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**Students' Academic Resilience and Competence-Based Learning Outcomes: A Survey
on Students' Adaptive Help-Seeking Behaviours**

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the study was to examine how students' adaptive help-seeking behaviours contribute to competence-based learning (CBL) in selected secondary schools in Mukono and Kayunga districts, Uganda.

Methodology: The study was guided by Constructivist Theory, Connectivist Theory, Resilience Theory, Emotional Intelligence Theory, and Self-Directed Learning Theory. It adopted a mixed-methods approach using a convergent research design. Data were collected from students, teachers, head teachers, District Education Officers, and school inspectors through questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis, while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings: The findings revealed that adaptive help-seeking behaviours significantly enhanced students' mastery of competences within competence-based learning environments ($\beta = 0.595$, $p < 0.01$). Specifically, adaptive help-seeking positively influenced the development of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. The results further indicated that students who actively sought appropriate academic support demonstrated higher levels of academic engagement and competence acquisition.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study recommends the establishment of peer-support systems and mentorship programs in secondary schools to encourage adaptive help-seeking behaviours among learners. It also recommends the adoption of learner-centered instructional strategies that promote collaboration, interaction, and timely academic support to strengthen competence acquisition and enhance the implementation of competence-based learning.

Keywords: *Adaptive Help-Seeking, Competence-Based Learning, Academic Resilience, Secondary Education, Uganda*

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INTRODUCTION

The global shift from content-based education toward competence-based learning (CBL) has transformed educational systems by emphasizing the acquisition of practical competences, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving skills rather than rote memorization of knowledge. Competence-based learning focuses on learners' ability to demonstrate mastery of measurable competences and apply knowledge in real-life contexts (Powell, 2013; Tadesse & Gillies, 2015). The approach promotes learner-centered instruction, self-paced progression, and continuous assessment, thereby requiring students to actively participate in their own learning process. International organizations such as UNESCO and the World Bank have increasingly advocated for competence-oriented curricula as a means of preparing learners for the dynamic demands of the twenty-first century labor market. However, the successful implementation of CBL depends not only on curriculum reforms and teacher preparedness, but also on learners' personal capacities to adapt, persist, and seek support when confronted with academic challenges.

In Uganda, the introduction of the competence-based curriculum by the Ministry of Education and Sports represented a major educational reform aimed at improving the quality and relevance of secondary education (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2020). The reform sought to equip learners with practical competences that enhance adaptability, innovation, communication, and critical thinking. Despite these efforts, implementation challenges continue to affect schools, particularly in Mukono and Kayunga districts where schools experience shortages of learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teacher preparation, and limited learner support systems. Reports by the Ministry of Education and Sports (2020) and UNEB (2019) indicated that many learners felt overwhelmed by the demands of CBL, while a significant proportion of teachers lacked sufficient training to effectively implement the curriculum.

Academic resilience has emerged as a critical factor in enabling learners to succeed within CBL systems. Academic resilience refers to students' ability to overcome setbacks, adapt positively to academic difficulties, and persist despite challenges such as stress, failure, limited resources, or psychosocial pressures (Martin & Marsh, 2006; Morales, 2008). Resilient learners demonstrate perseverance, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping strategies that enable them to sustain engagement in learning activities even under adverse conditions. Research by Masten (2019) further emphasizes that resilience is not merely an innate trait but a dynamic process shaped by environmental support systems, personal attributes, and adaptive learning behaviours.

Among the dimensions of academic resilience, adaptive help-seeking behaviours have gained increasing scholarly attention due to their role in enhancing students' academic engagement and competence acquisition. Adaptive help-seeking refers to learners' ability to recognize when assistance is needed and strategically seek support from teachers, peers, mentors, or learning resources in ways that promote understanding and independent learning rather than dependency (Rudd et al., 2021). Students who demonstrate adaptive help-seeking behaviours are more likely to overcome learning difficulties, sustain motivation, and develop confidence in managing academic tasks. Studies indicate that students with strong adaptive help-seeking skills are better able to navigate academic challenges and perform more effectively in school settings (Borazon & Chuang, 2023; Almulla, 2024).

The theoretical foundation of this study draws from constructivist, connectivist, resilience, emotional intelligence, and self-directed learning theories. Piaget's Constructivist Learning Theory emphasizes that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment and through collaborative engagement with others (Piaget, 1980). Siemens' Connectivism Theory highlights the importance of networks, collaboration, and social interactions in facilitating learning within modern educational contexts (Siemens, 2005). Resilience Theory explains how students adapt positively despite adversity through protective processes and support systems (Richardson, 2002), while Self-Directed Learning Theory underscores learners' responsibility in identifying learning needs, seeking resources, and evaluating progress (Knowles, 1975). Together, these theories suggest that adaptive help-seeking behaviours are central to learner autonomy, persistence, collaboration, and successful competence acquisition in CBL environments.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of academic resilience in CBL, limited empirical attention has been given to the specific contribution of adaptive help-seeking behaviours among secondary school students in Uganda. It is against this background that the present study examined how students' adaptive help-seeking behaviours contribute to competence-based learning in selected secondary schools in Mukono and Kayunga districts. The study sought to generate evidence that can inform instructional practices, learner support strategies, and educational policies aimed at strengthening CBL outcomes in Ugandan secondary schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Competence-based learning (CBL) has increasingly transformed secondary education from a system centered on content coverage to one that prioritizes the practical application of knowledge, learner autonomy, and demonstration of competences. Existing literature consistently suggests that successful participation in CBL requires learners to engage actively with teachers, peers, and learning resources. While Powell (2013) emphasizes mastery-based progression as the defining characteristic of CBL, other scholars associate successful competence acquisition with learners' ability to seek clarification, feedback, and guidance when confronted with learning challenges. This suggests that adaptive help-seeking is not merely a supportive learning behaviour but a critical mechanism through which learners sustain engagement and achieve competence mastery.

Scholars generally agree that adaptive help-seeking contributes positively to learning outcomes; however, they explain this relationship from different perspectives. While Rudd et al. (2021) prioritize self-regulation and learners' ability to identify knowledge gaps requiring support, constructivist scholars emphasize social interaction and collaborative knowledge construction as the primary pathways through which help-seeking enhances learning (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2020). Together, these perspectives suggest that adaptive help-seeking supports competence development by enabling learners both to monitor their learning needs and to access social and instructional resources necessary for addressing those needs.

The literature further distinguishes between adaptive and maladaptive forms of help-seeking. Although both involve seeking assistance, they differ significantly in purpose and learning outcomes. Adaptive help-seeking promotes understanding, independent problem-solving, and long-term competence development, whereas maladaptive help-seeking is characterized by dependence on others for answers or task completion (Karabenick, 2003). Ryan and Pintrich (1997) argue that excessive dependence on external assistance may undermine learner

autonomy and self-regulation. This distinction is particularly important within competence-based learning environments, where learners are expected to demonstrate independent application of knowledge and skills. Consequently, adaptive help-seeking is more likely than maladaptive help-seeking to contribute to meaningful competence acquisition.

Theoretical Perspectives Underpinning the Study

This study is anchored in Constructivist Learning Theory and Resilience Theory because together they provide a comprehensive explanation of how adaptive help-seeking contributes to competence development. Constructivist theory views learning as an active process in which learners construct knowledge through interaction, inquiry, reflection, and collaboration. Rather than viewing learners as passive recipients of information, constructivists emphasize their active role in seeking information, questioning ideas, and negotiating meaning through social engagement (Piaget, 1980). From this perspective, adaptive help-seeking represents an important learning strategy that enables learners to participate actively in the construction of knowledge.

Resilience Theory complements the constructivist perspective by explaining how learners respond to academic challenges and setbacks. Whereas constructivism focuses on the learning process itself, resilience theory emphasizes learners' capacity to persist, adapt, and recover when confronted with difficulties (Richardson, 2002). Southwick et al. (2019) contend that resilience is strengthened through supportive relationships and access to social resources. This suggests that adaptive help-seeking functions not only as a learning strategy but also as a coping mechanism that enables learners to maintain engagement despite obstacles. Together, the two theories suggest that competence acquisition is strengthened when learners actively construct knowledge while simultaneously drawing upon available support systems to overcome challenges.

The implementation of Uganda's competence-based curriculum has increased the importance of learner participation, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. Although competence development requires independent learning, the literature suggests that independence should not be interpreted as isolation. Instead, effective competence acquisition depends on learners' ability to identify when support is needed and to access appropriate assistance. Consequently, adaptive help-seeking emerges as an important learner-centered behaviour that enables students to navigate challenging learning tasks while maintaining responsibility for their own learning.

This relationship becomes particularly significant when examined within the educational realities of Mukono and Kayunga districts. Existing evidence indicates that many schools continue to experience overcrowded classrooms, inadequate instructional materials, and limited teacher preparedness for competence-based instruction (MoES, 2021). These challenges often reduce opportunities for individualized teacher support and may limit the effectiveness of classroom instruction. While such structural constraints cannot be eliminated by learners alone, adaptive help-seeking behaviours may enable students to mitigate their effects. Through peer collaboration, participation in study groups, consultation with teachers, and utilization of available learning resources, learners can access additional academic support that compensates for some of the limitations associated with resource shortages and overcrowded learning environments.

Therefore, adaptive help-seeking should not merely be viewed as an individual learning behaviour but also as a practical strategy for enhancing competence acquisition within resource-constrained educational contexts. This perspective provides a strong justification for examining how adaptive help-seeking contributes to competence-based learning among secondary school students in Mukono and Kayunga districts.

Within this study, Constructivist Learning Theory explains how adaptive help-seeking enables learners to engage in collaborative knowledge construction and competence development, while Resilience Theory explains how learners mobilize support resources and persist through academic challenges. Together, the theories provide a coherent explanation of how adaptive help-seeking behaviours (independent variable) contribute to competence-based learning outcomes (dependent variable)

Research Gaps in Existing Literature

Although existing studies consistently associate adaptive help-seeking with improved academic outcomes, several gaps remain evident in the literature. First, much of the available research has examined adaptive help-seeking within traditional content-based educational systems, where academic achievement is typically measured through examination performance and content mastery (Karabenick, 2003; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). Comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how adaptive help-seeking contributes to competence acquisition within competence-based learning environments that emphasize practical application of knowledge, skills development, and demonstration of competences.

Second, while studies such as those by Rudd et al. (2021) have emphasized the role of self-regulation in adaptive help-seeking, and constructivist scholars have highlighted collaborative learning processes (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2020), limited research has integrated these perspectives to explain how help-seeking behaviours facilitate competence development. Consequently, there remains insufficient understanding of the mechanisms through which adaptive help-seeking supports learner participation, competence mastery, and independent learning within competence-based curricula.

Third, the majority of studies on adaptive help-seeking have been conducted in developed educational contexts where learners often have greater access to instructional resources, smaller class sizes, and more established learner-support systems. The extent to which these findings apply to resource-constrained educational settings remains unclear. In contexts characterized by overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional materials, and varying levels of teacher preparedness, adaptive help-seeking may function differently and assume greater importance in supporting learner success.

Finally, despite the nationwide implementation of Uganda's competence-based curriculum, empirical evidence examining adaptive help-seeking behaviours among secondary school learners remains limited. Existing studies on competence-based education in Uganda have largely focused on curriculum implementation challenges, teacher preparedness, assessment practices, and resource availability, with comparatively little attention given to learner-driven behaviours that may enhance competence acquisition. This leaves an important contextual and empirical gap regarding the contribution of adaptive help-seeking to competence-based learning outcomes among secondary school students in Uganda, particularly within Mukono and Kayunga districts. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining how adaptive help-seeking behaviours contribute to competence-based learning within these educational contexts.

Significance of the Study

Understanding the contribution of adaptive help-seeking behaviours to competence-based learning has important implications for educational policy and practice. The findings may assist policymakers in designing interventions that strengthen learner engagement and support the effective implementation of competence-based education. School administrators may use the findings to establish mentorship programs, peer-support systems, and collaborative learning structures that encourage productive help-seeking behaviours among students.

The study may also benefit teachers by providing insights into classroom practices that promote constructive help-seeking, learner participation, and independent problem-solving. Curriculum developers may utilize the findings to strengthen learner-support mechanisms within competence-based education frameworks. Furthermore, the study will assist educators in distinguishing between adaptive help-seeking behaviours that promote competence acquisition and maladaptive help-seeking behaviours that foster dependency and undermine learner autonomy. Ultimately, students are expected to benefit through enhanced engagement, improved learning experiences, and stronger competence development

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design to examine how students' adaptive help-seeking behaviours contribute to competence-based learning in secondary schools in Mukono and Kayunga districts. The design enabled the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to obtain comprehensive evidence regarding learners' adaptive help-seeking behaviours and their influence on competence acquisition. The convergent design was considered appropriate because it allowed simultaneous collection, analysis, and integration of both forms of data for triangulation and complementarity of findings.

Study Population and Sample

The study population comprised 13,302 Senior One to Senior Four students from 12 selected secondary schools in Mukono and Kayunga districts implementing CBL. The schools included six government-aided and six private secondary schools. The qualitative sample included 8 head teachers, 48 teachers participating in focus group discussions, 2 District Education Officers, 2 school inspectors, and 2 education officers selected from both districts.

Sampling Techniques

The study employed multiple sampling techniques. Simple random sampling was used to select student respondents for the quantitative component. Purposive sampling was applied in selecting teachers, head teachers, District Education Officers, and school inspectors because these participants possessed relevant knowledge and experience concerning CBL implementation and learner behaviours.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. Structured questionnaires were administered to students to gather quantitative data regarding adaptive help-seeking behaviours and CBL experiences. Interview guides were used to obtain qualitative information from head teachers, teachers, and education officials. Focus group

discussions provided opportunities for learners to share experiences regarding how they seek assistance when faced with academic challenges.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize learners' perceptions. Inferential analysis involved correlation and regression techniques to establish the strength and significance of the relationship between adaptive help-seeking behaviours and CBL outcomes. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically through identification of recurring ideas, patterns, and explanations related to learners' help-seeking experiences and competence acquisition.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics on Students' Adaptive Help-Seeking Behaviours

Adaptive help-seeking behaviours were measured across key dimensions including self-monitoring, goal-setting, resource-seeking, and willingness to consult peers and teachers. These dimensions are considered essential for academic success within competence-based learning environments. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics reflecting learners' perceptions of their adaptive help-seeking behaviours.

Table 1: Learners' Perceptions of Adaptive Help-Seeking Behaviours

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
I seek help from teachers or classmates when I need it.	4.564	0.563
I would use my past successes to help motivate myself.	4.419	0.652
I would start to monitor and evaluate my achievements and plans.	4.381	0.650
I am willing to ask for help even if it means admitting I don't know something.	4.351	0.721
I would start to self-impose rewards and punishments depending on my performance.	3.882	1.041
I ask clarification on concepts I don't understand.	4.331	0.692
I actively search for resources to support my learning.	4.449	0.651
I would set my own goals for achievement.	4.569	0.584
I am comfortable seeking help from multiple sources.	4.298	0.850
I would try to think more about my strengths and weaknesses to help me work better.	4.436	0.646

Source: Field Data (2024)

The results indicate that learners generally reported high levels of adaptive help-seeking behaviours. Setting personal goals for achievement ($M = 4.569$, $SD = 0.584$) and seeking help from teachers or classmates ($M = 4.564$, $SD = 0.563$) were the most strongly endorsed items. Actively searching for resources to support learning ($M = 4.449$, $SD = 0.651$) and reflecting on personal strengths and weaknesses ($M = 4.436$, $SD = 0.646$) also received strong endorsement. The item with the lowest mean rating related to self-imposing rewards and punishments based on performance ($M = 3.882$, $SD = 1.041$), though this remained above the midpoint of the scale.

Correlation Analysis

The correlations among the independent variable (adaptive help-seeking skills) and the dependent variable (competence-based learning) were examined to determine the nature and strength of their association. Table 2 presents the correlation results.

Table 2: Correlation between Adaptive Help-Seeking Skills and Competence-Based Learning

Variables	Correlation	Sig.
Academic Adaptive Help-Seeking Skills — Competence-Based Learning	0.5736	0.0000

Note. $p < 0.01$. Source: Field Data (2024)

The analysis revealed a moderately strong positive association ($r = 0.574$, $p < 0.001$) between students' adaptive help-seeking skills and engagement in competence-based learning. This suggests that learners who actively seek academic assistance are more likely to participate effectively in CBL environments.

Regression Analysis

Regression analysis was employed to test the predictive relationship between adaptive help-seeking and CBL outcomes. Table 3 presents the regression results.

Table 3: Regression Analysis — Adaptive Help-Seeking as Predictor of Competence-Based Learning

Predictor	β	p-value	R^2
Adaptive Help-Seeking Skills → CBL	0.595	< 0.01	0.329

Note. $p < 0.01$. Source: Field Data (2024)

The regression analysis reveals a strong positive relationship between adaptive help-seeking skills and competence-based learning ($\beta = 0.595$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that students who exhibit stronger adaptive help-seeking skills are more likely to engage effectively in CBL environments. The R-squared value of 0.329 indicates that approximately 33% of the variation in CBL engagement can be explained by adaptive help-seeking skills, while the remaining 67% is attributed to other factors.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that adaptive help-seeking behaviours are significantly associated with competence-based learning outcomes among secondary school learners in Mukono and Kayunga districts. The strong positive correlation ($r = 0.574$, $p < 0.001$) and regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.595$, $p < 0.01$) collectively indicate that students who actively seek academic support from teachers, peers, and learning resources are better positioned to succeed within CBL environments. These results are consistent with international evidence suggesting that adaptive help-seeking is a hallmark of self-regulated learning (Rudd et al., 2021) and a predictor of sustained academic engagement (Borazon & Chuang, 2023; Almulla, 2024).

The descriptive findings further support the view that Ugandan secondary school learners recognize the value of seeking assistance as a learning strategy. Learners reported high willingness to consult teachers and classmates, actively search for learning resources, and set personal goals — all behaviours consistent with the constructivist principle that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and engagement (Piaget, 1980; Jones & Brader-Araje,

2020). These findings suggest that learners are not merely passive recipients of instruction but active agents who utilize available support systems to negotiate academic demands.

The influence of emotional factors on adaptive help-seeking is evident from the relatively lower endorsement of self-imposed rewards and punishments, suggesting that behavioural self-regulation may be less developed among some learners. Goleman's (1995) emotional intelligence framework helps explain this variation, as students with lower self-regulation may be less inclined to engage in adaptive help-seeking or sustain consistent use of strategic learning behaviours. Educators and counselors should therefore attend to the emotional dimensions of learning within CBL environments to support broader engagement.

The findings also illuminate structural challenges that affect how effectively learners can seek help. Overcrowded classrooms and limited resources in Mukono and Kayunga districts may restrict opportunities for personalized teacher-student interaction, thereby constraining learners' ability to seek timely assistance (MoES, 2021). Peer-support and mentorship systems may therefore serve as critical complementary mechanisms through which learners access guidance when teacher-directed support is insufficient.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study concluded that students' adaptive help-seeking behaviours play a significant role in promoting competence-based learning in secondary schools in Mukono and Kayunga districts. Learners who actively sought guidance from teachers, peers, and available learning resources demonstrated higher levels of classroom participation, collaboration, problem-solving, and competence mastery. Statistical findings established a strong positive relationship between adaptive help-seeking behaviours and CBL outcomes, indicating that students who appropriately seek academic support are more likely to succeed in learner-centered educational settings.

Positive teacher-student relationships, peer interaction, mentorship, and supportive classroom environments were found to facilitate students' willingness to seek assistance constructively. Conversely, limited instructional support, overcrowded classrooms, and fear of embarrassment discouraged some learners from requesting academic help, thereby affecting competence acquisition. Strengthening adaptive help-seeking behaviours is therefore essential for improving the effectiveness of CBL in Ugandan secondary schools.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study offers the following recommendations:

First, secondary schools should strengthen peer-support and peer-tutoring programs to encourage students to seek academic assistance from classmates in ways that promote independent learning and competence mastery. Collaborative learning environments where learners freely interact and discuss academic challenges should be systematically cultivated within CBL settings.

Second, teachers should adopt learner-centered instructional approaches that encourage open communication, continuous feedback, classroom interaction, and academic consultation. Teachers should create supportive classroom climates that reduce fear, anxiety, and embarrassment associated with seeking help. Professional development programs should equip teachers with strategies for nurturing adaptive help-seeking behaviours among learners.

Third, secondary schools should establish mentorship, counseling, and guidance programs to strengthen students' confidence, resilience, and willingness to seek academic support. Education policymakers and school administrators are encouraged to integrate emotional support systems and social-emotional learning interventions into CBL implementation frameworks to improve learner engagement and competence acquisition.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests, personal relationships, or affiliations that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Declaration of Generative AI Use

The author used ChatGPT during the preparation of this manuscript for brainstorming, language editing, and improving clarity of expression. All content generated with AI assistance was critically reviewed, revised, and verified by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the manuscript.

Biographical Note

Nakacwa Florence Patricia is a Lecturer at Nkumba University. Her academic and professional interests focus on student growth and support, applied counselling and psychology, child development, and educational psychology. Her work explores factors that promote learners' academic, social, and emotional well-being, with particular interest in counselling interventions and supportive educational environments. She is committed to advancing research and practice that enhance student development and educational outcomes.

Consent

Informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all participants involved in this study prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The researcher ensured that participant confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process and in the reporting of findings. No personally identifiable information is included in this manuscript.

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