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Teachers' roles and choice of subject combinations in Jinja District, Uganda

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ABSTRACT

A mixed-method approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of teachers' roles in choice of subject combinations in secondary schools was employed. The study employed descriptive survey design to collect numerical data for statistical analysis while also gathering detailed perspectives and experiences that provided depth and context to the quantitative findings. The study revealed that Teachers' background, experience, and personality significantly impact students' choice of subject combinations in secondary schools. Teachers work with administrators as a team to influence choice of subject combinations. A number of challenges affect Teachers' role in choice of subject combinations and positive perception of teachers' involvement in guiding subject and career choices, particularly in promoting specificity and aligning combinations with interests and performance combinations. Concerning recommendation, schools should provide teachers with training on effective career guidance, Policy makers should fund career guidance programs, School management should encourage collaboration among teachers, parents, and administrators, all teachers should view career guidance as a shared responsibility.

Keywords: Teachers' role, choice of subject combinations.

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INTRODUCTION

Uganda's education system was originally designed to serve colonial administrative needs, with limited subject offerings and a narrow focus on literacy and clerical skills (Ssekamwa, 2000). Post-independence reforms, especially the 1987 Education Policy Review Commission and the 1992 Government White Paper, sought to diversify and vocationalise the curriculum to better serve national development. However, secondary schools often struggle to implement them due to limited resources, teacher shortages, and inadequate infrastructure (NCDC, 2020). This creates a disconnect between policy intent and classroom reality. The tendency to compartmentalize the choice of subject combinations as the responsibility of designated career teachers, rather than a shared responsibility, limits the potential impact of the entire teaching staff, and the focus on marketable subject combinations may not adequately address the holistic development of students' career aspirations as emphasized by Lee et al. (2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The process of subject combination choice among students is influenced by a complex interplay of personal aspirations, academic performance, and social context. Two prominent psychological theories offer insight into this decision-making process: Super's Career Development theory and Bandura's Social Cognitive theory.

Super's Career Development theory (1990) emphasizes that career choices evolve through distinct life stages, shaped by an individual's self-concept and social roles. In the Ugandan context, this theory helps explain how students' long-term career aspirations and personal growth influence their subject combinations. However, its focus on developmental stages may not fully show the immediate social dynamics that shape decisions at the secondary school level.

In contrast, Bandura's Social Cognitive theory (1986) provides a more nuanced lens for understanding the

choice of subject combinations. This theory is preferred because it highlights the role of observational learning, modeling, and self-efficacy in shaping behavior. Teachers, as influential social models, play a critical role in shaping students' perceptions of subject relevance and their confidence in mastering specific disciplines.

Conceptual background

Subject combination choice refers to the process by which students select specific clusters of subjects to study at the Advanced (A-Level) level. Teachers influence this process through their roles as career advisors, subject promoters, and mentors.

The teacher's role is thus multifaceted, ranging from providing academic guidance to shaping students' attitudes towards certain disciplines (Muwonge et al., 2021). Where teachers are actively engaged in guiding in combination choices, students often make more informed and relevant selections aligned with their interests and abilities (Kajubi et al., 2023).

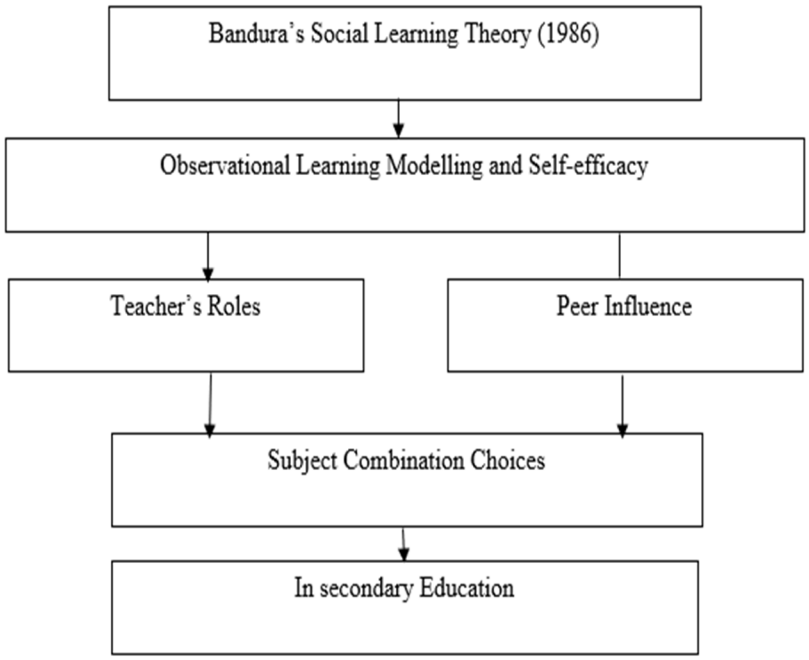

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

As shown in Figure 1, teachers serve as significant social models whose behaviors and attitudes shape students' perceptions of subject relevance and their confidence in mastering specific disciplines. Peer influence and school culture further reinforce these choices, making subject selection a socially constructed process embedded in the school's micro-environment. This framework supports the study's focus on understanding how social factors, particularly teacher influence, affect academic decision-making in Ugandan secondary schools.

Contextual background

In Jinja District, secondary schools offer varied subject combinations based on school categorization (government or private), teacher specialization, and infrastructure. However, disparities remain in teacher involvement in guiding subject choice, especially in rural and under-resourced schools. Some schools lack trained guidance counselors, leaving classroom teachers as the primary influencers of student decisions. According to recent studies, many students in Jinja rely on teachers for advice due to limited parental involvement and inadequate career guidance systems (Namirimu and Kasirye, 2022). The effectiveness of the teachers' role in this context is critical in shaping students' academic and career paths.

Teachers play a crucial role in guiding students through subject selection, as their background, experience, and personality significantly impact students' choices (Brown and Lent, 2021). Teachers from academically inclined families may emphasize certain subjects, encouraging students to follow structured educational paths (Sawitri, Creed and Zimmer-Gembeck, 2020). Those from diverse cultural backgrounds can offer a broader perspective on career opportunities, promoting inclusivity in subject

selection (Ryan, 2021). Those in well-funded schools can provide better career counseling and subject-related resources (Garcia and Cohen, 2020). Lower-income teachers may struggle with access to career development tools, impacting the quality of subject guidance provided (Watts and Kidd, 2021).

Highly accomplished teachers who have excelled in their academic fields often inspire students to pursue related subjects (Steinberg and Monahan, 2021). Teachers with advanced degrees can offer deeper insights into subject combinations, helping students align their choices with career aspirations (Hughes and Gibbons, 2021).

Enthusiastic and approachable teachers can encourage students to take subjects they might have otherwise avoided (Johnson and Mortimer, 2021). Teachers who demonstrate strong mentorship qualities influence students to develop confidence in their subject choices (Ryan, 2021).

They help students explore diverse career options through activities like career fairs, workshops, and internships. Smith et al. (2021) underscores the impact of practical exposure on students' career aspirations. Teachers provide individualized counseling to align students' strengths, interests, and academic performance with career goals (Lee et al., 2022). Integration of career concepts into academic subjects enhances students' understanding of the relevance of their studies to future careers (Anderson and Taylor, 2023). Teachers' professional experiences influence students' perceptions of various careers. A study by Brown (2022) indicates that students often look up to teachers as exemplars of successful career paths.

Despite these efforts, many schools lack adequate funding for career guidance programs (Kagoro et al., 2021). A shortage of trained career counselors and teachers proficient in career guidance remains a barrier (Njoroge et al., 2021). Misalignment between parental expectations and students' aspirations creates additional hurdles (Evans and White, 2023).

Orientation

Mixed-methods research approach was employed to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the teachers' role in the choice of subject combinations. It also allowed for triangulation, where both quantitative and qualitative data were used to validate findings and flexibility.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

Concurrent design, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed simultaneously. This design was preferred because it allowed for efficiency and a comprehensive understanding of the problem.

Target population

The target population consisted of 50 teachers and 150 students from secondary schools. The Teachers were of advanced-level education and both male and female. Students were of an advanced level of education and male and female students.

A sample of 40 teachers and 108 students participated in the study. This sample size was determined to be representative of the population and adequate for statistical analysis according to Morgan.

Sampling techniques

The study utilized both purposive and stratified random sampling techniques: Purposive sampling was used to select schools that offer A-level education, career teachers and advanced-level students. Stratified random sampling was used to select teachers and students from different subject areas to ensure representation across all disciplines.

Instruments

The primary data collection tool was a questionnaire; it consisted of Closed-ended questions using a four-level Likert Scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, and Open-ended questions to gather in-depth qualitative data were employed.

Validity

Content validity was ensured through expert review of the research instruments by three education specialists with extensive experience in career guidance. Face validity was established through a pilot study with 20 teachers and 50 students from two schools not included in the main study. Construct validity was enhanced by aligning questionnaire items with the social cognitive career theory framework.

Reliability

Internal consistency of the questionnaire was determined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.78, indicating high reliability. Test-retest reliability was established by administering the questionnaire twice to a small sample of 15 teachers and 30 students with a two-week interval, resulting in a correlation coefficient of 0.78.

Data collection procedures

The researcher obtained permissions from school administrators and education authorities. Trained two research assistants to help administer the questionnaires.

About ethical considerations, codes instead of names ensured participants' confidentiality. Informed consent forms were obtained to ensure voluntary participation.

Data analysis

Quantitative data was sorted, coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, to show trends and patterns in SPSS software (version 25).

Qualitative data from open-ended questions were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically to identify patterns and relationships. The researchers employed constant comparative analysis to derive meaningful insights from the qualitative data.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred at the data collection and interpretation phase, allowing for triangulation and enhancing the validity of the research findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The teachers and students were given items to rate with regard to the teachers' role using a four-level Likert scale ranging from strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. The teachers' ratings of their role in influencing students are provided in Tables 1 and 2, 3 and 4.

Table 1. Teachers' role as rated by teachers.

Items rated	Teachers							
	S A (4)		A(3)		D(2)		S D(1)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Encourage students to do subject combinations according to their abilities	19	30.6	29	46.8	10	16.1	4	6.5
Students' abilities are linked with the world of work.	20	32.3	21	33.9	18	29.0	3	4.8
Guidance is the domain of career teachers.	1	1.6	26	41.9	6	9.7	29	46.8
Teachers liaise with the parents to help choose subjects.	23	37.1	25	40.3	13	21.0	1	1.6
Organises career guidance activities.	24	38.7	25	40.3	12	19.4	1	1.6
Administrators and teachers work as a team to influence career choice.	38	60.3	16	25.8	7	11.3	1	1.6
Encourage students to do subject combinations according to students' interests.	30	48.4	22	35.5	9	14.5	1	1.6
Encourages students to do subject combinations according to their performance.	33	53.2	20	32.3	8	12.9	1	1.6
Informs about the relationship between the jobs and subject combinations	29	46.8	23	37.1	10	16.1	-	-
Encouraged to offer subjects at A-level teachers did.	39	62.9	14	22.6	8	12.9	1	1.6
Helped students to be specific in their career choices.	29	46.8	30	48.4	2	3.2	1	1.6

Key: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; SD = Strongly Disagree.

From Table 1, most teachers (60.3%) strongly agreed that teachers work as a team to influence subject combinations, while 25.8% of teachers agreed, 11.3% disagreed, and the least (1.6%) strongly disagreed. On whether teachers encourage students to do subject combinations according to performance, most teachers (53.2%) strongly agreed, 32.3% of the teachers agreed, while 12.9% disagreed, and 1.6% of the teachers strongly disagreed.

Regarding whether teachers tend to encourage students to offer subjects at A-level that teachers themselves offered, most teachers (62.9%) strongly agreed, while 22.6% agreed, 12.9% disagreed, and 1.6% disagreed strongly. On whether teachers inform students about the nature of jobs the subjects offered will lead them to, most teachers (46.8%) strongly agreed, 35.5% agreed, while 14.5% disagreed, and 1.6% strongly disagreed. Also, most teachers (46.8%) strongly agreed that they help students to be specific in their career choices. On the same issue, 48.4% of the teachers agreed, whereas 3.2% of the teachers disagreed, and 1.6% strongly disagreed.

Considering whether teachers encourage students to do subject combinations according to their ability, many teachers (46.8%) agreed, 30.6% strongly agreed, while 16.1% of teachers disagreed, and 6.5% strongly disagreed. On whether schools organise career guidance activities for students, many teachers (40.3%) agreed, then (38.7%) of teachers strongly agreed, while 19.4% of teachers disagreed, and 1.6% strongly disagreed. In almost the same proportions, 40.3% of the teachers agreed that teachers liaise with parents to help students choose subjects to offer at the advanced level of

education; many teachers disagreed, and 1.6% strongly disagreed.

Finally, on whether there is a tendency by teachers to regard guidance and counseling as the domain of career teachers only, most teachers (41.9%) agreed, as compared to 46.8% of the teachers who strongly disagreed and 9.7% who disagreed. On the question of whether teachers help students to link their ability with the world of work, 33.9% of teachers agreed, 32.3% strongly agreed, 29% disagreed, and 4.8% disagreed strongly, respectively.

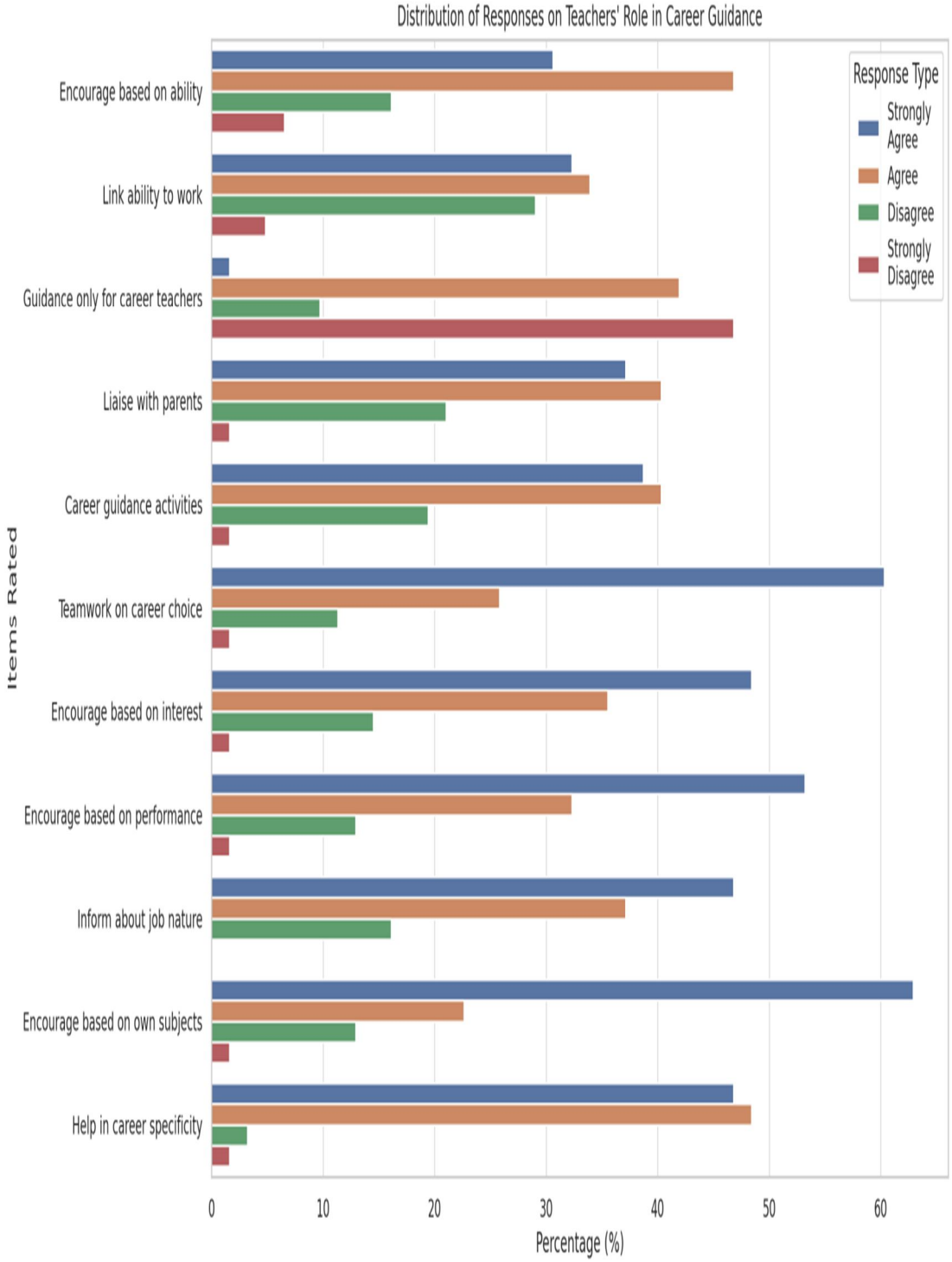

Figure 2.

Interpretation

Teachers encourage students to take subjects they themselves studied—suggesting a personal bias.

The data indicate a generally positive perception of teachers' involvement in guiding subject and career choices, particularly in promoting specificity and aligning combinations with performance. However, there's room for improvement in ensuring all teachers view career guidance as a shared responsibility and avoid personal bias in subject recommendations.

Table 2. Teachers' role as rated by students.

Item	SA(4)		A(3)		D(2)		SD(1)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Match their abilities with the world of work.	16	6.3	62	24.2	80	31.3	98	38.3
Guidance as the domain of career teachers only.	11	4.3	87	34.0	63	24.6	95	37.1
Liaise parents to help students choose subjects.	102	39.8	74	28.9	65	25.4	15	5.9
Organises career guidance activities.	93	36.3	11	44.5	45	17.6	4	1.6
Administrators, career masters and teachers work as a team.	108	42.2	66	25.8	72	28.1	10	3.9

Key: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; SD = Strongly Disagree.

From Table 2, most students (44.5%) agreed that schools organise career guidance activities for students, and 36.3% strongly disagreed. On whether administrators, career masters and teachers work as a team to influence career choice, many students (42.2%) strongly agreed, (25.5%) agreed, while 28.1% of students disagreed, and 3.9% strongly disagreed. Many students (39.8%) also strongly agreed that teachers liaise with their parents/guardians to help students choose subjects best suited for abilities, while 28.9% of students agreed, then 25.4% disagreed, and 5.9% strongly disagreed.

Considering whether teachers help students match their relevant abilities with the world of work. 38.3% of the students strongly disagreed, 31.3% disagreed while 24.2% of the students agreed, and 6.3% strongly agreed. On whether there is a tendency by teachers to regard guidance as the domain of career masters only, 37.1% of students strongly disagreed, 24.6% disagreed, whereas 34.0% of students agreed, and 4.3% strongly agreed, respectively.

To supplement the above ratings, both teachers and students were asked to give their individual opinions on how teachers help students in choosing subject combinations.

The stacked bar chart shows each teaching-role item and the percentage of students who chose each rating (Figure 3).

It is evident from the description that the students agreed with the teachers that Teachers help students to match their subject choice with their abilities with the world of work.

From Table 3, teachers reported that they helped students to make appropriate subject combinations through providing career guidance (51.1%), encouraging students to choose subjects of their ability (36.0%), and by taking into account students' ambitions (12.9%).

About helping students to make appropriate career choices, teachers mentioned that they considered students' performance (43.0%), provided guidance to students in combinations (28.0%), and also provided career guidance (26.3%).

Table 3. Teachers' views as to how they help students to choose subject combination.

Mention on...		No. of responses	%
Making appropriate subject combination	Providing career guidance	95	51.1
	Encouraging them to choose subjects of their ability	67	36.0
	Taking into account the student's ambition	24	12.9
	Taking into account students' performance.	80	43.0
	Providing career guidance	49	26.3
	Identifying students' areas of interest	3	1 .6
	Recommendation of appropriate combination	2	1.1

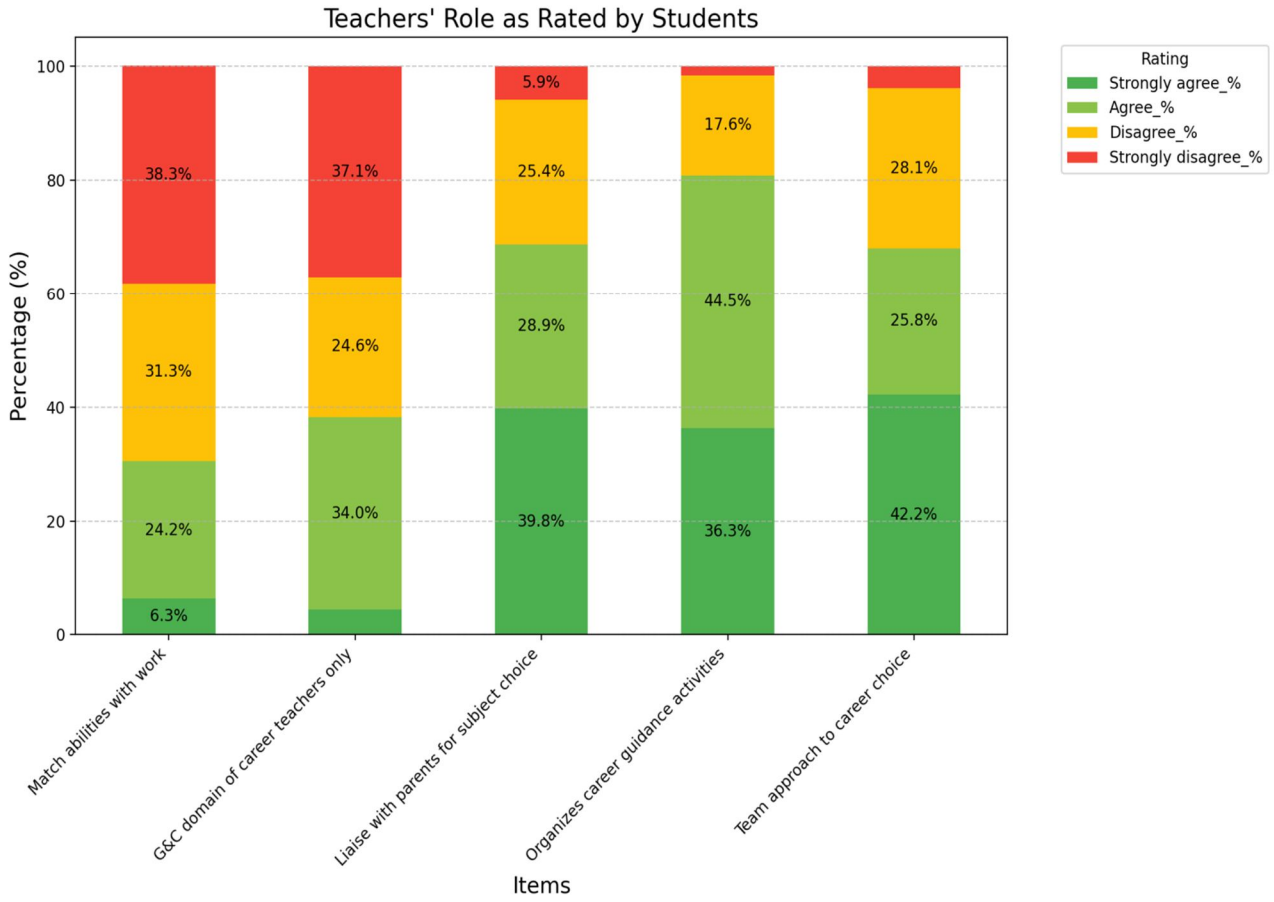

Figure 3.

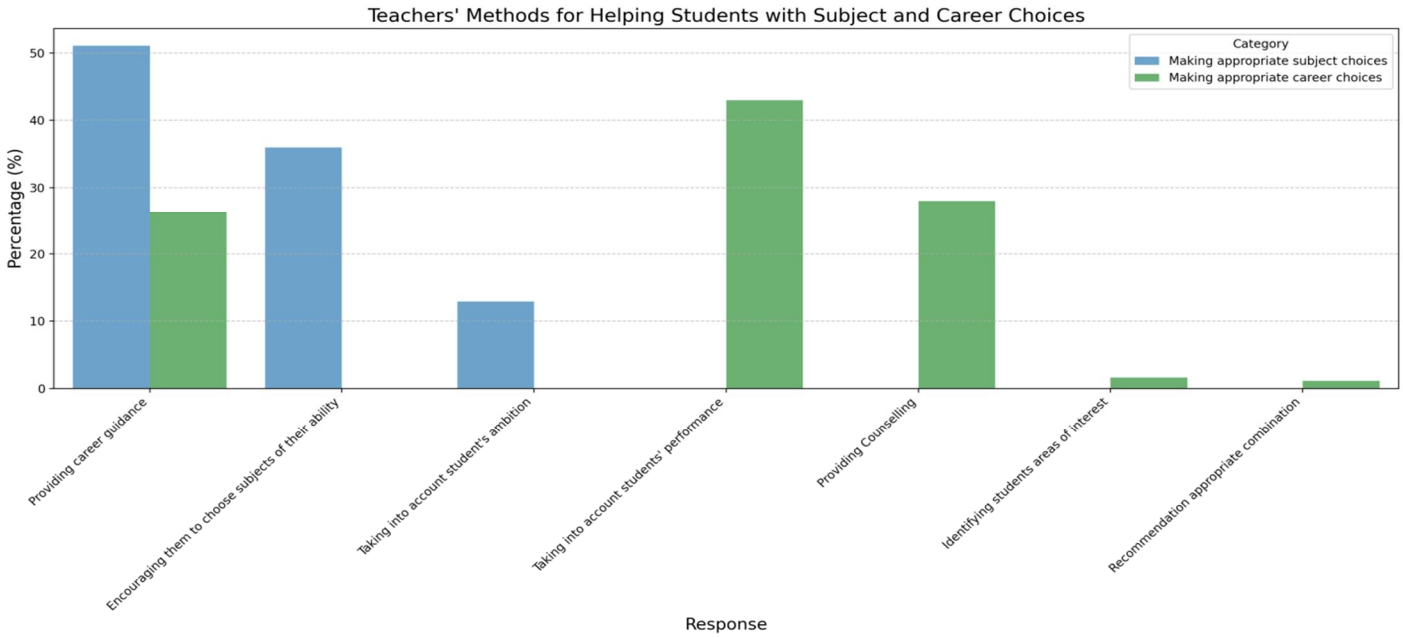

Figure 4

Figure 4 shows two distinct categories: making appropriate subject combinations and making appropriate career choices. For subject choices, the most common method is "Providing career guidance" with 51.1% of responses. For career choices, "Taking into account students' performance" leads with 43% of the responses. The bar visually represents these proportions, enabling comparisons between the different response types

Table 4. Students' views as to how teachers help in sélection of subject combinations.

Mention on...		No. of responses	%
Ways in which teachers have guided students in choosing subject combinations.	Encouraging students to do subjects that are marketable	488	38.1
	Providing information about subject combinations	395	38.0
	Providing information about jobs.	223	17.4
	Guiding of students on subject combinations	182	14.2
	Giving career guidance	28	2.2
	Basing on students' intellectual ability	691	54.0
	Indicating the benefits and disadvantages of a given career	240	18.8
	Informing students on government-employed policy	192	15.0
	Basing information on community needs	141	11.0
	Using role models	16	1 .5

From Table 4, students mentioned ways through which teachers assisted them in selecting subject combinations. These included encouraging them to do marketable subjects (38.1%), providing information about jobs (17.4%), as well as guiding students on subject sélection (14.2%). Regarding teachers' assistance to career choice, students reported that they base their help on students' intellectual abilities (54.0%), and teachers informed them about the advantages and benefits of given careers (18.8%). They inform students on government employment policy (15.0%) as well as informing students about community needs (11.0%).

Key findings

- Teachers reported that they help students choose subject combinations based on their abilities.
- Teachers reported that information about government policies, community needs, and role models are scanty. (Figure 5)

Key insights

For subject combinations, "Encouraging marketable subjects" (38.1%) and "Providing information about combinations" (38.0%) are the most common. For careers, "Basing on students' intellectual ability" dominates at 54%. The least utilized methods are "Giving career guidance" (2.2%) for subjects and "Using role models" (1.5%) for careers.

DISCUSSION

Teachers' role in the choice of subject combinations in secondary schools

The findings of this study highlighted the multifaceted role of teachers in guiding students' subject combinations in secondary schools. These findings aligned with and expanded upon existing literature in several key areas.
The literature review emphasized that teachers' background, experience, and personality significantly impact students' choices (Brown and Lent, 2021). Our study strongly confirms this, with 62.9% of teachers acknowledging they tend to encourage students to offer subjects they themselves studied. This reflects Ryan's (2021) assertion that teachers from diverse backgrounds offer broader perspectives on career opportunities. The high percentage (53.2%) of teachers who reported encouraging subject combinations based on performance aligns with Hughes and Gibbons' (2021) findings that teachers with advanced academic achievements can provide deeper insights into subject combinations.

However, there is a notable discrepancy between how teachers and students perceive career guidance efforts. While 46.8% of teachers strongly agreed that they help students link their abilities with the world of work, 38.3% of students strongly disagreed with this statement. This disparity suggests a communication gap that may hinder effective career guidance, supporting Kagoro et al.'s (2021) conclusion that many schools face challenges in implementing comprehensive career guidance programs.

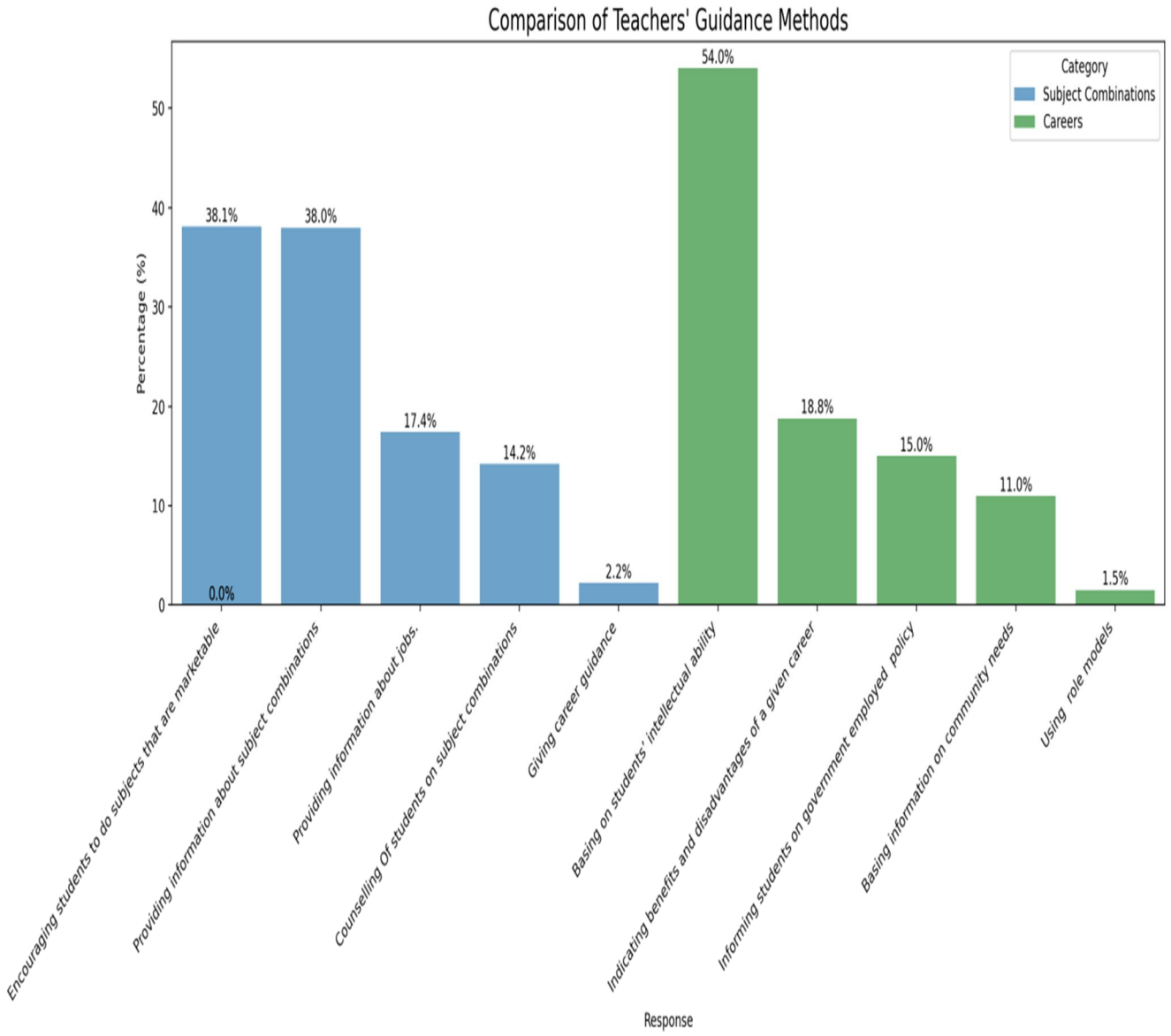

Figure 5

The study revealed that 60.3% of teachers strongly agreed that administrators and teachers work as a team to influence the choice of subject combinations, with 42.2% of students concurring. This collaborative approach is supported by Anderson and Taylor (2023), who emphasized the importance of integrating career concepts across the curriculum. However, the finding that 41.9% of teachers agreed there is a tendency to regard guidance as the domain of career teachers only indicates a fragmented approach that contradicts best practices identified in the literature.

The study findings implicitly point to resource constraints affecting career guidance. This aligns with Njoroge et al. (2021), who identified a shortage of trained career counselors and teachers proficient in career guidance as a significant barrier. The relatively low percentage of teachers (26.3%) who reported providing dedicated career guidance suggests a need for more structured training programs, as suggested by Watts and Kidd (2021).

The study found that 39.8% of students strongly agreed that teachers liaise with parents to help in subject selection. This finding supports Evans and White's (2023) research highlighting the importance of alignment between parental expectations and students' aspirations. However, the 25.4% of students who disagreed suggests room for improving this three-way partnership between teachers, students, and parents.

Students reported that teachers primarily guide them by

encouraging marketable subjects (38.1%) and basing recommendations on intellectual ability (54.0%). This approach aligns with Johnson and Mortimer's (2021) research on the importance of confidence-building in subject choice but raises questions about whether sufficient attention is paid to individual passion and intrinsic motivation, which Smith et al. (2021) identified as crucial for long-term career satisfaction.

The findings broadly support the social cognitive career theory that framed this study. The emphasis on performance (reported by 43.0% of teachers) as a factor in career guidance reflects SCCT's focus on self-efficacy beliefs. However, the relatively low emphasis on identifying students' areas of interest (reported by only 1.6% of teachers) suggests a potential misalignment with SCCT's emphasis on outcome expectations and personal goals.

The study's findings indicate several practical challenges in the implementation of career guidance in Jinja's secondary schools. The tendency to compartmentalize career guidance as the responsibility of designated career teachers, rather than a shared responsibility, limits the potential impact of the entire teaching staff. Additionally, the focus on marketable subjects, while practical, may not adequately address the holistic development of students' career aspirations as emphasized by Lee et al. (2022).

Conclusion

1. Teachers' background, experience, and personality significantly impact students' choice of subject combinations in secondary schools.
2. Teachers work with administrators as a team to influence the choice of subject combinations.
3. A number of challenges affect Teachers' role in the choice of subject combinations.
4. There is a positive perception of teachers' involvement in guiding subject and career choices, particularly in promoting specificity and aligning combinations with interests and performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Schools should provide teachers with training on effective career guidance with emphasis on what interests and personality in students' subject combination choice
2. Policy makers should ensure that career guidance programs are adequately funded to provide students with comprehensive guidance and support.
3. School management should encourage collaboration among teachers, parents, and administrators to provide students with comprehensive guidance and support in making informed subject combinations and career choices.
4. Ensure all teachers view career guidance as a shared responsibility and avoid personal bias in subject recommendations.

Areas for further studies

1. Attitudes of teachers towards guidance and counselling in secondary schools.
2. Teachers' effectiveness in providing adequate career guidance.in secondary schools
3. Challenges in implementing comprehensive career guidance programs.
4. The perceptions of students and teachers in the choice of subject combinations.

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