

Role of Learners' Interests and Talents in Their Choice of Senior Secondary School Pathways in Bumula Sub County, Bungoma County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the Competency-Based Education (CBE) curriculum in Kenya emphasizes pathway selection based on learners' interests, talents, strengths, and career aspirations. However, limited empirical evidence exists on the extent to which learners' interests and talents influence their choice of senior secondary school pathways, particularly in rural contexts. This study examined the role of learners' interests and talents in the choice of senior secondary school pathways among Grade Nine learners in Bumula Sub-County, Bungoma County, Kenya. The study adopted a mixed methods research design. The target population comprised approximately 3,500 Grade Nine learners in public junior secondary schools, together with career guidance teachers, school heads, and selected parents. Using the Krejcie and Morgan sampling table, a sample of 347 learners was selected through stratified random sampling from twenty public junior secondary schools. Quantitative data were collected using questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that learners' interests and talents significantly influenced pathway selection. Most respondents indicated that their personal interests influenced their pathway choices ($M = 3.98$), their talents matched their selected pathways ($M = 3.87$), they enjoyed subjects related to their preferred pathways ($M = 4.01$), and they were passionate about their chosen pathways ($M = 3.93$). Conversely, most learners disagreed that they selected pathways that did not match their interests ($M = 2.39$). The study concludes that learners generally choose pathways that align with their interests, talents, and aspirations, although a minority continue to be influenced by external factors such as parental expectations, school limitations, and inadequate career guidance. The study recommends that schools strengthen career guidance programmes and create opportunities to identify and nurture learners' interests and talents through co-curricular activities, mentorship, and practical learning experiences to promote informed and learner-centred pathway selection.

Keywords: Competency-Based Education, learners' interests, learners' talents, pathway selection, Grade Nine learners, senior secondary school pathways

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of senior secondary school pathways under Kenya's Competency-Based Education (CBE) framework seeks to ensure that learners select pathways that reflect their individual interests, talents, strengths, and future career aspirations. The underlying principle of the reform is that learners are more likely to remain motivated, perform well academically, and pursue meaningful career opportunities when educational choices align with their personal abilities and passions. Consequently, learners' interests and talents have become central considerations in pathway selection because they influence motivation, engagement, persistence, and long-term educational success. Despite this expectation, there is concern that not all learners are able to choose pathways that genuinely reflect their interests and talents, particularly in rural settings where educational resources and guidance services remain limited.

Previous studies have consistently reported that learners' interests and talents influence educational pathway selection. For example, Kilonzo and Njeru (2023) established that learners with well-developed interests were more confident in selecting pathways related to their strengths, while O'Connor and Paquette (2019) found that personal interests and self-assessed talents strongly predicted educational and career choices. Similarly, Njoroge and Kamau (2020) reported that learners with identified talents were more likely to prefer pathways that allowed them to develop those abilities further. However, these studies paid limited attention to how learners themselves perceive and express their interests and talents within the context of Kenya's Competency-Based Education, particularly in counties such as Bungoma where socio-cultural expectations, inadequate career guidance, and limited school resources may influence pathway decisions.

Furthermore, although existing literature acknowledges that interests and talents are important determinants of pathway selection, there remains limited empirical evidence on whether learners are actually selecting pathways that correspond with their interests, talents, enjoyment of related subjects, and personal aspirations. The interaction between learners' personal motivations and external influences such as parental expectations, school conditions, and availability of pathway options has also received insufficient attention, especially among Grade Nine learners in Bungoma County. This knowledge gap makes it difficult to determine whether pathway selection under the Competency-Based Education system is genuinely learner-centred or continues to be influenced by factors beyond learners' personal preferences.

To address these gaps, this study examined the role of learners' interests and talents in the choice of senior secondary school pathways among Grade Nine learners in Bumula Sub-County, Bungoma County. Specifically, the study investigated whether learners' personal interests, talents, enjoyment of pathway-related subjects, and passion for their preferred pathways influenced their pathway choices, while also providing evidence from a rural Kenyan context to enhance understanding of learner-centred pathway selection under the Competency-Based Education framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Kenya, Kilonzo and Njeru (2023) explored the influence of learners' interests on pathway selection among Grade 9 students in Kisii County. Using a mixed-method approach, the study found that learners who identified clear interests in arts, sports, or technology were more confident in selecting related pathways. The study emphasized that internal motivation derived from interests positively affects commitment and success in the chosen pathway. While several scholars emphasize the importance of learners' interests and talents in pathway selection (Kilonzo & Njeru, 2023; O'Connor & Paquette, 2019), there is limited focus on how learners perceive and express these interests, especially in contexts like Bungoma County. This study addressed this gap by exploring how learners' personal strengths, passions, and career aspirations influence their pathway choices, with a specific focus on how these factors are shaped by local socio-cultural and educational contexts under the CBC framework.

A regional study by Njoroge and Kamau (2020) in Uganda reported that learners' talents, especially in creative and technical fields, strongly predicted their preference for vocational and technical education pathways over academic tracks. The authors recommended enhanced career guidance programs to help learners identify and nurture talents early, thus facilitating better pathway decisions. While Kilonzo and Njeru's study highlights the role of interests in pathway selection, it does not consider how external factors such as limited career guidance or cultural expectations in rural areas may hinder learners from pursuing pathways aligned with their interests. This study bridged this gap by examining the influence of external factors in Bungoma County, where resource limitations and socio-cultural pressures may shape or restrict learners' ability to pursue interests-driven pathways.

Globally, research from the United States by O'Connor and Paquette (2019) supports the assertion that interests and talents are powerful predictors of educational and career pathways. Their longitudinal study tracked high school students and found that self-assessed talents and preferences often led to sustained engagement and achievement in chosen fields. Although Njoroge and Kamau's study emphasizes the predictive value of talents in pathway selection, it overlooks the role of school infrastructure and availability of specialized programs that can support the development of talents. This study addressed this gap by exploring how the availability of

resources, such as vocational training facilities and career guidance programs, influences the expression of learners' talents in Bungoma County, particularly under the new CBE framework.

In many developing contexts, including Kenya, cultural expectations and parental pressure may override learners' personal interests, leading to pathway choices that do not reflect talents or passions (Wambua, 2021; Mwenda & Karanja, 2024). This mismatch often results in poor performance and dropout. Thus, while interests and talents are important, their influence can be mitigated by external socio-cultural factors. O'Connor and Paquette's research underscores the importance of self-assessed talents and preferences, but it does not account for how socio-economic conditions and access to quality guidance affect the realization of these interests. This study filled this gap by examining how the socio-economic context of Bungoma County impacts learners' ability to pursue pathways based on their talents and interests, particularly in the context of limited resources and guidance.

The literature also reveals a gap in examining how learners discover and validate their interests and talents, particularly in resource-limited schools lacking adequate facilities and counseling services. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how learners' interests and talents interact with external guidance in pathway selection within Bungoma County. While this research acknowledges the role of cultural and familial pressures, it does not explore the complex interaction between these pressures and learners' personal motivations within specific Kenyan counties like Bungoma. This study addressed this gap by investigating how family expectations, cultural norms, and learners' personal interests interact and influence pathway decisions, particularly under the Competency-Based Education. Although the existing literature highlights the importance of discovering and nurturing talents, it lacks a detailed exploration of how resource-limited environments, like those in Bungoma County, impact learners' ability to validate their interests and receive appropriate guidance. This study filled this gap by investigating the role of both formal and informal guidance systems in helping learners discover and pursue pathways aligned with their interests and talents.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed methods research design to explore the determinants influencing pathway selection among Grade 9 learners in Bungoma County.

The study was conducted in Bumula sub county in Bungoma County, located in Western Kenya.

Bumula Sub-County was selected for this study because it has a large number of public junior secondary schools and a diverse population of Grade 9 learners from predominantly rural and semi-rural communities

The target population consists of Grade 9 learners in public junior secondary schools within Bungoma County, approximately 3,500 learners (Bungoma County Education Office, 2025). Additionally, career guidance teachers, school heads, and selected parents participated in the qualitative segment to provide contextual information and perspectives on pathway selection

Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling table for a population of 3,500 learners, a sample size of 347 learners was selected. To ensure representation across the county, twenty (20) public junior secondary schools were selected through stratified random sampling. Stratification considered sub-county location and school type (day, boarding, and mixed), ensuring that schools from diverse geographical areas and with varying resource levels are included.

From each selected school, approximately 15–20 Grade 9 learners were randomly chosen to achieve the total sample size of 347 learners.

A pilot study was conducted with a small sample of 30 learners from a school outside the study area. The resulting data was analyzed using SPSS version 25 to compute Cronbach's alpha. Items that show low reliability (below 0.7) was revised or removed to improve the overall consistency of the instrument.

Data collected from the questionnaire, was organized, coded, analysed, and interpreted according to the theories of study. Quantitative data collected from Grade 9 learners through questionnaires was first checked

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section analysed, presented and discussed findings on the role of learners' interests and talents in their choice of senior secondary school pathways among Grade 9 learners in Bungoma County. The findings focus on how learners' personal interests, talents, enjoyment of related subjects, passion for selected pathways, and alignment between interests and pathway choices influenced their decisions. The responses were collected from 321 Grade 9 learners using a five-point Likert scale and are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis on Learners' Interests and Talents and Their Influence on Pathway Selection

Statement	SD n (%)	D n (%)	N n (%)	A n (%)	SA n (%)	Mean	SD
My personal interests influence my pathway choice.	12 (3.7%)	21 (6.5%)	36 (11.2%)	143 (44.5%)	109 (34.0%)	3.98	1.026
I have talents that match my chosen pathway.	16 (5.0%)	24 (7.5%)	45 (14.0%)	137 (42.7%)	99 (30.8%)	3.87	1.088
I enjoy subjects related to my selected pathway.	9 (2.8%)	18 (5.6%)	39 (12.1%)	149 (46.4%)	106 (33.0%)	4.01	0.965
I am passionate about my chosen pathway.	14 (4.4%)	20 (6.2%)	41 (12.8%)	145 (45.2%)	101 (31.5%)	3.93	1.041
I choose my pathway even though it does not match my interest.*	103 (32.1%)	92 (28.7%)	54 (16.8%)	43 (13.4%)	29 (9.0%)	2.39	1.302

When respondents were asked whether their personal interests influence their pathway choice, 12 (3.7%) strongly disagreed, 21 (6.5%) disagreed, 36 (11.2%) were neutral, 143 (44.5%) agreed, while 109 (34.0%) strongly agreed. The findings indicate that the majority of learners acknowledged that their personal interests played an important role in determining the pathways they intended to pursue. The combined percentage of those who agreed and strongly agreed was 78.5%, showing that most learners considered their interests when making pathway decisions. Only 10.2% disagreed with the statement, indicating that relatively few learners selected pathways without considering their interests.

The statement recorded a mean score of 3.98. This mean is close to 4.00, which corresponds to the "Agree" category on the Likert scale. The result shows that learners generally believed that their interests influenced their pathway choices. The high mean score indicates that interests were a significant determinant of pathway selection among Grade 9 learners. It further shows that learners were inclined to choose pathways that reflected what they enjoyed, valued, or wished to pursue in the future.

The standard deviation for the statement was 1.026. This relatively low standard deviation indicates that the responses were moderately clustered around the mean. Most learners shared similar views regarding the influence of interests on pathway selection, although some variation existed. The variation may be attributed to differences in learners' exposure to career guidance, parental influence, school environment, and individual experiences. Nevertheless, the low dispersion shows a reasonable level of consensus among respondents that personal interests affect pathway choice.

The findings resonate with those of Kilonzo and Njeru (2023), who examined the influence of learners' interests on pathway selection among Grade 9 learners in Kisii County. Their study established that learners who had clearly developed interests in areas such as arts, sports, and technology were more confident in selecting pathways related to those interests. The authors observed that personal interests increase learners' commitment to a chosen pathway because learners are naturally motivated to pursue activities they enjoy. The present study similarly demonstrates that personal interests are central in pathway selection, showing that learners in Bungoma County, like their counterparts in Kisii County, consider their preferences and passions when making pathway decisions.

The findings can also be viewed alongside those of O'Connor and Paquette (2019), whose longitudinal study in the United States found that learners' interests and preferences were strong predictors of educational and career pathway choices. The researchers argued that learners who selected pathways aligned with their interests were more likely to re

When respondents were asked whether they had talents that matched their chosen pathways, 16 (5.0%) strongly disagreed, 24 (7.5%) disagreed, 45 (14.0%) were neutral, 137 (42.7%) agreed, while 99 (30.8%) strongly agreed. The findings show that a majority of learners believed that their talents were aligned with the pathways they intended to pursue. Overall, 236 (73.5%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, indicating that talents played an important role in pathway selection. However, 40 (12.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, showing that some learners may have selected pathways that did not fully reflect their talents.

The statement recorded a mean score of 3.87. This mean indicating that learners generally perceived a strong connection between their talents and their selected pathways. The relatively high mean shows that many learners considered their natural abilities and strengths when making pathway decisions. This implies that pathway selection among Grade 9 learners was not solely influenced by academic performance but also by learners' recognition of their talents and capabilities in specific areas.

The standard deviation was 1.088, indicating a moderate spread of responses around the mean. Although most learners agreed that their talents matched their chosen pathways, the variation shows that not all learners shared the same experience. The differences in responses may have resulted from variations in talent identification, availability of opportunities to develop talents, parental expectations, and school support systems. Nonetheless, the standard deviation remains relatively low, implying that respondents generally held similar views regarding the influence of talents on pathway selection.

These findings reflect the observations made by Njoroge and Kamau (2020), who investigated the influence of learners' talents on vocational education preferences in Uganda. Their study found that learners with identified talents in creative, technical, and practical fields were more likely to prefer pathways that allowed them to develop those abilities further. The researchers emphasized that talents often provide learners with a sense of competence and confidence, making them more inclined to pursue pathways that utilize their strengths. In the current study, the high proportion of learners who reported having talents that matched their chosen pathways shows that talents played a similar role in influencing pathway preferences among Grade 9 learners in Bungoma County.

The findings may also be interpreted in light of Wambua (2021), who examined learner perceptions of abilities and pathway choices in Kenyan secondary schools. Wambua found that learners who believed they possessed abilities and talents relevant to particular fields were more likely to choose pathways associated with those strengths. The study further noted that self-perception significantly influences educational decision-making because learners tend to pursue areas where they feel capable of performing well. The present findings support this perspective, as the majority of learners indicated that their talents matched their chosen pathways. This shows that learners' awareness of their abilities contributes significantly to pathway selection decisions and may enhance confidence in pursuing their preferred educational trajectories.

When respondents were asked whether they enjoyed subjects related to their selected pathways, 9 (2.8%) strongly disagreed, 18 (5.6%) disagreed, 39 (12.1%) were neutral, 149 (46.4%) agreed, while 106 (33.0%) strongly agreed. The findings indicate that the majority of learners enjoyed the subjects associated with their chosen pathways. In total, 255 (79.4%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, showing that enjoyment of specific subjects was an important consideration in pathway selection. Only 27 (8.4%) of the learners expressed disagreement, implying that relatively few learners selected pathways linked to subjects they did not enjoy.

The statement recorded a mean score of 4.01. This mean is slightly above 4.00, makes it one of the highest-rated statements in this section. The result shows that learners generally selected pathways connected to subjects they enjoyed studying. The high mean further indicates that subject enjoyment was a strong motivational factor in

pathway decision-making. Learners appeared more inclined to pursue pathways associated with subjects they found interesting, enjoyable, and engaging.

The standard deviation for the statement was 0.965, which was the lowest among the statements in this section. This indicates that responses were closely clustered around the mean and that learners shared relatively similar views regarding the role of subject enjoyment in pathway selection. The low variability shows a high level of agreement among respondents. This consistency may be attributed to the fact that enjoyment of a subject is often directly experienced by learners through classroom activities, assessments, and interactions with teachers, making it easier for them to determine whether a pathway aligns with their preferences.

These findings can be discussed in relation to the work of Njagi and Mwangi (2022), who examined the impact of career guidance on pathway selection among junior secondary students in Nairobi County. Their study established that learners who received adequate guidance were more likely to select pathways that reflected both their academic strengths and personal preferences. The researchers observed that learners often expressed stronger commitment to pathways connected to subjects they enjoyed because they could easily relate classroom experiences to future educational opportunities. The current findings support this argument by demonstrating that enjoyment of pathway-related subjects influenced the choices made by Grade 9 learners in Bungoma County.

The findings may also be viewed alongside those of Ouma (2023), who investigated challenges affecting career guidance services in Kenyan schools. Ouma noted that learners are more likely to make informed pathway decisions when they have opportunities to reflect on their interests, strengths, and experiences in different learning areas. The study emphasized that learners who enjoy particular subjects tend to develop stronger confidence and motivation in pursuing related pathways. The present findings reinforce this observation, as a substantial proportion of learners indicated that they enjoyed subjects connected to their selected pathways. This shows that positive learning experiences within specific subjects contribute significantly to pathway selection decisions by increasing learner interest, confidence, and commitment.

When respondents were asked whether they were passionate about their chosen pathways, 14 (4.4%) strongly disagreed, 20 (6.2%) disagreed, 41 (12.8%) were neutral, 145 (45.2%) agreed, while 101 (31.5%) strongly agreed. The findings indicate that a majority of the learners were passionate about the pathways they intended to pursue. Overall, 246 (76.7%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, showing that passion was an important factor in pathway selection. On the other hand, 34 (10.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating that a small proportion of learners may have selected pathways without a strong personal attachment to them.

The statement recorded a mean score of 3.93. This means that learners generally expressed positive feelings towards their selected pathways. The relatively high mean shows that many learners had a strong emotional connection with their preferred pathways and viewed them as suitable avenues for achieving their future aspirations. This implies that passion was a motivating factor that influenced pathway choices among Grade 9 learners in Bungoma County.

The standard deviation for the statement was 1.041. This indicates that although most learners agreed that they were passionate about their chosen pathways, some differences in opinion existed among respondents. The moderate level of variation may be explained by differences in exposure to pathway information, parental influence, peer influence, and individual career aspirations. Nevertheless, the relatively low standard deviation shows that learners generally shared similar perceptions regarding the role of passion in pathway selection.

These findings can be examined alongside those of Lee and Shute (2021), who found that learners who received adequate support and encouragement were more likely to remain committed to educational pathways that reflected their personal goals and aspirations. The researchers argued that passion contributes to learner persistence because it increases motivation, commitment, and willingness to overcome challenges encountered along educational journeys. In the present study, the high proportion of learners who reported being passionate about their chosen pathways shows that many learners had already developed a sense of purpose regarding their

future educational directions. Such passion is likely to strengthen their commitment to the selected pathways and enhance their chances of success.

The findings also relate to the observations of Mwenda and Karanja (2024), who investigated parental influence on pathway selection among secondary school learners in Kiambu County. Their study revealed that although parents significantly influence pathway decisions, learners tend to show greater commitment and satisfaction when their chosen pathways align with their personal aspirations and interests. The researchers noted that pathways selected solely because of external pressure often result in reduced motivation and lower satisfaction. The present findings shows that most learners in Bungoma County were passionate about their selected pathways, implying that many pathway decisions reflected personal aspirations rather than being entirely driven by external influences. This may contribute positively to learner engagement, persistence, and long-term educational achievement.

When respondents were asked whether they chose their pathways even though the pathways did not match their interests, 103 (32.1%) strongly disagreed, 92 (28.7%) disagreed, 54 (16.8%) were neutral, 43 (13.4%) agreed, while 29 (9.0%) strongly agreed. The findings show that the majority of learners rejected the statement. In total, 195 (60.8%) of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating that most learners selected pathways that aligned with their interests. However, 72 (22.4%) agreed or strongly agreed, showing that a notable proportion of learners had chosen pathways that did not necessarily reflect their personal interests. This may indicate the presence of external influences such as parental expectations, peer pressure, school limitations, or perceived career opportunities.

The statement recorded a mean score of 2.39. This mean falls within the “Disagree” category and is the lowest mean among all the statements in this section. The low mean shows that learners generally did not choose pathways that were inconsistent with their interests. Instead, most learners appeared to select pathways that reflected what they enjoyed and preferred. The result reinforces the earlier findings which showed that interests, talents, enjoyment of subjects, and passion significantly influenced pathway selection among Grade 9 learners.

The standard deviation for the statement was 1.302, which was the highest among all the statements in this section. This indicates greater variability in learners’ responses. While most learners disagreed with the statement, a considerable number either agreed or remained neutral. The relatively large spread of responses shows that learners had diverse experiences regarding pathway selection. Some learners may have had the freedom to choose pathways that matched their interests, whereas others may have been influenced by factors such as parental pressure, school expectations, availability of pathways, or socio-economic considerations. The higher standard deviation therefore reflects differences in the circumstances under which learners made pathway decisions.

These findings can be discussed in relation to Otieno and Ayumba (2020), who examined the influence of parental pressure on learners’ educational choices in Kenya’s Rift Valley region. The researchers observed that some learners were encouraged or compelled to pursue educational pathways preferred by their parents rather than those aligned with their own interests. Such situations often resulted in lower satisfaction and, in some cases, later changes in educational direction. The current findings reflect a similar pattern among a section of learners who indicated that their chosen pathways did not match their interests. Although this group represented a minority, the results shows that external influences may still affect pathway decisions for some learners.

The findings may also be interpreted alongside those of Wambua (2021), who explored learner perceptions of abilities and pathway choices in Kenyan secondary schools. Wambua reported that learners were more confident and committed when pathway choices reflected their interests and perceived strengths. Conversely, when learners entered pathways that did not correspond with their interests, they often experienced uncertainty and lower levels of motivation. The present findings support this perspective because the majority of respondents rejected the idea of choosing pathways that did not match their interests. This shows that most learners recognized the importance of personal interest in educational decision-making and preferred pathways that reflected their individual preferences, aspirations, and strengths.

These findings demonstrate that learners' interests and talents played a significant role in influencing their choice of senior secondary school pathways among Grade 9 learners in Bungoma County. The majority of learners indicated that their personal interests influenced their pathway choices, that their talents matched their selected pathways, that they enjoyed subjects related to their pathways, and that they were passionate about their chosen pathways. Furthermore, most learners disagreed that they selected pathways that did not align with their interests. These findings show that learners generally preferred pathways that reflected their personal strengths, preferences, and aspirations. In the researcher's view, the results indicate that pathway selection under the Competency-Based Curriculum is increasingly becoming learner-centered, as many learners appear to consider their interests and talents when making educational decisions. However, the presence of a small proportion of learners who selected pathways that did not match their interests shows that external factors such as parental influence, school conditions, career guidance, and resource availability may still shape pathway choices. Therefore, while interests and talents emerged as important determinants of pathway selection, there remains a need for continuous guidance and support to ensure that all learners are able to pursue pathways that genuinely reflect their abilities, passions, and future goals.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that learners' interests and talents played an important role in pathway selection. Many learners selected pathways that reflected their personal interests, talents, enjoyment of subjects, and passion for future learning. This showed that learners were becoming more aware of their abilities and preferences under the Competency-Based Education system. However, some learners still selected pathways that did not fully match their interests, showing that external influences such as parents, peers, school limitations, and limited guidance still affected some choices. Therefore, interests and talents should be strongly considered in pathway selection to promote learner motivation and commitment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, schools should identify and nurture learners' interests and talents early through clubs, sports, arts, practical activities, mentorship, and co-curricular programmes.

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