	10 (12.2%)	59 (72.0%)	4 (4.9%)	3.646	0.894
Utilising ICT	4 (4.9%)	23 (28.0%)	19 (23.2%)	28 (34.1%)	8 (9.8%)	3.159	1.093
Grouping Learners in Smaller Class Sizes	2 (2.4%)	3 (3.7%)	15 (18.3%)	56 (68.3%)	6 (7.3%)	3.744	0.750
Collaborating with Peers and Senior Colleagues	1 (1.2%)	4 (4.9%)	7 (8.5%)	66 (80.5%)	4 (4.9%)	3.829	0.644
Engaging Parents and Communities	2 (2.4%)	5 (6.1%)	17 (20.7%)	51 (62.2%)	7 (8.5%)	3.683	0.815
Improving Time Management	2 (2.4%)	3 (3.7%)	14 (17.1%)	57 (69.5%)	6 (7.3%)	3.756	0.746
Adapting Learning Materials	2 (2.4%)	2 (2.4%)	6 (7.3%)	67 (81.7%)	5 (6.1%)	3.866	0.662

The most strongly endorsed strategies were adapting learning materials (M = 3.866) and collaborating with peers and senior colleagues (M = 3.829). Improving time management (M = 3.756) and reducing class size (M = 3.744) were also highly valued.

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In contrast, continuous professional development (CPD) (M = 3.220) and ICT integration (M = 3.159) received lower ratings, likely reflecting resource challenges and limited access to quality programmes.

Interview responses echoed these patterns. Teacher R13 remarked:

"When we brainstorm with our senior colleagues, we gain strategies for engaging students better. It reduces the pressure of having to do it ourselves."

Teacher R06 noted:

"Sometimes the books are inadequate or too complex, so we create simpler materials that students can learn from."

Administrator R01 highlighted class size as a structural factor:

"Smaller classes allow more one-on-one attention, especially for strategies like group work and projects."

Overall, teachers favoured practical, low-cost, and context-sensitive strategies, while recognising that ICT and CPD require stronger institutional support.

Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm that Uganda's Lower Secondary Curriculum is deliberately designed to promote learner-centred, constructivist-based pedagogy. Approaches such as project-based learning (PBL), debates, research-driven inquiry, and role-playing offer participatory and experiential learning opportunities aimed at cultivating core competencies, including creativity, collaboration, and analytical thinking. These results are consistent with prior studies (O'Sullivan, 2006) that emphasise the role of contextualised and active learning in enhancing learner engagement. In particular, SchoolNet Africa (2023) emphasises the use of real-life scenarios within PBL as crucial in preparing learners to navigate complex societal challenges. Such findings support the theoretical position that active learning and learner agency contribute meaningfully to cognitive, social, and emotional development.

However, despite the progressive vision of the LSC, its implementation in Gulu City's private secondary schools remains uneven. Pedagogies such as PBL, debates, and research-based learning appear more common—perhaps because they require minimal infrastructure—whereas resource-intensive methods, including ICT integration, flipped classrooms, and contextual knowledge, are less frequently adopted. This scenario aligns with the observations of STiR Education (2022), which found that low-tech, low-cost strategies are more readily implemented in resource-constrained contexts. The limited uptake of technology-mediated pedagogies reflects broader structural challenges. As Arinaitwe et al. (2024) document, inadequate digital infrastructure and low teacher digital literacy significantly hinder the adoption of technology-mediated teaching, particularly in under-resourced and rural areas. This disparity between curricular aspirations and systemic realities underscores the need to address infrastructural inequalities before prescribing technologically advanced approaches. Similarly, the limited application of role-play and co-operative learning—despite their recognised value for fostering interpersonal and reflective skills—points to practical challenges in implementation. These results echo Hardman's (2009) findings that large class sizes, limited instructional time, and insufficient facilitation skills discourage teachers from employing interactive pedagogies.

As Akyeampong et al. (2011) argue, variations in the adoption of learner-centred teaching methodologies are often influenced by teachers' beliefs, professional preparation, and the quality of school leadership. While the theoretical case for learner-centred teaching is compelling, effective implementation depends on

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enabling conditions such as high-quality professional development, manageable class sizes, and a supportive institutional culture.

Barriers identified in this study, reflected in the third research question, include insufficient teacher training, inadequate instructional resources, and inadequate institutional support. These concerns align with UNESCO (2021) and Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports (2021), both of which note that weak professional development systems and inadequate infrastructure hinder curriculum reform efforts. The lack of emphasis on continuous in-service training is particularly worrying, given the global consensus that sustained professional learning is a cornerstone of pedagogical transformation. Notably, the present findings suggest that the primary constraints faced by teachers are systemic rather than attitudinal, implying a willingness among teachers to innovate if supported with adequate resources and training.

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the findings reinforce constructivist and socio-cultural perspectives, affirming the effectiveness of active, inquiry-based, and collaborative learning approaches. They also highlight the central role of systemic readiness in translating pedagogical theory into classroom reality. Practically, the findings call on policymakers, school leaders, and teacher educators to prioritise investment in capacity building, especially ICT integration and experiential learning design. Curriculum developers are encouraged to adopt global competencies to local contexts without compromising their relevance. Ultimately, sustainable education reform requires a multi-dimensional approach—one that extends beyond curriculum design to encompass institutional support, equitable resource allocation, and a culture of continuous pedagogical improvement.

Conclusion

This study examined the barriers to adopting learner-centred pedagogies in private secondary schools in Gulu City and assessed their implications for the effective implementation of Uganda's Lower Secondary Curriculum. Although the LSC is theoretically grounded in learner-centred and constructivist approaches—such as project-based learning (PBL), debates, and research-based learning—its practical application remains uneven and constrained.

The findings highlight several interrelated challenges: limited teacher capacity development, inadequate teaching resources and facilities, insufficient institutional support, and underdeveloped technological infrastructure. These structural limitations, compounded by contextual factors such as large class sizes, time constraints, and entrenched pedagogical traditions, restrict the curriculum's potential to build competencies in critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, and problem-solving.

Notably, the study shows that resistance to innovation is more systemic than attitudinal. Teachers generally express a willingness to adopt new methods, but are hindered by skills gaps, scarce resources, and inadequate institutional support. This scenario highlights the urgent need for coordinated reforms that target both professional and infrastructural development.

Based on these findings, the study prioritises the following recommendations:

1. Strengthen teacher professional development through sustained, in-service training on innovative pedagogies, including ICT-supported and experiential strategies.
2. Improve the quality and accessibility of teaching resources - both digital and physical - alongside classrooms that enable learner-centred approaches.
3. Bolster institutional support by embedding innovation in school policies, providing incentives for pedagogical change, and cultivating reflective practice cultures.
4. Address structural constraints, substantial class sizes and limited instructional time to make interactive strategies feasible.
5. Align implementation with socio-economic and infrastructural realities, particularly in under-resourced schools, to enhance sustainability and effectiveness.

6. Advance system-wide reforms that extend beyond curriculum design to equitable resource allocation and long-term capacity building.

Among these, teacher training and resource provision are foundational, as they directly determine whether other reforms can succeed. Without urgent action, the LSC risks remaining aspirational, leaving a persistent gap between policy design and classroom practice.

Overall, the LSC provides a strong framework for reform, but its success depends on a multi-dimensional strategy that integrates curriculum infrastructure and professional growth. Looking ahead, further research should explore long-term monitoring of LSC implementation, the effectiveness of professional development initiatives, and the policy mechanisms most likely to sustain innovation. A systematic evaluation will be crucial in ensuring that Uganda's learners acquire the competencies necessary for national development and global competitiveness.

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