



Original Article

Uncovering the roots of students' under performance in secondary school National Examination: A Qualitative Case Study in Eastern Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study explored factors contributing to students' under performance in the Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination, reflecting a national educational crisis of low pass rates. In doing so, a case study design was employed, with data collected from four major cities in eastern Ethiopia through four focus group discussions with 24 teachers and a semi-structured interview with 22 purposefully selected participants, comprising students, parents, school administrators, and supervisors. The primary data were supplemented by national statistical abstracts and official reports. The data were consolidated by deductive thematic analysis and presented in three predetermined thematic categories: student-level, teacher-level, and contextual-level factors. The factors related to the students showed issues of motivation and value orientation, preparedness and performance barriers, and gaps of basic knowledge and skills. Teacher-related factors pointed to weak instructional practices, low morale and economic hardship, inadequate professional development, and ethical gaps. The gaps and deficiencies in educational policy, implementation, governance, and accountability, misalignment of curriculum, and resource scarcity were emphasized as contextual factors. The study corroborates the notion that ESSLCE under-performance is the result of the systemic interactions between these three themes and the subsequent sub themes mentioned, which perpetuate cycles of student disengagement and poor instructional quality, including systemic inequities in educational policy. This underscores the need for coordinated policy responses that address these interwoven dimensions.

1 Introduction

Secondary school education is undoubtedly critical in any society. Its value is, however, highly variable between countries depending on the country's history, economy, culture and political climate. In the Ethiopian educational context, secondary school refers to grades 9–12, which is designed to equip students with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for tertiary education or employment (Ministry of Education, 2022). Beyond academic preparation, as Woreta (2024) stated, it is an important stage of socialization where students internalize the moral, ethical, and social norms that equip them for life in adulthood.

Based on these significance, the Ethiopian education system has experienced several reforms, especially after regime changes. Unlike before, the 2021/22 educational reform was policy-driven rather than being politically motivated by leadership change. The [Ministry of Education \(2022\)](#) has attributed many factors, which are related to this reform. The most urgent needs mentioned are, in particular, to align the system with international standards and enhance citizens' horizons of knowledge to achieve tangible outcomes ([Ministry of Education, 2021](#)). The main reform included, among others, the shift from the old system of 4-2-2-4 (4 years in primary school, 2 years in junior secondary school, 2 years in senior secondary school, 4 years in secondary school) to the new system of 6-2-4 (6 years in primary school, 2 years in junior secondary school, 4 years in secondary school).

As of now, [Gebreselassie and Abebe \(2026\)](#) highlighted that the implementation of the reform does not seem to be improving student outcomes. Overall, the quality of education in Ethiopia is very low in relation to SDG 4 targets being set. For this, [UNESCO \(2025\)](#) reported that Ethiopian educational landscape has faced resource, language and systemic challenges which could hamper the achievement of the SDG 4 benchmarks by 2030.

Despite facing these challenges, the enrolment rate (Grades 9-12) rose from 23% in 2011/12 to 46% in 2021/22. Actually, there exists a huge disparity between quantity and quality issues ([Tefera & Zelalem, 2025](#)). In light of this quality concern, the 2022 policy on academic integrity made significant reforms in the administration of the examination. Most notably, the responsibility for overseeing the ESSLCE moved from a secondary school setting to a university campus, accompanied by strict supervision and rigorous monitoring ([Demissie, 2024](#)). As part of this measure, MoE covers all expenses for students, supervisors and examiners during their week-long stay at the site during the exams ([Tefera & Zelalem, 2025](#)).

After the change in examination settings, the number of students who are caught cheating in academic examinations dropped from 20,170 in 2022 to 859 in 2023 and down to 120 in 2024/25 ([Tefera et al., 2024](#)). This implies that the exam administration has been effective in curbing cheating, which, before the 2022 reform, affected approximately 80% ([Tefera & Zelalem, 2025](#)). In fact, the achievement in examination integrity is irrefutable; however, it has not translated into improved outcomes, as the results of the ESSLCE demonstrate that the long-standing emphasis on enrollment over learning remains largely unchanged.

For example, the passing rate of the last four years from 2021/22 to 2024/25 remains: 3.3% (896,520 sat; 30,000 passed), 3.2% (845,000 sat; 27,267 passed), 5.4% (674,823 sat; 36,409 passed), and 8.4% (585,882 sat; 48,929 passed) ([Ethiopian Monitor, 2024](#); [Tiruneh & Molla, 2023](#)). Moreover, evidence from statistical reports confirms that 1,161 out of 2,959 high schools in the country had a 0% pass rate for the 2021/22 school year. In 2022/23, the issue was escalated, when 1,328 of 3,106 schools none of their students pass the exams; this number rose to 1,363 in 2023/24. Although there was a slight improvement in 2024/25, in which 1,249 schools indicated a 0% pass rate ([Ministry of Education, 2025](#)). This number suggests compelling evidence of serious confusion; it raises a serious alarm about the direction the educational system is taking if corrective measures are not taken promptly.

Considering this performance crisis, numerous scholars ([Alford, 2023](#); [Demissie, 2024](#); [Desta, 2025](#); [Ethiopian Monitor, 2024](#); [Molla & Tiruneh, 2023](#); [Tamrat, 2024](#)) have reflected their views through diverse media outlets, including radio, online platforms, newspapers, and public forums, on the seriousness of the issue. They also noted that the situation may lead to a significant loss of human capital, limit institutional capacity, and hinder sustainable national development. Despite an increasing scholarly focus on the

underperformance of ESSLCE, existing research has largely relied on quantitative analyses from the Ministry of Education aggregate statistics. These statistics provide a record of what is going on, rather than sufficient reason for a lack of achievement persists across various regional contexts.

Pertaining to this, studies such as those by [Tefera et al. \(2024\)](#), [Tiruneh and Molla \(2024\)](#), and [Tebeje and Molla \(2023\)](#) have identified general factors associated with underperformance. These scholars, however, do not give any insight into the experiences of those students who fail, teachers who prepare students, educational experts supervised schools or the institutional and community contexts in which school examinations are conducted. Furthermore, there is no theoretical account for the large disparities between the national average high and low performing cities (Dire Dawa and Harar), and (Jijiga and Chiro), respectively, which is helpful in explaining the problem as a whole.

Thus far, there appears to be no study to date that has systematically explored how factors at the student level, teacher level, and contextual level interact in these differing settings. The presence of the gap has been recognized by [Tiruneh and Molla \(2024\)](#), [Desta \(2025\)](#), and others, who emphasize the need for contextually grounded qualitative inquiry. Such research should move beyond documenting yearly score magnitudes to uncover what contributes to students' underperformance in the ESSLCE.

Thus, the study integrates two complementary systems-based models: [Scheerens \(1990\)](#) Context–Input–Process–Output (CIPO) framework and [Astin \(1993\)](#) Input–Environment–Output (I-E-O) model. Both frameworks conceptualize educational outcomes as products coming through a system but at different levels of educational process detail. The two models complement each other in that CIPO provides a structural map outlining where conditions originate (context, teacher, student), while the I-E-O model focuses on how these conditions are transformed into learning experiences (process), which ultimately affect exam outcomes. Within this dual lens, while CIPO focuses on the domains structurally and I-E-O clarifies the mechanisms of transformation.

To this end, this multi-site qualitative case study was designed to explore the three levels that have been linked to the underperformance of ESSLCE in Eastern Ethiopia in the four educationally important cities of Dire Dawa, Harar, Jijiga and Chiro. The performance of these sites varies; in Dire Dawa and Harar is generally higher than the national average score, and in Jijiga and Chiro, performance is amongst the lowest. This internal variance presents an abundance of analytical opportunities to develop grounded rationales linking the specific conditions and processes that affect exam results and to produce insights that can only be gained by analyzing it. As a result, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What Student-related factors contribute to students' underperformance in the ESSLCE?
2. What Teachers-related factors contribute to students' underperformance in the ESSLCE?
3. What Contextual-related factors contribute to students' underperformance in the ESSLCE?

2 Methods

2.1 Research design and study site

This study used a qualitative case study design with a single embedded unit of analysis, which is suitable for capturing multiple perspectives within one bounded case ([Baxter & Jack, 2008](#); [Creswell, 2014](#)). The central phenomenon being studied was factors

contributing to underperformance in the ESSLCE. That is examined through predefined themes at the student, teacher, and contextual levels. Consequently, in eastern Ethiopia, the four largest cities, Chiro, Harar, Dire Dawa, and Jijiga, with the respective public universities and the largest TVET institutions, were included to ensure contextual diversity. The site selection followed Patton (2002) maximum variation sampling logic, chosen to capture common patterns of underperformance across sites that differ substantially in performance outcomes in that Harar and Dire Dawa perform better than the national average, whereas Chiro and Jijiga perform below the national average. Administratively, Dire Dawa and Jijiga hold city administration status, while Harar and Chiro function as zonal centers. Oromiffa and Amharic are the most widely spoken languages across Chiro, Harar, and Dire Dawa. The Harari-speaking minority is concentrated in Harar, and Somali is predominant in Jijiga. The sites further serve as educational hubs, attracting rural students through universities, TVET institutions, and better-resourced secondary schools. This deliberate variation allows the study, guided by the CIPO and I-E-O frameworks, to explore what factors contribute to students' underperformance across these differing contexts.

2.2 Study participants

This study's participants comprised secondary school principals, teachers, and regional education experts, including students who did not meet the 50% threshold pass mark set by the Ministry of Education for university admission for the 2022/23 academic year and enrolled based on their results from either the remedial program or TVET. The other group was those who did not meet the criteria for either pathway. Family representatives were also included as participants. These participants were selected from the cities of Chiro, Harar, Dire Dawa, and Jijiga. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants, notably using a multi-site selection strategy to capture different experiences that influence examination outcomes.

From each location, three student representatives were intentionally selected to provide diverse perspectives, comprising students engaging in remedial programs, TVET programs, and those not enrolled in either pathway. In addition, the school principal, family members, and district education expert representatives were invited as they maintained a direct tie to the topics under consideration; a total of 22 people were interviewed. Additionally, four focus group discussions (FGDs), each consisting of six secondary school teachers, comprising a total of 24, provided complementary perspectives on factors influencing underperformance.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Participant Type	Jijiga (JJ)	Chiro (CR)	Dire Dawa (DD)	Harar (HR)	Total	Gender (M/F)
1. Remedial Student (RS)	1	1	1	1	4	3 M / 1 F
2. TVET Student (TS)	1	1	1	1	4	2 M / 2 F
3. Student – Neither (SN)	1	1	1	1	4	3 M / 1 F
4. School Principal (SP)	1	1	1	1	4	3 M / 1 F
5. Regional Education Expert (EE)	1	1	1	1	4	4 M / 0 F
6. Family representative (FR)	1	0	0	1	2	2 M / 0 F
Interview Subtotal	6	5	5	6	22	17 M / 5 F
7. Teachers (4-FGDs)	6	6	6	6	24	19 M / 5 F
Grand Total	12	11	11	12	46	36 M / 10 F

Note. Participants were coded by type and site; for instance, FGDHR for Harar, and an interview by type and site (e.g., RSJJ) represents a remedial student from Jijiga, with other categories identified similarly, uneven family-representative sampling due to unavailability.

2.3 Data collection procedures

Multiple instruments were employed to generate rich and contextually grounded data. In particular, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with students, families, educational experts and school leaders to highlight personal experiences and views of what happens to students after exams. Furthermore, FGDs were held with teachers to enable group introspections on issues of systems. Also, document reviews included examination reports, giving institutional and historical context. Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and all the transcripts were translated into English and subjected to a back-translation procedure by bilingual experts to ensure semantic equivalence and trustworthiness. Documents were also coded on a thematic basis. On average, individual interviews lasted 20–35 minutes, while focus group discussions ranged from 70 to 90 minutes, with each participant engaged in one to two sessions. Combined this multi-instrument, multi-site approach provided triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

2.4 Data analysis

This study employed a deductive thematic analysis, especially following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). The conceptual themes were explicitly derived from the research questions, which in turn ensured analytic focus and theoretical consistency. Initial codes were systematically generated and subsequently organized into predefined themes. Then, subthemes were identified, which lie under each broader theme. In relation to this, a codebook was developed documenting each code's label, definition, and representative data extracts. These subthemes further refined the broader themes while maintaining theoretical alignment with the CIPPO and I-E-O frameworks. NVivo 14 facilitated systematic coding, retrieval of extracts, and visualization of thematic patterns throughout the process.

2.5 Trustworthiness and rigor

This study followed the four criteria laid down by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to guarantee trustworthiness. Data triangulation was performed to ensure the credibility from data sources, and member checking was conducted of six interviewees, where summarized transcripts were shared for verification. A thick description of the research context and institutional settings was provided to facilitate transferability. Dependability was achieved through an audit trail that documenting methodological decisions and coding processes and along with the use of NVivo query logs. Reflective notes and analytic memos were used to ensure conformity, meaning interpretations were grounded in the data of participants.

2.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Haramaya University, before data collection commenced. In line with this approval, the participants were briefed on the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any stage, and the steps taken to ensure confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was upheld by assigning pseudonyms and ensuring that responses could not be linked to individual participants. Ethical practice was followed and the right to privacy, dignity and rights of the participants in the study was respected.

The research is therefore transparent and conducted with integrity and safeguarded the data analysis and reporting ethically throughout.

3 Findings

This study explored the factors contributing to students' underperformance in ESSLCE. The data were analyzed deductively using thematic analysis, which revealed a complex interaction among three main themes: student factors, teacher factors, and larger contextual factors, each with associated subthemes.

3.1 Theme One: Student-related factors

For this theme, three sub-themes that affect student performance were identified: (1) motivational and value orientation, (2) preparedness for examinations and academic performance, and (3) gaps in prior academic knowledge and skills.

3.1.1 *Motivational and value orientation*

Participants suggested that low motivation is associated with lower values of education. This subtheme was identified as a major factor of student under performance in ESSLCE. EE-JJ explained, "With a lack of jobs and an increased emphasis placed on business and trading success, students are less inclined or able to devote the time, energy, and resilience to overcoming academic challenges." On the same issue, RS-DD added, "For instance, many graduates from university during the last few years have been working as street vendors and daily laborers. So, why would we want to put a lot of effort into our studies?"

Overall, students' lack of motivation was identified as a challenge, as the students' effort put into education does not necessarily translate to immediate, tangible outcomes. When students feel there is no link between the educational process and future labor market outcomes, or that education has no utility for social mobility, their attitude towards education is negative, and they see it as worthless. As a result, they feel that learning is imposed on them and is not meaningful to them.

3.1.2 *Preparedness and performance barriers*

Multiple overlapping pressures were identified by participants, which negatively affected students' readiness for the ESSLCE. It is also said that the environment of examination itself is a source of psychological tension, as noted in the words of SP-CH: "Students travel to university campuses for a week under strict supervision to take the national examination; it ensures the integrity of the examination but increases psychological pressures and reduces preparedness." Another common issue raised by both FGD-JJ and FGD-HR highlights: "In this particular region, it is common to observe students engaged in different trades, as the area is commonly known as a commodity pathway to centers." On the same issue, offering a contrasting perspective, EE-HR noted: "Even high-achieving students at the school level failed last year's ESSLCE, causing everyone to question the necessity of preparation." This has highlighted that internalizing last year failure rate in believing that success is nearly impossible and weaken preparation.

3.1.3 Foundational knowledge and skill gaps

One significant sub-theme that emerged from the discussions was the appearance of core academic foundational knowledge and skill gaps in which students entered secondary school. This was directly related to the promotion practices followed in the educational system, as SP-HR stated: "Students are promoted from class to class without having mastered the material, as an agenda, high enrollment is a shared objective among all administrators. Simply, the general tendency was to promote access rather than uphold quality."

In addition, FGD-DD raised the language ability as a compounding barrier: "The main problem is the competency of students' instructional language, which is minimal among most of the students." The explanation provided by EE-DD was notably comprehensive in offering a detailed account of the challenges faced by students in this context:

The outcome observed at the end of the day in the ESSLCE mainly goes to challenges encountered at lower grade levels, particularly where overcrowded classrooms and foundational literacy deficits are common in government schools, which accommodate the largest percentage of students, whereas private schools tend to have stronger performance.

To this end, the three subthemes indicate that several factors contribute to student underperformance, including motivational disengagement due to socioeconomic factors, psychological and financial stress about examinations, and the accumulation of core competencies over years of education.

3.2 Theme 2: Teacher-related Factors

This theme explores how teacher-related issues contribute to underperformance in the ESSLCE, proceeding to student-related factors. From the participants' accounts, the following four subthemes arose: (1) instructional practices and pedagogy, (2) motivation, morale, and economic status, (3) professional support and development, and (4) professionalism, ethics, and conduct.

3.2.1 Instructional Practices and Pedagogy

In this section, the recurring issues raised by participants were related to teacher recruitment, training, and the appointment, which they felt were compromising the quality of teaching. As said by the participants of FGD-CH:

Many students who have a degree in any subject other than education are now teaching because of its accessibility, and invite to take a short training course. This has created a situation where most of them see teaching as a temporary job or a stepping stone towards a better-paying employment.

To provide a clearer picture, it is more apt to quote EE-CH accounts: "Ethiopia's MoE has planned to commence, starting in the 2026/2027 academic year, a one year teaching service, involving university students before they complete their studies, in response to addressing the persistent problem of teacher shortages." From this, it is surmised that the recruitment of unqualified teachers as a quick fix to teacher shortages, and on the regular base to hire teachers from those with the poorest grades, is likely to impact classroom

instructional practices. It also suggests that poorly prepared and uncommitted teachers directly affect the learning outcomes of students.

3.2.2 Motivation, morale and economic status

Low satisfaction amongst teachers, due to inadequate compensation and lack of recognition in society, has an impact on teachers, and its consequence is on the performance of students in direct ways. FGD-DD said, "The profession's low standard of recognition has been attributed to the teachers' low salary and lack of financial incentives for them compared to other professions with similar qualifications, which has caused the decline of interest in the teaching profession." In the same vein, SP-JJ added, "High turnover is common in the teaching profession and depends on second jobs to sustain their living." What these stories reveal is that economic struggles hit individual teachers as well as the teaching profession.

It is clear that taking on a second job reduces teachers' availability, preparation, and commitment. This, in turn, leads to lower quality of instruction and poor students' outcomes. All of these factors combine to weaken teachers' professional identity.

3.2.3 Professional support and development

Participants mentioned that the continued need of the system is a lack of proper and inadequate professional development. The participants in FGD-HR stated: "The MoE organized a 15-day-long summer training program for 60,000 secondary schools teachers and school administrators in 2025 at university campuses, with a training of 60 to 120 hours in the subjects matter knowledge, pedagogy, and school administration." This action was an indicator that the issue was being recognized by institutions, but the participants raised concerns about the effectiveness of the training. The same group of participants during FGD-HR reiterated the above and added: "Given these numbers and the 15 days to get the job done, it is difficult to achieve effective skill development, particularly in the situation where the availability of qualified trainers is questionable." The discovery highlights a larger systemic issue where professional development is viewed as a quick fix and not as a long-term foundation to build real competency in teachers.

3.2.4 Professionalism, ethics and conduct

Participants noted that the lack of professional conduct and lack of standards of ethics among teachers adds to underperformance. The expected standard was demarcated with its challenge by EE-DD as: "Competence of teaching, student integrity, fairness, and impartiality among students and staff, despite the lack of adequate professional training." Other participants of FGD-JJ mentioned the difference between this standard and practice: "Professionalism is closely related to integrity, professional development, and commitment to student learning and achievement." The accounts show that the challenges are not unique, such as a failure in responsibility, a lack of commitment to learning, or a failure to establish boundaries, but indicate that it is systemic. Most importantly, this subtheme is strongly linked to the previous three sub-themes: low pay, poor training, and weak recruitment pipelines, all of which contribute to a weakening of the professional standards.

For this reason, these four subthemes put together show that teacher-related issues that affect the underperformance of ESSLCE are systemic rather than individual. A combination of weak recruitment pipelines, economic pressures, lack of professional develop-

ment, and ethical issues creates a vicious cycle that is always a detriment to instructional quality and student outcomes.

3.3 Theme 3: Contextual-related factors

In addition to the two themes mentioned above, participants highlighted the broader contextual theme as a significant contributor, and under it, four subthemes were identified: (1) educational policy and implementation gaps, (2) governance, accountability, and integrity, (3) curriculum and policy misalignment, and (4) resource scarcity and underfunding.

3.3.1 Educational policy and implementation gaps

Participants noted a significant misalignment between the centrally designed education policy framework and their actual implementation at the grass root level. EE-DD stated, "There is discrepancy between the policy framework and school practices, driven by issues of resources, capacity, and governance, particularly limited real autonomy at school levels." This can be accounted in the differing ESSLCE results between regions, zones, and even schools. In FGD-CH, a secondary school teacher elaborated on the funding dimension:

Poor funding in secondary schools had an impact on the quality of education, and therefore, achieving the policy targets is not an easy task, especially at the regional level, due to differences in the allotment of funds from one region to another.

The accounts also emphasize that the decentralized governance system, which was established to distribute responsibility, has resulted in uneven implementation in different administrative areas within the centralized curriculum framework policy.

3.3.2 Governance, accountability, and integrity

Participants identified weak institutional governance, accountability, and integrity as a foundational problem underlying many of the challenges reflected in ESSLCE results. Given that these components are complementary rather than employed interchangeably, EE-CH pointed to structural tensions: "Tensions between top-down mandates and local realities mismatches are visible as well as weak institutional capability at the woreda and school levels." In addition, FR-HR highlighted that accountability is more institutionally based and less at the community level: "The school carries a significant portion of the responsibility, while parents often consider their engagement as less significant." Another research participant, EE-JJ, offered a statement that is equally revealing:

The limited accountability is the root cause of many problems that the sector encounters, most notably the high failure rates in national exams. This situation demands more responsibility from students, teachers, administrators, and all others involved in the educational landscape, including parents. In fact, weak vertical and horizontal coordination persists throughout the system.

Taken together, these viewpoints indicate that there are several levels that accountability gaps exhibited, such as institutional-level, community-level, and individual-level, from

top to bottom. In a context where there is no single responsible body that takes accountability for learning outcomes, underperformance becomes a common phenomenon and depicts the system's malfunctioning. Moreover, it becomes challenging to pinpoint the exact areas where difficulties arise and to find solutions.

3.3.3 Curriculum and policy misalignment

In this sub-theme, participants were more specific about the impact of the misalignment between the content of the centrally designed curriculum and its suitability to the context. One participant, SN-HR, emphasized that "often curricula are developed centrally and implemented without taking local language, culture, and socio-economic contexts into account; that is, a one-size-fits-all approach." Similarly, FGD-CH stated, "Any curriculum must be accompanied by teacher development, robust supervision, and appropriate instructional resources to be effective; if these are not managed appropriately, student outcomes will not improve."

The results show that the policy framework focuses on prioritizing expansion and reform is undertaken without adequately addressing the contextual and capacity-related limitations. The secondary school curriculum has been criticized for being irrelevant to work-related competencies. Most importantly, it lacks complete integration with local knowledge systems.

3.3.4 Resource Scarcity and under-funding

Participants identified that secondary schools face significant challenges of a lack of textbooks, operational laboratories, libraries, and ICT facilities, which are more pronounced from the city to the rural areas. Strengthening the notion of the above statement, TS-DD captured the scale of the problem: "Just the existence of overcrowded classrooms and high student-teacher ratios reveals the extent of underfunding and inadequate infrastructure, including the number of secondary schools available." Moreover, SP-HR discussed the structural source of these inequities:

The Federal MoE formulates a general policy, while the Regional Education Bureaus have responsibility for implementing the policy for their respective regions, and the 'Woredas' Education Offices have responsibility for providing direct services. This separation of powers often leads to uneven and unbalanced resource allocation between regions and schools and to insufficient funding for the sector.

Regarding the four research sites ESSLCE score differences, especially EE-DD described: "more private schools are present in Dire Dawa than the governments. These schools are better resourced in provision of facilities". On a similar point, one participant in the FGD-CH commented: "scarcity of resources is a common problem in Chiro secondary schools".

These examples show that decentralization does not necessarily mitigate funding disparities, particularly if it isn't coupled with equitable and robust resource-sharing mechanisms. In general, secondary schools, and particularly in rural areas, are characterized by overcrowding in classes, a lack of textbooks, laboratories, and inadequate ICT facilities, all of which have a direct impact on the performance of the students and ESSLCE.

These four subthemes illustrate that contextual and structural issues are a subtle and complex part of the underperformance issue. Policy-implementation gaps, accountability

gaps, curriculum gaps, and underfunding are not stand-alone problems but rather part of a systemic environment in which students and teachers operate, and they are major determinants of ESSLCE outcomes, irrespective of individual effort.

4 Discussion

This discussion section highlights on the three interrelated themes shaping student outcomes: student-related, teacher-related, and contextual-related factors (see sections 3.1 to 3.3).

4.1 Theme 1: Student-related Factors

Within this theme, the first significant challenge identified directly from participants' accounts was motivational and value-orientation. According to participants, students' lack of interest and commitment to learning stems from the perception that formal education may not provide sufficient financial benefit. This belief is reinforced by high unemployment rates, and the economic reality that many students, even after graduating, still rely on their family's income. This view is supported by [Liu and Helwig \(2020\)](#), who indicated that a decreased societal value of education leads to lower investment in education. What is more, [Tefera et al. \(2024\)](#) noted that only 3% of students passed the national exam, which is indicative of a systemic crisis rather than failure on the part of individual students, and thereby contributes to the motivational disengagement of students within the educational system.

The second sub-theme refers to barriers to preparedness and performance. The finding indicates that the shift of national examination administration from secondary schools to university campuses, which was designed to curb malpractice, has created new challenges. On this, [Amsale et al. \(2023\)](#) noted that the majority of students were new to the experience of remaining on campus for about a week, and they found it hard staying up late in their rooms and the noise from their roommates. Coupled with this, taking a single high-stakes exam with a multi-subject threshold of 50% or higher to score, induces exam stress. In this study area, poverty prevalence resulted in students being involved in income-generating activities, and less time was left for studying. This is related to the socio-economic conditions in Ethiopia in which students have to work alongside their studies to contribute to their families. Endorsing these, [Tefera et al. \(2024\)](#) noted that student performance during an examination could be affected when learners are put in a stressful situation without the required psychological guidance and support. To this end, it is crucial to recognize that exam preparedness barriers are a multilayered chain in addition to the above-mentioned, connected to teachers' preparation, student study habits, support structures, exam-day psychological stress, and logistical demands of the examination process.

The third and final challenge cited by participants in this section was the lack of foundational knowledge and skills. It is common to see incompetent students often advance to the next class in government schools, so this, in turn, imposes a structural constraint on teachers' ability to provide individualized instruction. The study report by [Tebeje and Molla \(2023\)](#) found, among the total grade 4 students, only 10% of them can read and comprehend age-appropriate text in Ethiopia. Similarly, [Alemu \(2023\)](#) demonstrated that from the students who were promoted to grade 9, above 50% were those who scored below the minimum cutoff points. This clearly shows that much emphasis is given in Ethiopian educational landscape to quantity over quality, whereby students who fail to meet the minimum expectations are advanced to the subsequent grade, leaving the

achievement gap to widen each year. This situation is further exacerbated by the sudden change of teaching and learning language from mother tongue to English medium at grade 9 without proper language support, which presents further barriers in all core subjects. This impact is most apparent at the ESSLCE, where deficits add up and become visible in failure rates. Taken together, this necessitates the systemic intervention, starting well before Grade 12, addressing early literacy, grade promotion criteria, and language-of-instruction policy.

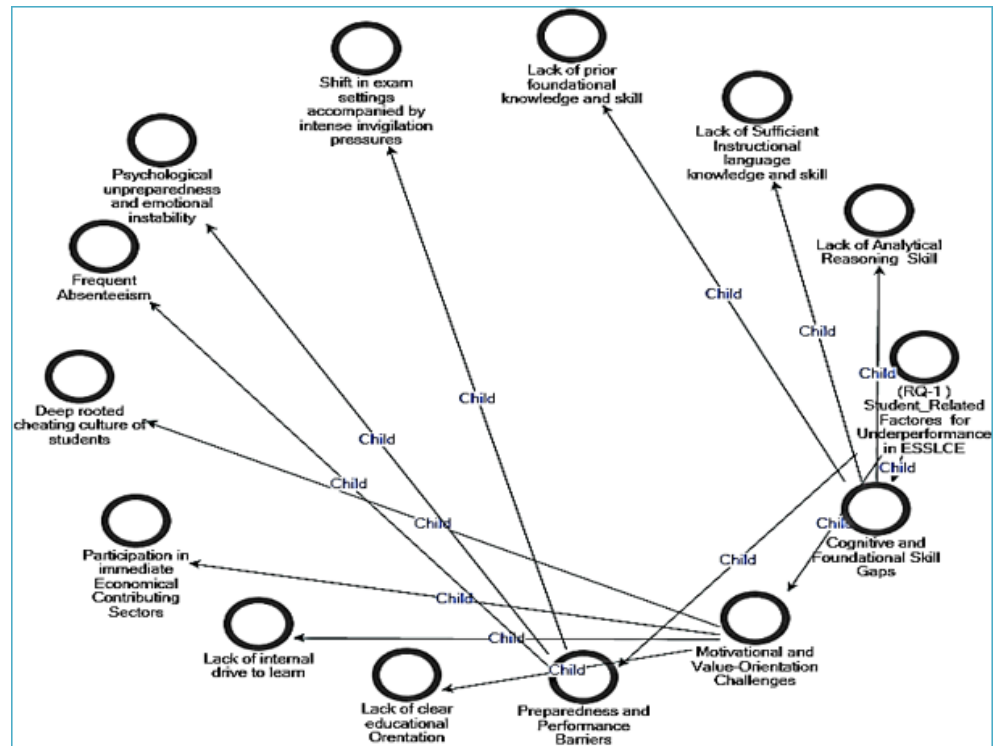


Figure 1: Student-related Theme, Sub-themes, and Codes Classification

4.2 Theme 2: Teacher-related Factors

Primarily, instructional practices and pedagogy were identified as the most contributing factors for the students' underperformance. In a general way, the result indicated a systemic weakness in teaching and learning, caused by the lack of adequate teacher preparation and the focus on teacher-centered pedagogies. This certainly points to a very important factor that contributes to the gap between teachers' capabilities and the demand for adequate student preparation in exams. Building on this, Demissie (2024) underscored that teachers' content knowledge and effective pedagogical practices, are important factors influencing the results of secondary school students. Furthermore, Faro et al. (2025) found that the teaching model employed in Ethiopia does not align with the requirements of the curriculum. In many occasions, reforms have often been rolled out before teacher training and materials were fully in place, and this can make teachers to implement the reform without understanding it (Tiruneh et al., 2024).

The second important factor is the motivation of teachers, morale, and economic difficulties. The findings suggest that teachers' inadequate salaries and persistent inflation have led to lower moral standards, and resulted teachers taking up additional second jobs. Accordingly, teachers focused on content coverage than comprehension and subject depth. This is compounded by less preparation time, classroom innovation, and, ultimately, long-term commitments, which have a direct impact on student outcomes

of learning. On this point, it is imperative to forward the study conducted by [Shishigu \(2015\)](#), which revealed that more than 90% of teachers entering the profession in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, were not passionate but that was the only choice.

Thirdly, gaps identified in the professional support and developments realized to have a direct and measurable effect on student performance. Teachers' preparation for the new curriculum was insufficient, as with many teachers entering classrooms following short-term or fast-track training in teaching profession or had not undergone any such training. This often leaves substantial deficits in subject knowledge and teaching strategies. It is worth noting that these gaps are not static, but they tend to add over time as curriculum requirements evolve faster than teachers' ability to adapt. This is due to the programs being designed centrally at the top-level of the MoE and provided only for layers of experts and officials, but failing to reach the school level, as [Shanko and Kabtyimer \(2024\)](#) indicated. This simply depicts that there is a missing link on the line from federal to regional to zonal and school levels. As for this, the policy implications are that professional development should not be seen as an occasional and partially offered add-on, but rather as a structural component of the teaching profession.

Fourth, compounding all of the above is a crisis of professionalism, ethics, and conduct rooted in systemic decline, and economic stress. In this regard, widespread malpractice and political interference have historically compromised examination integrity due to officials in nearby structures were engaged in promoting students directly, irrespective of actual preparedness to score a pass mark ([Mitiku, 2023](#)). This was intentionally done to make their respective zones or schools successful. Indeed, transferring exam centers to universities has effectively reduced exam malpractices, yet other challenges persist, including inadequate teacher preparation, policy and school reality mismatch, and weak accountability. In conformity with this, [Tamrat \(2023a\)](#) describes the teachers as "ill-qualified, poorly paid, and restive", and notes that the system generally prioritizes high enrollment counts over the achievement of the learning objectives. With this in mind, the study by [Ayechew et al. \(2023\)](#) calls for a collaborative, systematic approach to solutions, considering teacher misconduct as a shared community problem rather than a standalone for teachers.

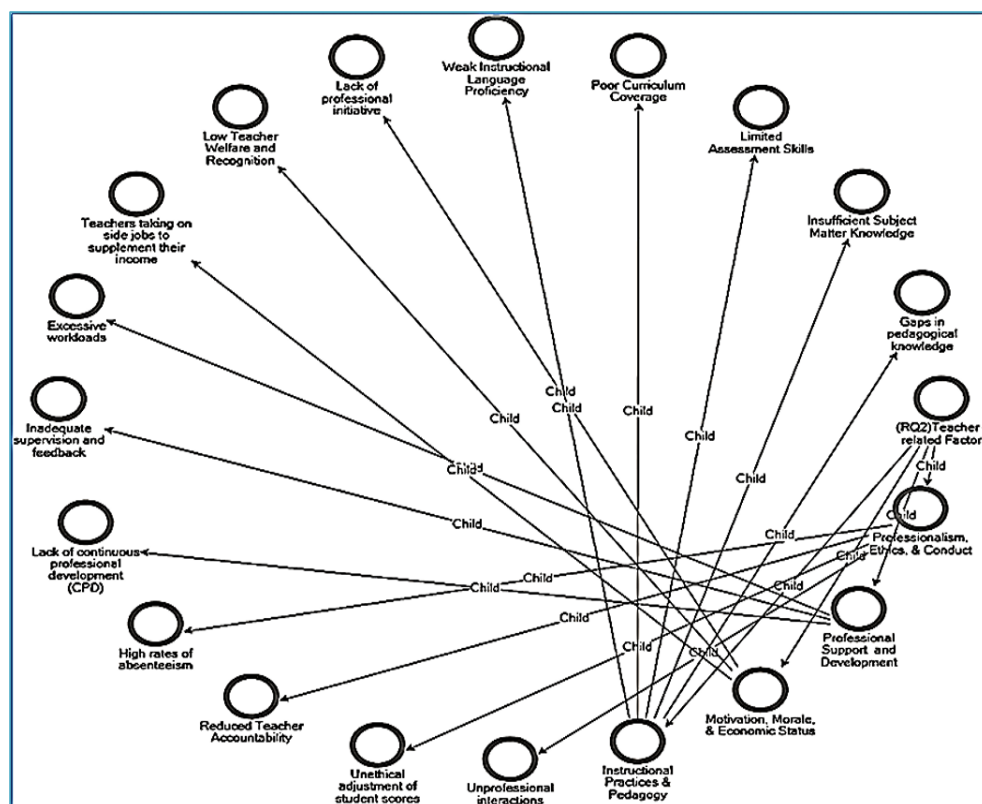


Figure 2: Teacher-related Sub-themes, and Codes Classification

4.3 Theme 3: Contextual-related factors

The initial subtheme identified was the significant discrepancy existing between the centrally designed policy and the classroom implementation layers. For this execution gap, the major drivers identified were inadequate resources and governance weaknesses. This aligns with previous research, as noted by Tebeje and Molla (2023), who argue that abrupt policy changes influence teachers' pedagogical adaptation and enable underprepared students to advance to the next level. Moreover, the introduction of new curricula, textbooks, and pedagogical approaches at regional and school levels is frequently introduced before teacher training is completed and instructional materials are distributed. Consequently, pedagogical reforms are implemented without being fully comprehended by teachers (Alemu, 2023; Tiruneh et al., 2024). In addition, inconsistent implementation of education policy, following the decentralized governance structure of regions and areas, including at the school level, has made it difficult to translate national policies into local practice in an equitable way. Specifically, Tefera et al. (2024) stressed that major educational reforms were designed with unequal participation of stakeholders from the top to the bottom, especially with weak engagement at the bottom. This forms the basis that students' actual performance in ESSLCE is different from one region to another and even from one city to another, including schools, which are in the same region or zones.

Furthermore, the results indicated that weak institutional accountability is a structural root cause of ESSLCE's underperformance at both the institutional and community and individual levels. The participants found that there was a conflict between top-down prescriptions and the local realities, as the woreda education offices and school-level actors were neither empowered nor able to mediate between the two, and thus responsibility was diffused and remains unfulfilled. Strengthening this, Berhanu and Gobie (2023) stated that decentralization merely found theoretically on papers, lack of formal edu-

cational laws and the exclusion of stakeholders' say in decision-making have caused widespread capacity and accountability deficits in the educational system. More critically, the school administration's political loyalty, over educational administrative tasks, has eroded professional culture and undermined meritocratic processes (Tamrat, 2023b; Tebeje & Molla, 2023). To this end, it is crucial to recognize that, with the absence of a clear accountability structure, learning outcomes in ESSLCE will remain the same for an extended period.

Consequently, the findings reveal a significant gap between curriculum content and the practical, economic, and contextual realities it is designed to serve. In this regard, the curriculum is highly theoretical in orientation and insufficient to address the economic demands of the day. Moreover, it disregards context-relevance by advocating a uniform approach to content delivery. Despite the policy emphasis on skill development, rote learning is a pedagogical approach that is widely employed in the classroom, as mentioned by Tebeje and Molla (2023). Problem solving skills and critical thinking skills, on the other hand, are the core skills for preparation of the ESSLCE. To this end, Demissie (2024) found that the theoretical focus has reduced the skill practices of students, and focus now is on admission to a university, rather than skills development.

Finally, the findings indicate that resource scarcity is a major structural determinant of ESSLCE failure. Secondary schools report critical shortages of textbooks, functional laboratories, libraries, and ICT facilities, with conditions deteriorating markedly in rural contexts, where classroom overcrowding—frequently exceeding 50 students per class—severely constrains instructional quality. The fragmented funding structure, distributed across the Federal Ministry of Education, Regional Education Bureaus, and Woreda Education Offices, produces inequitable resource allocation both within and across regions. This inequity is compounded by a real decline in per-student education expenditure of approximately 23% between 2017 and 2022, driven by inflation and competing fiscal priorities (Tiruneh & Molla, 2024). The literature affirms that achieving SDG 4 requires not merely increased investment but structural reform of resource distribution mechanisms, a conclusion that directly applies to addressing ESSLCE mass failure.

5 Conclusions

The study indicated that students' under-performance in the ESSLCE is not the result of isolated factors but of systemic interactions among student-related, teacher-related, and contextual factors. Most importantly, these factors are mentioned as interconnected and reinforce a cycle of weak learning outcomes. At the student level, motivational disengagement, lack of preparedness, and gaps in foundational knowledge contribute to under-performance in ESSLCE. While weak instructional practices, poor morale standard due to economic hardship, limited professional development and low professional integrity, were some of the reasons for students' under-performance in ESSLCE at the teacher level. At the contextual level, misaligned policies, governance deficiencies, incoherence of the curriculum and lack of resources contribute to inequality between schools and regions were accounted for under-performance in ESSLCE. Considering the two lenses used in this research, the CIPO framework and the I-E-O model, the findings revealed that structural conditions (context, teacher, and student) and transformative processes (learning environment, instructional practices) interact and explain the persistence of weak educational outcomes. This integration clarifies that while reforms have enhanced the integrity of the examination process, there are deeper systemic challenges to learning that have not yet been tackled.

The insight developed from the findings implies that the policy intervention should move from enrollment expansion to improving the quality of education. This should focus

on targeted teacher training and recruitment reforms, including maintaining curriculum alignment. Moreover, it is necessary to fill the gaps between instructional language competencies and exam requirements. There is also a need to reinforce accountability mechanisms and keep the balance of resources allocation between regions the same. Overall, student support systems such as remedial programs and psychosocial services should be institutionalized to mitigate motivational and preparedness challenges. Unless coordinated action takes place on all of these fronts, the vicious circle of underperformance will persist and continue to erode human capital and national development prospects.

6 Limitations

The conclusions of this study are confined to four cities in Eastern Ethiopia: Chiro, Harar, Dire Dawa, and Jigjiga, and may not fully represent experiences beyond this region. Furthermore, the study draws on the distinct voices and lived experiences of stakeholders, without statistical inference. As such, the broader crisis across Ethiopia's more than 3,700 secondary schools cannot be fully captured. Besides, the account of teachers, school administrators and supervisors may reflect social desirability biases. Future studies should therefore use multi-site, data-based analysis on a wider geographic scale to give a national perspective.

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Data Availability

Data can be made available on reasonable request.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no competing interests.

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