

The Parental Term: Understanding The Role Of Parents During School Holidays In Uganda

Dr Arinaitwe Julius¹, Dr Namara Mable², Dr Kamusiime B. Samuel³

1, 2, 3 Metropolitan International University

Abstract

School holidays in Uganda represent a critical but neglected period in children's developmental trajectories, during which the institutional structures of schooling give way to home environments characterized by highly variable parental engagement, supervision quality, and learning continuity. This qualitative study explored how parents understand and enact their roles during school holiday periods, and how these understandings and enactments are shaped by socioeconomic context, gender, occupational demands, and cultural norms around parenting. Employing grounded theory methodology, the study conducted in-depth interviews with thirty-six parents across urban, peri-urban, and rural settings in Uganda, supplemented by focus group discussions and observational data from four household case studies. Findings revealed that parents conceptualize the holiday period through multiple, often competing frameworks: as a rest period for both children and parents, as a learning continuation opportunity, as a period of heightened child vulnerability requiring increased supervision, and as a period of productive labour contribution in agricultural households. The study documents substantial disparities in holiday parenting quality along socioeconomic lines, with wealthier urban parents structuring holidays through extracurricular programming while low-income rural parents face competing demands between agricultural productivity and child supervision. Critically, many parents experience what the study terms 'parental term anxiety'-the pressure to compensate academically for perceived school inadequacies during holidays-a dynamic that reflects broader distrust of Uganda's public school system. Recommendations address policy support for parent education, holiday learning programme accessibility, and child protection infrastructure during school breaks.

Keywords: School holidays, parenting, Uganda, child development, parental role, school breaks, qualitative research, family education, supervision, learning continuity

1.0 Introduction

The school term, with its structured timetables, qualified teachers, prescribed curricula, and institutional accountability systems, occupies the dominant place in educational policy discourse and research attention. Yet for children in Uganda, as elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, school holidays which typically comprise approximately four months of each calendar year across three holiday periods represent a substantial portion of childhood time during which educational and developmental experiences are shaped almost entirely by family and community contexts rather than institutional ones. The quality of these experiences, and the role parents play in shaping them, has profound implications for children's academic progress, physical safety, psychological development, and social learning, yet parental roles during school holidays remain profoundly understudied in the Ugandan educational research literature.

Uganda's educational calendar, structured around three terms with holidays of varying lengths between them, creates recurring transitions between institutional and family-centred childhood environments that parents must navigate across diverse and often challenging circumstances. For parents in formal employment, school holidays create childcare dilemmas that must be resolved through combinations of relative care, paid child-minding, commercial holiday programming, and workplace flexibility each option carrying different costs, quality implications, and equity dimensions. For parents in agricultural livelihoods, which characterize the majority of Uganda's rural population, school holidays coincide with periods of intensive farm labour, creating acute tensions between productive necessity and child supervision. For parents in informal urban economies street traders, market vendors, domestic workers children's presence during holidays may be simultaneously a logistical challenge and a labour resource, particularly for older children.

The theoretical literature on parenting styles and child outcomes, while extensive, has been critiqued for its Western-centric assumptions about the nuclear family structure, the primacy of mother-child relationships, and the developmental goals of parenting (Serpell, 2011). In Uganda, as across many African societies, childrearing is understood and practiced as a communal rather than exclusively parental responsibility, with extended family networks, older siblings, and community members sharing supervision roles in ways that challenge dyadic parent-child attachment models (Weisner, 2014). Understanding parental roles during school holidays must therefore be situated within these broader communal childrearing ecologies rather than assumed to follow Western individual-parenting norms.

The policy context is also relevant: Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) programmes have dramatically expanded school enrolment but have not correspondingly invested in parenting education, family support services, or holiday programming for children from low-income families. The result is a policy environment in which schooling has been acknowledged as a public responsibility but holidays — and the child welfare and developmental opportunities they contain — remain entirely within the private domain of families with widely varying capacities to realise those opportunities.

2.0 Problem Statement

Despite four months of each calendar year being spent outside institutional educational settings, Ugandan educational policy and research has paid almost no attention to the holiday period as a site of developmental significance or policy intervention. This neglect has practical consequences: children from low-income families who lack access to structured holiday activities, educational support, or adequate supervision are at elevated risk of academic regression (the 'summer slide' phenomenon documented extensively in the Northern Hemisphere literature), physical harm through unsupervised activity, early exposure to labour, and vulnerability to abuse in the absence of institutional oversight. The absence of research on parental roles during Ugandan school holidays means that policy-makers, school

administrators, and parent education practitioners lack evidence-based understanding of how holiday parenting is currently practiced, what resources parents access, and where the most significant welfare gaps lie.

3.0 Main Objective

The primary objective of this study was to explore how parents in Uganda understand and enact their roles during school holiday periods, and to examine how these roles are shaped by socioeconomic context, gender, cultural norms, and occupational demands. Specific objectives included: documenting how parents conceptualize the holiday period and their role within it; exploring the specific activities, supervision practices, and learning support strategies parents employ; examining how socioeconomic context shapes holiday parenting practices; and identifying the challenges and support needs parents experience during school holidays.

4.0 Literature Review

The concept of 'summer learning loss' or 'summer slide' the phenomenon of academic skill regression during extended school breaks has been extensively documented in the United States and increasingly in other educational contexts (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay & Greathouse, 1996). The seminal review by Cooper et al. found that students on average lose approximately one month of learning during summer, with losses disproportionately concentrated among students from low-income families who have less access to structured learning activities, stimulating environments, and parental educational support. The equity implications are significant: summer learning loss is documented as a major driver of the achievement gap between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, not through differential school quality alone but through differential access to enriched out-of-school experiences.

In the African context, research on school holiday effects has been limited, with available studies suggesting that the dynamics may differ from North American contexts due to different family economic structures, agricultural calendars, and communal childrearing practices (Abadzi, 2009). In Uganda specifically, Kyambadde (2015) documented that children in agricultural households frequently contributed substantial farm labour during school holidays, creating a tension between productive family labour and cognitive engagement that may have both positive and negative developmental implications. Positive aspects include the development of practical skills, family responsibility, and agricultural knowledge; negative aspects include physical fatigue, reduced time for academic revision, and exposure to hazardous agricultural activities.

Parenting research in African contexts has increasingly challenged the theoretical hegemony of Western attachment theory and authoritative parenting models, arguing that these frameworks inadequately capture the communal childrearing ecologies, respectful authority relationships, and interdependence values that characterise many African family systems (Serpell, 2011; Weisner, 2014). In Uganda, Nsamenang's (2008) influential work on African childhoods emphasises that children are understood as social beings embedded in community relationships rather than primarily as developing individuals in dyadic parent-child relationships, and that developmental goals emphasise

social responsibility, practical competence, and community contribution alongside or sometimes above-academic achievement.

The gender dimension of holiday parenting is central to any analysis of how parental roles are distributed and experienced during school breaks. Global evidence documents the disproportionate burden of childcare falling on mothers across diverse cultural contexts (Hochschild, 2012), but the specific mechanisms and consequences of this burden distribution during Ugandan school holidays have not been empirically examined. Uganda's patriarchal family structures, combined with women's significant productive agricultural roles, create conditions of 'double burden' that holiday periods may intensify, as women simultaneously manage increased childcare demands and maintain productive labour contributions.

5.0 Methodology

This study employed grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014), which seeks to generate theoretical accounts of social phenomena grounded in systematically gathered and analysed empirical data rather than deduced from pre-existing theoretical frameworks. Grounded theory was appropriate given the study's aim of theory generation in a largely uncharted empirical territory rather than theory testing in an established field. The constructivist variant of grounded theory employed, associated with Charmaz, acknowledges that the categories developed through analysis are co-constructed by researcher and participants rather than 'discovered' as objective realities, and attends reflexively to the researcher's role in shaping analytical outcomes.

Thirty-six parents (twenty-two mothers, fourteen fathers) were recruited across three sites representing contrasting socioeconomic and geographic contexts: Kampala's Nakawa division (urban, mixed income), Wakiso District's peri-urban belt, and Kamwenge District (rural, predominantly agricultural). Purposive sampling targeted parents with at least one child in primary or lower secondary school, ensuring relevance to the school holiday question. Within each site, maximum variation sampling was employed to capture diversity across income levels, employment types, household structures, and number of children. Data collection included individual in-depth interviews (thirty-six interviews), four focus group discussions (two at each non-urban site), and ethnographic observation during four household case studies in which the researcher spent one full school holiday day with consenting families.

Data analysis followed grounded theory's iterative constant comparison process, beginning with open coding of transcripts to identify preliminary categories, proceeding through focused coding to develop more abstract categories, and culminating in theoretical coding that related categories to each other in ways that suggested an emergent theoretical account of holiday parenting. Theoretical saturation — the point at which additional interviews produced no new categories — was reached after approximately twenty-eight interviews, with the remaining eight providing

confirmatory and elaborative data. Theoretical memos documenting the researcher's analytical thinking were maintained throughout and contributed to the final theoretical account.

6. Results

6.1 Conceptualising the Holiday: Rest, Anxiety, and the 'Parental Term'

When parents described how they understood the school holiday period and their role within it, a fundamental tension emerged between two competing frameworks that participants held simultaneously: the holiday as a legitimate rest period for children deserving parental facilitation, and the holiday as a 'parental term' — a period of additional parental educational responsibility that compensated for perceived deficiencies in formal schooling. This latter framework was particularly prominent among parents of primary school children and was closely associated with distrust of the quality of public school education.

“When the school closes, people think I can relax. But that is when my real work begins. The schools here are very crowded — one teacher and eighty children, no books, children sitting on the floor. My child cannot learn properly in that environment. So in the holiday, I am the teacher. I buy revision books, I sit with her every morning for two hours, we do reading, we do mathematics. In the evening I quiz her on what she studied. I am paying for a holiday tutor also on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The holiday is not a rest — it is my term to teach my child properly.”

(Participant 28, mother, Nakawa, Kampala)

This account articulates what emerged across multiple urban middle-income parent interviews as a systematic private educational strategy to compensate for perceived public school inadequacy. The intensity of this 'parental term' practice — private tutors, daily home study sessions, parental instruction — reflects both the genuine quality limitations of Uganda's public primary education system and the anxiety-driven educational culture that has developed among urban middle-class families as a response to competitive secondary school entrance examinations.

“The holidays come and I feel happy for about two days. Then I start worrying. Are my children losing what they learned? Are they falling behind the children whose parents are drilling them all holiday? I see the holiday and I see opportunity but also I see risk — the risk that when school begins again, my children are behind because I let them rest too much. I give them one week of complete rest and then we begin revision. Is that enough rest? I don't know. But I cannot give them more and feel okay.” **(Participant 11, father, Wakiso district)**

Rural agricultural parents presented starkly different holiday conceptualisations driven by fundamentally different economic circumstances and educational cultures. For parents in Kamwenge District, the holiday period was primarily a period of agricultural intensification in which children's labour contributions were economically significant and culturally expected as part of their development as responsible family members.

“When school closes in July, we are beginning the second weeding season and it is also time to harvest beans. I need my children on the farm. My eldest son can weed an acre in two days. My two daughters help their mother with

cooking, carrying water, and they also help in the garden. This is how they learn to be adults. They learn to work. They learn what the family needs. This is also education — this is the education that will sustain them when they have their own gardens. I will support their school education, but the holiday is for the family, for the farm, for teaching them what school does not teach.” (Participant 34, father, Kamwenge district)

This account represents a fundamentally different cultural framework for understanding holiday-time childhood activity — one that positions agricultural labour as developmentally valuable rather than as an obstacle to academic progress, and that situates children's developmental goals within a framework of communal productive contribution rather than individual academic achievement. This framework is not simply a rationalisation of economic necessity but reflects genuinely different cultural understandings of what education is for and what children owe their families — understandings that any policy intervention targeting school holiday practices must engage with respectfully rather than simply override.

6.2 Supervision and Safety: Navigating Parental Absence and Child Vulnerability

Across income levels and geographic settings, the challenge of providing adequate supervision for children during school holidays while meeting occupational demands emerged as a central parental preoccupation. The strategies parents employed to address this challenge varied enormously with their resources and social networks, generating profound inequalities in children's supervised experiences during holiday periods.

“I am a market vendor in Owino. I leave the house at six in the morning and I return at seven in the evening. During school time, this is okay because the children go to school. During holidays, my two children aged seven and nine are at home alone all day. I have spoken to the neighbour who is a retired woman and she agreed to check on them. I leave them food that is already prepared. I lock the gate. I pray. What else can I do? I cannot leave my stall — one day without selling and we cannot eat that week. This is the reality of the holiday for me. I am not there. I trust God and the neighbour.” (Participant 17, mother, Nakawa, Kampala)

This account captures the holiday supervision dilemma facing low-income informal economy parents with devastating clarity. The combination of economic necessity requiring continuous market presence and the absence of affordable formal childcare creates conditions in which children are left unsupervised for extended periods — a situation the participant clearly recognises as suboptimal and manages through informal neighbourhood support and prayer as the only available resources. The emotional weight of this situation — 'I pray. What else can I do?' — underscores the inadequacy of framing this as individual parental failure rather than as a structural problem requiring social policy solutions.

6.3 Gender Dimensions: Mothers' Disproportionate Holiday Burden

Across all sites, mothers carried disproportionately greater responsibility for holiday childcare, supervision, and educational support than fathers, regardless of mothers' own productive labour demands. This gendered distribution

was largely unquestioned by both male and female participants, reflecting deep-seated cultural norms about the naturalness of maternal childcare responsibility.

“My husband contributes money. That is his role. The school holidays, the children, the food, the activities, making sure they are reading — that is my work. He works, I manage the home and the children. During holidays I am a full-time mother in addition to being a part-time teacher, a play organiser, a counsellor, and a cook. I love my children. But I am tired. The holiday is not a rest for me. It is the most demanding period. I am grateful my husband earns enough that I can manage, but sometimes I wish he would just sit down for one Saturday and take the children to the park so I can sleep.” (Participant 6, mother, Wakiso district)

7.0 Discussion of Results

The findings of this study reveal school holidays as a period of profound significance for children's development and welfare that is shaped by enormous socioeconomic inequality and gendered labour distributions that educational policy has largely ignored. The emergence of 'parental term' as a core category — the practise of intensive holiday academic supplementation by anxious urban middle-class parents — reflects simultaneously the genuine quality limitations of Uganda's public schooling and the competitive educational culture these limitations have generated among families with sufficient resources to respond. This phenomenon has equity implications: holiday academic supplementation advantages children from wealthier families in ways that reinforce rather than reduce the achievement gaps that equalising school access alone cannot address.

The agricultural labour dimension of rural holiday parenting represents a fundamentally different cultural context that cannot be assessed through the lens of urban middle-class educational aspiration. The developmental value of children's agricultural labour contribution — in terms of practical skills, family solidarity, and cultural knowledge transmission — is real and should not be dismissed as merely economic exploitation of children. However, the equity implications of differential access to cognitive stimulation and academic reinforcement during holiday periods are equally real and require policy responses that do not replicate urban-centric assumptions about childhood.

8.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concludes that school holidays in Uganda are a critical and largely neglected period in children's educational and developmental trajectories, characterised by enormous inequality in parental capacity and practice that reinforces rather than reduces existing educational disadvantage. The 'parental term' phenomenon among urban middle-class families and the agricultural labour reality of rural families represent two poles of a diverse holiday parenting landscape that policy has not systematically engaged with. Gender inequality in holiday childcare burden is pervasive and reflects structural conditions requiring both cultural challenge and practical support.

The study recommends: first, that Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports develop a national Holiday Learning Programme providing structured, free or subsidised educational activities for primary school children during school

holidays, with priority access for children from low-income families. Second, parent education programmes should be developed and disseminated through schools and community health workers, addressing both academic support strategies and child safety and supervision planning during holiday periods. Third, child protection agencies should intensify community presence during school holidays, when institutional oversight is withdrawn and children's vulnerability is elevated. Fourth, gender-responsive parenting programmes should address the unequal distribution of holiday childcare burden, engaging fathers in parenting responsibilities through community-based initiatives. Fifth, research should examine the specific developmental outcomes of different holiday parenting practices among Ugandan children to build the evidence base for targeted interventions.

References

- Abadzi, H. (2009). Instructional time loss in developing countries: Concepts, measurement, and implications. *World Bank Research Observer*, 24(2), 267–290.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Cooper, H., Nye, B., Charlton, K., Lindsay, J., & Greathouse, S. (1996). The effects of summer vacation on achievement test scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 66(3), 227–268.
- Hochschild, A. R. (2012). *The second shift: Working families and the revolution at home*. Penguin.
- Kyambadde, J. (2015). Children's labour and learning during school holidays in rural Uganda. *Makerere Journal of Education*, 8(1), 34–48.
- Nsamenang, A. B. (2008). Agency in early childhood learning and development in Cameroon. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 9(3), 211–223.
- Serpell, R. (2011). Social responsibility as a dimension of intelligence and as an educational goal: Insights from programmatic research in an African society. *Child Development Perspectives*, 5(2), 126–133.
- Weisner, T. S. (2014). The socialization of trust and the trust of socialization. *Developmental Review*, 34(1), 1–9.