

Master Thesis Research



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**Unpacking the Influence of the Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exams on the
Learning-Teaching Process**

Thesis prepared for the degree of Master of Arts

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STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICITY

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to explore the influence of the Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exams (CLSSLE) on the teaching and learning process at grade 9. The 9th graders' learning experience and their school teachers' teaching approaches have been investigated through the study, employing the following research questions: 1. "What are the teachers' perceptions of the influence of the CLSSLE on their teaching approaches?" 2. "What are the students' perceptions of the influence of the CLSSLE on their learning?"

The qualitative exploratory research employed a thematic approach to categorize the students' and teachers' perspectives on the influence of CLSSLE on the teaching and learning process in the 9th grade. The data was collected from four schools in Baku through semi-structured interview questions. The schools were selected through convenience sampling. The study involved eight teachers and twenty-four students.

The findings of the study revealed that active teaching methods fade away because of the prevalence of the CLSSLE, and preparation for these exams impede teaching system at school in the ninth grade. Furthermore, the timing of the CLSSLE has a multifaceted influence on the teaching and learning process: restricted curriculum, negligence of unexamined subjects, and shallow learning are of key findings of this research. It was also revealed that because of the CLSSLE students' motivation and responsibility increase till the exam time, while they stop engaging in the lessons after the exams.

Backing to the findings of this study, it is suggested that both the State Exam Committee and the Ministry of Science and Education look through the exam timing. Another concern that needs to be considered is aligning the students' CLSSLE results with their school performance

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assessments. School management and teachers would better delimit the CLSSLE results and daily student performance.

Keywords: high-stakes test, teaching-learning process, learning, centralized lower secondary school leaving exam (CLSSLE)

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

After the collapse of the USSR, education assessment exams have been conducted in a centralized way in post-soviet areas; countries (except Turkmenistan) established their national exam administrations (Bethell & Zabulionis, 2012). In 1992, Azerbaijan instituted the State Student Admission Commission (SSAC), which conducted the student admission process to private and public tertiary education institutions, including universities and technical vocational colleges (MoSE, 2023). Subsequently, “The Assessment Concepts for the General Education System of the Azerbaijan Republic” was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers on January 13, 2009. According to this concept, the standardized final examinations in grades 9 and 11 are conducted in a centralized way for issuing the education certificate. The new assessment system aims to derive concise feedback on students’ learning outcomes, assist students in developing critical thinking abilities during the learning process, and implement changes in curricula according to the test results of the students (Baku Research Institute, 2018).

Statement of Problem

Educational assessment plays a vital role in the quality of student learning experiences, teacher instructional activities, evaluation of curriculum, school quality, and system performance (Brown, 2022). However, contemporary investigations reveal varying approaches to the effects of standardized high-stakes testing on the teaching-learning process. Some researchers underline the exams as an inevitable part of the learning process (Brown, 2022; Boyukozturk, 2016; Amerin & Berliner, 2002). No matter what level and scope of education is provided, it is a necessity to test learning during or at the end of the process (Buyukozturk, 2016).

Moreover, standardized exams are advocated as an effective tool that creates positive learning behavior (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). Nevertheless, these arguments are strictly contradicted by other researchers who view these exams as a hindrance to the active learning process. Zhao et al. (2016) revealed the adverse effect of high-stakes testing on learning, underlying that these tests make students passive learners but active memorizers. Likewise, Thompson (2013) suggested that these exams cause stress, anxiety, and pressure in students. Furthermore, a comprehensive study conducted by Jones and Egley (2004) revealed that high-stakes testing impacts negatively on curricula, teaching, learning, and motivation of students and teachers. Economic pressure of these exams is one of the side-effects, which may affect the learning process. Thus, in many cases, students are inclined to private tutoring to get ready for the centralized exams (Ertug, 2019).

Despite the contradicting arguments, high-stakes testing is widely applied in both developed and developing countries in the world. The centralized high-stakes testing has been utilized in Azerbaijan since the early years of independence. Students become the subject of these kinds of tests as they finish the general lower secondary education in Azerbaijan (Cabinet of Ministers, 2009). According to the Law on Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2009, article 19.16), a final assessment is conducted at the level of Lower Secondary Education (LSE), and the students who complete the LSE are given a corresponding state document - a certificate. The document on Lower LSE is considered the basis for continuing education at the next level, Upper Secondary Education (UPS) or VET (Vocational Education and Training). Consequently, from the beginning of the 9th grade, students start to prepare for the Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exam (CLSSLE) subjects: main instruction language, math, and foreign language. The students are not involved in testing on other subjects, which in turn

influences the overall learning process at this level of education. Thus, “teaching to test” not only reduces the depth of instruction in specific subjects, but it also narrows the curriculum so that non-tested disciplines receive less attention during school day (Volante, 2004).

In addition, exams on the above-mentioned subjects cover not only the current grade topics but the whole curriculum till the 9th grade, which affects teaching and learning of the adequate grade material. According to the preliminary discussions with my colleagues and my own experience as a teacher of the ninth grade, it could be summarized that the CLSSLE may create extra challenges for the learners and teachers of the 9th grade.

The Purpose of the Study

The study aims to explore the influence of the CLSSLE on the teaching and learning process in the 9th grade. Employing the following research questions, the students’ learning experience and the teachers’ teaching approaches were investigated throughout the study.

Research Questions

1. What are the teachers’ perceptions of the influence of the CLSSLE on their teaching approaches?
2. What are the students’ perceptions of the influence of the CLSSLE on their learning?

Definition of the Keywords

A standardized test is any form of test that requires all test takers to answer the same questions, or a selection of questions from a common bank of questions, in the same way, and that is scored in a “standard” or consistent manner, which makes it possible to compare the relative performance of individual students or groups of students (Education Reform, 2014).

A high-stakes test is any test used to make important decisions about students, educators, schools, or districts, most commonly for the purpose of accountability. For example, if test results are used to determine an important outcome, such as whether a student receives a high school diploma, the test would be considered a high-stakes test regardless of whether it is a multiple-choice exam, an oral exam, or an essay exam (Education Reform, 2014).

The teaching-learning process can be defined as a transformation process of knowledge from teachers to students. It is referred to as the combination of various elements within the process where an educator identifies and establishes the learning objectives and develops teaching resources and implements the teaching and learning strategy (Munna & Kalam2021).

Learning is a process that leads to change, which occurs because of experience and increases the potential for improved performance and future learning (Mayer, 2002 as cited in Ambrose et al., 2010).

Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exam (CLSSLE): School-leaving examinations of the pupils graduating from the lower general secondary education (9 years of schooling) are conducted by the SEC (State Examination Centre). The secondary school-leaving examination is constructed as paper-based questions on the subjects of the Instruction Language (Azerbaijani, Russian, Georgian), Foreign Language, and Mathematics. These tests are also considered admission exams to secondary specialized educational institutions on the basis of general secondary education (DIM, 2023).

Significance of the Study

Investigating how the CLSSLE affects the teaching-learning process is important for many reasons. The study can point out how these tests influence the teaching and learning process in the 9th grade. For instance, it can show whether teachers frequently prioritize test

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preparation at the expense of other crucial facets of student learning such as oral presentation, working on projects, and thinking critically. This study can help teachers evaluate their instructional strategies. In addition, the CLSSLE can be subject to student anxiety which is vital to comprehend how such stress affects students' learning. Lastly, the results of the research can help education specialists create a program that is more sensitive to students' learning needs.

To shed light on the above-raised problems, the study is organized around the following sections: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion of the findings. The next chapter will cover the available literature on the above-mentioned significant points.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Exams whose results are not used to make important decisions for students or educators are called low-stakes exams (Ilhan et al., 2021). On the contrary, a test becomes high stakes when the outcomes are used to make decisions about promotion, admissions, and graduation (Jones & Ennes, 2018). In addition, high-stakes testing can affect the whole stakeholders which include education practitioners, students, and parents in all aspects (Ananda & Ashadi, 2021). According to Fitzgerald (2015), high-stakes testing was selected as an assessment tool to look at students' outcomes, measure the schools' improvement, and determine their progress in achieving the goals. One type of high-stakes testing is School leaving Exams, which are called differently in various regions such as standardized school leaving exams, centralized school leaving exams, central exams, unified school examinations, and school graduation exams. In the Azerbaijani context, Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exams are high-stakes as the consequences are serious for stakeholders (Eggen & Stobart, 2015). As the main stakeholders of CLSSLE, students and teachers experience either direct or indirect influence of these exams in the teaching and learning process. By conducting a study-by-study review, this section aims to explore different studies that disclose the effects of centralized exams on education.

Double Effects

A longitudinal study by Maag and Oerke (2017) found the ambivalent influence of centralized school leaving exams: teacher support is persistent till the exam dates, while the teachers' motivation declines after that period. The data was collected from 28 schools of Bremen and Hesse secondary schools within five consecutive years, from 2007 to 2011. Each

year 800-1000 students participated in written questionnaires of their three written exam subjects, including an advanced-level mathematics or English course. Findings revealed that central exams influence positively on students' intrinsic motivation of engaging in the learning process. Simultaneously, extrinsic factors (teacher support, exam impact) were shown to play distinct roles in engaging different subjects. The authors summarized that teaching and learning progress positively till the exam time, while both the students and teachers feel saturated and pacify after the exams.

A correlation between extrinsic and intrinsic factors, contributing to learning motivation, was shed light by Korean researchers, too. Kwon et al. (2017) investigated the influence of high-stakes exams, College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), on the Korean education system including the teaching and learning process in classrooms. The study compared the exam scores of high school graduates from 1974 to 2013, Korean students' performance on PISA in 2012, and TIMSS in 2011. Although the results of these exams were quite high to justify the national exam assessment system, the authors concluded that Korean students demonstrated less index of intrinsic motivation for learning under the influence of high-stakes exams.

In addition, the positive correlation between central exams and student learning (Leschnig et.al, 2020) was investigated relying on data collected from 30 member countries of Europe: PIAAC (Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies). The researchers falsified the approach that the knowledge and skills gained under the centralized high-stakes exam process have a temporary effect. Vice versa, the quantitative research revealed that centralized high-stakes exams increase the cognitive skills of students by about seven percent of a standard deviation compared to that of decentralized exam systems.

Students as well as the surrounding community, including teachers and schools were the objects of the study by Yiyang Lai (2023), conducted in Minnesota, USA. The thorough analysis of the influence of centralized standard testing on students and the learning environment concluded varying results. While anxiety and serious psychological stress were underscored as adverse effects, decreased forgetfulness, and increased self-efficacy and self-assessment were highlighted as benefits of those tests. The author concluded that regardless of some pitfalls, centralized high-stakes testing has a special importance as a teaching tool and can indeed improve students' learning.

Adverse Effects

On the contrary, Morgan (2016) emphasized that since teachers face pressure for low performance on high-stakes tests, they employ a style of teaching that focuses on drilling and memorization that leads to shallow learning. The paper concluded that these tests offer framed and restricted knowledge that harms students' potential success in active learning.

To identify how students respond physiologically to high-stakes testing, Jennifer A. Heissel (2018) and her colleagues collected data using cortisol samples provided by low-income students in New Orleans, USA. The team found that high-stakes testing does affect cortisol responses, which in turn affects test performance. Although, the research was conducted based on the data collected from students with low socioeconomic status (SES), a descriptive work by Bradbury et al. (2015) bolsters the fact that children from low-SES perform weaker than that of high-SES families. Overall, it is concluded that high-stakes testing cannot accurately evaluate the relevant knowledge of the candidates who are stressed and anxious during the process.

Along with psychological effects, which have direct connections with the teaching-learning process, some other negative consequences were underscored by countries

geographically close to Azerbaijan. For example, in 2021, the study conducted in Georgia by Gorgodze and Chakhaia examined the effectiveness of two external standardized exams administered centrally in the last 15 years – the Unified National Examinations (UNE) for university admission and the School Graduation Exams (SGE). Employing explanatory research design, the authors concluded adverse effects of these high-stakes exams, such as shallow learning and even more tutoring. The researchers proposed a centralized system to be decentralized over time.

Students' and Teachers' Perspectives

The exploratory study by Smyth and Banks (2012), which was based on surveys completed by 897 lower secondary students and 748 upper secondary students along with interviews with 100 students from both groups, aimed to reveal students' experiences of the influence of high-stakes exams on teaching and learning in Ireland. The mixed method study found that students who were going to take high-stakes tests were not satisfied with teaching at school. They believed that good teaching meant focusing thoroughly on knowledge and skills to do well in the exam. Most of the students would expect the learning process be more exam-oriented rather than containing broader classroom activities, which they found more engaging in previous years.

Similar findings can be underlined for the research conducted in Turkey by Ilhan et al. (2021). The study involved 191 teachers who were given seven stimulants related to the adverse influences of high-stakes exams on education. The descriptive survey research revealed that the foremost problems stemming from high-stakes exams are neglecting internal school assessments, provoking teaching to the test and private tutoring. The psychological influence of these exams was also among the adverse effects, which concerned the teachers who participated in the

surveys. The authors concluded that the course content which is included in high-stakes exams is prioritized compared to the content of other courses; the teachers prefer teaching the topics that appear in tests.

Another study on students' thoughts on central exams was investigated by a Turkish researcher Ertug (2017). The research involved 120 students who had attended the survey. Nearly all the participants in the research (116 people) stated that centralized examination practices had negative effects. The findings confirm and support the conclusion of the research that with the central examination practices, the private teaching institution sector has developed: private courses, private lessons and exam-oriented publications have increased, and this has a negative economic and psychological impact on students and their families. Almost all of the students participating in the research (112 people) stated that the central exam practices pave the way for taking the exam by memorizing the information, that these exams cannot measure characteristics such as the ability of thinking, reasoning, predicting, analyzing, and evaluating.

The study by Gologlu and Kelesh (2021) on the impact of high-stakes testing on the teaching and learning processes of mathematics shed light on the impacts of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning processes, academic performance measurement, communication, and motivation based on teacher perceptions. 13 middle school mathematic teachers were selected via the maximum sampling technique to participate in this qualitative research. The study on the influence of high-stakes testing on the process of teaching-learning found that the teachers mostly stuck to traditional teaching techniques; active learning is either ignored or used very rarely.

In Azerbaijan, a comprehensive analysis conducted by Emin Hajili (2019) emphasizes that standardized high-stakes assessments alone cannot evaluate students' real achievements. The

author suggests academic essay writing be added to the high-stakes exams, which will improve students' critical thinking and overall learning process. According to Hajili (2019), the implementation of the teaching of writing across the curriculum and its assessment via state centralized exams could be done in a parallel way because teaching and assessment are interconnected.

Conclusion

Overall, Centralized School Leaving Exams have been a common topic for researchers around the world. These exams are high-stakes as the results affect the whole society. The literature regarding the influence of these high-stakes exams on teaching and learning reveals double consequences from the perspectives of teachers and students. Some studies reveal that these exams increase students' and teachers' motivation, though for a short time, and strengthen learners' cognitive skills. However, teaching to the test and shallow learning are among the adverse effects of the researchers' findings. In addition, psychological repercussions are mentioned as side-effects of these high-stakes exams. Exam stress and anxiety hinder students from demonstrating their actual knowledge and skills, which triggered some researchers to undermine the accuracy level of these exams.

Literature Gap

While the literature review provides a thorough perception of the impact of high-stakes exams on teaching and learning in different diverse settings, there is a gap in acknowledging how these exams particularly influence on the teaching-learning approaches of 9th-grade teachers and students in Azerbaijan. The existing literature focuses on various global contexts including the USA, Germany, Ireland, Korea, Georgia, and Turkey; however, in the Azerbaijani education context – at the 9th grade level – there is not enough study.

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Intrinsic and extrinsic learning motivation, cognitive skills, teaching methods, stress and its effects on the teaching and learning process were embraced in the current body of literature. This study can shed light on the influence of high-stakes exams on teaching and learning from the perspectives of cultural, social, and educational characteristics of Azerbaijan. The research may contribute to the specific dynamics which were not relevantly addressed in the prior investigations. Thus, the literature gap is highly apparent in considering both teachers' perspectives and students' attitudes in combination, which can unpack the effects of these exams on the teaching and learning process within the specific context of 9th-grade education in Azerbaijan.

Overall, the available literature mainly discusses the general influence of centralized exams on the education process, thus the need for specific research on the nuanced experience and approach of 9th-grade teachers and students in secondary schools is a gap to address, giving a voice to the students and teachers.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The main goal of this research was to unpack the influence of Centralized Secondary School Leaving exams on students' learning experience and teachers' teaching approaches in the 9th grade in Azerbaijani schools through teachers' and students' perceptions. This chapter introduces the research design and theoretical framework that guided the study. Alongside the research questions, data collection methods, data analysis, and ethical issues cover the main discourse of this part.

Research Questions

Following the above-mentioned methodology guide, I have scrutinized how the Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exams influence the teaching-learning process in 9th grade. The inquiry has been constructed on the research questions listed below:

1. What are the teachers' perceptions of the influence of the CLSSLE on their teaching approaches?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the influence of the CLSSLE on their learning?

Qualitative Research

To understand individuals' experiences, which is mostly interpreted through verbal data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), qualitative research is a widely used research design in social science. In this study, I investigated 9th-grade students' and teachers' experiences and approaches to the influence of centralized school-leaving exams on their learning and teaching, which aligns with the nature of the qualitative research design. Furthermore, Creswell (2012) claims that qualitative research becomes actual when "the literature might yield little information about the phenomenon of the study" (p. 16). As it was mentioned in Chapter II, nuanced research

on the problem that is focused on this study is not available in the Azerbaijani context.

Accordingly, the lack of literature on the influence of the centralized lower secondary school leaving exams on the teaching-learning environment in Azerbaijan made the research refer to the data collected from specific individuals: teachers and students.

Interpretive Paradigm

The interpretive paradigm – which prioritizes understanding of human experiences and meanings within different social contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) – directed the route of this research. As the study tended to perceive subjective viewpoints under a realistic environment, I employed the interpretivist philosophy that encouraged me to enter the process of analyzing the phenomenon through the real setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which could ensure the validity of the findings of this research. To interpret the information, the multi-angled approach to the influence of CSSLE was analyzed through specific philosophical stances, such as interpretive ontology and epistemology.

Research Design

Choosing a relevant research design is a crucial component in shaping the development of a qualitative study. Accordingly, I was encouraged to employ Creswell's (2012) three procedures in the qualitative research process: data collection, data analysis, and report writing. I collected the data systematically, and this qualitative procedure employed "extensive discussion about the major themes that arise from analyzing a qualitative database" (Creswell, 2012, p. 276). I used this approach to back up the themes drawn from quotes and abundant details. As this study's purpose was to interpret the experience of teachers and students regarding the influence of the CLSSLE on teaching and learning, I used interview approaches to explore the participants'

perceptions. The data were collected from the teachers of the 9th grade through semi-structured interviews, while focus group discussions were organized with the students of the 9th grade.

Data Collection

I employed qualitative approach using “human tools” to receive “rapid response and adaptation capabilities” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 16). Therefore, I investigated the impact of high-stakes exams on human experience through interviews and focus group discussions as primary data collection. I interviewed the teachers of the 9th grade utilizing the interview protocol containing open-ended and closed-ended questions prepared before the data collection process. Besides, focus group discussions were organized with the 9th-grade students of the same schools.

Semi – Structured Interviews

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), “less–structured, or semi-structured, interview formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique formats” (p.110). I used this format in One-on-One interviews with the teachers, who have at least three years’ experience teaching in the 9th grade, to share their perceptions of the effects of the CSSLE on teaching and their students’ learning. By means of beforehand prepared open-ended questions, I provided provide more flexibility to respond to the situation. In Merriam and Tisdell’s (2015) words, “insights and understanding can be obtained through the flexible interview approach” (p.111)

Focus Group Interviews

Creswell (2015) characterizes “focus group interviews advantageous when the interactions among interviewees will likely yield the best information and when individuals are hesitant to provide information” (p. 218). Considering the age of the students, I tended not to

interview the students One-on-One as they might have hesitated or felt shy to share their perceptions on the influence of these exams on their study. Instead, I organized focus group discussions that encouraged the students to talk and share their views.

Research Site and Sampling

The investigations were conducted at four schools in Baku. To provide the variety, two of the schools were public and two private which provide education according to national curriculum. To involve the participants I used purposeful sampling, which is characterized as strategic, targeted, and percipient approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Employing this sampling strategy, I contacted two teachers from each school to arrange interviews. As mentioned above, the participants of semi-structured interviews were the teachers who teach school leaving exam subjects in 9th grade. Thus, two teachers were involved in the interviews from each selected school. In total, three of the participants were male and five of them were female: two math teachers, three Azerbaijani language teachers, and three English language teachers. In addition, focus group interviews were organized with six students at each school who study in the 9th grade.

A convenience sampling method was employed for this study. So that, one of the public schools is the one which I graduated from. As some of my schoolteachers are teaching there, they helped me to schedule a time for the individual interview and focus group discussions. Another public school is located near my living area, whose principal is a friend of mine. He is quite open to research and innovations. Furthermore, one of the selected private schools is the one that I am working at. The other private school is also located in the city center. I talked to the school leader and agreed about the time that I could investigate the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 202). Creswell (2015) characterizes qualitative analysis as inductive, built on an interpretive approach to process the collected data. Employing this approach, I transcribed the interviews and categorized the data on general codes, categories, and themes. Qualitative data analysis is not only inductive but comparative (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Accordingly, the data was analyzed in a comparative way to understand the thoughts and perceptions of the influence of Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exams on teaching and learning.

Validity, Reliability, and Ethics

“Ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner” (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 237). One of the main goals of this study was providing precise and reliable knowledge in an ethically accountable way. The research site observations and personal experience as a high school teacher helped me to tranquilize the trustworthiness of the interviews. The term triangulation is defined by Merriam & Tisdell (2015) as a process using multiple sources of information through different opinions and observations. The data collection process involved human interactions that makes the ethical issues prominent for this research. The purpose of the study was explained to all the participants before the interviews and focus group discussions. In addition, consent forms had been prepared and signed before the interviews. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the interviews any time they wanted.

Conclusion

In summary, the chapter highlights the methods employed to unpack the effects of centralized secondary school leaving exams on the learning experience of 9th-grade students and

their teachers' teaching approaches. The nature of the research complies with the selected qualitative research design, which aims to understand the experience and approach of students and teachers at the specific grade level in Azerbaijan.

The main strategy of the research is constructed on the formulated research questions, which focus on the overall influence of the centralized secondary school leaving exams on the teaching-learning experience and perception of students and teachers of 9th grade. The philosophical overview of the study is guided by an interpretive paradigm that prioritizes comprehension of human experiences and approaches through various sociocultural contexts.

Aligning with Creswell's (2011) procedures in qualitative research, the selected design employs semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to collect the needed data. To complement the study findings, research site diversity enhances the validity of the collected data. Through purposeful sampling at private and public schools in Baku, diverse viewpoints are collected and analyzed. The chapter also delineates the data analysis process including inductive and comparative approaches, which classify data into general themes and codes.

Overall, the employed methodological framework lays out a comprehensive exploration of the effects of centralized secondary school leaving exams on the teaching and learning experience and approaches of 9th-grade students and teachers.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of the study was to explore the teachers' and students' perceptions of the influence of the Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exams (CLSSLE) on the teaching and learning process in the 9th grade. To unpack the potential effects of these exams on the teaching methods of the 9th-grade teachers and the learning experience of the students of the same grade, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight teachers, and four focus group discussions were organized with 9th-grade students at four schools in Baku city. The data collected through the interviews and focus group discussions were used to provide answers to the research questions of this study.

1. What are the teachers' perceptions of the influence of the CLSSLE on their teaching approaches?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the influence of the CLSSLE on their learning?

The participants' views and experiences were analyzed through thematic analyses, employing an inductive approach, in which the codes were drawn from the data. Prioritizing the core aims of the research, the findings were organized around two main themes that were relevant to the research questions of the study. Theme 1 (Challenges in Teaching) is dissected into four sub-themes which revealed the perceptions of the teachers on the following topics: Dual Teaching and Confusion; Curriculum Adaptation and Exam Oriented Teaching; and Impact of Exam Timing on Teaching; Exam Impact on Assessment. While Theme 2 (The impact of the CLSSLE on Students' Learning) was laid out in three sub-themes - Students' Motivation and Participation; Tutoring Versus Learning at School; Responsibility and Academic Pressure –

which aimed to illustrate the 9th graders' perceptions of the influence of CLSSLE on their learning.

Theme 1 Challenges in Teaching

The first research question, “What are the teachers' perceptions on the influence of Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exams (CLSSLE) on their teaching?” seeks to unpack teachers' experience while teaching 9th grades. So that, several specific questions were addressed to the teachers who participated in the interviews. The following subthemes were summarized referring to the teachers' responses.

Subtheme for teacher responses 1.1 Dual Teaching and Confusion

By and large, the teachers expressed that the factual presence of both school teaching and private tutoring in the 9th grade creates confusion for students and disrupts schoolteachers' lesson plans. Thus, the teachers cannot maintain coherence aligned with school programs to provide systematic education. According to the teachers, the students cannot follow their instructions as the learners have different topics with their private tutors. Because the private tutors employ fast exam-oriented teaching; however, the school program is designed on an active learning basis which covers a year-long term, considering only the current year's topics. Some of the extracts from the teachers' responses are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

The teachers' thoughts on dual teaching and confusion

Uşaq bir sistemdən başqa sistemə keçdiyi üçün, sonra mən onu məktəb sisteminə qaytaranda, dediyim kimi, sistem pozulur.	The school system is spoiled as the student takes private tutoring and learns at school.
Şagird onunla (repititorla) bir şey oxuyur məndə başqa şey. O daha çox sürətləndirilmiş şeyə meyl	The student studies one thing with him (with the tutor) and another thing with me. He leans more

edir. Çünki, düşünür ki o, imtahan verməlidir. Digər tərəfdən də mən mövzu-mövzu keçdiyim şeyi qəbul etmir.	towards the accelerated thing. Because he thinks that he should take the exam. On the other hand, he does not accept what I am going through topic by topic
Şagird bir yerə yönəlməlidir.	The student must focus on one place.
Məsələn, 25 şagirddən, olar ki, 3 nəfər repititor yanına getməsin. Tutaq ki, biz bu gün 9-cu sinifdə çevrə mövzusunı keçiriksə, şagird repititor yanında o mövzunu hələ keçməyibsə, artıq fokuslanır repititora.	For example, out of 25 students, almost 3 students do not go to the tutor. Let us say that today in the 9th grade we are passing the circle topic, if the student has not yet covered that topic with the tutor, he is already focusing on the tutor.
Məsələn, kimya dərslirsə, şagirdlər ingilis dili oxuyur. Və ya, fizika dərslirsə, şagirdlər məktəbdən sonrakı repititorun dərsinə hazırlaşır.	For example, if it is a chemistry class, students study English. Or, if it is a physics class, students prepare for after-school tutoring.

Subtheme for teacher responses 1.2 Curriculum Adaptation and Exam Oriented Teaching

Another common subtheme related to the teaching challenges was teaching methods, which was brought up by most of the teachers. The teachers mentioned that because of the requirements of CLSSLE, they adjust teaching methods to exam preparation in the 9th grade. Because student results on CLSSLE are one of the important indicators in school evaluation, the school authority wants the students to get high scores in these centralized exams. Basically, all the instructions and teaching plans include test writing. In addition, the 9th grade's content is condensed as the exam topics cover materials from 5th to 9th grade. So that, the teachers not only focus on delivering the content of the current grade but also concentrate on revising subject topics of earlier grades. In addition, active teaching is overshadowed because of these exams. Teachers stated that active curriculum standards are left aside, and teaching for the test becomes the dominant way of educating till exam time in the 9th grade. Subsequently, the

teachers expressed their concerns regarding the impact of the CLSSLE on their teaching in different forms (see Table 2).

Table 2

Teachers' concerns about the influence of the CLSSLE on their teaching

Biz vaxtımızın çox hissəsini testlər üzərində işləməyə, yəni sırf test modellərinə sərf edirik.	We spend most of our time working on tests, that is, purely on the test models.
Mən əlavə resurslardan istifadə edirəm. ... nəinki məktəbdə istifadə etdiyimiz materiallardan, nə də dərslikdən.	I use additional resources. ... not only from the materials we employ at school, not from the textbook.
Açıq deyim ki, 9-cu sinifdə biz sırf imtahana hazırlaşırıq. Demək olar ki, biz aktiv qruplarla işləyirik. Və bu kimi şeylərə çox vaxt sərf edə bilmirik.	To be honest, in the 9th grade we are just preparing for the exam. We hardly work with active groups. And we cannot spend a lot of time on things like that.
... bizim sırf məqsədimiz imtahana hazırlaşmalarıdır.	... our only goal is to prepare them for the exam.
... hə, repititor kimi oluruq. Çünki, uşağın tələbi odur.	... yes, we are like tutors. Because that is the student's demand.
Biz şagirdi testə hazırladıırıq. Valideyn də istəyir ki, onun övladı yaxşı nəticə yığsın.	We prepare the student for the test. A parent also wants his child to get good results.
... 8-ci sinifdə, məsələn, biz, demək olar, üstünlüyümüz daha çoxdur. 9-cu sinifə qədər mənə dərs demək daha xoşdur.	... In the 8th grade, for example, we almost have an advantage. It is more pleasant to teach me till 9th grade.

Subtheme for teacher responses 1.3 Impact of Exam Timing on Teaching

Discussions of the timing of the CLSSLE revealed a general concern, which was addressed by all the teachers who participated in the interviews. That is, the CLSSLE is usually held in the middle of the academic year in the 9th grade. As the data collection was conducted a few days before the current centralized exams, all the teachers raised the issue as an alarming

concern in their teaching. They expressed that all the students and teachers work intensively to reach the exam topics within a four-month period, which hinders the teaching and learning process. In one word it leads to fast and plain teaching. Accordingly, the following extracts were commonly articulated by the teachers (see Table 3).

Table 3

Teachers' concerns about the exam timing.

İmtahanların keçirilmə vaxtı tədris prosesini yarımçıq qoyur.	The timing of the exams interrupts the teaching process.
Amma, yenə də, mən düşünürəm ki, bu təbii ki, bizi məhdudlaşdırır.	But, again, I think, of course, it limits us.
İmtahanların mart ayında olması bizi çox incidir.	We are very upset that the exams are in March.
İmtahanların çox tez olması mənfi bir şeydir. Biz maksimum dərəcədə çalışırıq ki, hər gün bir yeni mövzu keçək və onun üzərində testlər edək.	Exams being too early is a negative thing. We try our best to cover a new topic every day and do tests on it.

Subtheme for teacher responses 1.4 Exam Impact on Assessment

CLSSLE seems to shape teachers' assessment strategies as well. According to some teacher narratives, student assessment is conducted without considering CLSSE; nevertheless, a group of teachers align student marks to students' centralized exam scores.

Some of the teachers do not consider students' exam scores while assessing after the CLSSLE. They carry out assessments according to daily student performance before and after these exams. For example, one of the teachers stated: “Ümumiyyətlə, buraxılış imtahanının nəticəsini nəzərə almaq mənim leksikonumda yoxdur. Nə alır onu da yazıram. Başqa cür olsa, saxtakarlıq sayılır.” [In general, considering the result of the final exam is beyond my

comprehension. I write what they deserve. Otherwise, it is considered fraud.] Another teacher mentioned that he has never adjusted student assessment to their exam scores either, claiming; “Elə bir problem olmur. İstədiyim qiyməti yazsa bilərəm bəli.” [There is no problem with it. I can mark whatever I want.]

On the other hand, most claimed that, before the exam period, they usually adjust their assessment practices to align with the requirements of the CLSSLE. Besides, they assess students solely on their exam scores rather than overall student progress after the exam. The exam-score-adjusted student evaluation continues for 3-4 months till the end of the academic year. Some statements have been excerpted from the teachers’ responses. (See table 4)

Table 4

Teachers’ assessment perceptions

Yəni, yenə də deyirəm, uşaq 2 alıbsa, ona 3 yazıram. Amma proqresi olubsa belə, imtahanı 2 alana 4 qiyməti yazmıram. Bilirəm, yalnızdır belə etmək. Amma belə tələb edirlər.	I say again, if the student scores 2, I give him 3. But even if there is progress, I never give a “4” to those who get a “2” in the exam. I know it is wrong to do so. But they demand it.
Qiymətləndirmə meyarlarında bir şablon olur. O suallar üzərində imtahanlar təşkil edilir və şagird yazdığı nəticələrə görə qiymətləndirilir amma fərdi yanaşılır.	There is a template in the evaluation criteria. Exams are organized on those questions and students are evaluated according to that, but they are not approached individually.
Test şəklində qiymətləndirməni ədalətsiz hesab edirəm. ... 9-cu sinifdə biz bunu ümumi sınaq test üzərində edirik.	I think the test measurement is unfair. ... in the 9th grade, we do this as a general practice test.
... amma imtihandan sonra şagird buraxılış imtahanında nə qiymət alıbsa, o qiyməti yazırıq. Yəni, reallıq budur.	... but after the exam, we mark whatever grade was obtained in the exam. this is the reality

Theme II

The Impact of the CLSSLE on Students' Learning

The research's other objective was understanding the influence of the centralized lower secondary school living exams (CLSSLE) on students' ninth-grade learning. To identify the students' and teachers' perceptions of the influence, several questions were included in the interview protocol. Some of the addressed questions were: "How do you attract the students to the learning process?" "How do you think the focus on these exams affects students' approach to learning and their academic performance in the ninth grade?" "In your opinion, what are the positive effects of having these exams in learning the tested subjects," "How well do you think you would be able to learn these subjects better without these centralized exams?" The questions regarding the learning were asked by the teachers in individual interviews, while the students' perceptions were inquired in focus group discussions. As a result of both data, the following subthemes were laid out as a common category: teachers' perceptions on students' motivation and engagement; exam impact on schooling and tutoring; and responsibility and academic pressure.

Subtheme for Teacher Responses 2.1 Students' Motivation and Attendance

In general, most of the teachers' perceptions of students' motivation and attendance in the exam environment signal serious concerns. Nevertheless, some positive narratives were expressed, either. For instance, one of the teachers claimed that the CLSSLE increases the students' motivation and class engagement, stating that, "Yüksək, yüksək təsir edir." [Positive, it affects positively.] She also mentioned that the post-exam period has a negative influence neither on motivation nor on attendance. She continued: "Yəni, uşaqlar imtahandan sonra da böyük ruh

yüksəkliyi ilə, həvəslə oxuyurlar.” [That is, the students study enthusiastically after the exam, as well.]

However, another group of teachers commonly observe a notable decline in attendance and engagement before and after the exam because of specific reasons for each period. On one hand, the timeline till the exam was observed with extensive tutoring, which leads to absenteeism at school. On the other hand, students’ attendance and motivation decline after the exam as they feel saturated and wait only for their exam results, skipping school lessons. Consequently, attendance and motivation throughout the ninth grade are significantly affected by the CSSLE. Accordingly, as one teacher mentioned, “İmtahanın tez keçirilməsi imtahandan sonrakı tədris prosesinin zəifləməsinə gətirib çıxarır. Uşaqları adaptasiya, motivasiya eləmək çətinləşir. Yəni, yaxşı olardı ki, imtahanlar tədris ilinin sonunda keçirilsin.” [The early examination leads to a weakening of the post-examination teaching process. It becomes difficult to adapt and motivate children. That is, it would be good if the exams were held at the end of the academic year.] Most of the responses supported these perceptions (see Table 5).

Table 5

Teachers’ perceptions of students’ motivation and attendance

İmtahandan sonra uşaqları təhsilə cəlb etmək çox çətin olur.	It is very difficult to involve the children in education after the exam.
İmtahandan sonra uşaqların kitab, dəftər gətirməməyi ənənəvi hal alır. Hətta dərslərə gəlmirlər, gələndə də oxumaq istəmirlər.	It is customary for children not to bring books and notebooks after the exam. They don't even attend the class, and when they do, they don't want to study.
Repititorla hazırlaşan uşaq məktəb sisteminə uyğunlaşa bilmir və yaxud elə hiss edir ki, daha mənə lazım deyil. Ona görə oxumaq istəmir.	The student who has extra tutoring can't adapt to the school system or they think that they don't need it anymore. So, they don't want to

	study.
Marta qədərki dövr, bəli, uşaqlarda canfəşanlıq var. Düzdü, bəziləri hazırlığa gedir, yəni məktəbə gəlmir.	The period until March, yes, children have the zeal to study. That's right, some take extra tutoring, that is, they don't come to school.
... məktəbdə vəziyyət mart ayından sonra çox acınacaqlı olur. Və nəzrə alsaq ki, martdan sonra bizim riyaziyyatda 9-cu sinifin əsas materialları martdan sonraya qalır, bu çox böyük ciddi problem yaradır.	... the situation at school becomes very sad after March. And considering that after March, the main materials of the 9th grade in our mathematics remain after March, this creates a very big and serious problem.
Yəni, bu çox çətin bir şeydir ki, uşaqları dərəcə cəlb etmək. Bu problemdir.	That is, it is very difficult to attract children to the lesson. This is the problem.
... keçən ilki 9-lardan götürək, imtahana çox ciddi şəkildə hazırlaşırdılar. Artıq imtahan verəndən sonra, sanki, bir sakitlik dövrü çöktü, bütün dərslər kənara atıldı.	... let's take the last year's 9th graders, they were preparing for the exam very seriously. After taking the exam, as if a period of calm fell, all lessons were thrown aside.
İmtahandan sonra şagirdlərin, demək olar ki, 50% - i tədrisə yaxınlaşmır. Məktəbə gəlmirlər.	After the exam, almost 50% of students do not approach teaching. They don't come to school.

Subtheme for students' perceptions 2.2 Tutoring Versus Learning at School

The necessity for private tutoring is acknowledged as an inevitable demand by the students. These additional courses are thought to help students prepare themselves better for the CLSSLE. Participants expressed their challenges in balancing schoolwork and tutoring tasks for exam preparation. In addition, preparation for other school subjects, which are not examined, gets stagnant during a 5–6-month period in the ninth grade. Students mostly prepare for the exam subjects, ignoring the other disciplines in the ninth grade. The excerpts provided below are some of the students' experiences that describe their learning process in the ninth grade (see Table 6).

Table 6

Students' perceptions of learning under exam conditions.

Məktəbdə imtahana qədər digər fənnlər tədris edilmir. Hər gün yalnız 3 fənnə hazırlaşırıq. Çox çalışırıq ki yaxşı qiymət alağ.	Other subjects are not taught till the exams in our school. Every day, we prepare only for three subjects. We try hard to get excellent scores.
Mənə məktəb bəs eıəmir. Məktəb kifayət etmədiyi üçün müəllim yanında hazırlığa gedirəm.	School is not enough for me. Since the school is not enough, I take private tutoring.
Vaxtımızın çox hissəsini imtahana hazırlaşırıq ona görə digər fənnlər üçün çox az vaxtımız qalır.	We spend more time preparing for the exam, which leaves us less time for other subjects.
Məncə, 9-cu sinifdə Azərbaycan dili, riyaziyyat və ingilis dilindən başqa fənnlərə vaxt ayırmaq, çətdırmaq nisbətən çətin olur.	In my opinion, it is relatively difficult to devote time to subjects other than the Azerbaijani language, mathematics, and English in the 9th grade.
Məncə, 9-un imtahanı çox mənasızdı. Heç bir işə yaramır və olmasa daha yaxşı olardı. Digər fənlərə vaxt ayıra bilərdik.	In my opinion, the exam of 9 is very pointless. It is useless, and it would be better if we didn't take it. We could devote time to other subjects
Həm 9dan hazırlıqlara gedənlər özləri adlarını başqa məktəblərə yazdırıb imtahana hazırlaşırılar.	Those who take private tutoring from the 9th grade, just, get enrolled in other schools and prepare for the exam.
... bir müəllim 45 dəqiqə ərzində bir uşağa heç 10 dəqiqə vaxt ayıra bilmir. Bizim sinifdə 25 uşaq var.	... a teacher can't spend even 10 minutes on a student for 45 minutes. There are 25 students in our class.

Subtheme for Student Perceptions 2.3 Responsibility and Academic Pressure

The focus group discussions imply that students take more responsibility and academic pressure in the 9th grade. Students stated that they spend most of their time studying: having extra lessons; taking private tutoring and additional preparation to be ready for the exam. Some students mentioned increased family expectations as a source of extrinsic motivation, which affects their individual study habits. In some of the focus group discussions, students also stated that being in the 9th grade causes improvement in learning specific subjects. Especially, the increase in exam stress and the preparation process makes students take on more responsibility.

It could be concluded that both academic pressure and student responsibility become high because of the CLSSLE in the first term of the academic year in the 9th grade. For instance, one of the students stated: “9-cu sinifdə üstümüzə daha çox məsuliyyət düşür, çünki bilirik ki, bizim imtahanımız olacaq, daha çox öz üzərimizdə işləməliyik.” [We feel more responsible in the 9th grade because we know that we will take an exam. We must work harder.]

Another student mentioned: “9-cu sinifdə hazırlaşdığımız imtahan indiyə kimi oxuduqlarımızın hamısının toplamı kimi bir şeydir. Burada hamısını sübut eləmiş olacağıq.” [this exam is like a proof of what we have learned till now. We will prove everything.]

Some more student responses can illustrate the above interpretation (see Table 7).

Table 7

Student perceptions of responsibility and pressure.

Vəziyyətin ciddiliyinin fərfinə varırıq.	We understand the seriousness of the situation.
İmtahan olan şəraitdə daha çox oxuyuram.	I study more in the exam environment.
9-cu sinifdə, yəni, hazırlıqdan-hazırlığa qaçırsan. Hən də hər yerdən gələn təzyiqlə başqa fənləri oxuyub imytahan hazırlaşmaq nisbətən pisdır.	In the 9th grade, that is, you run from one tutor to another. Also, studying other subjects and preparing for exams with pressure from everywhere is relatively bad.
... evə getdikdən sonra 5-6 saat dərslərimin üstündə işləyirəm. Hətta saat birə kimi oxuduğum günlər də olur.	... after going home, I work on my studies for 5-6 hours. There are even days when I study until one am.
Mənfi cəhəti qeyd etdiyim kimi stress həyəcandır. Müsbət cəhəti odur ki, məsuliyyət artır. Şagirdlər daha ciddi yanaşmağa başlayırlar.	The downside, as I mentioned, is stress and excitement. On the positive side, responsibility increases. Students start to take it more seriously.

Summary of the Findings

In summary, the data collected from four different schools in Baku shed light on the teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the influence of the Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exams (CLSSLE) on the teaching and learning process in the 9th grade. The

main purpose of the study was to explore teachers' perceptions of the influence of CLSSLE on teaching the 9th graders. Simultaneously, 9th-grade students' apprehension of the influence of these exams on their learning was investigated as another core aim of the research. Both the semi-structured interviews with the teachers and focus group discussions with the students were aimed at addressing the research questions, which revealed certain findings. In relevance to the collected data, the research findings were categorized under two major themes: "Challenges in Teaching" and "The Impact of the CLSSLE on Students' Learning."

The theme "Challenges in Teaching" was elucidated in four subtheme areas. In general, schoolteachers' concerns on existence of private tutoring were highlighted as hindrance for delivering their lesson plans. Thus, learning a subject with a private tutor and school program creates confusion and spoils the school system. Another crucial factor was the consideration of curriculum adaptation and exam-oriented teaching, which eradicates active learning methods. The teachers expressed that because of the requirements of CLSSLE, they adjust their teaching to exam preparation rather than active learning. In addition, exam timing was emphasized as a big hurdle for providing adequate teaching by the teachers. The teachers complained that having these exams in the middle of the academic year creates a stressful atmosphere in teaching and learning in the 9th grade. The last subtheme about the teaching challenges covers the issue of assessment under the impact of CLSSLE. Thus, some of the teachers consider the students' centralized exam scores while assessing them. However, another group of teachers expressed that students' centralized exam scores do not affect their assessment strategies in the 9th grade.

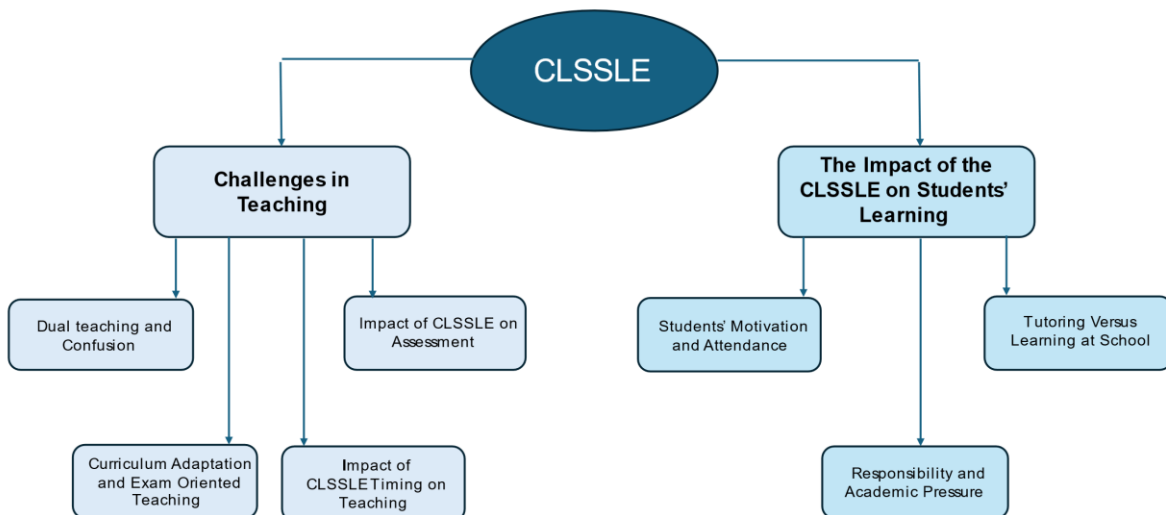
Dissected into three subthemes, "The impact of the CLSSLE on Students' Learning" was the other key theme that revealed the students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the influence of CLSSLE on the learning of the 9th graders. Thus, students' motivation and participation under

the impact of CLSSLE were interpreted differently by the teachers. Some of the teachers expressed that these exams increase students' engagement and incentives; however, most of them claimed that because of the CLSSLE, the students' attendance decline dramatically in the 9th grade. In many cases, students prioritize private tutoring, avoiding school classes because they only focus on getting ready for the centralized exams. Consequently, the other school subjects not involved in CLSSL are kept aside by the 9th-grade students. This negligence negatively affects learning non-examined disciplines throughout the academic year. Nevertheless, an increased student responsibility was outlined by the students and teachers of the ninth grade. Most of the participants expressed that the exam preparation period incites the students to work harder under the highly stressful exam environment, though this responsibility fades away once the students take the exam.

Overall, the findings of the study hint that the centralized lower secondary school leaving exams have a significant influence on educators' teaching attitudes and students' learning experience. (See figure 1 below). The exam-oriented environment embraces all aspects of the teaching and learning process in the last grade of lower secondary education.

Figure 1

Summary of the findings



Master Thesis Research

The next chapter is dedicated to comparing the findings of this research with the results of the studies conducted at various places. The literature review provided in Chapter II will be employed to discuss the conclusions drawn from the presented study.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The aim of the study was to shed light on students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the influence of centralized lower secondary school leaving examinations (CLSSLE) on the teaching-learning process in the 9th grade. The study was constructed upon two research questions that guided all the data collection and analysis process.

1. What are the teachers' perceptions of the influence of the CLSSLE on their teaching approaches?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the influence of the CLSSLE on their learning?

To strengthen the research's findings, the earlier studies' results were explored in relation to the current insights drawn from this work. The analysis of the study revealed some new conclusions, which trigger the importance of the conducted research. So that, the influence of CLSSLE revealed specific challenges for teachers in delivering an adequate curriculum. Furthermore, the learning experience of the students under the exam atmosphere was investigated through the qualitative research methodology. The research touched on specific nuances of teaching and learning experiences that both the teachers and students face in the 9th grade in the Azerbaijani context, which distinguishes its uniqueness compared to the other prior studies. However, certain similarities and discrepancies were noted between the current study findings and previous research results.

School Curriculum Under the Influence of High-Stakes Exams.

The literature provided in Chapter II illustrates findings regarding the influence of centralized exams on teaching approaches (Gologlu & Kelesh, 2021; Zhao et al. 2016; Jones & Egley, 2004; Volante 2004). The main insight related to the teaching methodology the teachers

employ under the influence of high-stakes exams were teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum; overshadowing the non-tested disciplines; and creating hindrances for active learning. Similarly, the above-mentioned factors were subject to the influence of CLSSLE on organizing teaching in the 9th grade at investigated schools in Baku. Thus, nearly all of the teachers who participated in the interviews expressed that they considered the requirements of CLSSLE while designing their lesson plans. Adequately, focus group discussions with the 9th grade students at four schools approve the fact that students prioritize the centralized exams at the expense of active classroom learning methods in the last year of lower secondary education. A surprising finding was even noted at one of the institutions, where a school removed all the untested subjects from the teaching program till the exam time so that the students could focus only on tested disciplines for superior results.

Sustainable Learning Under the Influence of High-Stakes Exams

In accordance with the perceptions of the teachers and students who participated in the study, it could be emphasized that “learning” progresses “positively” till the exam time, while the process pacifies once the students take the tests. The same finding was concluded in a comprehensive study conducted by Maag and Oerke (2017). However, certain positive consequences of these kinds of exams such as decreased forgetfulness, and increased self-efficacy and self-assessment (Yiyang Lai, 2023) were among the findings of this study. The expression of teachers and students highlights that CLSSLE encourages the learners to work intensively, repeating the previous years’ materials. Also, they feel more responsibility under the influence of centralized exams in the 9th grade compared to earlier years.

On the other hand, learning quality under the influence of high stakes exams is of importance to mention in comparison to the available literature. These exams lead to shallow

learning (Morgan, 2016; Ertug, 2017), which was raised as a concern by some of the participants. The common thought was that the students obtain temporary knowledge under the influence of CLSSLE because they learn fast without comprehending thoroughly. Furthermore, exam timing was mentioned as a big hurdle for continuous learning in the 9th grade.

Teaching-Learning Environment Under the Influence of High-Stakes Exams

Psychological influence, such as exam stress were underscored as adverse effects of the centralized exams on the teaching-learning process (Gorgodze & Chakhaia, 2021; Heissel, 2018; Bradbury et al., 2015; Ilhan et al., 2021). While the findings of the previous studies mainly characterize exam-related stress as a negative factor in educating students, the participants of this research expressed controversial approaches to this issue. Some of the students highlighted that these exams increase their motivation and engagement because they understand their responsibility. Still, others find preparation for CLSSLE a stressful and tiring process that affects their learning adversely.

Student Assessment Under the Influence of High-Stakes Exams

Along with formative and summative assessment strategies, “standardized high-stakes assessments have had the biggest impact on the education system, overall.” (Gorgodze and Chachaia, 2021, p.325). The findings regarding the student assessment ambiguity are of importance to mention as a distinguishing feature of this study. The influence of centralized examination on teachers’ assessment strategies was an unexpected research finding. Thus, the teachers involved in the study have double approaches to considering the CLSSLE results of the students while assessing their daily performance after the exam period.

Conclusion

Employing the thematic research approach, the study explored the teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the influence of Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exams (CLSSLE) on teaching-learning process in the 9th grade at four schools in Baku. The study was built upon two research questions:

1. What are the teachers' perceptions of the influence of the CLSSLE on their teaching approaches?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the influence of the CLSSLE on their learning?

The sample size of the study covered eight teachers and twenty-four students from four schools in Baku city. Three of the teacher participants were males and five of them were females. As for 9th graders, fifteen girls and nine boys from 9th grade were involved in focus group discussions (each, containing of 5,6 students) from four schools. The semi-structured interview questions were used to delve into answers to the research questions of the qualitative study. Before categorizing the findings under specific themes, the data was reviewed several times and coded to provide accuracy. The following conclusions were drawn from the study findings:

1. In the 9th grade, students excessively apply for private tutoring to get successful results from CLSSLE. The teachers face challenges delivering curriculum in the atmosphere of a dual education system: school teaching and private tutoring.
2. CLSSLE influences the teachers' teaching methods in the 9th grade. Because of the requirements of these exams, the teachers are obliged to consider both the 9th-grade curriculum and CLSSLE content, which impedes systematic teaching.
3. Content delivery becomes a major concern as CLSSLE is held in the middle of the academic year. Thus, exam timing influences the teachers' content delivery approaches.

4. Assessing the students' daily performance is affected by the exam results; though, not all the teachers prioritize CLSSLE scores while assessing them.
5. Because of the exam timing, sustainable learning is threatened by CLSSLE. Students' motivation progresses till the exam, while their responsibility and participation decline after the exam.
6. The quality of learning is obsessed by overestimation of CLSSLE in the ninth grade. Extensive and overloaded education leads to temporary memorizing rather than deep learning.
7. Focusing on school leaving exam subjects overshadows the other school subjects, restricting the curriculum through the academic year in the ninth grade. The students get apart from other disciplines that hinders the students' academic progress in those subjects.

Limitations

The study had the following limitations:

1. The research involved only the teachers who teach school-leaving exam subjects; nevertheless, it was intended to include the teachers of other disciplines which are not tested.
2. The sample size was limited to only 4 schools, 8 teachers, and 24 students of the 9th grade. Thus, the findings of the study may not be applied to all Azerbaijani schools.
3. The lack of prior research on CLSSLE in the Azerbaijani educational context restricts the ability to compare and contrast findings with existing literature, limiting the depth and informativeness of the study's conclusions.

Implications

The study on the influence of the Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exams (CLSSLE) on the teachers' teaching and students' learning revealed certain conclusions that can identify some implications for future research studies and practice. The curriculum framework, teaching-learning methodology, and the exam content integration are the factors to be discussed at this grade level. Also, understanding how the Centralized Secondary School Leaving Exams shape the teaching-learning process of 9th-grade students can be a precious insight for policymakers and educators.

Implications for Future Research Studies

The teachers' and students' perceptions of how CLSSLE influences on the teaching-learning process were investigated through qualitative research, which involved interviews at four schools in Baku city. During the interviews, some of the teachers drew attention to other disciplines which are not involved in the school leaving examination. It was emphasized that due to CLSSLE, the teaching-learning process of un-tested subjects is overshadowed in the ninth grade. Thus, students do not pay attention to those subjects which can hinder the students to grasp the related topics in subsequent years. Future investigations on the longitudinal impact of Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exams on un-tested subjects could be explored to reveal the effects of a year's skipping in upper grades. Grasping the findings of this research to that of future studies, regarding the overshadowed subjects, can provide an intact work that can thoroughly cover the teaching-learning process of both tested and untested subjects in the long term.

Implications for Future Practice

One of the study's noticeable findings was concerns about the timing of the Centralized Secondary School Leaving Exams. All the teachers and most of the students expressed their worries about the exam timing, which is held in the middle of the academic year. The research revealed that time pressure adversely affects teachers' teaching methods, making them restrict the curriculum to cover the exam content within a brief period. In addition, after taking the exam students get into a big gap, losing their motivation and engagement. It was noticed that the teaching and learning system was spoiled for three to four months after CLSSLE. Thus, it is recommended that both the State Exam Committee and the Ministry of Science and Education look through the exam timing. Referring to the participant responses, it is advised that the school leaving exams be held at the end of the academic year in the 9th grade.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions with Teachers

1. Could you please introduce yourself?
2. What subject do you teach?
3. What do you like most about teaching?
4. How long have you been teaching at grade nine?
5. Could you share your experiences teaching various grades?
6. How do you accommodate diverse learning activities while considering CLSSLE requirements in grade nine? Please, provide some specific examples.
7. How do you attract the students to the learning process in the 9th grade?
8. Can you compare the teaching-learning process before and after these exams?
9. How much do you think the students feel overwhelmed because of these exams?
10. Can you share your observations or experiences, with some specific examples, regarding how CLSSLE impacts the learning environment for 9th-grade students?
11. In your opinion, how do these exams influence students' motivation and engagement in their studies during the 9th grade?
12. What kind of specific changes have you noticed in students' attitudes towards learning due to the emphasis on centralized exams in the 9th grade?
13. Can you describe one of your classes at grade nine? In what ways do you think this lesson differs from a grade eight class?
14. Can you describe any challenges or benefits that students encounter in their overall learning experience due to the presence of centralized secondary school leaving exams?

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- 15.** How do you think the focus on these exams affects students' approach to learning and their academic performance in 9th grade?
- 16.** From your perspective, how do centralized secondary school leaving exams shape your teaching methods and strategies for 9th-grade students?
- 17.** Have you noticed any adjustments in your teaching plans specifically tailored to prepare students for these centralized exams? Please provide some specific examples.
- 18.** In what ways do you believe these exams impact the way teachers design assessments and deliver content throughout the academic year for 9th-grade students?
- 19.** Can you share any challenges or opportunities you have encountered in adapting your teaching style to align with the requirements of centralized secondary school leaving exams?
- 20.** How do you think the focus on these exams influences the broader teaching culture within the school, particularly in the 9th-grade classrooms?

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview Questions with Students

1. Can you introduce yourselves?
2. Are you enjoying the 9th grade?
3. Was school more enjoyable for you in previous grades?
4. Do you try to get excellent scores on school assignments?
5. How important are the scores of summative school assessments for you?
6. How much time do you spend preparing for your daily homework on different school subjects?
7. How do you prepare for the school leaving exams?
8. Do you dedicate any extra time to preparing for school leaving exams every day?
9. Do you feel overwhelmed because of the time pressure to prepare for the school leaving exams? Why?
10. How do you think the focus on these exams influences your learning in the 9th grade?
Please, provide some specific examples.
11. What do you think of your classes in grade nine? How do they differ from the eighth grade?
12. Do you need extra tutoring to prepare for the school leaving exams? Please, provide reasons.
13. In what ways do you think your schoolteachers can better support you to be ready for the exams?
14. In your opinion, what are the positive effects of having these exams in learning the tested subjects?

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15. How well do you think you would be able to learn these subjects better without the centralized exams in grade nine?

Appendix C

VALİDEYNİN ÖVLADININ MÜSAHİBƏSİNƏ RAZILIQ FORMASI

Tədqiqatçının adı: Sakit Hüseynov

Tədqiqatın adı: Mərkəzləşdirilmiş Orta Məktəb Buraxılış İmtahanlarının Tədris və Öyrənmə Prosesinə Təsirinin Aydınlaşdırılması.

Tədqiqatın məqsədi: Bu tədqiqatın məqsədi mərkəzləşdirilmiş orta məktəb buraxılış imtahanlarının 9-cu sinif şagirdlərinin öyrənmə prosesinə və 9-cu sinif müəllimlərinin tədris üslubuna təsirlərini aşkara çıxarmaqdan ibarətdir. Tədqiqatın nəticələri 9-cu sinif şagirdlərinin tədris və öyrənmə prosesinin təkmilləşdirilməsində, eləcə də müvafiq fənnləri tədris edən müəllimlərə dəstək məqsədi ilə müəyyən tövsiyyə xarakterli töhvələrin hazırlanmasında istifadə ediləcək.

- Övladımın bu tədqiqatda könüllü olaraq iştirak etdiyini anlayıram.
- Anlayıram ki, övladımın istənilən müsahibə sualına cavab verməmək hüququ var.
- Mən anlayıram ki, müsahibənin səs yazısı aparılacaq, səs yazısı ancaq məlumatların təhlili üçün istifadə olunacaq və bütün şəxsi məlumatlar silinəcək. Səs yazısı üçüncü tərəflə paylaşılmayacaq.
- Mən müsahibənin təqribən 35-40 dəqiqə çəkəcəyini qəbul edirəm.
- Mən anlayıram ki, övladımın şəxsi kimliyi anonim saxlanılacaq.
- Mən tədqiqat işi ilə bağlı tezisdə, hesabatlarda, nəşrlərdə və təqdimatlarda müsahibədən anonim sitatların istifadəsinə razılıq verirəm.
- Mən başa düşürəm ki, bu müsahibədən toplanılmış məlumatlar üçüncü tərəflə paylaşılmayacaq.
- Mən bu sənədi oxudum və başa düşdüm.

Bu sənədi imzalamaqla mən övladımın müsahibədə iştirak etməsinə razılıq verirəm.

Valideynin adı: Tarix: İmza:

İştirakçının adı: Tarix: İmza:

Tədqiqatçının adı: Tarix: İmza:

APPENDIX D

MÜƏLLİMİN MÜSAHİBƏYƏ RAZILIQ FORMASI

Tədqiqatçının adı: Sakit Hüseyinov

Tədqiqatın adı: Mərkəzləşdirilmiş Orta Məktəb Buraxılış İmtahanlarının Tədris və Öyrənmə Prosesinə Təsirinin Aydınlaşdırılması.

Tədqiqatın məqsədi: Bu tədqiqatın məqsədi mərkəzləşdirilmiş orta məktəb buraxılış imtahanlarının 9-cu sinif şagirdlərinin öyrənmə prosesinə və 9-cu sinif müəllimlərinin tədris üslubuna təsirlərini aşkara çıxarmaqdan ibarətdir. Tədqiqatın nəticələri 9-cu sinif şagirdlərinin tədris və öyrənmə prosesinin təkmilləşdirilməsində, eləcə də müvafiq fənnləri tədris edən müəllimlərə dəstək məqsədi ilə müəyyən tövsiyyə xarakterli töhvələrin hazırlanmasında istifadə ediləcək.

Müsahibədə iştirak etməklə mən aşağıdakılarla razılaşıram.

- Mən bu tədqiqatda könüllü olaraq iştirak etdiyimi anlayıram.
- Mən anlayıram ki, məni narahat edən istənilən müsahibə sualına cavab verməmək hüququm var.
- Mən anlayıram ki, müsahibənin səs yazısı aparılacaq, səs yazısı ancaq məlumatların təhlili üçün istifadə olunacaq və bütün şəxsi məlumatlar silinəcək. Səs yazısı üçüncü tərəflə paylaşılmayacaq.
- Mən müsahibənin təqribən 35-40 dəqiqə çəkəcəyini qəbul edirəm.
- Mən anlayıram ki, mənim şəxsi kimliyim anonim saxlanılacaq.
- Mən tədqiqat işi ilə bağlı tezisdə, hesabatlarda, nəşrlərdə və təqdimatlarda müsahibəmdən anonim sitatların istifadəsinə razılıq verirəm.
- Mən başa düşürəm ki, bu müsahibədən toplanılmış məlumatlar üçüncü tərəflə paylaşılmayacaq.
- Mən bu sənədi oxudum və başa düşdüm.

Bu sənədi imzalamaqla mən müsahibədə iştirak etməyə razılıq verirəm.

İştirakçının adı: Tarix: İmza:

Tədqiqatçının adı: Tarix: İmza:

Appendix E



No. 07/5485-24

"07" mart 2024-cü il

MÜTDA-in
Direktor müavini, BŞTİ-nin
müdiri vəzifəsini icra edən
Nərminə xanım Hüseynovaya

Hörmətli Nərminə xanım,

Nəzərinizə çatdırmaq istərdik ki, ADA Universitetinin MAEM 2023 "Təhsilin İdarəedilməsi" ixtisası üzrə magistr proqramı ikinci kurs tələbəsi Sakit Hüseynov apardığı yekun tədqiqat işi (Unpacking the Influence of the Centralized Lower Secondary School Leaving Exams on the Learning-Teaching Process; Mərkəzləşdirilmiş Orta Məktəb Buraxılış İmtahanlarının Tədris və Öyrənmə Prosesinə Təsirinin Aşkarlanması) üçün Nərimanov rayonu 66 sayılı (Tərəqqi Liseyi), Xətai rayonu 147 nömrəli texniki-humanitar lisey və Xətai rayonu 48 nömrəli tam orta məktəbin 9-cu sinif şagirdləri (6 şagird olmaqla) və buraxılış imtahanı üzrə tədris edən müəllim (iki müəllim) heyəti arasında müsahibə keçirilməsi tələb olunur. Müsahibənin məqsədi 9-cu sinifdə keçirilən mərkəzləşdirilmiş buraxılış imtahanının tədris və öyrənmə prosesinə təsiri ilə bağlı müəllim və şagirdlərin münasibətini öyrənməkdən ibarətdir. Bu məqsədlə tədqiqatın aparılması üçün şəraitin yaradılmasını Sizdən xahiş edirik.

Əməkdaşlığa görə təşəkkürümüzü bildiririk.

Hörmətlə,

Ülviyyə Mijkayılova,
Dekan



Appendix F



AZƏRBAYCAN RESPUBLİKASI
ELM VƏ TƏHSİL NAZİRLİYİ
BAKİ ŞƏHƏRİ ÜZRƏ TƏHSİL İDARƏSİ

AZ 1007, Bakı, Nəsimi r-nu,
Xan Şuşinski küç., 17

tel.: +994 12 599 12 22,
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"15" 03 2024-cü il

№ 3-29-59/2-1289/2024

ADA Universitetinin Təhsil fakültəsinin dekani
Ülviyyə Mikayılova

Surəti: Bakı şəhəri Tərəqqi liseyi, 48 və 147 nömrəli
ümumi təhsil müəssisələrinin rəhbərlərinə

Hörmətli Ülviyyə xanım,

Sizin Bakı Şəhəri üzrə Təhsil İdarəsinə ünvanladığınız 07.03.2024-cü il tarixli, 07/5485-24 nömrəli məktuba (daxilolma: 3-29-59/1-560/2024/11.03.2024-cü il) aidiyyəti üzrə baxılmışdır.

Bildiririk ki, ADA Universitetinin MAEM 2023 "Təhsilin idarə edilməsi" ixtisası üzrə magistr programının II kurs tələbəsi Sakit Hüseynovun "Mərkəzləşdirilmiş orta məktəb buraxılış imtahanlarının tədris və öyrənmə prosesinə təsirinin aşkarlanması" mövzusunda apardığı yekun tədqiqat işi ilə əlaqədar Bakı şəhəri Tərəqqi liseyi, 48 və 147 nömrəli ümumi təhsil müəssisələrində tədris prosesinin gedişinə mane olmadan və vaxtı öncədən məktəb direktoru ilə razılaşdırmaqla, eyni zamanda iştirakçıların könüllülüüyü prinsipi əsasında məktəbin pedaqoji heyəti və 9-cu sinif şagirdləri arasında müsahibə aparmasına etiraz etmirik.

Hörmətlə,

Azərbaycan Respublikası Elm və Təhsil
Nazirliyi yanında Məktəbəqədər və Ümumi
Təhsil üzrə Dövlət Agentliyinin direktor
müavini, Agentliyin Bakı Şəhəri üzrə Təhsil
İdarəsinin müdiri vəzifəsini müvəqqəti icra edən

Nərminə Hüseynova

AZƏRBAYCAN RESPUBLİKASI
ELM VƏ TƏHSİL NAZİRLİYİ
Bakı Şəhəri üzrə Təhsil İdarəsi
Elektron Sənədin Surəti

İmzalayan şəxs:

Nərminə Hüseynova
İdarə müdiri səlahiyyətlərini icra edən

Sənədin N-si: 3-29-59/2-1289/2024 Tarix: 15.03.2024

Qeyd: "Elektron imza və elektron sənəd haqqında" Azərbaycan Respublikası Qanununun 3-cü maddəsinə əsasən elektron imza əl imzası ilə bərabər hüquqi qüvvəyə malikdir. Elektron imza şəxsin kağız daşıyıcısı üzərindəki möhürle təsdiq edilmiş əl imzasına bərabər tutulur.

Təhlükəsizlik kodu: 8B7CC3

