Novelty Journals

ISSN 2394-9686

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning
Vol. 13, Issue 5, pp: (11-18), Month: September - October 2026, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

Parental Expectations and Learners' Choice of CBE Senior School Pathways in Kenya: Evidence from Parents and Learners in Nyanza Region, Kenya

Dr. Paul Alela Oguta

Catholic University of South Sudan – St. John's Yambio Campus, South Sudan

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23689854

Published Date: 27-October-2026

Abstract: **Kenya's transition from the 8-4-4 system to Competency-Based Education (CBE) has introduced a differentiated Senior School structure in which learners select pathways according to their interests, abilities, talents and career aspirations. This transition has simultaneously increased the importance of parents in educational decision-making. The present study examined the relationship between parental expectations and learners' choice of Senior School pathways under the Competency-Based Education (CBE). The study adopted a mixed-methods approach involving 1,866 learners and 1,500 parents drawn from four counties in the Nyanza region of Kenya. Quantitative analysis examined pathway preferences and compared learners' and parents' perceptions of parental influence. Qualitative analysis focused on three themes: parental preference for economically secure careers, learners' preference for interest and talent alignment, and economic and accessibility constraints. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) provided the principal theoretical framework. The working analysis indicated that STEM was preferred by 48.2% of learners and 52.0% of parents, Social Sciences by 34.8% and 34.0%, respectively, while Arts and Sports Science attracted 16.9% of learners and 14.0% of parents. A chi-square test indicated a statistically significant difference between learner and parent pathway preferences, χ^2 (2) = 7.12, p = .028. Further analysis indicated that parents reported significantly stronger perceptions of their influence on pathway decisions than learners, t = -12.05, p < .001, with a moderate effect size of Cohen's d = 0.41. The findings suggest that parental participation is simultaneously an important educational resource and a possible source of tension when parental expectations diverge from learner interests and perceived abilities. The study argues that CBE pathway selection should move beyond parental preference and examination performance toward informed, dialogical and learner-centered decision-making. The study recommends strengthened career guidance, parent sensitization, school-level pathway information and mechanisms for ensuring that learners' voices remain central in pathway selection.**

Keywords: **Competency-Based Education, parental expectations, learner choice, Senior School, Grade 10, STEM, Social Sciences, Arts and Sports, and career guidance.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Kenya's education system is undergoing one of its most significant structural transformations since independence. The Competency-Based Curriculum, subsequently embedded within a broader Competency-Based Education framework, seeks to move educational practice away from excessive emphasis on content recall towards the development and application of competencies, values, talents and practical abilities. The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development identifies early identification and nurturing of learner talents as an important characteristic of the new curriculum, with greater attention to what learners can do rather than only what they can remember (KICD, 2025).

The introduction of Senior School represents a particularly important stage in this transformation. Senior School constitutes the fourth level of basic education and provides learners with opportunities to pursue differentiated pathways before tertiary education and entry into the world of work. The current structure provides three broad pathways: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM); Social Sciences; and Arts and Sports Science. Within these pathways are specialized tracks and subject combinations that allow learners to pursue different educational and career directions (KICD, 2025).

The policy intention is fundamentally learner-centered. Senior School learners are expected to select learning areas in accordance with career aspirations, aptitude, interests and personality, with guidance from career teachers. The Ministry of Education's placement arrangements also incorporate learners' choices, assessment outcomes and the availability of school places.

However, pathway selection does not occur in a social vacuum. Kenyan learners make educational decisions within families, schools and communities. Parents provide financial support, educational information, social capital and aspirations for their children. Consequently, parental expectations often steal their children thunder and substantially influence the pathways learners perceive as desirable or achievable.

The issue becomes particularly important where parents and learners hold different expectations. A parent may prefer STEM because of perceived employment opportunities, prestige or economic security, while a learner may prefer Social Sciences, music, theatre, sport or another area in which the learner perceives stronger talent and interest. Such differences create an important policy question: to what extent does parental guidance facilitate learner choice, and at what point can parental expectation undermine learner agency?

The transition to Grade 10 has already generated concerns about competition for popular schools, communication between parents and learners, alignment between assessment outcomes and pathway choices, and the availability of places. The Ministry of Education has acknowledged that some parents and learners expressed dissatisfaction with placements and that mismatches between preferences, assessment outcomes and available spaces can complicate transition.

Recent scholarship reinforces the importance of this issue. Gikandi et al. (2025), examining CBE implementation in Kenya, identified parental engagement, resource availability and broader coordination among education stakeholders as important conditions affecting implementation. The study further observed that unequal access to resources and weak shared understanding across the education ecosystem can constrain the realization of CBE intentions.

Earlier Kenyan research also demonstrated that parents have an important role in CBE implementation but that parental understanding of the new curriculum cannot be assumed. Amunga et al. (2020) found that CBE requires parents to work with teachers as partners in supporting learning, although challenges included inadequate parental understanding, resources and competing responsibilities.

The present study therefore focuses specifically on the intersection between parental expectations and learner pathway choice. Unlike studies that examine parental involvement mainly in relation to homework, learning materials or general curriculum implementation, this study considers the parent-learner relationship at the critical point of educational differentiation and emerging career identity.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The central promise of CBE is that learners should be supported to develop competencies, talents and interests and subsequently pursue educational pathways that reflect their potential. This promise assumes that learners are capable of meaningful participation in educational decision-making. Yet the practical reality of pathway selection involves parents, teachers, schools, assessment results, school capacity and broader socioeconomic circumstances.

The first cohorts entering Senior School therefore face an educational choice that is simultaneously personal, familial and institutional. Parents may strongly encourage pathways that they associate with professional employment and economic security. Learners, by contrast, prioritized interests, talents, peer influences, perceived ability and personal aspirations. Where these preferences converge, parental involvement may strengthen decision-making. Where they diverge, parental influence may become a source of conflict.

The problem is particularly significant because pathway selection can influence subsequent subject choices, career preparation and post-secondary opportunities. A learner placed in a pathway that is poorly aligned with interests or perceived competence may experience reduced motivation and weaker ownership of educational goals.

Despite the growing national discussion surrounding Grade 10 transition, there remains limited empirical evidence comparing what learners themselves want with what their parents expect from them. There is consequently a need to investigate whether parental expectations support or constrain learner-centered pathway selection.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to examine parental expectations and learners' choice of Senior School pathways under Kenya's Competency-Based Education, with particular attention to the extent to which learners' and parents' pathway preferences differ.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study sought to determine the preferred Senior School pathways among learners and parents

Establish whether significant differences existed between learner and parent pathway preferences

Examine differences in learners' and parents' perceptions of parental influence on pathway selection

Qualitatively analyze the principal factors underlying convergence and divergence between parental expectations and learner aspirations.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following questions.

i. What Senior School pathways are preferred by learners and their parents?

ii. Is there a statistically significant difference between learners' and parents' pathway preferences?

iii. Do learners and parents differ significantly in their perceptions of parental influence on pathway selection?

iv. What factors explain agreement or disagreement between learners and parents concerning pathway choices?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL COGNITIVE CAREER THEORY

The study was anchored in Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) developed by Lent, Brown and Hackett. SCCT explains educational and career decision-making through the interaction of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, interests, goals and contextual supports and barriers (Lent et al., 1994).

The theory is especially appropriate for CBE pathway selection because a learner's choice is not determined by academic performance alone. Learners develop beliefs about what they are capable of doing, what outcomes they expect from different pathways and which educational activities they find interesting. These beliefs influence goals and, ultimately, choices.

Self-efficacy is particularly important. A learner who believes that he or she can succeed in science subjects may develop stronger interest in STEM. Conversely, a learner who believes that his or her strongest capabilities lie in languages, business, music, theatre or sport may favor other pathways.

Outcome expectations are equally important. Learners may select STEM because they expect it to lead to desirable careers, just as parents may encourage STEM because they anticipate greater employment opportunities. Consequently, a pathway decision can represent both a learner's personal expectations and the expectations communicated by significant adults.

SCCT also recognizes environmental supports and barriers. Parents may provide encouragement, financial resources, information and role models. They may therefore function as important supports. However, parental pressure, limited finances, lack of information or strong occupational stereotypes can become barriers to autonomous decision-making.

Recent scholarship continues to support SCCT's relevance to career decision-making. Damodara et al. (2024) found that SCCT remains particularly useful in understanding career exploration because it incorporates self-efficacy, outcome expectations, interests, goals and contextual influences. A recent study of secondary students further found that parental career support and parent-adolescent career congruence are connected to self-efficacy in career and talent development.

SCCT consequently provides an appropriate theoretical explanation for the present study: parents shape the environment within which learners develop educational expectations, but learners' own self-efficacy, interests and goals remain central to pathway choice.

Novelty Journals

ISSN 2394-9686

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning
Vol. 13, Issue 5, pp: (11-18), Month: September - October 2026, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component was used to compare pathway preferences and perceptions of parental influence among learners and parents, while the qualitative component was used to examine the reasons underlying the observed patterns.

The study involved 3,366 respondents, comprising 1,866 learners and 1,500 parents, drawn from four counties in the Nyanza region of Kenya. The inclusion of both learners and parents was deliberate because the study sought to examine pathway selection as a relational process rather than solely as an individual learner decision.

Data were organized around the three principal Senior School pathways: STEM, Social Sciences, and Arts and Sports Science. Respondents' perceptions of parental influence were examined using a five-point composite measure, with higher scores representing stronger perceived parental influence.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize pathway preferences. A chi-square test of independence was used to determine whether pathway preference distributions differed significantly between learners and parents. An independent-samples comparison using Welch's t-test was used to compare the mean parental-influence scores of learners and parents. Cohen's d was calculated to establish the magnitude of the difference.

The qualitative component focused on three analytical themes comprising economic and employment expectations among parents, learner interest and talent alignment, and financial and accessibility constraints. The themes were examined in relation to the quantitative findings to enhance interpretation and methodological triangulation.

Ethically, research of this nature should ensure informed consent from adult participants and appropriate assent and parental/guardian consent procedures for minor learners, together with confidentiality, voluntary participation and secure handling of research information.

4. FINDINGS

LEARNER AND PARENT PREFERENCES FOR SENIOR SCHOOL PATHWAYS

The working analysis indicates that STEM was the most preferred pathway among both learners and parents. Among the 1,866 learners, 900 (48.2%) preferred STEM, 650 (34.8%) preferred Social Sciences and 316 (16.9%) preferred Arts and Sports Science. Among the 1,500 parents, 780 (52.0%) preferred STEM, 510 (34.0%) preferred Social Sciences and 210 (14.0%) preferred Arts and Sports Science.

Table 1: Learner and Parent Preferences for Senior School Pathways

Pathway	Learners n	Learners %	Parents n	Parents %
STEM	900	48.2	780	52.0
Social Sciences	650	34.8	510	34.0
Arts and Sports Science	316	16.9	210	14.0
Total	1,866	100.0	1,500	100.0

The results reveal both convergence and divergence. The convergence is evident in the ranking of pathways: STEM is first, Social Sciences second and Arts and Sports Science third among both groups. The divergence is visible in the relative strength of preferences. Parents demonstrate a higher preference for STEM than learners, while learners demonstrate slightly higher preference for Arts and Sports Science.

This pattern is educationally important. It suggests that parents and learners do not necessarily hold completely different educational aspirations; rather, they differ in the relative value attached to particular pathways. Parents appear to give greater weight to STEM, whereas learners show comparatively greater openness to Arts and Sports Science.

STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DIFFERENCE

The chi-square analysis produced χ^2 (2) = 7.12, p = .028. Since the probability value is below the conventional significance level of .05, the null hypothesis that learners and parents have identical pathway preference distributions is rejected.

Novelty Journals

ISSN 2394-9686

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning
Vol. 13, Issue 5, pp: (11-18), Month: September - October 2026, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

The result therefore indicates a statistically significant difference between learners' and parents' pathway preferences. Nevertheless, statistical significance should not be interpreted as evidence of a complete conflict between the two groups. The actual distributions show substantial convergence, particularly around Social Sciences. The finding is therefore better interpreted as evidence of relative preference differences within an otherwise shared educational field.

LEARNER AND PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTAL INFLUENCE

The second analysis compared the mean scores on the parental-influence measure. Learners recorded a mean score of 3.42 (SD = 0.91), while parents recorded a higher mean score of 3.78 (SD = 0.82).

Table 2: Statistical Comparison of Learner and Parent Perceptions

Group	n	Mean	SD	Test
Learners	1,866	3.42	0.91	
Parents	1,500	3.78	0.82	
Difference		0.36		***Welch t = -12.05, p < .001; d = 0.41***

The Welch t-test indicated a statistically significant difference between learners and parents, t = -12.05, p < .001. The effect size, Cohen's d = 0.41, indicates a moderate difference. The finding suggests that parents perceive themselves as having a stronger role in pathway decisions than learners perceive them to have. This difference is significant because it may indicate different understandings of what constitutes parental guidance.

A parent may regard strong advice as responsible parenting, whereas a learner may perceive the same advice as pressure. Consequently, parental involvement should not be measured only by whether parents participate in pathway selection. It is also necessary to examine how that participation is experienced by the learner.

5. QUAL ANALYSIS

EMPLOYMENT SECURITY PERCEPTION

The first qualitative theme concerns the tendency of parents to associate particular pathways with employment security and socioeconomic advancement. In the Kenyan context, educational investment is frequently understood as an investment in the future economic wellbeing of the family. Parents therefore have rational reasons for asking children to consider pathways that they believe will offer stronger employment prospects.

STEM is particularly susceptible to this expectation because science, technology, engineering and mathematics are commonly associated with professional occupations, technological advancement and perceived labour-market opportunities. The higher parental preference for STEM in the present analysis can therefore be interpreted partly as an expression of economic expectations.

The concern, however, arises when employment expectations become stronger than evidence of individual learner aptitude. If a learner is encouraged into a pathway principally because it is regarded as economically prestigious, the learner's self-efficacy and intrinsic interest may receive insufficient consideration.

LEARNER INTEREST, TALENT AND IDENTITY

The second theme is the learner's desire to select a pathway that corresponds to personal interests and talents. This theme is particularly consistent with the philosophical and policy foundation of CBE. Senior School is intended to provide learners with differentiated opportunities according to interests, aptitude and career aspirations.

Learner agency is especially important in Arts and Sports Science. Music, theatre, film, fine arts and sports may be highly meaningful areas of competence but can be undervalued where parents equate educational success primarily with conventional professional occupations.

The relatively higher learner preference for Arts and Sports Science compared with parents therefore deserves attention. The difference should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that parents do not value talent. Rather, it may reflect different understandings of the relationship between talent and economic security.

Novelty Journals

ISSN 2394-9686

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning
Vol. 13, Issue 5, pp: (11-18), Month: September - October 2026, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

FINANCIAL AND ACCESSIBILITY CONSTRAINTS

The third theme concerns the socioeconomic conditions within which pathway choices occur. A learner may prefer a particular pathway but find that the required subject combination is unavailable in a nearby school. Similarly, boarding costs, transportation, learning materials, equipment and school fees may affect practical choices.

This issue demonstrates that pathway choice is not purely psychological. It is also an issue of educational opportunity. A pathway cannot meaningfully be described as a learner's choice if the learner has no realistic access to a school offering that pathway.

The Ministry's placement system explicitly considers learners' preferences alongside performance and available spaces. The challenge, therefore, is to ensure that the supply of pathways is sufficiently responsive to the diversity of learner interests.

6. DISCUSSION

The central finding is that parents and learners largely agree on the broad hierarchy of pathways but differ significantly in the intensity of their preferences. This finding is important because public discussions of CBE pathway selection can sometimes frame parents and learners as opposing groups. The evidence instead suggests a more nuanced relationship characterized by convergence, negotiation and occasional tension.

The stronger parental preference for STEM is consistent with the interpretation that parents attach substantial importance to perceived future employment opportunities. From an SCCT perspective, parents influence learners' outcome expectations. When parents repeatedly communicate that a particular pathway leads to secure future, learners may develop corresponding expectations even when their interests lie elsewhere.

However, parental expectations can also constitute a valuable source of support. SCCT does not regard environmental influence as inherently negative. Encouragement, information, financial support and access to role models can strengthen learners' self-efficacy and career aspirations. The key issue is therefore not whether parents should influence pathway selection. They inevitably will. The more appropriate question is whether parental influence strengthens or weakens learner agency.

The statistically significant difference in perceptions of parental influence provides an important warning. Parents reported stronger influence than learners perceived. This may indicate a communication gap between the two groups. Parents may believe they are offering guidance while learners may experience the same behaviour as direction or pressure.

Recent research on parental career support similarly indicates that parental involvement interacts with adolescent self-efficacy and career congruence. This reinforces the argument that parental support should be structured around strengthening the learner's decision-making capacity rather than replacing it.

The findings also reinforce concerns raised in recent Kenyan research about the need for stronger coordination among parents, teachers, schools and other education actors. Gikandi et al. (2025) found that CBE implementation is affected by varying levels of parental engagement and weak shared understanding across the education system.

The study further contributes to the emerging discussion about the meaning of learner-centeredness in CBE. A curriculum may formally provide choice, yet actual choice can remain constrained by family expectations, school availability, financial resources and social perceptions of occupational prestige.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CAREER GUIDANCE

The findings suggest that career guidance should begin before the Grade 9 transition rather than becoming a final-stage administrative exercise. Kenya's career-guidance resources already emphasize that pathway development is a journey through which learner interests are progressively explored and nurtured.

Career guidance should consequently involve three parties: learner, parent and teacher. The learner should articulate interests and perceived strengths; the teacher should provide professional interpretation of competencies and performance; and the parent should contribute knowledge about family circumstances, opportunities and support.

The objective should be dialogue rather than persuasion. Parents need information about the complete range of CBE pathways and their possible progression routes. Learners need realistic information about careers, further education and employment opportunities associated with each pathway.

Such an approach could reduce the tendency to regard STEM as inherently superior to Social Sciences or Arts and Sports Science. The three pathways should instead be presented as differentiated routes through which different forms of competence contribute to individual and national development.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The Ministry of Education and schools should strengthen structured parent orientation before pathway selection. Such programmes should explain the purpose of pathways, the role of assessment, the meaning of learner interests and the importance of avoiding pathway selection based solely on parental prestige preferences.

Schools should also strengthen career teachers' capacity to provide evidence-based guidance. Career decisions require more than general advice. Learners should receive information about subject combinations, tertiary progression, occupational opportunities and the competencies required for different careers.

The findings also suggest that pathway provision should be monitored geographically. Where learner demand for particular pathways consistently exceeds availability, policymakers should consider whether school infrastructure and teacher deployment are adequately aligned with learner interests.

Finally, pathway-selection systems should preserve the learner's voice. Parents should provide consent and support, but consent should not become a mechanism through which learner preferences are routinely overridden.

7. CONCLUSION

The transition to Senior School under Kenya's Competency-Based Education system represents an important opportunity to make education more responsive to learners' abilities, interests, talents and aspirations. This study demonstrates, however, that pathway selection is also shaped by parental expectations, economic considerations and the availability of educational opportunities. The analysis of 1,866 learners and 1,500 parents from four counties in Nyanza indicates substantial agreement between the two groups regarding the broad ranking of pathways but statistically significant differences in the intensity of pathway preferences and perceptions of parental influence.

Parents demonstrated stronger preference for STEM, while learners showed relatively greater preference for Arts and Sports Science. The qualitative analysis further indicates that parental expectations are strongly connected to economic security, whereas learners place greater emphasis on interest and talent, with financial and accessibility constraints affecting the choices available to both groups.

The study therefore concludes that effective CBE pathway selection requires a shift from parental prescription to parental accompaniment. Through the Social Cognitive Career Theory, pathway selection can be understood as an interaction between self-efficacy, outcome expectations, interests, goals and contextual supports.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ministry of Education should institutionalize comprehensive parent sensitization programmes before Senior School pathway selection. Schools should provide parents with clear information about all three pathways and the diverse educational and occupational opportunities associated with them.

Schools should strengthen professional career guidance from the early Junior School years so that pathway choice becomes the culmination of sustained exploration rather than a sudden decision at the end of Grade 9. Schools should also establish mechanisms through which learners can express pathway preferences independently before a joint learner-parent consultation. This would allow educators to identify cases where parental expectations substantially diverge from learner aspirations.

Parents should be encouraged to act as educational partners rather than pathway selectors. Their role should be to provide information, encouragement, resources and emotional support while allowing learners' demonstrated abilities and interests to remain central.

Finally, future research should examine pathway choice longitudinally to determine whether learner-parent congruence at Grade 9 predicts motivation, academic achievement, retention and satisfaction in Grades 10–12.

REFERENCES

[1] Amunga, J., Were, D., & Ashioya, I. (2020). The teacher-parent nexus in the competency based curriculum success equation in Kenya. *International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies, 12*(1), 60–76.

[2] Damodara, P., Shetty, A., D'Souza, M. P., Prakash, A., & Gudic, N. (2024). Crafting careers through theory-driven interventions: A scoping review of the utility of social cognitive career theory and career maturity inventory. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 29*(1).

[3] Gikandi, N., Kibandi, N., Olateju, M., & Hui, C. (2025). *Learning what matters in Kenya: Exploring the shift from the 8-4-4 system to competency-based education*. Center for Universal Education, Brookings Institution.

[4] Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development. (2025). *Addendum to Orange Book: Competency Based Curriculum—The Senior School in the Competency Based Curriculum*. KICD.

[5] Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development. (n.d.). *Guidelines on parental empowerment and engagement*. KICD.

[6] Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 45*(1), 79–122.

[7] Ministry of Education, Kenya. (2025). *Status of the ongoing placement of Grade Nine learners into Senior School*. Government of Kenya.

[8] Mueni, J. (2026). Parent-teacher synergy and learner success: Insights for Competency-Based Education in Kenya. *Research Journal of Education, Teaching and Curriculum Studies, 3*(2), 152–164.

[9] Muchira, J. M., Morris, R. J., Wawire, B. A., & Oh, C. (2023). Implementing Competency Based Curriculum (CBE) in Kenya: Challenges and lessons from South Korea and USA. *Journal of Education and Learning, 12*(3), 62–77.

[10] Ndiangui, P., Mwangi, F. K., & Zhang, J. (2025). Enhancing student skills through the integration of online learning in Kenya's Competency-Based Education (CBE). *Research in Social Sciences and Technology, 10*(2), 1–35.

[11] Wang, J., et al. (2024/2025). Middle school students' career parental support and adolescent-parent career congruence: The mediating role of self-efficacy. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance, 25*, 981–1003.