



ADA UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Title

Secondary School Teachers Perception on Certification Exam

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Baku, 05/15/2025

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Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of secondary school teachers about the teacher certification exam. Although teacher certification is generally meant to help teachers grow in their careers and improve the standard of education, there is no research done to find out what the experiences of teachers are about the exam. This study focuses on the real experiences, and a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was used to understand the lived experiences of teachers.

The target population was secondary schools in Baku, and a sample of 12-15 teachers who had taken the certification exam were interviewed. The interviews revealed that the exam was stressful and never took into account the long years of service for the experienced teachers, where some even mentioned that it was like they had to prove themselves all over again. For the younger teachers, it was the direct opposite as they saw the exam as an opportunity to improve their teaching techniques and use it as a tool for professional growth.

The teachers further offered practical suggestions such as adapting the certification process based on teaching experience, teachers being offered support to prepare for the exam, and including classroom observations. The study finally revealed that even though certification has a huge potential, it still needs to be more supportive, balanced, and most importantly, it must be grounded in the real lives of teachers, as good education begins by listening to the voices of everyday classroom leaders.

Chapter I

Problem Statement

The Teacher Certification Exam in Azerbaijan is intended to ensure that school teachers meet the standards to support quality education. However, there is limited understanding of teachers' perspectives on the certification process—its goals, fairness, and relevance to their daily teaching practices. Teachers frequently report feeling overwhelmed by the administrative tasks associated with educational reforms, including certification processes. They feel these demands take away valuable time that could be spent on direct teaching or professional development (Huseynova, 2018). Certification can be a milestone in teachers' careers, helping them stand out and advance professionally (Teachers of Tomorrow, 2023). Yet, if teachers perceive the process as unfair, unclear, or misaligned with practical classroom realities, this could impact their motivation, engagement, and even their effectiveness in the classroom (ERIC, 2019; Huseynova, 2019).

In other countries, teachers have voiced negative points of Certification Exam. For example, in Turkey, many feel certification exams don't reflect the actual challenges they face in classrooms (Yildirim, 2021). Chinese teachers have noted that the process sometimes emphasizes standardized skills over what they really need to connect with students and succeed professionally (Wang & Zhang, 2019). The U.S. experience with certification, like the National Board Certification, shows that high standards can improve teaching quality, but they're just one piece of what supports student learning (Antunez, 2015). Exploring such views can help shed light on how certification

impacts teachers' sense of professionalism and career growth. For Azerbaijani teachers, understanding their perspective could lead to important changes in the exam process to better support their professional journeys and, in turn, benefit students.

Teacher accreditation and accountability vary globally, with many countries balancing certification requirements and evaluations aimed at professional growth rather than punitive measures. Countries like the U.S. and Singapore exemplify different models, where the former often relies on standardized assessments and the latter emphasizes peer evaluations to foster development (Manzi, Sun, & García, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). Understanding these approaches is essential to developing sustainable teacher evaluation systems that support both teacher effectiveness and professional development.

Teacher certification is essential for ensuring professional competence and supporting continuous improvement within the education sector. Certification processes often include both theoretical and practical training, covering subject-specific knowledge, pedagogical strategies, educational psychology, and classroom management. In Azerbaijan, teacher certification aligns with strategic goals to elevate education quality, stimulating educators with salary increases and career growth opportunities based on certification achievements (Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan On Education, 2009). A recent survey showed that 70% of certified teachers expressed eagerness to share their certification experiences and pedagogical insights with colleagues, fostering a collaborative learning culture that emphasizes continuous development. Between 2023 and 2024, 64,500 teachers participated in Azerbaijan's certification exams, further underscoring the Ministry of Education's commitment to advancing professional standards (Azertag, 2024).

Aim of the Study

This study aims to explore how Azerbaijani secondary school teachers perceive the Teacher Certification Exam as well as to examine previous studies which revealed teachers felt overwhelmed by the administrative responsibilities linked to educational reforms, including certification processes by Huseynova (2018).

Research Questions

How do Azerbaijani secondary school teachers perceive the Teacher Certification Exam?

How does the teachers' perception of the purpose of Certification corresponds with what the State targets?

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Definition.

Certification is proof that teachers can get a positive opportunity for their career advancement and their self-improvement. Certification of educators is carried out for checking the professional level of teachers who have pedagogical knowledge, and who want to attain their success as well as for their professional growth. For improving the quality of education certification exams play an indispensable part in education. The certification exam provides an opportunity for teachers to find their weaknesses and strengths and improve their skills. (Azerbaijan Ministry of Education, 2020)

Teacher's Certification Exam in Azerbaijan.

The certification process for educators in state schools was first implemented in 2022. On August 30, 2020, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the rules for educator certification under Decision No. 155 (Azərbaycan Respublikası Nazirlər Kabineti, 2020). The certification exam consists of two stages: a written test and an interview. The test includes 50 questions, divided into 40 content-based questions and 10 questions on teaching methodology. Educators have 180 minutes to complete the test, with each correct answer earning one point. Teachers who score 30 or higher qualify for the interview stage.

The interview stage is evaluated on a 40-point scale and assesses the following competencies:

- Presenting a topic from the curriculum.

- Evaluating students effectively.
- Demonstrating self-presentation skills.
- Organizing the pedagogical process.
- Displaying communication skills (Azerbaijan Ministry of Education, 2020).

Educators are required to retake the certification every five years, as the certificate remains valid for that duration. In 2023, 29,951 educators participated in the certification exam, with 5,246 successfully passing. Those who passed saw their salaries increase by 35%, while 17,914 educators received a 10% salary increase. Overall, 31,207 educators participated in the test stage, and 23,160 achieved success across both the test and interview stages. (Caucasian Knot, 2024).

Key Terms Related to Teacher Certification

Before examining how different countries approach to teacher accreditation and certification, it is important to clarify the main terms used in this paper. These concepts are closely connected, but each one highlights a different aspect of how teachers are prepared, assessed, and supported in their profession.

Accreditation – Accreditation is the official recognition given to a teacher education program when it meets certain quality standards set by a professional body or government. Instead of judging teachers individually, it focuses on whether the program itself provides solid preparation for future educators (CAEP, 2022; Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Licensure – Licensure means being granted legal permission to teach in a particular region or country. To earn it, teachers usually need to complete an accredited education program, gain

practical classroom experience, and pass state or national exams. Licensure acts as a safeguard to make sure only qualified people enter the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2014).

Certification – Certification is about evaluating teachers themselves against professional standards. This often involves standardized tests and assessments of teaching practice. It shows that a teacher has the knowledge, skills, and professional responsibility needed to teach effectively (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000).

Qualification – A qualification is a credential such as a degree or diploma that confirms a teacher has completed the required studies or training. While important, qualifications alone do not always equal licensure or certification, since extra approval from education authorities is usually required (OECD, 2020).

Competency-Based Assessment – This approach measures what teachers can actually do in the classroom. It goes beyond theory and looks at practical skills, asking whether teachers can apply their knowledge effectively with students. In this way, it connects professional standards to real teaching practice (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Frost, 2023).

Standardized Exam – A standardized exam is a test given to all candidates under the same conditions. It is designed to measure knowledge and teaching skills in a fair and consistent way. Such exams are often a core part of certification, as seen in the Praxis Test in the United States (ETS, n.d.).

Professional Development (PD) – Professional development refers to ongoing learning opportunities that help teachers strengthen their skills and grow in their profession. Although it is

not the same as certification, many systems link PD to accreditation and licensure to make sure teachers continue to improve after they enter the field (OECD, 2020).

Teacher Accreditation across the World

In the United States, teacher accreditation serves as a cornerstone of professional standards. Prospective teachers must typically complete a bachelor's degree, participate in state-approved teacher preparation programs (an example of accreditation), and obtain licensure by passing certification exams such as the Praxis Series. The Praxis Test in the United States consists of a series of standardized exams designed to measure subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, and overall teaching competencies of individuals pursuing teacher licensure (Educational Testing Service [ETS], n.d.).

In Canada, the decentralized education system means that accreditation varies by province. In Ontario, for example, the Ontario College of Teachers regulates licensure, requiring candidates to complete a Bachelor of Education (a qualification) and demonstrate pedagogical competence. Teacher accountability in Canada blends formal evaluations with a strong emphasis on professional development, allowing educators to engage in reflective practices and collaborate on innovative teaching strategies (Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2022).

Finland's approach to accreditation reflects its broader educational philosophy of trust and professional respect. Teachers must hold a master's degree (a qualification), and their training emphasizes both subject knowledge and pedagogical expertise. Unlike many countries, Finland does not rely on standardized exams or external accountability systems; instead, teachers are trusted to uphold quality through peer collaboration and self-regulation. This trust-based model is

seen as integral to Finland's sustained success in international education rankings (Sahlberg, 2015).

Teacher accreditation in the United Kingdom is overseen by national regulatory bodies such as the Teaching Regulation Agency in England and the General Teaching Council for Scotland. Candidates are required to achieve Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), which involves completing accredited teacher training (an example of accreditation) and undergoing practical assessments linked to licensure. Accountability frameworks, including Ofsted inspections, aim to ensure teaching quality, though some educators feel these measures prioritize compliance over creativity (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2020).

In Turkey, the Public Personnel Selection Examination (KPSS)—a centralized standardized exam—is used to select candidates for various public sector positions, including teaching. It primarily assesses theoretical knowledge and educational foundations. Following this, an induction phase functions as a form of competency-based assessment, evaluating teachers' classroom practices. While the KPSS ensures uniform standards, educators have raised concerns about its limited focus on practical teaching skills, calling for reforms to better align assessments with real-world classroom demands (UNESCO, 2022).

Russia's accreditation process requires candidates to complete a pedagogical degree (a qualification) and pass a Standardized Certification Exam (a form of certification), which is designed to measure candidates' knowledge and skills objectively. Recent reforms emphasize competency-based assessment, focusing on teachers' practical abilities and classroom effectiveness. Regular professional development and peer evaluations complement this system, ensuring continuous improvement in teaching quality (OECD, 2020).

In Iran, accreditation is managed by the Ministry of Education, which mandates national certification exams for teachers (a form of certification based on standardized exams). While these exams assess pedagogical knowledge and subject expertise, they are often criticized for prioritizing theoretical over practical competencies. Teachers advocate for a more flexible and inclusive system that incorporates elements of competency-based assessment to reflect diverse classroom contexts (International Journal of Educational Development, 2023).

Kazakhstan employs a competency-based assessment, an evaluation method measuring teachers' practical skills, knowledge, and abilities against predefined professional standards. Teachers are also required to complete rigorous exams (a type of standardized exam) and practicums (applied qualification). Recent reforms aim to decentralize teacher evaluation, fostering greater autonomy and alignment with international best practices. Teachers are encouraged to engage in continuous professional development, addressing regional disparities in teaching quality (Frost, 2023).

In Turkey, teachers view the KPSS as a high-stakes standardized exam that can disproportionately influence career opportunities. Many believe that the focus on theoretical knowledge undermines its practical applicability in classrooms (UNESCO, 2022). Similar concerns are echoed in Azerbaijan, where the Centralized Certification Exam (CCE) is criticized for its lack of alignment with daily teaching practices. Teachers often feel that such exams add stress without significantly contributing to their professional development (British Council, 2023).

Teachers' perceptions of certification exams are shaped by factors such as relevance, fairness, and the impact on professional growth. In many countries, such exams are seen as essential for maintaining professional standards. For instance, Canadian teachers often view certification requirements as a validation of their skills and a means to establish credibility (Kitchen &

Ciuffetelli Parker, 2022). Conversely, educators in the US have expressed concerns about the rigidity of standardized exams like Praxis, arguing that these assessments may not fully capture the complexities of effective teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

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The perceptions and preparedness of the teachers towards professional teacher licensing policy in Ghana

The study by (Ansah, 2023) examined the preparedness and perspectives of senior high school teachers in the Bono region of Ghana toward the implementation of the teacher licensing policy. The descriptive survey method was used whereby 300 teachers from basic schools in Sunyani Municipality. The study revealed that while many teachers recognize licensing as a legal approach to teaching, discussions, and awareness of the policy were limited. Moreover, the study identified a weak correlation between teachers' perceptions of the licensing policy and their performance at work. The financial cost of licensing was also another challenge that could discourage individuals from pursuing a teaching career. Despite all these concerns, licensing is still viewed as the most appropriate method to enhance professional skills and ensure teachers possess the required qualifications. The study concluded that despite teachers acknowledging the importance of

licensing, they are mostly worried about the financial impact of such a policy and how it may reduce the number of aspiring teachers.

A comparison of teacher perceptions of their teacher certification programs

According to (Nukic, 2015), the perceptions of teachers on certification pathways in Hartford public school when compared to the traditional pathways (undergraduate and graduate programs) revealed contrasting experiences. Teach in America emphasized support in high-need schools but was lacking academic depth yet on the other hand traditional routes provided stronger subject training and pedagogical training with their graduate programs focused on their career pathways. Despite the small sample size, the findings revealed the diversity in teacher preparation methods and their different impacts. The study calls for more research to determine how the different certification pathways influence the effectiveness of teachers.

Impact on student learning: National board-certified teachers' perceptions

The study (Handler, 2016) examined the perceptions of National board-certified teachers (NBCTs) to find out their thoughts on the certification process and how it affects student learning. A survey was conducted and over 80% reported that it leads to improved learning outcomes, better assessment methods, and enhanced teaching quality. While the process was praised as a vigorous professional development tool for raising professional standards and helping foster teacher leadership, many critics were concerned about the time demands and high costs as potential barriers.

The effectiveness of the national board certification as it relates to the advanced placement calculus AB exam

The study (Antunez, 2015) examined the influence of the National Board Certification (NBC) on the performance of students in the Calculus AB exam of 2014 in South Florida. With 1,162 students' scores, the study revealed that those students taught by NBC teachers achieved higher scores ($M = 3.70$) compared to the students taught by non-NBC teachers ($M = 2.74$). What contributed to student success was the fact that NBC instructional strategies aligned with the NCTM standards. The study mentioned the risks of using certification as a sole factor and recognized the role of contextual and individual variables.

Analysis of the status of teacher certification in the Australian capital territory following the introduction of the molecular model

The study by (Nethsinghe, 2023) examined the highly accomplished and lead teacher (HALT) certification process in Australia focusing on the Certification molecular model (CMM) which is managed by the teacher quality institute and is also aligned with the Australian professional standards for teachers. This model divided certification into various stages offering flexibility and allowing for personalized feedback. The study revealed that curriculum design, enhanced teaching quality and leadership opportunities were the benefits in 2022 where 0.3% of the Australian teachers had achieved the HALT certification. There were recommendations made which included improving accessibility and refining the model to get its full impact on teaching standards and professional growth.

The effect of certification and preparation on teacher quality

The study by (Wyckoff, 2017) investigated how certification requirements and teacher preparation impact student achievement and teacher quality and it found mixed results. Teaching standards are mostly elevated by certification processes, they may also discourage prospective teachers without improving student outcomes. The use of selective alternative certification pathways helped produce teachers who had comparable effectiveness over those who were traditionally certified. Teachers with high certification results tend to improve students' scores yet uncertified and less experienced teachers are placed in low-performing schools which worsens the situation. Despite all these challenges, the study revealed limited evidence that would connect student outcomes and certification and emphasized a collaborative approach to gather more data that will help create teacher quality improvement policies.

Research gap and contribution

The reviewed articles provided insights into teacher certification processes and mainly focused on the effects on student achievement and professional development. Little is known about how secondary school teachers perceive certification exams, especially in regions where it is recently implemented. Most studies focus on certification's impact on the quality of teachers and student achievement but do not mention the perspectives of teachers when undergoing such processes.

This study seeks to fill the gap by exploring secondary teachers' perspectives on certification exams in Azerbaijan. The aim is to find new knowledge through exploring teachers' perspectives and concerns regarding certification exams. The study will offer practical recommendations for policymakers to design effective and inclusive certification framework.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the perspectives of secondary school teachers in Azerbaijan on the certification exam. Phenomenology is particularly suited for capturing the lived experiences of individuals, allowing for an in-depth understanding of how teachers perceive and interpret the certification process (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach is focused on exploring key dimensions, including teachers' experiences with the certification exam, their perceptions of its fairness (e.g., clarity of criteria and inclusiveness), and its alignment with their teaching practices (e.g., practical relevance). Such a design is essential for understanding the nuanced and subjective views of participants, as it foregrounds their personal narratives and contextual realities.

Research Participants and Sampling

The study targeted secondary school teachers working in public schools in Baku, Azerbaijan. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who meet the study's objectives. The criteria were as follows:

1. Teachers involved in teaching secondary school students.
2. Teachers that have direct experience with the certification exam, recent or earlier in their careers.
3. Teachers willing to share their perspectives through the interview process

The study intended to include 12-15 teachers which is consistent with the phenomenological norms as such a size allows for in-depth exploration of individual experiences whilst providing sufficient

data for thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants will be selected from schools in Baku that have diverse educational settings in which teachers operate.

Data Collection Methods

To gain a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions on the certification process, this study employed qualitative data collection methods that prioritize depth, context, and participants' lived experiences. Rooted in the principles of qualitative inquiry, these methods aim to capture rich, detailed insights into the research questions while staying adaptable to the ever-changing and dynamic nature of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12–15 secondary school teachers who had experience with the certification process. This approach provided a platform for participants to express their thoughts, emotions, and perspectives in their own words while enabling the researcher to explore emergent themes.

These interviews examined teachers' perceptions of the certification process, focusing on its relevance to their professional roles, its influence on their teaching practices, and its emotional impact. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their stories, experiences, and insights in an unrestricted yet guided manner.

A flexible interview guide outlined key questions aligned with the study's objectives, while leaving room for follow-up questions based on participants' responses. Interviews were conducted in a conversational tone, allowing participants to feel at ease. Depending on logistical needs, the

interviews took place face-to-face or virtually. To ensure accuracy and depth, each interview was audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed for thematic analysis.

Semi-structured interviews strike a balance between guided questioning and open exploration, making them ideal for addressing complex and emotionally charged topics like teacher certification. This method was particularly effective in uncovering personal experiences and contextual insights that structured interviews or surveys might overlook (Creswell, 2013).

Document review

The purpose of document analysis in this study was to explore how institutional documents reflect and influence the certification process. The goal was to assess whether these documents align with teachers' perceptions and practices or highlight inconsistencies between policy intentions and classroom realities. Specifically, the analysis focused on three areas. First, *curriculum guides* were examined to understand how the goals and competencies outlined in these documents relate to what teachers experience during certification. Second, *school policies* were reviewed to uncover the level of institutional support and expectations surrounding certification preparation and success. Finally, teachers' *lesson plans* were analyzed to assess the extent to which their instructional practices align with the criteria set by the certification process.

The process of document analysis began with identifying relevant materials. A diverse range of documents were selected, focusing on those that play a central role in shaping teachers' understanding of the certification process. They included official guidelines provided during certification preparation, institutional policies from participating schools, and teachers' own lesson plans that reflect their day-to-day practices. Each document was systematically reviewed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to the research questions. For instance, curriculum

guides were analyzed to determine whether they provide clear and actionable goals for teachers or present challenges by being overly broad or ambiguous. Similarly, lesson plans were assessed to see how teachers adapt their instruction to meet certification standards, while school policies were evaluated for their role in supporting or hindering teachers as they prepare for certification.

A crucial step in the analysis involved comparing the themes identified in the documents with the insights gathered from interviews. That comparison helped to determine whether teachers' perceptions align with institutional expectations or highlight areas of divergence.

By incorporating document analysis into the study, this research illuminated both the individual and systemic dimensions of teacher certification. It sought to bridge the gap between what teachers experience and what their educational environments demand of them, ensuring that the findings were meaningful not only for educators but also for policymakers. Ultimately, that approach offered actionable insights to align institutional intent with teachers' lived experiences, fostering a more supportive and effective certification process.

Data analysis

The capstone group conducted interviews and analyzed the collected data as part of the research process. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure accurate and detailed data analysis. To facilitate a thorough understanding of the content, the group read the transcripts multiple times, a crucial step in the data analysis process (Creswell, 2014).

The next step after the interview process was coding which helped to identify key points, highlighted ideas, and organized them systematically (Saldana, 2016). It gave an in-depth analysis of the data to address the objectives of the research study. Codes were organized into themes like

“challenges of certification”, “personal growth,” and “alignment with classroom realities”. Each of these themes were closely examined so that they best reflected data that answered the research questions.

Using the research questions to guide the process, substantial parts of the data was identified and coded. Codes were directly related to the responses given by the teachers participating in the interviews. In the initial coding, the group focused on responses related to challenges of certification and educators’ personal growth as described in the interview transcripts.

Ethical Considerations

Before starting the study, ethical approval was obtained to ensure that participants’ rights, safety, and well-being were fully protected. The study followed clear guidelines to create a supportive and respectful environment for everyone involved (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016): Participants received detailed information about the purpose of the study, what it involved, and their role in it. They were able to ask questions and fully understand the process before agreeing to take part. Their participation was completely voluntary, and they were free to withdraw at any time without facing any negative consequences.

To protect participants’ privacy, all personal information was anonymized. Names and identifying details were replaced with codes or pseudonyms. Data were stored securely, and only authorized researchers had access to it. These steps ensured participants’ information was kept private and safe.

Participation in the study were optional, and teachers could choose whether they wanted to take part or not. They also had the right to leave the study at any time without needing to explain their decision. This ensures that participants felt respected and in control throughout the process.

By taking these steps, the research was upheld high ethical standards, ensuring a process that is respectful, transparent, and focused on protecting participants at every stage (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Validation of Findings

To ensure the findings are both accurate and trustworthy, this study incorporated key strategies commonly used in qualitative research. The Triangulation and Member Checking are designed to strengthen the credibility and reliability of the results while staying true to the voices and experiences of participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Triangulation

Triangulation was used to compare data from, interviews, and document analysis. By looking at the findings from multiple angles, the study aimed to identify consistent themes and validate the insights gathered. This approach not only ensures accuracy but also provides a fuller, more nuanced understanding of teachers' experiences (Creswell, 2013). Bringing together different perspectives helps to paint a well-rounded picture of the research topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

MemberChecking

Participants played an active role in reviewing their interview transcripts and preliminary findings to ensure their perspectives had been captured accurately. This collaborative process not only reduces the chance of misinterpretation but also reinforces the authenticity of the research. It gives participants a voice in shaping the final narrative, ensuring their lived experiences are faithfully represented (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Limitations

Like any study, this research had its limitations, and it's important to acknowledge them openly. The study focused on a relatively small group of secondary school teachers, which might not fully represent all teachers in Azerbaijan. While the purposeful sampling method ensures rich and detailed data, it inherently limits the diversity of perspectives included (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews and focus groups rely on participants sharing their thoughts and experiences, but these accounts can sometimes be influenced by personal biases, selective memories, or the tendency to present oneself in a favorable light. This may affect the completeness and reliability of the data (Creswell, 2013).

The limited time available for this study may result in fewer participants and a narrower scope of data collection than desired. This constraint could affect how deeply certain themes are explored or how many perspectives are included (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Since interviews will be conducted in participants' native language, there is a possibility that some nuances may be lost or altered during transcription and translation. Careful attention will be given to interpreting the data in its full context to minimize this risk (Creswell, 2013)

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This section highlights the real views of the secondary school teachers from S1, S2, and S3 (for anonymity, the participating schools are coded as S1, S2, and S3. These identifiers are fictional and do not correspond to actual school numbers). They mentioned the difficulties they faced and how it impacted on their professional growth. Some teachers found certification exams to be valuable and a great way to grow professionally. All their voices are of fundamental importance as they are the ones living the experiences daily.

Overview of the Findings

The certification exam is generally intended to evaluate subject knowledge, pedagogical competence, and many other things such as classroom management techniques. The data collected has proven that many teachers do believe that certification exam promotes the standard of education and help teachers grow professionally. The teachers from the schools interviewed related how the exam has enabled them to update their teaching techniques and has led to them engaging deeply with their curriculum.

Positive Perceptions

Teachers from S1 and S2 had more positive perceptions and experiences of the exam. Most of them perceived the exam as a tool to help them grow professionally, especially for the new teachers. One teacher from S1 mentioned that “The exam was a great encouragement to me as I got a chance to revisit pedagogical strategies and have since updated my lesson plans to meet

curriculum standards”. Another teacher mentioned that “preparations for the exam got me reading about teaching strategies and curriculum updates which I wouldn’t have done if there was no exam”.

The new teachers were happy about the clarity of the exam, one teacher from S2 mentioned “We are happy with the exam, it somehow helps guide us on what we need to do and know”. Similarly, a teacher from S1 stated “As a new teacher, I am now aware of what is expected professionally”. Certification also leads to increased professional pride and confidence. One of the teachers mentioned “Now I can boldly say with pride that I am qualified and the exam has given me great skills and boosted my confidence”. Another teacher from the same school mentioned “I am happy that now we have a system that holds everyone accountable”. A third teacher from the same school also mentioned “The exam process is not perfect for now but at least it’s a good start going forward”. A teacher from S3 mentioned “The exam has prompted me to work on myself and during this process I discovered various strategies which are essential for teaching and learning”.

Critical Perceptions

Despite the many positive reflections mentioned, there were quite several concerns raised mostly by experienced teachers in the schools. The majority of them stated that the process does not align with the realities of the classroom and they defined it as stressful and rigid. The experienced teachers shared their frustrations about being re-evaluated. A teacher from S1 mentioned “After more than 20 years teaching, I am now required to prove what I have been doing all this long”. Another teacher from the same school echoed the same words and said, “The process does not consider experience, it seems like everyone is new to the profession”. Yet another teacher from

the same school highlighted that “We have taught for decades, why do we need to prove ourselves”.

Some teachers mentioned the emotional toll that comes with the exam. A teacher from another school mentioned “I got so anxious about the exam that I could not sleep the night before”. Another teacher mentioned “Some of my colleagues are even considering early retirement due to the stress and pressure the exam brings”.

Some teachers were critical of the exam misalignment with what they teach in class. One teacher from S1 mentioned “The exam tests for something different from what we teach daily”. Another echoed the same and mentioned, “We teach what’s in the curriculum but the exam asks questions not related to daily class activities”. The teacher from S2 mentioned “The scenario-based questions were a bit challenging and it was difficult to assume what the examiners wanted”. A teacher from S3 highlighted “I am more experienced and never faced difficulties with theoretical questions but my problem was with scenario-based questions due to lack of study materials about such”.

The interview stage of the exam was described as the biggest barrier and most described it as inaccessible. A teacher from S1 mentioned “With over 10 years of teaching experience which couldn’t help me as I had just a few minutes to explain my daily life in the classroom”. Another teacher from S2 stated “It was extremely difficult to demonstrate interactive teaching in an online platform as you can’t show everything on Zoom classes”. Another teacher from the same school echoed the same words “The hall was too noisy and that affected my concentrating”. Some teachers were unable to express themselves well and faced numerous challenges. A teacher from S3 mentioned “It was quite challenging for me to clearly explain my daily lesson on the online platform”. Moreover, teachers faced challenges due to a lack of relevant resources for them to

prepare for the exam. A teacher from S2 mentioned “We were just told to prepare for the exam but were not given any books”.

Impact on Teacher Morale

There was a mixed impact on teacher morale as the younger teachers felt motivated and empowered while the older teachers reported issues related to anxiety and even considering early retirement. One teacher from S1 said “What is the purpose of the process if it causes me more stress than growth”.

Recommendations from the Teachers

There were several proposals of strategies to improve the certification exam as many advocated for alternative testing for older experienced teachers to observations instead of standardized exams. Other teachers suggested that exam questions should be tailored in a way that they are closely related to the national curriculum and also provide resources necessary for exam preparations. In conclusion, both groups stated the need for flexibility and support that acknowledges the diverse needs faced in various classrooms.

As part of this study’s qualitative approach, we carried out a document analysis using an inductive method. The aim was to explore how teacher certification—and the views teachers shared during interviews—show up in the documents used in schools. We looked specifically for signs, whether clear or subtle, of how teaching methods, curriculum goals, and professional skills tied to certification were reflected in these materials.

Three types of documents were selected for review: the *Curriculum Guide*, *Lesson Plans*, and *School Policy*. However, the process of gathering these documents revealed some limitations. All three schools relied on the same state-issued *Curriculum Guide*, which lays out what teachers are expected to cover, as well as broader goals around teaching methods and subject knowledge. These expectations closely match what the teacher certification exam assesses, showing that the national curriculum already contains elements that reflect certification standards.

Unfortunately, we were not able to obtain any *School Policy* documents, which limited the analysis at the institutional level. Out of all participants, only one teacher shared a *Lesson Plan*. Still, this plan offered meaningful insights. It followed the curriculum closely, included clear objectives, well-organized methods, and emphasized student participation—all features that align with the expectations of the certification process. Her lesson plan became a strong example of how certification principles can be applied in everyday teaching.

Although the number of available documents was small, the analysis still pointed to important findings. The Curriculum Guide clearly reflects national-level certification goals. However, without additional documents like school policies or more examples of lesson planning, it's difficult to see how these expectations are supported within individual schools. This suggests that while the state sets the direction, the extent to which certification values are put into practice may depend heavily on individual teachers and their own commitment.

Participant Profiles

Throughout this study, 14 teachers were interviewed. The names of the teachers were mentioned with numbers to have anonymity. The participants were novice and veteran teachers with more than 30 years experience.

Participant information	
Interview 1	Work experience: 17 years Programme: Certification Subject: English
Interview 2	Work experience: 10 years Programme: Certification Subject: Azerbaijan language
Interview 3	Work experience: 12 years Programme: Certification Subject: Mathematics
Interview 4	Work experience: 8 years

	<p>Programme: Certification</p> <p>Subject: History</p>
Interview 5	<p>Work experience: 6 years</p> <p>Programme: certification</p> <p>Subject: English</p>
Interview 6	<p>Work experience : 8 years</p> <p>Programme: Certification</p> <p>Subject: History</p>
Interview 7	<p>Work experience : 10 years</p> <p>Programme: Certification</p> <p>Subject: Mathematics</p>
Interview 8	<p>Work experience: 6</p> <p>Programme: Certification</p> <p>Subject : English</p>

Interview 9	Work experience : 15 years Programme: Certification Subject: English
Interview 10	Work experience: 5 years Programme: Certification Subject: English
Interview 11	Work experience: 8 years Programme: Certification Subject: English
Interview 12	Work experience: 15 years Programme: Certification Subject: Primary School
Interview 13	Work experience: 15 years Programme: Certification

	Subject: Primary School
Interview 14	Work experience: 4 years Programme: Certification Subject: Azerbaijan language

CHAPTER V

Discussion and Implications

In this chapter, we focused on scrutinizing the findings in relation to the literature we had and distinguish the implication for teachers, policymakers. We applied Grounded Theory to explore the data, which permitted the deep understanding of teachers' perception at secondary schools on the Certification Exam as well as its alignment with the state's objectives. By listing the data into key points, we reveal how teachers' experiences and perceptions build their understanding of the exam, its purposes, and its impact on their professional growth.

Research Question 1: How do Azerbaijani secondary school teachers perceive the Teacher Certification Exam?

As it emerged from the findings of this research, teachers' perceptions of the certification exam are formed by both their personal experiences and educational environment. The findings we study various points of views, including positive experiences of professional development, disappointment with the exam's severity and its irrelevance to real-world teaching practices.

1. Professional Growth and Motivation: Teachers who, especially new in their careers, expressed that preparing for the certification exam stimulated them to improve their teaching strategies and align their practices with curriculum standards. It gave them a clear framework to follow and helped them to advance in their profession. When teachers see certification exams as a chance to improve themselves, they're more likely to take their work seriously and stay engaged (Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2022). Thus, the theory that emerged from the data suggests that when certification is framed as an opportunity for a professional growth, rather than as a pure compliance

with the administrative regulations, it boosts motivation and enhances engagement, especially for novice teachers.

2. **Stress and Rigidity:** However, the certification process seemed stressful for many experienced teachers, as it was perceived to be too severe and does not reflect the realities of their work. Standardized tests are often perceived as stressful and restrictive, offering little chance for teachers to exhibit the practical, hands-on skills that really have effective teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

3. **Mismatch with Real Teaching Practices:** The perceived difference between the theoretical content and actual needs of classroom instruction was a significant matter that came from the data. The flexible, collaborative element of teaching was not reflected in the certification exam as reported by teachers. This topic in accordance with complaints stated in other international contexts where the complexities of teaching practice often are not accurately represented by conceptual assessments (International Journal of Educational Development, 2023).

4. **Confidence and Recognition:** Many educators believed taking the certification exam enhanced their professional belief spite of these challenges. For those who considered that the examination proved their teaching abilities, the feeling of satisfaction and recognition was especially precious. The importance of professional reinforcement in building teachers' identities is underscored by grounded theory, which is in line with this study (Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2022). Teachers regard the test as an indicator of achievement as well as an obligation, which increases their status and reputation within the educational system.

Research Question 2: How does the teachers' perception of the purpose of Certification align with objectives set by the State?

The data shows the education system set specific aims for the Certification Exam but teacher participants view it differently as ineffective. Educational authorities seem to think that the states have a very clear goal in mind regarding measuring the quality of teaching and using the exam for recording purposes.

1. Need for Practical Assessments: Teachers recommended a practical testing system which utilized classroom demonstrations with direct method evaluation as its core components. The foundations of teacher preferences for practical exam components come from their classroom practice and these beliefs develop their teaching effectiveness perspectives. The teaching profession supports performance-based assessments as better measures of their professional capabilities because these approaches mirror current assessment trends found in education systems across the globe particularly in Finland and Russia. (OECD, 2020; Sahlberg, 2015).

2. Perception of Injustice and Inflexibility: Experienced teachers demonstrated their discontent regarding the strict rules in the certification exam system. The system did not recognize that different teaching scenarios exist and each educator has distinctive expertise levels. The standardization of the examination appears to create unfairness according to Grounded Theory because it provides identical testing conditions for teachers regardless of their different experience levels and expertise. Evaluations in various countries across the globe match these claims because they neglect to understand the multi-faceted nature of educators' work.

(Darling-Hammond, 2017).

3. Recommendations for Reform: Teachers express their professional requirements through educational recommendations that demonstrate a need for system design to align with these needs. New teachers need comprehensive preparation support according to their recommendations and

practical assessments should evaluate their skills according to their professional standards. A Grounded Theory framework demonstrates that these proposed modifications provide solutions for building an accreditation procedure for teachers which supports their work and enhances education standards. (OECD, 2020; Frost, 2023).

Conclusion: Grounded Theory Insights

This research uses Grounded Theory to unveil the multifaceted perceptions Azerbaijani secondary school teachers have about the teacher certification exam together with state policy objectives. The grounded study shows the discrepancy between imagined exam objectives and actual teacher classroom experiences. The professional advancement goals of some educators do not eliminate the challenges they face in the certification process which creates stress and reveals unmatching references to classroom practice and unjust grading practices.

Implications

These results produce crucial implications for teaching staff and educators in addition to policymakers of Azerbaijan and the nationwide education framework. Teachers should have an examination process which connects to real classroom practices while delivering less pressure and providing career support for professional development. The test results show that educators should provide their teachers with better preparation materials in addition to teaching reflection methods. The study demands from policymakers to revisit their certification exam policy which must ensure fairness together with relevance and practicality in order to adjust to different teacher experiences while adapting to education system needs.

Appendix A : Interview Protocol

Title: Secondary School Teachers Perception on Certification Exam

Thank you for participating actively in the interview. The purpose of the interview is to explore the secondary school teachers' perception on certification exam and the importance of the certification exam. The interview was conducted for only the research. The interview was about 20-30 minutes.

Teachers' Perception on the Certification Exam

Interview Format

Interviewee Information:

- Name (optional): _____
- Age Group:
 - 20-30
 - 31-40
 - 41-50
 - 51+
- Highest Qualification:
 - BA/BSc
 - MA/MSc
 - PhD
- Institution Type:

- Public School
 - Private School
 - International School
 - Teaching Experience:
 - Less than 3 years
 - 3-7 years
 - 8-15 years
 - More than 15 years
 - Employment Type:
 - Full-time
 - Part-time
-

Section 1: Awareness and Understanding

1. How aware were you of the certification exam's purpose before taking it?

- Fully aware
- Mostly aware
- Somewhat aware
- Minimally aware
- Not aware at all

2. Do you think the certification criteria are clear and inclusive? Why or why not?

(Open-ended response)

Section 2: Exam Fairness, Relevance, and Structure

3. To what extent do you think the certification exam fairly assesses a teacher's skills and knowledge?

- Very fair
- Mostly fair
- Neutral
- Somewhat unfair
- Totally unfair

4. How well does the exam content align with your day-to-day teaching responsibilities?

- Fully aligned
- Mostly aligned
- Somewhat aligned
- Not at all aligned

5. What were the most challenging aspects of the certification process? (Select all that apply and elaborate if necessary.)

- Content difficulty

- Exam format
 - Time constraints
 - Question design
 - Administration issues
 - Other (please specify): _____
-

Section 3: Institutional Support

6. Did your institution provide any support while you were preparing for the exam? (Select all that apply.)

- Academic support
 - Emotional support
 - Financial support
 - Reduced teaching load
 - Flexible schedule
 - No support received
-

Section 4: Impact on Teaching and Professional Growth

7. How has preparing for or taking the certification exam influenced your:

- Teaching methods? (*Describe any changes in your instructional approach.*)

- Lesson planning? *(Has your planning process changed?)*
- Content knowledge? *(Have you gained new insights or skills?)*

(Open-ended response)

8. Do you believe the certification process is beneficial for professional growth, or do you see it as a burden? Please explain.

(Open-ended response)

Section 5: Post-Exam Implications and Recommendations

9. How does the certification exam impact collegiality in your school? Does it encourage collaboration or create competition among teachers?

(Open-ended response)

10. What suggestions would you make to improve Azerbaijan's teacher certification process?

(Open-ended response)

Appendix B:

The 6-Cs of Certification:

Supporting Secondary Teachers Through Assessment

A visual framework capturing teacher experiences and policy directions.

Clarity

Clear expectations and guidelines from certifying bodies
Transparent communication on evaluation criteria



Competence

Skills enhancement via mentoring & Workshops and scenario-based training opportunities



Connections

Professional learning communities & collaborative PD
Peer mentoring and dedicated prep time



Choice

Flexible certification pathways (e.g, portfolios, observations)
Recognition of prior teaching experience



Compassion

Mental health support during exam periods
Access to counseling, stress management training



Celebration

Recognition of growth and accomplishments



Let's build certification systems that support, not strain.

A well-designed, inclusive exam process can empower teachers, not exhaust

**Empowered teachers create empowered classrooms.*



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<https://doi.org/10.3390/su15010818>

