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School Community's Perceptions of Factors Influencing Students' Grade IX School

Leaving Examination Results.

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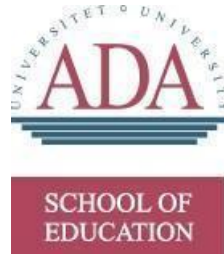


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Abstract

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This study aims to reveal the factors affecting students' results in the 9th grade school-leaving exams. The study addressed the problem regarding the 9th grade students low performance in school leaving exams in Azerbaijan. For this reason, this study tried to contribute to the local literature by exploring the difficulties faced by 9th grade students in public schools in the process of preparing for the final exams and investigating the issues related to the problem. The main interested parties, principals, teachers, students, and parents, were involved in discussions, and their beliefs, perceptions, and suggestions regarding the problem were explored. In addition to two urban schools, research was also conducted in a rural school. 47 people, including 3 school principals, 15 students, 17 teachers, and 12 parents, were involved in the research process. To explore and understand participants' perceptions individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with three principals. In addition, focus group discussions were held with teachers, students, and parents. Face-to-face focus group discussions were conducted with the participants of urban schools, whereas online focus group discussions were conducted with the participants of rural schools. Although, during the discussions, the participants voiced different opinions about the factors contributing to students' performance in the school leaving exams, four main themes emerged by the researcher: 1) student's personal qualities and attitude

towards education, 2) school-related factors (including lack of technical equipment and class size) 3) teacher-student relationship 4) family's attitude towards their child's education.

The results of this study may pave the way for further research on improving student achievement in 9th grade school leaving examinations in Azerbaijan and stimulate the initiatives and cooperation of relevant institutions on the problem.

Keywords: teacher-student ratio, teacher-student relationship, self-efficacy, peer relationship, standardised tests, school-leaving exams, family ses.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

After gaining independence, Azerbaijan cooperated with international organisations to transition from Soviet ideology to modern standards in education (Karimova et al., 2014). The Ministry of Education and the World Bank implemented projects to develop the education sector from 2003-2014 (Karimova et al., 2014). One of the main lines of this cooperation was teacher training, formation of curriculum outcomes, textbook preparation, and adoption of new curricula (Baku Research Institute, 2018). Although the national curriculum, which reflects a set of achievement standards that define what students should know and be able to do in various subjects at each grade level, and focuses more on student-centered education, was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers in 2006, it has been implemented in all schools of the country since 2008 at the elementary level (Karimova et al., 2014). On the basis of the new curricula and teaching methods, student enrollment took place for the first time in 2008 (Baku Research Institute, 2018). In order to evaluate the results of these students who completed the 9th grade in 2017, they were involved in the final exams held by the State Examination Center (Sec, 2021). According to the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Education" (2009), all citizens must receive nine years of compulsory education. Students who complete lower and upper secondary education receive a graduation certificate (Kazımzadeh & Silova, 2009). To obtain this certificate, students are required to pass standardised state exams based on state standards learned and implemented during the school year (Kazımzadeh & Silova, 2009). The first centralised certification exam for 9th-grade graduates was held by the State Examination Center in 2017 (SEC, 2021). In order to improve the teaching-learning process and provide a more objective assessment of students' achievements, the Cabinet of Ministers decision No. 9 dated January 13, 2009 approved the "Evaluation Concept of the

General Education System of the Republic of Azerbaijan" (Baku Research Institute, 2018). This concept takes as the main direction to obtain detailed information about the knowledge and skills of students by evaluating student achievements at the end of a particular teaching period to make appropriate changes in subject curricula and textbooks based on this information and develop students' logical thinking skills, unlike memory-based assessment (MoSE, 2023). According to the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Education" (2009), all citizens must receive nine years of compulsory education. Students who complete lower and upper secondary education receive a graduation certificate (KazıMZadeh & Silova, 2009). To obtain this certificate, students are required to pass standardised state exams based on state standards learned and implemented during the school year (KazıMZadeh & Silova, 2009). The first centralised certification exam for 9th-grade graduates was held by the State Examination Center in 2017 (SEC, 2021).

Since students' state-standardized test scores are of great interest to educators, parents, and society, researchers have continuously investigated the factors affecting student performance in these exams (Neild, 2009). Therefore, this study also analyses the factors contributing to the results of the 9th-grade final exams from the school principal, teacher, student, and parent perspective in rural and urban public schools in Azerbaijan.

Definition of terms

Teacher-student ratio- the proportion of the number of students attending a given school or training to the total number of faculty members at that institution (Koc & Celik, 2015)

Teacher-student relationship- interactions between students and teachers in and out of the classroom (Pianta, 1999)

Student self-efficacy- students are confident in their abilities to carry out certain activities and reach desired results (Olivier et al., 2018)

Student motivation- it is the desire and power that exists within a person to achieve specific goals that he wants to achieve (Wardani et al., 2020).

Peer relationship- interpersonal connections are developed through peer interactions (Brown & Larson, 2009).

Standardised tests- standardised tests are administered centrally by the state, where the questions, timing, and scoring are the same for all students (Fletcher, 2009).

School-leaving exams- the end-of-year national state exams that all lower and upper secondary school students are required to pass (Kampa et al., 2020)

Family SES - a measurement of the amount of job experience that both parents have, as well as their economic and social standing (Ji et al., 2020)

State Examination Center (SEC) - a national testing agency responsible for preparing and administering undergraduate and graduate, residency-level entrance exams and civil service entrance exams (SEC, 2023)

Statement of Problem

Neild (2009) suggests that the ninth grade is one of the most turbulent periods in a student's educational life, as parental control decreases and peer influence increases. Also, Balfanz (2009) adds that in the 9th grade, students either progress towards achievements or experience academic and psychological challenges and stop their academic life. An analysis of student progress in lower secondary education shows that about one-third of dropouts do not continue beyond the ninth grade (Neild, 2009). Azerbaijan is seeing a pattern that is very similar to the one described above. According to the results of the SEC Report (2021-2022), 15.9% of the students who passed the school-leaving examination for the 9th grade in 2019 did not continue their education. The analysis of school-leaving exam results of students who did not

continue classes after the 9th grade shows that they scored 0-25, 25-50 points on a 100-point scale for each subject in the 9th-grade school-leaving exams. (Sec Report, 2021-2022). The students who participated in the 9th-grade school-leaving exams in 2019 are the students who participated in the 11th-grade school-leaving exams in 2021. It is important to mention that according to the Sec Report for 2021-2022, rural students account for 70 % of the student population with low academic performance. State Examination Center compared the results of the same students participating in the 9th and 11th-grade school-leaving exams. The obtained results confirm that students who showed low results in the 9th grade showed similar results in the 11th-grade school-leaving exams (SEC Report, 2021-2022).

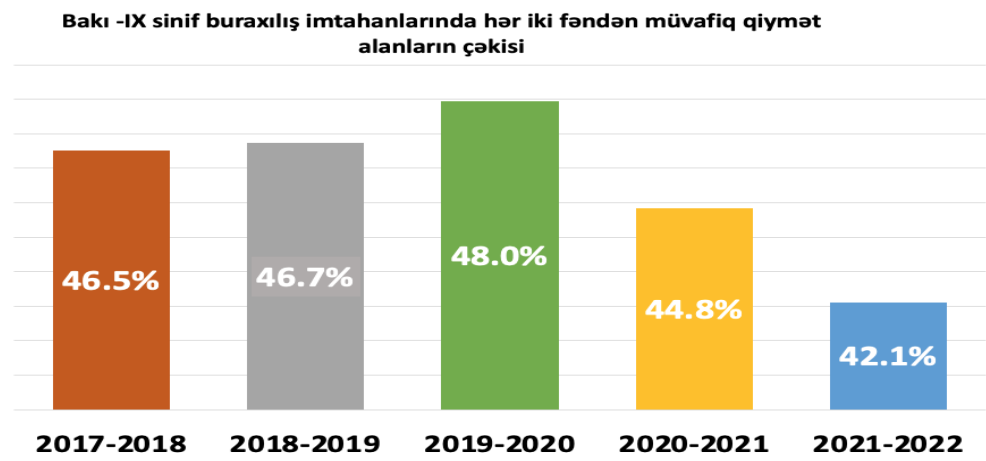
The SEC Report (2021-2022) assessed the performance of students participating in the 9th grade school-leaving examinations as follows. The results shown by the students were evaluated with a 100-point system for each subject, and the average statistical student score was determined. Thus, the average statistical score was 45.12 in the subject of the Azerbaijani language, 37.25 in the subject of mathematics, and 34.04 in the subject of a foreign language. Also, the SEC Report (2021-2022) shows that the number of students who scored above 80 points in each subject in the 9th grade final exams is quite low. Thus, the number of students who scored more than 80 points is 7.09 percent in Azerbaijani language, 6.96 percent in mathematics, and 6.06 percent in foreign language. In spite of the fact that the maximum score that students can obtain from all three subjects combined is 300 points, the average score that students received was 116.27 points (SEC, 2022).

The chart shows the results of only two subjects (math and Azerbaijan language) since the English language subject was not included when the 9th-grade graduation exams were held centrally for the first time, and students only took the exam in the Azerbaijani language and

mathematics subjects. Therefore, the chart reflects the number of 9th-grade students who scored more than 30 points in the school leaving exams and passed the exam during 2017-2022.

Before starting the research, the preliminary data conducted by the researcher with 3 school principals also suggests that student performance in the 9th grade school-leaving exams performed poorly. One of the interviewed school principals presented a chart developed by the Baku City Education Department and showed student achievement on school-leaving exams for 9th graders in Baku city over the previous five years. The paper includes a chart after receiving permission from the school's principal.

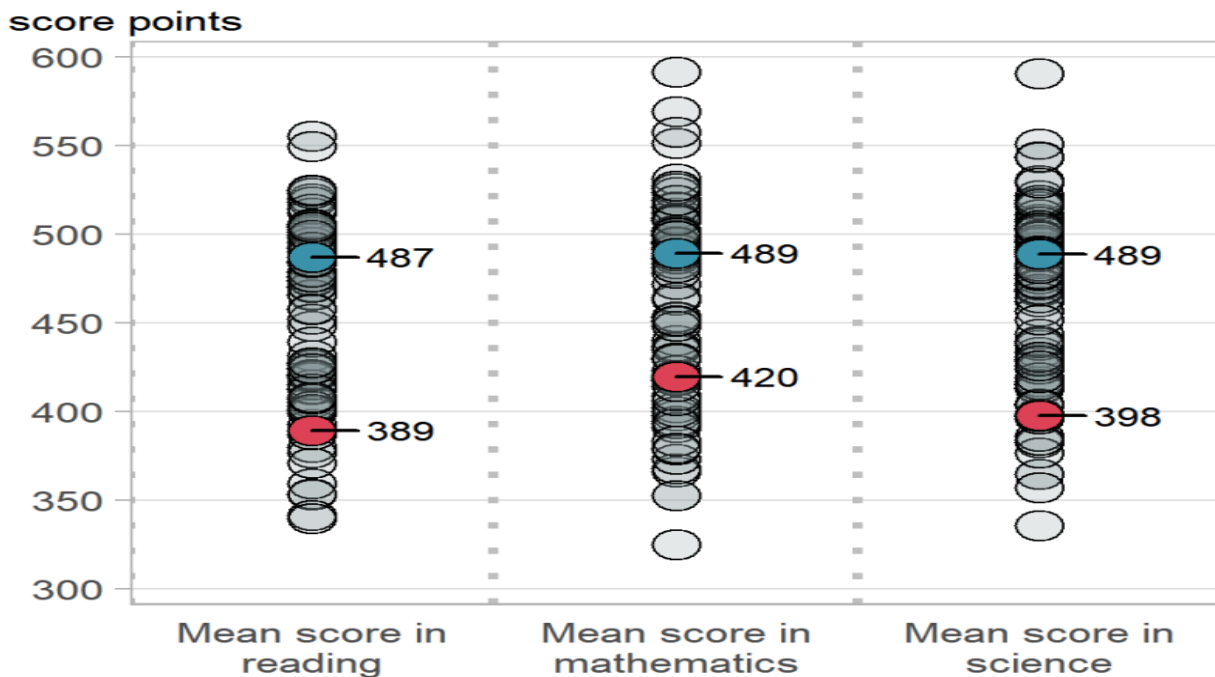
Figure 1. *The results of the students who scored more than 30 points in the 9th-grade school leaving exams in Azerbaijani language and Mathematics in 2017-2022 in Azerbaijan.*



The chart shows that the number of students passing the exam has been below 50% for five years. The result of the last year was 41.2% percentage, which means that the remaining 58.8% of students did not pass the exam. Students who scored less than 30 points are considered to have received a grade of 2 and failed the exam. (Approval of the Assessment Concept in the General Education System of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2009).

Analysis of Azerbaijani students' performance in PISA tests shows similar results (PISA, 2018). The chart below shows that students from the schools located in Baku scored below the OECD average in reading and mathematics (PISA, 2018). PISA evaluates student performance on a seven-point scale in reading and a six-point scale in mathematics (PISA, 2012). According to PISA (2018), students are regarded to be low achievers if they score at levels two or lower on the PISA test. According to PISA (2018), the reading performance of 40% of Azerbaijani students was rated as level 2, while only a small percentage of students managed to attain levels 5 or 6, which are the highest reading indicators (PISA, 2018). In addition, only 2% of Azerbaijani students are qualified for reaching level 5 or above in mathematics, the majority of students have achieved level 2, which is the minimum proficiency level (PISA, 2018).

Figure 2. *PISA (2018) performance of Azerbaijani students.*



The need to identify students at risk of failure in school-leaving exams and to address the difficulties they face makes it important to investigate the factors affecting school-leaving exam

results of 9th grade students. Although a number of steps have been taken to improve student achievement, the continued low performance of students in the 9th grade school-leaving exams can be identified as an important issue that needs to be addressed (SEC, 2022).

Significance of the study

Although much information has been collected about school leaving exams, one of the least studied components of the topic is the school community's perceptions of the factors that influence student performance on these tests (Kuh, 2001). This study will contribute to investigating the topic in more detail and expand previous studies by conducting a comparative analysis of the perceptions of four parties (principals, teachers, parents, and students). Also, the research will make the voice of the main participants (principals, teachers, parents, and students) heard in society.

The Purpose of the Study

This study aims to investigate the factors contributing to the test scores of lower secondary school students in school leaving examinations. In addition, the study seeks to understand the views and perceptions of school principals, teachers, students, and parents regarding the problem. Finally, the study will seek to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are principals' perceptions regarding the factors contributing to 9th graders' school-leaving exam results?
2. What are teachers' perceptions regarding the factors contributing to 9th graders' school-leaving exam results?
3. What are students' perceptions regarding the factors contributing to 9th graders' school-leaving exam results?

4. What are parents' perceptions regarding the factors contributing to 9th graders' school-leaving exam results?

Chapter 2

Literature review

This literature review aims to analyse the factors influencing the performance of 9th-grade students on school-leaving exams. Emphasis will be placed on studies examining the perceptions of four main parties: school principals, instructors, students, and parents.

A Literature Analysis of Factors Affecting Students' State Standardized Test Performance

Delelis (2019) notes that students' learning skills, and teachers' competencies play a unique role among the factors that influence students' test performances. Crosnoe (2004) and colleagues emphasise that students' gender, race, extracurricular activities, and physical and mental health significantly affect their test scores. Abdulkadhum et al. (2019) evaluate the factors influencing students' state exam results by dividing them into internal and external factors. According to Abdulkadhum et al. (2019), internal factors include initial ability, student motivation, and student learning process. While external factors are teacher competence, school environment, and family support. Internal and external factors should be interconnected to achieve learning success (Chamidy et al., 2023).

Student Related Factors

According to Eysenck (1997), motivation structures describe the commencement, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of activity, particularly goal-directed behaviour. Seifert (2004) also states that interest in learning is students' motivation to learn without coercion, and this motivation creates the basis for their ongoing and disciplined study. According to Pinrich and Zusho (2002), students' learning discipline is one of the main factors influencing

their learning process in school. Thus, the more the student's motivation, the greater their learning success and exam results (Crozier, 2001). There is a considerable research base to support a strong correlation between the degrees of student motivation among others (Cattel, 1982).

Some studies claim a positive relationship exists between students' self-efficacy and test results (Johnson & Stevens, 2006). Continuing this statement, Murdock (2000) explains self-efficacy as a person's belief that they have sufficient ability to achieve specific goals. Also, according to Chemers and Garcia (2001), self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in how successfully they can perform behaviours in given situations. In this regard, various studies have found that students perform better when they love a subject and believe they are good at it (Vanderstoep & Johnson, 2008).

Teacher Related Factors

Goe et al. (2008) examined the effect of teacher experience on student test scores. Research conducted in secondary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria, found that teachers' teaching experience is significantly related to student learning outcomes as measured by their performance in secondary school state examinations. Students at schools taught by teachers with more than five years of teaching show better exam results. From the study conducted by Shukakidze (2013) comparing student achievement in Estonia and Azerbaijan, it is confirmed that among independent teacher-related variables, teacher competencies, and experience had a statistically significant effect on student academic performance. Both countries were part of the former Soviet Union, and most teachers used old teaching methods and techniques. Although both countries have significantly progressed in teaching their teachers modern teaching styles, Estonian teachers are more

experienced in effectively using modern teaching methods and approaches, supporting students' active participation in the process, and independent and critical thinking (Shukakidze, 2013).

The teacher-student relationship should be remembered when discussing teacher-related factors because it has always been important in teaching (Split et al., 2012). Gibbs (2006) defines the teacher-student relationship as a caring and authentic relationship between teachers and students. In addition, contemporary literature describes teacher-student relationships as trust, intimacy, and sharing (Wentzel, 1997). Delelis (2019) states that teacher-student relationships include closeness, affective tone of voice, listening skills, and motivating and encouraging students to learn.

School Related Factors

Students' educational outcomes and academic success are greatly influenced by the school they attend (Heschong et al., 2002). For Fraillon et al. (2014), critical school criteria include the number of students enrolled, teachers, and computers per classroom. Hanushek (1999) also indicates other factors influencing student academic performance, such as classroom activities, resources, and class size. Class size reduction has improved educational outcomes by fostering a closer teacher-student relationship (Murdock, 2000). The study conducted by Ouchi (2009) reveals similar findings regarding the teacher-student ratio. His analysis of eight large school districts in the United States (Boston, Seattle, Houston, St. Paul, San Francisco, Chicago, Oakland, and New York City) found that when teachers taught fewer than 80 students during the school year, student test scores were much higher. However, when the number of students exceeded 80, academic performance decreased. This study claims conditions are created for developing teacher-student relationships when the student load is low. Since the teachers have

fewer students to instruct, they are able to spend more time with each student and provide feedback (Ouchi, 2009)

Family Related Factors

Creighton et al. (2009) consider families as one of the main inputs included in the education system. Studies confirm that students' family structure, parents' socio-economic status, educational background, and attitude towards education affect their test scores (Alderman-Swain & Battle, 2000; Battle & Coates, 2004; Downey, 1994). Single-parent children show poorer test results than children raised in two-parent families (Gladow & Ray, 1984). According to Amato (2005), single parent families are more likely to experience poverty and low income. Students from low-income single-parent families will have access to fewer educational and recreational resources and materials. Amato (2005) agrees with this view, adding that low-income families cannot provide books, computers, and private tutoring for their children, which is essential for increasing student achievement. Furthermore, since only one parent is responsible for meeting the emotional needs of children, these students are likelier to have low test scores (Gladow & Ray, 1984).

Jeynes (2000) highlighted another aspect of family-related factors in student achievement. He found that the more parents communicate and spend time with their children, the higher their test scores. Downey (1993) also points out that parents' participation in their children's PTA activities, how well parents know their children's friends, their involvement in extracurricular activities and trips, and their relationship with the school community also affect student scores.

Test Related Factors

A student's performance on a standardised test is often viewed as the primary measure of that student's ability (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Many studies investigating the factors affecting students' test results focus on test anxiety (Adler, 2002). A student's test anxiety can be observed by comparing their performance with peers, having low confidence in their performance, not being able to justify the beliefs of parents and teachers, and fear of losing self-worth (Mazumdar et al., 2012). Chudowsky and Pellegrino (2003) investigated the effect of students' test anxiety on attention and memory skills during the exam. The results showed that students with high levels of test anxiety showed more distraction and lower performance. This suggests that sometimes students fail the exam not because of a lack of preparation but because of fear and lack of self-confidence. Feeling under pressure prevents students from understanding the material profoundly and staying motivated (Marzano, 2005).

Koretz (2008) points out other factors distracting students during the exam process and negatively impacting their test results. These cases are insufficient time to understand and analyse the questions, question formats unfamiliar to students, and examiners are too strict to prevent cheating (Linn, 2000).

In several studies, the factors that affect students' exam scores were investigated globally (Mahmud et al., 2020). For example, students' learning habits, discipline, self-confidence, and motivation were considered student-related factors. In addition, family structure and social and economic status were identified as key variables affecting the outcome of students in a standardised test. Also, the teacher-student ratio, the teacher's work experience, and the teacher-student relationship are other important factors affecting students' test results. Additionally, much research claims that the test is one factor affecting students' low performance in

standardised tests. Thus, the expectations from students complicate the successful passing of the exams by feeling pressure and stress.

The review of local literature shows that there is a need to carry out further research to explore and better understand the factors that influence students' academic performance in school-leaving examinations for 9th graders in Azerbaijan. Also, the perceptions of all four parties (principals, teachers, students, and parents) have not been included in the same qualitative study in local and global contexts.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Research Design

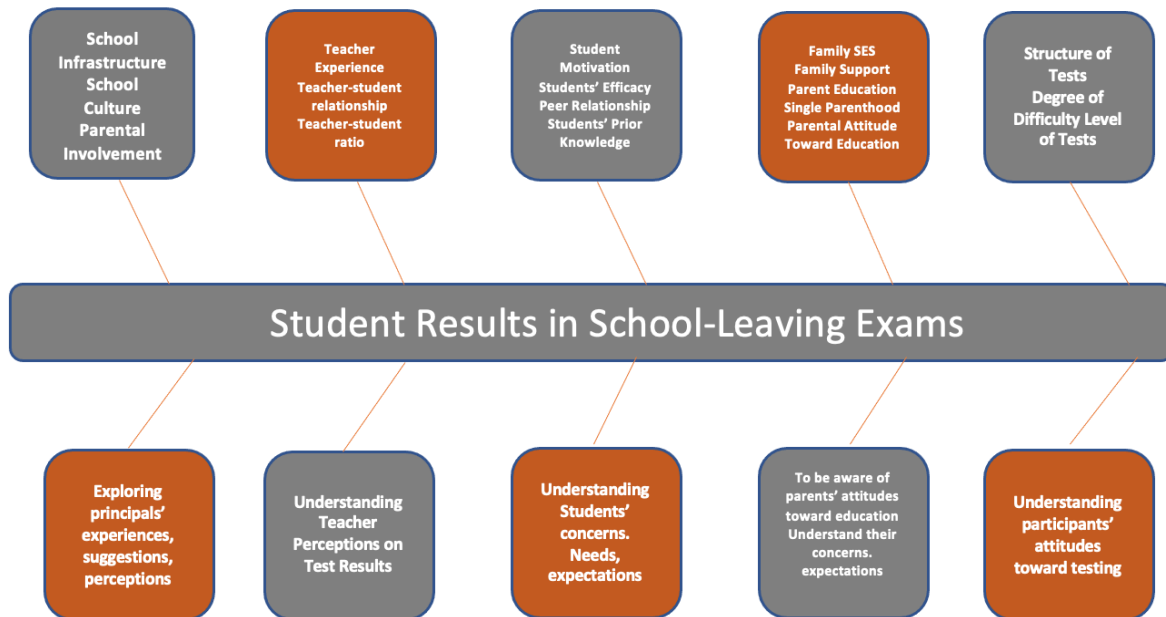
A research design specifies the methods that will be followed to collect and analyse information, as well as the approach in which these activities will provide an answer to the research question. (Buck et al., 2010). An exploratory study was chosen for this study to understand the factors influencing 9th-grade students' achievement on school-leaving exams. Exploratory research will guide the researcher in exploring the participants' perceptions of the problem (Henson, 2006). Schmit (2011) said that exploratory research is the basis for more detailed research, allowing for discovering ideas and insights by considering different problem elements. Exploratory research usually provides qualitative data (Henson, 2006).

Considering the researcher's goal, this study adopts the qualitative method to negotiate and collaborate based on dialogues with the study subjects for a meaningful understanding of reality (Creswell, 2012). Interpretivism is considered one of the most suitable paradigms for the qualitative approach since the researcher's primary goal is to explore individuals' perceptions (Yin, 2011). Furthermore, the interpretivism philosophy says that there are multiple realities. Each person interprets their own world and acts based on this interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Consequently, with the perspective of interpretivism, researchers do not try to generalise the fundamentals that are understandable for the entire population but intend to understand the phenomenon and its complexity more deeply in a specific context (Creswell, 2009).

The theory of Educational Productivity presented by Walberg in 1981 was chosen to guide the study. This theory can be used to understand better the factors influencing student learning (Reynolds & Walberg, 1992). Walberg's (1981) theory of educational productivity is one of the

few theories that has been empirically tested in this field (Fraser et al., 1987). The primary purpose of this theory is to analyse the cause of poor student performance and identify the influencing factors. According to Walberg's (1981) theory, these factors explain why students are not reaching their full potential. The theory identifies three critical elements to understanding student performance (Reynolds & Walberg 1992). These include student aptitude, instruction, and environment. Student ability includes prior achievement, development, and motivation. Instruction is determined by the amount of time students spend studying and the quality of the learning experience. Environmental factors include home, classroom social group, out-of-school peer relationships, and proper use of out-of-school time (Reynolds & Walberg 1992). The factors defined by Walberg's (1981) theory will guide this study. Given that these variables are based on a synthesis of more than 3,000 research on elements that influence school learning, the criteria mentioned above have been proven to be reliable, consistent, and generalisable (Vanderstoep & Johnson, 2009). Based on the perspective of this theory, the researcher prepared the study's conceptual framework.

Figure 3. *Conceptual framework.*



Participant Sampling

The study participants were school principals, teachers, students, and parents. School principals were selected using the convenience technique of the non-probability sampling method (Creswell, 2009). As Dorney (2007) stated, convenience sampling enables the inclusion of a target population that is easily accessible and meets certain criteria or those who are willing to participate. Because the members of the target population of the convenience sample are homogeneous, its results do not differ from the research results obtained from a random sample or a sample collected from some inaccessible part of the population (Maruyama & Ryan, 2014). One of the interviewed school principals was introduced by the instructor during the researcher's master's studies. Other school principals were also reached through the mediation of that principal.

Purposive sampling was used to select teachers, students, and parents. As Patton (2002) stated, purposive sampling is a widely used method in qualitative research to select an

information-rich target population for the most efficient use of limited resources. This enables the identification and selection of individuals with particular knowledge or experience of the phenomenon to be investigated (Creswell, 2012). Considering collecting the necessary data on the topic, the selected teachers should have experience teaching in 9th grade students for the state test exams. At the same time, teachers should be selected from candidates who teach the subjects included in state exams (Azerbaijani language, mathematics, foreign language). Also, it is appropriate to use purposive sampling to select students from 9th graders and to include both male and female participants to ensure gender equality. Additionally, parents should be the parents of 9th graders. In addition to the 9th grade students, the involvement of the 10th grade students in the discussions who have experienced the exam requires choosing purposive sampling.

Regarding the selection of school principals, convenience sampling was used. One urban school principal was introduced by one of the researcher's instructors, and that school principal guided the researcher to another urban school principal. The same step was proceeded in the selection of rural schools. Therefore, an acquaintance of the researcher who served in one of the schools in Guba guided her to the school principal who served in Shamakhi. However, it was not possible to get in touch with the principal who was in charge in Shamakhi since she did not respond to either phone calls or emails. As a result, it was possible to conduct research in 2 urban schools and 1 rural school. From each of the school that took part in the research project 5 students (3 females and 2 males) were selected. The total number of students representing 3 different schools was 15 people. It was not possible to expect gender equality in the study. So, although the 9th grade students participating in the research were equally distributed with 2 females and 2 males from each school, the 10th grade students involved in the study consisted of

only female students. According to the school principals, only the female students in the 10th grade desired to take part in the study. On the other hand, the male students in the same class were not motivated, and as a result, they were not pressured to participate in the study. For this reason, 12 of the 15 students were 9th grade students, and the other 3 students (1 female student from each school) were 10th grade students who took the final exams of the 9th grade school and experienced the process (Table 3). In addition, there were 12 parents who participated in the focus group discussions. 4 parents from each school were present. Only one of the parents was a male, while the other 11 were females (Table 4). As for teachers, focus group discussions were held with 17 teachers, 12 from urban schools (6 teachers from each urban school), and 5 from a rural school. Only one of the teachers was male, while the remaining 16 were female teachers. In general, 2 Azerbaijani language teachers, and 2 mathematics teachers participated in the interviews from 3 schools involved in the research. Regarding the English teachers, even though there were two English teachers recruited from each of the urban schools, there was only one English teacher at the rural school, thus only one English teacher participated in the study (Table 1). As a result, 6 Azerbaijani language teachers, 6 mathematics teachers, and 5 English language teachers participated in the research. The names of the institutions where this research was conducted as well as the individuals who took part in it have not been made public in order to protect their privacy.

Principals were in charge of making the decisions regarding who would participate in the study. The researcher provided the school principals with advance information regarding the quantity and characteristics of the participants who would be participating in the study. This made it possible the school principals to assist in the selection of individuals who would best meet the requirements of the study. School principals informed the school community about the

study and identified students who were willing to participate in the study. Participants were selected on a first-come, first-served basis.

Access to schools was granted at the end of February. The process of reaching an agreement with the participants on the time of the focus group discussions and completing the collection of the data was finished on March 10. March 10-20 is dedicated to analyzing and organizing the collected data. Finally, from March 23 to April 18 the draft version of the master thesis project was written and submitted.

Qualitative research instrument

Qualitative research is an approach that allows the researcher to understand phenomena in their particular context, try to make sense of them, and interpret the meanings people bring to them (Leavy, 2017). Qualitative methods are the most widely used method to understand and explore the complexities of human behaviour (Charmaz, 2006). To reveal, describe and understand what is behind the investigated phenomenon, it is necessary to understand it in its specific context. This can be achieved through qualitative interviews and observations rather than simply providing numbers and statistical models (Denzin, 2012). According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research is essential because it may provide inductive data analysis.

As a qualitative research instrument, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were used to explore school principals' perceptions (Adams, 2015). As Creswell (2012) stated, a personal interview is one of the best methods to get detailed information about the studied topic. Thus, an interview with a subject matter expert or individuals who have experienced the problem in real contexts may provide the researcher with meaningful insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One of the other advantages of interviews is that the researcher may facilitate the conversation with the

interviewees and obtain detailed information by using probing questions (Creswell, 2012). Face-to-face individual interviews with school principals lasted approximately 45-60 minutes.

As mentioned above, 15 students participated in the study. 5 of these students were from rural schools, and the other 10 students were from urban schools. 3 separate focus group discussions for each school were organised to understand students' perceptions. Focus group discussions are considered very useful as they help provide more authentic environments in which participants are influenced by each other (Casey & Crueger, 1994). In addition, these discussions accelerate the exchange of ideas among group members by ensuring interaction between them (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014) also added that focus group discussions may work well, especially when there is limited opportunity for data collection. However, when selecting individuals for a focus group, it is essential to ensure that they have a common comparable experience (Creswell, 2012). In focus group discussions, the researcher acted as a moderator and announced open-ended questions to elicit responses from participants and stimulated discussion among participants (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). As Prasad et al. (2017) stated, the primary goal of the moderator is to generate the most arguments and perspectives for a deep understanding of the issue in a limited time. As part of the document review, the scientific and statistical reports on student test performance generated by the State Examination Centre were utilised. In addition, field notes were regularly taken by the researcher during the discussions with the participants.

Students from rural schools with Internet access and a willingness to participate in the study were selected with the assistance of the school principal, and online focus group discussions were held. At the same time, it was considered that the selected students or their parents should have an email address so that the dates of the online meetings, including the trial

meeting, can be determined together with them. Since students had experience learning online during a pandemic, these discussions were manageable.

Separate face-to-face focus group discussions were organised for students of urban schools. Focus group discussions were held in schools in rooms reserved for the researcher by the principal. The purpose of engaging students in discussion together was that they could express themselves more comfortably and communicate with each other to share their experiences, insights, thoughts, and perceptions (Wisker, 2001). Discussions continued for 30-40 minutes, depending on the progress of the discussion and student participation.

Focus group discussions were also held with teachers and parents. Online discussions were held for teachers and parents of rural schools. Face-to-face discussions were conducted with teachers and parents of urban schools. Discussions lasted approximately 50-60 minutes.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The researcher used several strategies to establish the truthfulness of the study. The thick description was one of these methods (Kyngas et al., 2019). The researcher provided a detailed description of the setting and participants of the study, as well as of the findings with (documents, field notes, and quotes from participant interviews) proper evidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). In addition, peer debriefing, also known as peer review, was utilised, and Gulshan Aliyeva, Baku State University PhD researcher, reviewed and contributed to the study to ensure that the results were credible and reliable. Peer review by another researcher with no particular interest in this research will strengthen the study's internal validity by double-checking personal biases and interpretations (Creswell, 2012). To ensure the study's internal validity, special attention was paid to the selection of individuals who have experienced the problem since data collected from individuals not truly representative of the target group may prevent reliable

results. Another strategy used to ensure internal validity was the triangulation method. To achieve this, data was collected from different school communities and participants (both urban and rural) using different qualitative research methods. The triangulation method helped to gain a deeper understanding of the problem by allowing the same data to be analysed by different individuals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Also, after receiving the consent of the participants, each interview was recorded and transcribed shortly after the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher took notes to facilitate the data analysis (Creswell, 2012).

The researcher used a pilot study to strengthen the feasibility of the study (Majid, 2017). Pilot studies benefit novice researchers and help identify areas that need further investigation (Harding, 2013). In addition, conducting a pilot study will help the researcher to know how effective their methods are (DiCiccoBloom & Crabtree, 2006). For this purpose, the researcher interviewed one of the school principals before starting the data collection process. During the interview, the researcher had a chance to practice directing individuals' answers that needed clarification through probing questions. Likewise, the researcher organised a trial meeting with some students on the Zoom platform in advance and considered possible obstacles.

Ethical Considerations

Consideration of ethical issues in the study is crucial in terms of data privacy protection, understanding of potential risks in research methods, and transparency (Creswell, 2009). For the research to meet the legal requirements, a letter of permission was sent to the Baku City Education Department and the rural schools' education department. Access was requested to conduct the research in the selected schools. Participants were provided thorough information about the study's goal, methodology, and intended use of the findings. Informed consent was obtained beforehand, and their role in the process will be clearly explained. Participants were

given sufficient time to decide whether they wanted to participate in the study (Creswell, 2009).

Informed consent was distributed to the participants of urban schools by the principals three days in advance. Informed consent was sent to the participants of the rural school via email.

Participants (teachers, students, and parents) could express their opinions in focus group discussions. However, they were given the right to leave the program at any time and had the right to refrain from participating in the discussion of questions they did not want to answer. The permission of the participants was obtained to record the interview. The interviews were digitally recorded with two gadgets. To ensure the participants' anonymity in the data interpretation and sharing of findings, their names were kept confidential, and pseudonyms were used (Creswell, 2012). The researcher focuses on the problem during the interview and avoids asking off-topic questions. Questionnaires were distributed to the participants, and their demographic indicators were determined before the discussions began.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of properly organizing, interpreting and drawing conclusions from data. (Creswell, 2012). All data obtained were analysed immediately after each data collection. The data were coded manually in the next step, and similar and related codes were divided into categories (Creswell, 2012). A thematic analysis was used to group the content into words, concepts and themes and see their relationship among them (Creswell, 2012). To simplify the coding process, the researcher took small samples of the transcribed texts and developed a series of codes or categories that reflect the main themes. The researcher systematically adapted the participants' opinions to the themes. The researcher then identified recurring codes and revealed key insights from the data. Codes were revised and improved to achieve greater accuracy and consistency. In cases when the codes were too general, the researcher came up with sub-codes corresponding to the main categories.

Chapter 5

Findings and Discussion

Findings

This chapter provides a detailed presentation of the study findings. As previously stated, the research was carried out in three different public schools: two urban and one rural schools. The principals of both urban schools have been newly appointed to these schools (one has been serving in the new school for three months and the other for four months). Both principals (UPrincipal 1; UPrincipal 2) were reassigned to lower-ranked schools from higher-ranked schools where they previously worked. RPrinciple 3, from a rural school, has been working in the same school for thirteen years. Study participants' teaching experience ranges from three to fifteen years (Table 2). Seven of the parents were employed, while five were unemployed, and among them, only one was a male representative (Table 4). Fifteen of the students interviewed were in the 9th grade, and three were in the 10th grade (Table 3). The data obtained from the participants were grouped into major and minor findings. Major findings include school/teacher/student/parent-related, test-related and stress-related factors. Minor findings include peer influence, gadget use, and tutoring help.

School-Related Factors

Lack of IT equipment

UPrincipal 1 drew attention to the school's role in students' performance in the 9th-grade final exams and highlighted the shortcomings that hinder the establishment of a quality learning environment. She added that since the school where she works is not equipped with computers and projectors, difficulties arise in students' deep understanding of the content, especially in mathematics:

Tələbələr nə vaxta qədər səma fiqurlarını xəyal edərək öyrənəcəklər? Texniki avadanlıq olmadan riyaziyyatı dərin öyrənməkdən söhbət gedə bilməz.

[How long will students try to understand space figures by imagining them? Without technical equipment, there is no question of deep learning of mathematics.]

The same opinion was voiced by UPrincipal 2. According to her experience, if the classroom has computers and projectors, mathematics can be made more interesting and understandable for students.

Mənim əvvəl işlədiyim məktəb Təhsil Nazirliyinin birbaşa himayəliyində olan məktəb idi və müasir avadanlıqla təmin olunmuşdu. Şagirdlərin riyaziyyat ortalaması 70 bal idi. Burada isə 35 baldır. Bu o deməkdir ki məktəbdəki şagirdlərin çoxu 3 qiyməti almışdır.

[The school where I worked before was under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Science and Education and was equipped with modern school supplies. The math average of the students in that school was 70 points. However, it is 35 points in this school. This means that most students in the school received grade 3 in mathematics.]

Talking about the importance of technical equipment, UPrincipal 2 also added:

Gəlin baxaq texniki avadanlığın olduğu siniflərdə müəllimlər riyaziyyatı necə izah edir. Tələbə vizual olaraq görür ki düzbucaqlı bağlandı, yuxarıdan və aşağıdan iki dairə qoyuldu və silindir yarandı, bu qədər sadə. Amma onu xəttlərlə lövhədə çəkərək izah etmək eyni nəticəni vermir. Şagird başa düşmür.

[Let's see how math teachers explain the content in private courses. The student visually sees that the rectangle is closed, two circles are placed from the bottom and top, and it becomes a cylinder; it is that simple. But drawing things on the board with lines and explaining them does not give the same result. The student does not understand.]

While discussing technical facilities' role, UPrincipal.1 highlighted another interesting point. She said that all elementary schools in Baku are usually provided with computers and projectors, and visual methods are used during lesson delivery in primary school. However, in higher grades, the integration of technical equipment into the learning process decreases:

İbtidai sinfi bitirib 5ci sinfə keçəndə şagird heç bir visual resurs görmür. Əksinə şagirdlər ənənəvi təhsilə yaxın yanaşma ilə qarşılaşırlar. Bu vaxt da tələbə dərslə marağını itirir. Nəticədə şagirdlərə daha mürəkkəb məzmunları başa düşmək çətin olur. Yəni texniki avadanlıq yuxarı sinif tələbələrinin öyrənmə prosesində daha vacibdir.

[After finishing primary school and moving to the 5th grade, the student does not see any visual resources during the lesson. On the contrary, students encounter an approach close to the traditional teaching method. At this time, students lose interest in the lesson. As a result, students find it difficult to understand more complex content. Therefore, technical equipment is more necessary in the learning process of high school students.]

Shortage of teachers and books

All five students from rural schools highlighted the lack of teachers while reflecting on the reasons that demotivate them during exam preparation. Student 14 said that there is no English teacher in their school.

Başqa regiondan dərş keçmək üçün müəllim gəlir, amma hər dəfə gələ bilmir. Həm də qışda yollar pısdı, bəzən o xəstələnir. Yenə də bizim ingilis dili dərslərimiz çox vaxt boş keçir.

[A teacher from another region comes to teach but cannot come regularly. In addition, the roads are bad in cold weather, and sometimes she gets sick. As a result, our English classes are often empty.]

During the discussion of this topic, the principal of the rural school reported that there is a shortage of teachers, especially for teaching foreign languages. Furthermore, he added that sometimes even the books do not reach their schools, and they cannot provide the students with the necessary teaching materials. Commenting on the issue, Parent 12 from the rural school stated that even though the exam date is getting closer, her child's school does not yet have an English teacher and certain subjects are taught by other specialized teachers.

Baxmayaq ki sinifdə şagird sayı azdır, yenə də oxumağa yaxşı şərait yoxdur. Məktəbdə ingilis dili müəllimi yoxdur. O biri fənnlərin keçirilməyindən də razı deyilik. Bəzən kitab çatışmamazlığı da olur.

[Although the number of students in the class is small, there are no appropriate conditions for learning. There is no English teacher in the the school. We are also not satisfied with the teaching of other subjects. Sometimes there is a shortage of books.]

Tough School Schedule

During the discussions, all students said that one of the difficulties they faced in the final exam was studying various subjects and preparing for the exam. Student 8 noted that there are 17 subjects in the 9th grade.

Biz həm buraxılış imtahanına hazırlaşmaqdan, həm də bir neçə fənnin gündəlik dərslərini və ev tapşırıqlarını etməkdən çox yoruluruq

[We are very tired of preparing for the school-leaving exam and doing many subjects' daily lessons and homework.]

Similar comments were voiced by parents regarding student overload. 9 out of 12 parents reported that their children have difficulty preparing for exams and studying school subjects. They reported that their children struggled to study school subjects and prepare for exams. As a result, their children went to bed late and did not get sufficient rest. This, in turn, affects their children's physical and mental health, resulting in their children being unable to show the desired results in exams.

Class size

As for the teacher-student ratio, Principal 2 reported:

Şagirdlərin səviyyəsinin müxtəlifliyi daha çox problem yaradır nəinki onların sayı. Məsələn, müəllim yeni dərsləri izah edəndə yüksək nəticəli şagirdlər daha tez başa düşür və yubanmadan davam etmək istəyir.

[The diversity of students' levels causes a problem rather than a large number of students in the class. For example, if a teacher explains a new lesson, high-performing students quickly understand and want to move on quickly yubanmadan]

She added that when a teacher spends more time on low-performing students, other students become bored, sometimes thinking they are not spending their time effectively in the classroom. In addition, students say that they do not want to hear the same things repeatedly. Principal 1 shared a similar comment with her colleague. She explained that

Sınıfdə şagirdlərin sayı öyrənmə prosesində elə də vacib deyil. Bəzi şagirdlər repetitor köməyi qəbul edir və özəl kurslarda 3-4 nəfərlik qruplarda hazırlanırlar, amma yenə də yaxşı qiymətlər almırlar. Mənim əvvəl işlədiyim məktəbdə bir sınıfdə 40 şagird var idi və onların hər biri 9cu sinif buraxılış imtahanında 4 və 5 qiymətləri almışdılar.

[The number of students in the class is not particularly important in the learning process. Some students receive tutor support or prepare in private courses in groups of 3-4 people but still do not get good results. In the school where I worked before, there was a class of 40 students, and each got grade 4 or 5 on the 9th grade school leaving exam.]

However, the parents of the study had different views regarding the large number of students in the classroom. 9 out of 12 parents agreed that although school teachers do their best to help their children do well in exams, due to a large number of students, they prefer to use the help of tutors to ensure that their children's individual needs are met. Parent 7 from urban school reported that there are 42 students in the class:

Müəllim 45 dəqiqə ərzində bu qədər çox şagirdin ehtiyacları ilə necə maraqlana bilər?

[How can a teacher be interested in the needs of so many students in a 45-minute lesson?]

Although the teachers of the rural school reported that the teacher-student ratio was not high in their school, on the contrary, there were 7-8 students in each class, the teachers of the urban schools emphasized that the large number of students is one of the main obstacles in preparing students for the school-leaving exam.

School-Based Assessment

According to UPrincipal 1, students are prepared for school-leaving exams based on summative assessments held inside the school. For this reason, special attention should be paid to implementing school-based assessments. However, teachers work separately when preparing these questions, and each teacher is required to enter a certain amount of questions into the test bank. UPrincipal 2 also added that periodically informing students and parents about the results

of summative assessments is one of the main components of the work so that students are aware of what is expected of them. However, according to the reports of the rural school teachers of the study, although the summative assessment should be conducted by the school management, the primary responsibility in this process falls on them. As a result, summative assessment questions are distributed to students without ensuring their reliability and validity. Teacher 7 from the rural school commented on the issue:

Summativ qiymətləndirmənin keçirildiyi gün müəllimlər print olunmuş sualları sinfə gətirir və şagirdlərə paylayır.

[On the day of summative assessment, teachers bring printed questions to the class and distribute them to students]

While talking about the role of the school, UPrincipal 1 believed that among the factors affecting student performance in the exam is the presence of a shared vision among school community members, especially among teachers. UPrinciple 1 also noted that students feel safer and more comfortable when the school has core values and a collaborative environment. They don't hesitate to ask questions, which means they learn more. She believes students show better results when they come to school willingly and feel respect and love for their teachers.

Teacher-Related Factors

Teaching Experience and Competencies

UPrincipal.1 believes that regardless of whether teachers are experienced, or novices, their passion for teaching is important. She adds that novice teachers are eager to explore and apply innovative methods. This is because they can use technology and the Internet more efficiently and regularly acquire new knowledge. According to her, teachers who are not conservative and regularly work on themselves develop the same qualities in their students as well:

Mənim müəllimlərimdən biri 15 ildən çoxdur ki tarix fənnini tədris edir. Mən qəbul edirəm ki onun öz fənnində çox dərin biliyi var. Amma o tələbələrin diqqətini cəkmə bilmir. Onun tələbələrinin çoxu zəif nəticə göstərmiş summativ testlərdə. Lakin digər cavan tarix müəllimi Müəllimlərin işə qəbulu imtahanından keçib və mən həmin sinfə bu yeni müəllimi təyin etmişəm. Təzə müəllim gələndən sonra bizim zəif hesab etdiyimiz bu sinif yaxşı nəticələr göstərməyə başlayıb. Bu yeni müəllimin dərslər dediyi şagirdlər Zəfər Tarixi və Konstitusiyaya Məhkəməsi yarışlarında birinci yerləri tutdular. Çünki müəllim dərslər keçməyə çox həvəslidir, səbirlidir. O tələbələrini sevir. Daima nəşə araşdırır.

[One of my teachers has been teaching history for more than 15 years. I accept that he has a deep knowledge of his subject. However, he cannot attract the attention of students. Most of the students performed poorly in summative tests. However, another young history teacher passed the Teacher Recruitment Exam this year, and I assigned that class to this novice teacher. This class, which we considered weak, started to show good results after the arrival of a new teacher. That new teachers' students took first places in the competitions of Zafar history and the Constitutional Court. Because the teacher is very eager to teach, she is patient. She loves students. She is constantly investigating.]

Teacher 8 from the rural school described the role of teacher experience as building an effective learning environment and making students work more productively during the given time.

Mən ilk dəfə 9cu sinifləri buraxılış imtahanlarına hazırlayanda təcrübəsiz idim. Amma indi mən bir çox şeyi öz təlimatımda dəyişmişəm, hansı ki mənə şagirdlərimi imtahana daha yaxşı hazırlamağa kömək edib.

[I was a novice when I first prepared the 9th graders for the exam. However, now I have changed many things in my instruction, which helped me prepare my students more appropriately for the exam.]

Other respondents also shared similar views that being experienced as a teacher helped them to be more systematic in their work. 9 out of 15 teachers reported that, teaching for years has led to developing skills such as preparing assignments according to standards, time management, and evaluating students. Teacher 11, an Azerbaijani language teacher with 20 years of experience in the interview, also admitted that although her young colleague although Teacher 12 is a new teacher and has been in their school for four months, she is the favourite teacher of all students:

Onun tələbələri ən yüksək nəticələri göstəriblər.

[Her students show the highest results.]

Teacher 7 also confirmed her colleagues' opinions by saying that teachers' responsibility and passion for their work are more important than their teaching experience.

Bəzi müəllimlər illərin təcrübəsinə malik olsa da müasir tələbələrin ehtiyaclarını qarşılamayan konservativ metodlardan istifadə edirlər.

[Some teachers, despite many years of teaching experience, use conservative methods that do not meet the needs of modern students.]

On the other hand, several teachers (six teachers) who took part in the interview believed that a year of teaching does not play a decisive role when it comes to the practical construction of the learning environment. For instance, Teacher 7 from the rural school, who has three years of teaching experience, shared their thoughts as follows:

Müəllimlərin sertifikatlaşdırılması zamanı biz gördük ki illərlə təcrübəsi olan müəllimlər zəif nəticələr göstəriblər. Onlar hətta bəzi sözlərin düzgün yazılışını bilməyiblər.

[During the certification of teachers, we saw that teachers with many years of teaching experience showed very poor results. They did not even know how to spell some words correctly.]

Commenting on the role of teacher experience in student outcomes, UPrincipal 2 expressed her views as follows:

Məsələn mənə əvvəl idarə etdiyim məktəbdə ingilis dili müəllimləri imtahana yaxın bir müraciətlə gəldilər. Onlar dedilər ki hər gün dərslər bitəndən sonra bir müəllim qalacaq. Onların məktəbin bütün şagirdlərini idman zalına yığacaqlar və şagirdlər 45 dəqiqə müddətində dinləmə mətnlərini dinləyib testləri həll edəcəklər.

[For example, in the school I led before, the English language teachers came with a request on the eve of exam preparation. They said that one teacher would stay every day after the end of classes. They will gather the students of the whole school in the gym and the students will listen to the listening texts to solve tests for 45 minutes.]

This means that the teacher worked not only to develop the listening skills of the students of her class but also of the students of other teachers.

Contrary to the urban school principals, RPrincipal 3 indicated that a year of teaching is one of the critical elements in increasing student achievement:

Mən 9cu siniflərin hazırlanmasında təcrübəli müəllimlərin iştirakına xüsusilə fikir verirəm. Çünki illərlə dərslər keçdikdən sonra müəllim təcrübə qazanır ki mövzunu necə keçsin, hansı mövzuya nə qədər vaxt sərf etsin, və tələbələrin biliyini necə dəyərləndirsin.

[I pay special attention to the participation of experienced teachers in preparing 9th grades. Because after years of teaching, the teacher gains experience in how to teach the topic, how much time to devote to which topic, and how to evaluate students.]

While sharing her thoughts on teacher competency Principal 2 stated that summative tests are not organized according to standards by the teachers. Although the 9th-grade school-leaving exams start in April, the topics for the exam are known from October and November. She claimed that if the teachers prepare the summative questions according to the requirements, the students will be better prepared for the exam:

İndi Azərbaycan dili aylığıdır, və mən gündəlik olaraq dərsləri müşahidə edirəm. Məktəbdə 7 azərbaycan dili müəllimi var. Lakin onların heç biri kurikulum standartlarına uyğun şagird mərkəzli dərslər qura bilmir.

[This is the month of the Azerbaijani, and I am participating in lesson observations daily. There are 7 Azerbaijani language teachers in the school. However, none of them organizes student-centred lessons according to curriculum standards.]

During a discussion on teacher competency, RPrincipi 3 highlighted the teachers' lack of proficiency in using technological tools. He said that sometimes even though the school has the necessary equipment, the teachers cannot use it:

Kitabların sonunda QR kodlar və linklər var. Şagirdlərin mobil telefonları var, evlərində internet var. Tələbələr evdə də məşq edə bilirlər əgər müəllimlər onları düzgün istiqamətləndirərsələr. İş orasındadır ki 80ci illərin müəllimləri bu kitabları

tədris edə bilmir, onlar tələbələri yaxşı istiqamətləndirə bilmirlər, xüsusilə ingilis dilinin tədrisində.

[There are QR codes and links in the new books. Students have phones and internet at home. Students may practice at home if the teacher guides them. The point is that the teachers of the 80s cannot teach these books. They cannot guide the students properly, especially in teaching English.]

Teacher-Student Relationship

Regarding the teacher-student relationship, all the students believed it significantly impacted their learning process. Their main opinion was that they are more comfortable in the class of teachers with whom they have valuable interaction, and they do not hesitate to ask questions. 5 out of 15 students involved in the interviews reported that their teachers supported them in preparation for the exam, talked with them and were interested in their needs. Student 2, one of the female participants of the study:

Biz bu müəllimlərlə danışanda inanırıq ki biz imtahanlarda uğur qazana bilərik.

[When we talk to these teachers, we believe we can succeed in the exams.]

However, other 10 students reported not receiving any support from their teachers. Student 6 reported that unlike school teachers her private teacher is friendlier and patiently explains even if she asks repeated questions. Student 9 also mentioned that some of their teachers become aggressive when he asks questions about things he does not understand and always leaves the class with unanswered questions.

As for parents' opinions on teacher-student relationships, almost all of them reported no tense situations between their children and teachers. However, they added that their children are more successful in the classes of teachers who talk to them and treat them kindly.

The teachers, when being interviewed, brought attention to one aspect that influence the relationship between the teacher and the student, and reported that they are held responsible for students' poor results, which can sometimes make them feel under pressure. As students perform poorly on tests, principals and parents raise expectations for teachers to improve student achievement. On the other hand, the teachers, seeing the students who show an irresponsible attitude to the exam process, are worried that they will be unable to prepare them appropriately within the given time. This situation sometimes leads to strained teacher-student relationships in the classroom, negatively affecting student results.

Teacher Expectation

According to the reports of parents and students who participated in the research, teachers sometimes may have positive or negative expectations for students. Student 7 shared that three boys in their class are good at math. Their math teacher mainly works with them because they believe they will score well.

Mənim müəllimim deyir ki mən riyaziyyatda zəifəm, mən əsasən Azərbaycan dili fənninə diqqəti verməliyəm ki imtahanda ümumi balımı qaldıra bilim.

[My teacher tells me I am weak in mathematics, I should mainly focus on the Azerbaijani language so that I can increase my overall score in the exam.]

Student 4 provides a similar comment by saying that their English teacher prefers to work mainly with those students who have English speakers in their families and help with the homework given by the teacher.

Family-Related Factor

Parent-school relationship

All three school principals agreed that parental support is one of the main factors supporting student success in exams. Principal 1 said that those parents who attend the meetings often come to school and are interested in their child's progress, their children always show high results.

UPrincipal 1 noted a lack of parental involvement in her school. She added that although they invited the parents of the students who showed poor results, their efforts were unsuccessful:

Biz deyirik ki sizin övladınız dərslərə gəlmir, gəlsə belə hazırlıqsız gəlir. Biz bilmək istəyirik ki səbəb nədir. Biz valideynlərlə birlikdə işləmək istəyirik, lakin onlar bizimlə əməkdaşlıq etməyə həvəsli deyillər.

[We say that your child does not come to classes, and even if he comes, he comes unprepared. We want to know what the reason is. We want to work together with parents, however, parents are not willing to cooperate with us.]

UPrincipal 2 also shared the same opinion with her colleague, saying that not all parents attend even individual meetings. As a result, students know that no one will hold them accountable for their poor results:

Əgər valideyn övladının təhsilini davam etdirməsini və uğurlu olmasını istəyirsə, şübhəsiz ki o məktəb-valideyn əlaqəsinin qurulmasına önəm verəcək.

[A parent who wants his child to continue his education and be successful undoubtedly places importance on the school-parent relationship.]

Lack of Parental Support

Five male and three female students reported that the reason for demotivation was that their parents did not believe in them. Student 13 from a rural school said her mother says she will not pass the exam because you are bad at math. Student 9 expressed his opinion on this matter as follows:

Mənim anam düşünür ki mən sınaq imtahanında zəif nəticə göstərmişəmsə bu buraxılış imtahanında da belə olacaq.

[My mother thinks if I scored poorly in mock exams, it would be the same in the school-leaving exam as well.]

Principal 3 stated that parents from rural areas think that their daughters will not be allowed to work after getting married, and in such a case, what is the need to go to school and spend time. He added that parents do not understand the importance of education in their child's life. They think education is only for finding a job.

Halbuki təhsil ətrafındakı insanlarla düzgün münasibət qurmaq üçün vacibdir. Təhsil özünü tapmaq və özünü başa düşmək üçün vacibdir.

[However, education is necessary for students to establish proper relationships with the people around them. Education is necessary for self-discovery and self-understanding.]

Social Economic Status and Parent-Child Relationship

While continuing to discuss the factors affecting students' performance in school leaving exams, all teachers (except teacher 17) reported that coming from an incomplete family or a family with low financial status is not an obstacle to student achievement. Teachers believe that the parent's attitude towards education may reduce the negative impact of such situations. Teachers described that they have repeatedly observed that even though it is a low-income family, there is a friendly environment in the family, parents support their children, and they have meaningful conversations with their children. Teacher 6 added that many of our successful students were children from low-income families. Whereas Teacher 17 from a rural school reported that if the family's socioeconomic status is very low, it will definitely affect the student's performance:

Bizim elə şagirdlərimiz olub ki onlar məktəbə gələndə ac olublar, və ya onların soyuq havalarda geyinməyə isti paltarları olmayıb. Bu şagird necə fikrini dərəcə cəmləyə bilər?

[We have had students who came to school hungry or did not have warm clothes on cold days. How can this student concentrate on the lesson?]

Female Student 12, from rural school reported that she does not have a laptop and no space to study:

Bizim evimiz çox səs-küylüdür, mən fikrimi toplaya bilmirəm.

[Our house is very noisy, and I can't concentrate.]

RPrincipal 3 noted that low-income families are unable to provide their children with individual support in their studies when they need it. They cannot hire private tutors or buy the necessary school supplies, and because of this, these students lag behind their peers.

Test-Related Factors

Types and Difficulty level of the questions

Regarding the questions asked in the school-leaving exams, UPrincipal 1 and UPrincipal 2 think that the questions do not go beyond the school curriculum. UPrincipal 2 said that mainly situation-type questions cause difficulties, and students mainly cannot answer these tests correctly. For this reason, teachers sometimes say exam questions do not match the textbook:

Lakin müəyyən mövzuya dair bütün situasiyaları əks etdirən kitab ola bilməz. Bu sualları həll etmək üçün tələbələrin məntiqi və tənqidi təffəkirü vacibdir.

[However, no such book reflects all situations related to a certain topic. Logical and critical thinking is necessary for students to solve situational tests.]

All interviewed 10th grade students agreed that especially math questions on the exam were more complex than they did in class. Additionally, the students shared the same difficulties with the mock exams and said that the situational tests were difficult. Student number 9, who said that he got a low result from the test, gave the following explanation:

Biz situasiya testlərini həll edəndə bir neçə düzgün variantı seçməliyik. Əgər onlardan birini düz seçməsək, digər düz seçdiyimiz cavablar da səhv hesab olunur.

[We should choose several correct options when solving situational tests. If we select one of them incorrectly, the other correctly chosen answers are also considered wrong.]

Question solving time

UPrincipal 1 thinks the questions' difficulty level corresponds to the curriculum standards. She also believed that students were given enough time to solve the exam questions. UPrincipal 2 also added that the time given in the exam is sufficient. However, students need to practice a lot to improve their test-taking skills and develop reading comprehension.

Bu suallar birbaşa şagirdlərin qarşısına qoyulmayıb. Dövlət İmtahan Mərkəzi bir qrup tələbə ilə imtahan suallarını əvvəlcədən pilot edib və hər sual üçün tələb olunan vaxt hesablanıb.

[These tests are not put directly in front of the students. The State Examination piloted exam questions with a group of students in advance and the time required for each question is calculated.]

In contrast to the principals, most teachers have claimed that the questions have a high difficulty level and that the time allotted to complete these questions is insufficient. Teacher 4 mentioned that one of the open-ended questions on the exam the previous year required students to draw a tree and insert information connected to the text on the branches of the tree:

Bu sualı həll etmək 7-8 dəqiqə vaxt aparır, lakin imtahanda şagirdə bu sual üçün 3 dəqiqə vaxt verilir.

[To solve this task takes 7-8 minutes, but the student is given 3 minutes for this question in the exam.]

Teacher 12 reported that students get tired because the questions contain long sentences.

Mənim şagirdlərim deyir ki suallar çox uzun idi və onlar sualın sonuna çatanda başlanğıçda nə yazıldığını unudurdular. Onlar sualı başa düşmək üçün onu dəfələrlə oxumalı idilər.

[My students say that the questions were so long that by the time they got to the end, they forgot what was written at the beginning. They had to read the question repeatedly to understand it.]

Also according to the findings of study, 10 students reported that they could not solve some questions in the exam since they did not have the opportunity to think about those questions due to a lack of time.

Exam Setting

Teacher 14 reported that these questions were not for the exam room. The student can solve those problems in the classroom environment. But many factors distract the student during the exam, excitement, fatigue, a feeling of responsibility in front of teachers and parents, who expect answer from them. Teacher 12 added that her students always complain about the behaviour of the examiners:

Sözsüz ki imtahan nəzarətçiləri bir qədər sərt olurlar ki köçürmə hallarının qarşısını alsınlar. Amma onlar fərqində deyillər ki onlar onsuzda stressli olan şagirdlər üçün vəziyyəti biraz da çətin hala gətirirlər.

[Perhaps the examiners are being a bit strict to prevent cheating among students, but they do not realise that they are making the situation difficult for already stressed students.]

Almost all students mainly reported difficulty in listening tasks. Student 5, a 10th grade student who experienced the exam process, said there were no headphones for listening during the exam, and the texts were barely audible.

Buna görə də mən dinləmə suallarından ikisinə cavab verə bilmədim, çünki o hissəni eşitmədim.

[That is why I could not answer two of the listening questions because I did not hear that part.]

She also added that when she went to the mock exams, she listened to the texts with headphones and correctly answered all the listening questions. Other students also reported that the most challenging thing for them in preparation for English exams is the lack of conditions to practice listening in the classroom.

Interviews with students also revealed that they had concerns regarding the exam format. Student 8 said the exam duration was three hours in previous years, with no open-ended questions. He added that although open questions are included recent years, the exam time has been shortened to two and a half hours.

First standardized state exam experience and questions from lower classes

10 teachers associate one of the factors that lead to students' poor results in the final exams with their lack of prior state exam experience. According to Teacher 3:

Tələbələr məktəb həyatlarında ilk dəfə 9cu sinifdə belə məsuliyyətli imtahan verirlər.

[In the 9th grade, students take such a responsible exam for the first time in their school life.]

Other teachers also confirmed that in many cases, the students who did not perform well in the 9th grade exams can show progress in the 11th-grade exams. Because they are already familiar with the exam process, they have an idea about how to study.

According to the teachers who were interviewed, questions from lower grades are also included in the 9th-grade school-leaving examinations. Teacher 17 also stated that her students mostly make mistakes in questions from lower grades:

Bəzən tələbələrin 5ci sinifdə keçdikləri qramatik qaydalar yadlarında qalmır.

[Sometimes students may not remember a grammar rule they learned in the 5th grade.]

Stress-Related Factors

Exam stress and pressure

During the interviews, it became clear that female students are more affected by the stress factor than male students, which negatively affects their preparation for the exam. Thus, 4 out of 6 male students reported that they do not feel anxious, can plan their time properly, do not have problems meeting with friends, and spend time with family and relatives. However, all 9 female students reported feeling stressed since they spent most of their time studying without having an interesting time. This, in turn, leads to student demotivation during exam preparation. Student 7 said she feels tense, especially one week before the trial school exams, which prevents her from concentrating on her studies. All female students reported that they would have been more successful in their studies if they had not felt test anxiety.

When discussing with parents the factors affecting their children's school-leaving exam results, it became clear that they are mainly worried about their children feeling under stress in preparation for the exam. The parents of female students reported that exam anxiety prevented their children from fully concentrating on their studies. Parent 5 said that her child gets more stressed as the exam date approaches and has started to sleep restlessly at night.

Onun müəllimləəri deyir ki qızım dərslərinə əvvəlki kimi fokuslanə bilmir.

[Her teachers say that my daughter cannot concentrate on her lessons like before.]

Similar comments came from Parent 6 and Parent 10. They said their children were aggressive towards their siblings and mostly spent time in their rooms. Parent 8 added that after her daughter scored poorly on the first mock exam, she began to believe she would do poorly on the

final exam and became demotivated. However, the parents of male students emphasised that their children are not negatively affected by the stress factor in the process of preparing for the exam. Even if they sometimes feel tense, it does not last long, and they concentrate on their studies again. Parent 8 added:

Baxmayaraq ki mənim oğlum bəzən biraz gərgin hiss edir, onun testlərdə düzgün cavab verdiyi sualların sayı artıb, və o yaxşı gedir.

[Even though my son sometimes felt a little bit tense, the number of questions he answered correctly in the tests has increased, and he makes good progress.]

All the parents who reported that their children were not negatively affected by stress on the eve of exam preparation were employed parents.

Student-Related Factors

Prior Knowledge

Almost every interviewed teacher stated that the student's prior knowledge might help them anticipate how well they will do on an exam. Teacher 10 reported that some students in the 9th grade cannot read in English:

Biz bu tələbələrin bir neçə ay ərzində oxuyub anlama və ya qramatika suallarını həll etməklərini gözləyə bilmərik.

[We cannot expect these students to solve reading comprehension tasks or grammar questions in a few months.]

Self Esteem and Motivation

Teacher 3 reported that student's motivation is the main factor leading to persistence in the exam preparation process.

Mənim bəzi tələbələrim olub ki onlar fərqində idilər ki sinif yoldaşlarından geri qalırlar. Amma bu onları həvəsdən salmayıb. Onlar bunu normal qəbul ediblər ki

sinif yoldaşları üçün mətni bir dəfə oxumaq kifayət etsə də, amma mənim üçün bu kifayət deyil. Amma onlar inanıblar ki sonda istədikləri nəticəyə nail olacaqlar.

[I have had some students who are aware that they are lagging behind their classmates. But this did not discourage them. They think it may be enough for their classmate to read this text once, but not for them, which is normal. But they believed that in the end they will achieve the desired result.]

Teacher 8 stated that self-esteem and motivation are interrelated. She shared that she had a student who convinced herself that she would not understand the new material because she had no math skills:

Onun riyaziyyatı öyrənməyə həvəsi yoxdur, çünki o inanır ki o riyaziyyatda bacarıqlı deyil.

[She has no motivation to study mathematics because she believes that she is not good at math.]

Interpersonal skills

Teacher 6 added the importance of students' strong interpersonal skills to the list of factors that positively influence their exam results:

Bəzi tələbələr var ki onlar kommunikasiyaya açıqdır. Onlar yalnız müəllimlərinin izahatı ilə qane olmur. Onlar tənəffüslərdə başqa siniflərin şagirdlərinə, hətta başqa siniflərin müəllimlərinə yaxınlaşaraq ünsiyyət saxlayırlar və suallar verirlər.

[There are some students who are very open to communication. They are not satisfied only with the explanations of their teachers. They approach students of other classes, and even teachers of other classes during breaks, communicate and ask questions.]

Goal Orientation and Persistence

Interviewed students could be divided into two groups regarding their attitudes towards the 9th grade school-leaving exams. One group of students sees a high score in the state exams as a chance to enter a successful university, while another group thinks that the exam results will not

change anything in their life. According to the findings, 7 out of 15 interviewed students plan to continue their studies abroad. All students intending to continue their education abroad were from urban schools. They said the foreign universities they want to apply to require high scores on standardised state exams. Interviews with other students also showed that their choice of university determines their attitude towards the final exams. So, if a high score in the school-leaving exams is not required to continue their education abroad, students prefer to prepare for international exams rather than the 9th grade school leaving exams. Student 3 said he needs to have a rich portfolio to get admission to his desired university. That is why he prefers to participate in some internship programs as a volunteer and prepares in private courses to pass international exams required for studying abroad, rather than preparing for state exams. Student 8 and Student 9 shared similar views and said that the 9th and 10th grades are ideal for participating in some projects and training.

Biz 11ci sinifdə buraxılış imtahanlarından keçməliyik və universitetə qəbul olmalıyıq.

[In the 11th grade, we have to pass the school-leaving exams and get admission to the university.]

Two female students want to get a high result in the final exam to continue to the 10th grade in ADA School because students are expected to score specific points in the exams to study in this school. Interviewed students' responses show that compared to male students, female students approach final exams more responsibly and tend to achieve higher results. Student 5 completed the 9th grade with a red diploma and scored high marks in the state exam, and they are currently studying in the 10th grade. They reported planning to finish the 11th grade with high scores because they both enjoy learning. Student 6 and Student 7, who are 10th grade students from another school, also scored high results in the school-leaving exam because they want to win

scholarships to study in foreign universities and make their parents and friends proud of them. The other 8 students are unmotivated to show high results and simply want to pass the exam. They think that even if they score less on the exam, there will be no problem in continuing to the 10th grade.

Parents from both rural and urban schools noted that the student's personal qualities, motivation and persistence, regardless of the circumstances and environment, are the main factors for achieving successful exam results. Parent 11 from the rural school said her daughter learned English by watching lessons on YouTube. Parent 10 another parent from the rural school also noted that her son receives scanned versions of the tests from their relatives living in Baku and prepares for the exam in private courses. Regarding the importance of the student's personal qualities and attitude to education, Parent 4 added that her eldest son passed the school-leaving exam two years ago:

Həmin vaxtlarda bizim maddi problemlərimiz var idi, və biz böyük oğlumu müəllim yanına göndərə bilmədik. Buna baxmayaraq o özü hazırlaşmaqla imtahanda çox yaxşı bal topladı. Bu il mənim kiçik oğlum buraxılış imtahanından keçməlidir. Biz onun üçün bütün şəraiti yaratmışıq. Amma o çalışmaq istəmir.

[At that time, we had financial problems and could not send my eldest son to a tutor. Despite this, he scored very well on the exam with self-study. This year, my youngest son has to pass the final exam. We have created all conditions for him. However, he does not want to study.]

Minor Findings

Tutoring

In contrast to the principals, the majority of teachers (16 teachers) reported that using tutor help leads students to get poor exam results. According to Teacher 12:

Tələbə müəllim yanına hazırlığa gedəndə hazırlıq müəllimi bir tapşırıq verir, məktəb müəllimi başqa tapşırıq verir.

[When a student goes to a tutor, private teacher gives one task, and the school teacher gives another task.]

Students sometimes get confused when trying to do different tasks of different teachers. Teacher 8 also emphasised that:

Tələbələrin diqqəti bir istiqamətə cəmlənmədiyi üçün arzuolunan nəticə yoxdur.

[Since the student's attention is not focused on one direction, there is no desired result.]

According to the interviewed teachers if students carefully follow the tasks given by school teachers, they will not need tutoring support. They will not spend time on various preparatory courses. They will use their time more efficiently and better concentrate on the learning process. Explaining another negative aspect of tutor support affecting students' exam preparation, Teacher 8 said that when parents send their children to paid preparation courses, they inevitably expect more from their children and pressure them to achieve successful results.

Tələbələr nə qədər çox təzyiq hiss edirlərsə, bir o qədər də fikirlərini toplamağa çətinlik çəkirlər.

[The more pressure students feel, the more difficult it is for them to concentrate.]

Peer Influence

The next topic discussed in the interviews was related to peer influence. UPrincipal 2 said that peer influence has always existed in school environment, and students are influenced by each other both negatively and positively. She reported that they constantly observe student misbehavior:

Bir çox hallarda bu tələbələrin dərəcə davamiyyəti zəifdir və onlar aşağı nəticəli şagirdlər olaraq qruplaşdırılırlar. Məsələn, beş gün əvvəl 9cu siniflərin monitorinqi olmuşdur. Dərəcə davamiyyəti zəif olan şagirdlər ən aşağı nəticələri göstəriblər. Əlbəttə ki xüsusilə oğlanlar bir-birindən nümunə götürüb dərəcə gəlməyə bilirlər. Bəzən valideynin bundan xəbəri belə olmur.

[Mostly, these students have poor attendance and are classified as low-performing. For example, five days ago, we had monitoring for the 9th grade. Students with poor attendance and misbehaviour showed the low results. Of course, especially boys, do not come to school taking an example from each other. Sometimes the parent does not even know about it.]

However, U Principal 1 noted that she mainly observed the positive effects of peer influence in her experience:

[Of course, students may also have a negative effect on each other. However, now our teachers, parents, and students are very aware of bullying or other negative situations that can happen among students and can handle negative peer pressure.]

She also added that students who study well motivate their peers to study:

Əgər diqqətinizi çəkdisə mən sizdən əvvəl iki qızla danışdım. Onlar 10cu sinif şagirdləridir və 9cu sinfi qırmızı diplomla bitiriblər. İndi onlar bir layihə etmək istəyirlər və öz bilik və təcrübələrini bu il 9cu sinif buraxılış imtahanlarına hazırlaşan şagirdlərlə bölüşmək istəyirlər və onlara kömək etmək istəyirlər. Mən düşünürəm ki bu həmyaşid təsirinə ən yaxşı nümunədir.

[If you noticed, I was talking to 2 girls before you. They are in the 10th grade and finished the 9th grade with a red diploma. Now they want to do a project, we want to share our knowledge and experience with students preparing for the 9th grade school-leaving exams this year and help them. I think this is the best example of peer influence.]

RPrinciple 3 also accepts that the influence of students on each other may have a negative or positive effect on their exam preparation process. He explained that some male students in his school do not try to prepare for the final exams. They know that even if they get a low grade, they will pass to the 10th grade. Therefore, they prefer to work instead of preparing for the exam.

Other boys also look at their working peers and want to work, not spend time and effort on exams.

Interviewed teachers from both rural and urban schools reported that they did not encounter negative peer pressure from students in the classroom. The teachers also voiced the same opinion as the principals and reported that cases like bullying are primarily found in lower classes. In the upper grades, these cases have decreased because students can defend themselves and become more mature. On the contrary, students positively influence motivating each other to study well. The main point that teachers emphasised about peer influence was that students could negatively influence each other indirectly. Thus, students misbehaving during class do not allow others to pay full attention to the exam preparation process. Teachers reported that misbehaving students disrupt the learning environment and distract other students. According to Teacher 8:

Bəzən müəllimlər dərsi çatdırmaqdan ziyadə dərsdə özünü yaxşı aparmayan şagirdləri sakitləşdirməyə daha çox vaxt sərf edirlər. Bu da öz növbəsində öyrətmənin keyfiyyətini aşağı salır.

[Sometimes teachers, rather than lesson delivery, spend more time and effort on calming students who show misbehave in the class. This in turn lowers the quality of teaching.]

Although the parents interviewed in rural and urban schools reported that their children did not experience any negative influence from their peers, they emphasised the importance of a healthy environment in the learning process. For example, parent 5 said her child was previously in a low-performing class and was very irresponsible towards her studies.

Lakin onun sinfini dəyişəndən sonra qızım digər çalışqan şagirdlərə baxaraq həvəsləndi, və dərslərinə məsuliyyətlə yanaşdı.

[However, after changing her class, my daughter was inspired by other diligent students and approached the lessons more responsibly.]

Parent 4 also added that a female student in her son's class is fluent in English, and her son asks her to clarify what he does not understand.

Gadget Use

All the interviewed students reported that spending time with their gadgets is the main factor that distracts and demotivates them in the exam preparation process. All 6 male students reported spending much time on social networks. Student 9 added:

Telefonumu çox istifadə edəndən sonra mən yoruluram və oxumaq istəmirəm.

[After using my mobile phone a lot, I get tired and do not want to study.]

Other students also agreed that when they spend time with gadgets, they cannot complete their tasks on time. In this case, they lose motivation when they realize that they have to study a lot in a short period. Only 2 female students said they use their gadgets for short-term relaxation and lesson preparation. Those who gave this answer were students who completed the 9th grade with a red diploma.

Teacher 12 touched on another point that caused students to show low results and emphasized that students often do not read the question carefully. She added that students spend a lot of time on their mobile phones and this prevents them from concentrating on their studies:

Məsələn, sual tələb edir ki mətnin əsas ideyasına uyğun olmayan variantları seçin. Şagirdlər diqqətsizlikdən və ya həyəcandan sualı səhv oxuyurlar və uyğun olmayan variantları seçmək əvəzinə uyğun olan variantları seçirlər. Halbuki sualı diqqətlə oxusalar, onlar düzgün cavabı bilirlər.

[For example, the question requires choosing the variants that do not relate to the text's main idea. Either out of carelessness or excitement, the student misreads the question and selects the relevant variants instead of the irrelevant ones. However, if they read the question carefully, they know the correct answers.]

Teacher 10 confirmed that the students were not paying attention to the test questions. She said that sometimes her high-achieving students, who she thought would be successful, show poor results due to lack of attention.

Mən sınaq imtahanlarından sonra sualları yoxlayanda tələbələrə deyirəm ki səhv cavab verdikləri sualları təkrar oxusunlar. Bir çox hallarda tələbələr sualı təkrar oxuduqdan sonra nəyi səhv etdiklərini özləri tapa bilirlər.

[When I check the questions after the mock exams, I tell the students to re-read the question they answered incorrectly. In many cases, students themselves find out what they did wrong after rereading the question.]

Along with all the factors mentioned above, all interviewed principals think that student-related factors are more important than others. Students' attitudes to education, personal qualities, self-efficacy, motivation, and prior knowledge are the main factors influencing student outcomes.

Discussion

After the analysis of the answers given by the participants, the factors affecting student performance in the 9th grade final exams were divided into four categories: 1) student's personal qualities and attitude towards education, 2) school-related factors (including lack of technical equipment and class size) 3) teacher-student relationship 4) family's attitude towards their child's education.

Students personal qualities

This study's reports of principals, teachers, and parents revealed that student-related factors are of primary importance among the factors affecting student performance in state exams. The data obtained and analysed during individual interviews and focus group discussions show that the respondents understood student-related factors such as prior knowledge, previous achievements, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and study habits. Among the factors that had a negative impact on student achievement, the most emphasised response was low reading comprehension and math difficulty. In addition, almost all teachers think that prior knowledge is important. If students do not acquire sufficient knowledge and skills in primary education, as well as in general secondary education, there is always a possibility of gaps in their further education. Research in cognitive psychology supports the same idea that individuals with

more knowledge about a topic understand and remember more than those with less prior knowledge (Chi & Ceci, 1987).

Almost all interviewed teachers reported that having predetermined goals is one of the main characteristics of students who perform well in school-leaving exams. Similar answers came from the students as well, as 7 of them mentioned that they want to apply to foreign universities and the universities they want to be admitted to require a high score in school-leaving exams. The analysis of students' answers shows they are extrinsically motivated to pass the state exams. As Deci and Ryan (2000) said, students are motivated to achieve good results in exams either to get the required score and be rewarded or to avoid punishment.

Three principals and almost all teachers think that high self-ef is one of the main characteristics of students who score high on exams. According to Bandura (1999), self-esteem is the student's belief that he/she has sufficient knowledge and skills to complete a specific task. Students with high self-esteem put more effort into preparing for exams and tend to be persistent and find solutions when faced with failure (Pajares et al., 2000). In addition, 16 teachers and 10 parents reported the importance of being self-regulated for student success in exams. According to them, self-regulated students understand how much effort they have to put in to achieve their goals, allocate time correctly, listen carefully to the teacher during the lesson and take notes. Chermes and Garcia (2001) also stated that high self-efficacy and self-regulation are interrelated. Their study claims that students with high self-efficacy are also self-regulated in the learning process. This study describes self-regulated students as individuals who can control their learning processes and think of strategies to achieve their goals.

Instruction

Instruction is organising time and activities to teach content and engage students in effective learning (Dick & Carey, 1996). The goal of instructional design is to create an environment where students can learn effectively, making learning more accessible, faster, and enjoyable (Kemp et al., 1994). According to Molenda et al. (2003), both teacher-related and school-related factors have a role in the process of designing and applying quality instruction. Kemp (1995) identifies four primary factors that should be considered when implementing the training process: *What should be taught? How should it be taught? How should learners be assessed?* Principal 1 touched on this point during the interview and explained that one of the reasons for not achieving the expected student outcomes in the state exams is that there are gaps in the process of teaching the content and evaluating student performance in the classroom environment. She added that currently, the Education Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2019) includes standards that reflect what knowledge and skills students should acquire at the end of each grade in general education. However, there are no professional standards for teachers and guidelines on delivering content and assessing student achievement to achieve the desired student outcomes. According to Principal 1, a lack of professional standards for teachers leads to difficulties in appropriately evaluating student achievement during in-school assessment and using this assessment data to improve their performance". This finding aligns with the OECD (2004) report, which claims that professional standards serve as a guideline in shaping the learning process according to the needs of the education system and develop learners in the right direction based on curriculum standards. (OECD, 2004).

Another key variable reported by respondents in this study relates to the quantity and quality of lesson delivery. Principals reported that the schools' technological equipment is insufficient, especially in teaching mathematics. Also, 13 students said they turned to private

courses because they created a more understandable and interesting learning environment using technological resources. According to Graham and Gisi (2000), the lack of various training resources (visual, audio, video) cannot ensure quality lesson delivery. This, in turn, creates obstacles for the teacher to consider the students' interests while delivering new knowledge and adapting the instruction accordingly.

As for the quantity of instruction, the high teacher-student ratio emphasized by almost all respondents does not make individual support available to students when needed.

Almost all teachers and parents (except the teachers and parents of the rural school) reported that the number of students in the classes is between 35-42 people, which hinders the efficient use of instructional time. Thus, teachers cannot reveal students' needs and provide the necessary support. Similarly, Murdock (2000) conducted a study on class size and academic performance and found that overcrowded classrooms reduce the teacher's effectiveness in promoting effective teaching and prevent students from appropriately understanding content during class.

Social and psychological environment

Aspects of the psychological environment, the third primary variable claimed by Walberg's theory (1981) to influence student performance, also dominated among the answers given by the respondents. Thus, most respondents agree that the students' use of gadgets and social networks takes up a lot of their time and causes them to be careless in their studies and unable to concentrate. Also, factors such as classroom climate, home environment, and exposure to peer influence were reported by research participants, which reflect the characteristics of the psychological environment category according to Walberg's theory (Fraser & Walberg, 1987).

Graham and Gisi (2000) state that classroom climate is the best indicator of students' overall satisfaction with their college. A positive classroom climate is directly related to better

student outcomes, contributing to the learning process by increasing student motivation and reducing students' fear of asking questions and making mistakes (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). Hagenauer et al. (2014) state that an important element of a positive classroom environment is appropriate teacher-student relationships. The findings of this study use terms such as honest, respectful, trustworthy, safe, unbiased, encouraging, empathetic, and supportive when describing teacher-student relationships. During the interview, most respondents reported similar ideas when describing the student-teacher relationship. However, principals of urban schools reported that teachers focused on content-oriented relationships with students rather than interpersonal relationships. Principals mentioned that teachers mainly focus on students getting good marks in exams and think it is important to give them academic support. However, students sometimes also need emotional support, which is a key element of being academically successful. Ruzek and colleagues (2016) also supported this idea. They found that providing more emotional support by teachers strengthens teacher-student relationships and supports creating a student-oriented classroom environment and student autonomy. Similar opinions came from the students, as 15 people emphasized that they did not receive emotional support from their teachers on the eve of exam preparation and did not have a positive relationship with their teachers. Students reported being more motivated to study in private preparation courses because they can communicate better with these teachers. This makes them feel more comfortable and enjoy the learning process. As mentioned in Schrodts et al. (2006) study, when students feel validated, recognised, and perceived as valuable, important persons, they have a favourable opinion of the teacher's credibility and pay more attention to their lessons.

Also, Split et al. (2012) revealed in their research that teacher-student conflicts can hinder students' academic development and have a negative impact on student outcomes. The responses

given by female students in this study show that teacher-student conflicts have a negative effect on their motivation (both in rural and urban schools). Almost all female students reported avoiding asking questions about topics they do not understand to teachers with whom they do not receive emotional support and have conflicts. However, male students reported that although they are reluctant to come to class due to teacher-student conflicts, this does not affect their exam preparation process. Mazumdar et al. (2012) confirm the findings of this study and emphasise that female students are more negatively affected by classroom incidents than male students.

Also, a positive student-teacher relationship allows students to build closer relationships with their peers during class and increases student engagement (Ruzek et al., 2016). As Brown et al. (2009) said, students spend more time with their peers than adults and give great preference to their peers' opinions. This idea is supported by 10 parents that peer groups positively influence their children, and collaborating with their peers in preparing for the exam is a great support for their children. However, 5 parents reported that their children were negatively affected by the influence of their peers, lost interest in lessons, and approached the exam with an irresponsible attitude. This study reveals similar findings to Olalekan (2016) that a responsible and motivated student may lose interest in learning with peers who are boring and do not take enough responsibility for their studies. On the other hand, an educationally inclined peer group can stimulate a bored member's interest in learning. Unlike parents, principals and teachers voiced different opinions about peer influence. Principals and 18 teachers reported that although they agreed that peer interaction affected student performance, students chose the group of their own will. More specifically, the teachers and principals in the study believe that students with similar characteristics and goals generally find each other. Based on their experience, they reported that students who are enthusiastic about their studies and have disciplined study habits

mostly choose peers like themselves and spend time together. According to the respondents, in many cases, students are not negatively affected by their peer. Instead, they create peer groups according to their interests, that tend to study and learn and constantly discuss exams and lessons. While investigating peer influence, Filade et al. (2019) draw attention to a slightly different aspect and say that the peer choices made by students and their attitudes towards education depend on how they are supported and guided by their parents. Similar responses were reported by teachers and principals that parental care and support protect students from the harmful habits of their peers and guide them in making good choices. Principals of urban schools noted that most of the students who do not take responsibility for lessons and exhibit negative behaviours, especially between the 9th and 11 th-grades, are those who do not have close contact with their parents. The parents of these students rarely come to parent meetings or individual meetings. They do not participate in the events in which their children are involved.

All interviewed teachers reported that their students performed better if their parents talked to them, cared about their problems, encouraged them, and supported them, even if they came from single-parent or very low socioeconomic families. This provides similar findings to Creighton and colleagues (2009) study that strong bonds with parents and other close family members and relatives can reduce the negative effects of a broken family structure in single-parent families. Also, Pomerantz et al. (2007) define the role of the parent in a dichotomous approach: home-based involvement and school-based involvement. School-based participation includes factors such as parents' communication with the school community, participation in parent-teacher meetings and school events, close contact with teachers, and volunteering in school and extracurricular activities. Experiences of home-based involvement are interpreted as eating meals with children, meeting their friends and spending time with them, helping children with school-

related tasks, and having conversations with them about academic topics (Pomerantz et al., 2007).

Almost all the teachers from the rural school mentioned that compared to female students, families give more importance to male students applying for university education. The responses of the sampled rural parents confirm the opinions of the teachers. According to their reports, families do not provide equal resources and conditions for the education of girls and boys. 5 out of 6 rural school parents (the other parent had no daughter) reported that they were desperate for their daughters' education and thought their spouses might not allow them to work after their daughters married. Teachers from rural schools also reported that although some families favour male students continuing their education, some families involve their boys in household chores because parents know that scoring low in the final exam will not prevent their children from going to the 10th grade. According to Bertera and Crewe (2013), some parents may not understand how education plays a role in an individual's life and what values it forms. It brings up the education level of parents and their attitude towards education. According to Burchinal et al. (2010), lack of understanding of the purpose of education by parents and a lack of motivational and educational information transfer to students may cause certain deficiencies in their learning activities.

In accordance with the findings of Walberg's (1981) theory, the main point revealed by this study is that the main variables affecting students' performance in state exams are student-related factors. However, although student-related indicators are considered the main variables, the student should be supported with a suitable social and psychological environment to get the expected result (Fraser & Walberg, 1987). If we recall the four main factors revealed in this study, we can see that the student-related factors are consistent with the theory. According to

Walberg's theory (1981), the student's ability, previous achievements, motivation, age, and developmental level reflect the student's characteristics, which play a key role in student achievement (Reynold & Walberg, 1992).

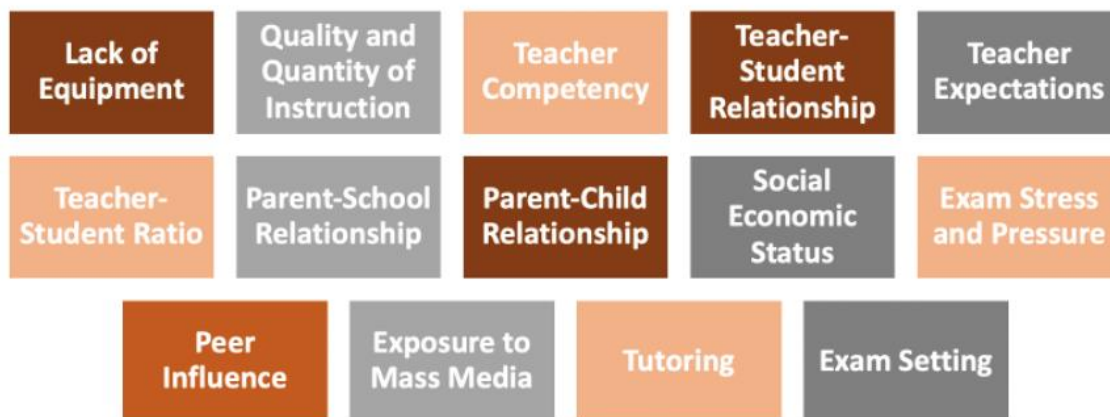
Other variables revealed in this study, school/teacher/family-related factors, correspond to the social and psychological environment, the second main category of Walberg's (1981) theory. According to Walberg's (1981) theory, the psychological and social environment includes the quantity of instruction, quality of instruction, classroom climate, home environment, peer group, and exposure to mass media outside of school (Reynold & Walberg, 1992).

Figure 8. *Distribution of perceptions of principals, teachers, students and parents about factors influencing student performance in 9th grade school leaving exams according to Walberg's theory (1981).*

Student-Related Factors



Environmental Factors



Limitations of the Study

Since research on this topic is relatively new, further research and evaluation of results are needed. The schools in the study were selected for their accessibility. However, a more comparative analysis could be achieved by conducting the study in high- and low-performing schools. Also, the researcher's relationship with some school principals may present a risk of researcher bias. The small sample size can also be considered a limitation, as it may be interpreted as giving little room for diversity of views on the issue. The research was conducted

only in public schools. Participants from private schools were not involved. Considering that 9th-grade students at private schools also participate in school-leaving exams, their results affect the statistical results for the country. In addition, the existence of differences between the curriculum of private schools and the national curriculum requires exploring the challenges of the students at private schools in the process of preparing for the exam. Due to the small number of participants in rural schools compared to urban schools in the study, there were difficulties in expecting proportional representation. Also, teachers and students might not be comfortable enough to share school-related factors in all their details and avoiding some questions may result in missing necessary information.

Recommendations

In this study, one of the factors influencing the 9th grade school leaving examination results was the teachers' poor IT skills. Providing training on improving teachers' skills in this direction not only in professional development programs but also within the school can make the lesson delivery process more effective. Another theme discussed in the study was the lack of an environment for teachers to brainstorm ways to increase student achievement. Collaboration between different schools can have beneficial results. Organizing teachers' meetings from different schools online or offline at certain intervals may create room for them to benefit from each other's experience and knowledge, share ideas, learn and explore together.

If we look at the SEC 2022 reports, we will see that the average score of students of urban schools in all three subjects is 194.5, while the average score of students of rural schools is 130.2 (SEC Report, 2022). This suggests that it is necessary to pay special attention to the cooperation of regional education departments with the Ministry of Science and Education of the

Republic of Azerbaijan regarding the education of 9th graders. Conducting further research in the regions to reveal the factors that have a negative impact on the academic life of students from rural schools and involving rural school in the decision-making process may give give the expected results.

Private schools' experience shows that a teacher assistant's presence is important in establishing an effective teaching and learning environment. I think this practice can be applied in public schools as well. Teaching assistants can be selected among the students at the universities who are studying for the pedagogical specialty based on the principle of volunteering. This can be useful both in increasing the knowledge and skills of those students related to their future professions, in reducing the workload of teachers, and in identifying and addressing the needs of each student in the class. Consequently, challenges related to class size expressed by teachers, parents, and students can be addressed, the need for tutor help can be reduced, and it can contribute to preparing students for exams in the school environment. Also, involving teachers in educational technology training can support the development of their IT skills.

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Appendix 1.

Informed Consent

Məlumatlı razılıq

Məktəb İctimaiyyətinin IX cu Sinif Tələbələrinin Buraxılış İmtahanları Nəticələrinə Təhfə Verən

Amillərlə Bağlı Qavrayışları.

Salam. Mənim adım Fidan Nəcəfova. Mən ADA Universitetinin Təhsil üzrə Menecment fakültəsini təmsil edirəm. İkinci kurs magistr tələbəsi olaraq 9cu sinif buraxılış imtahanlarında şagirdlərin nəticələrinə təsir edən faktorların araşdırılması üçün müsahibələr keçirməliyəm. Verdiyiniz cavablar məxfi və anonim saxlanılacaq, şəxsiyyətiniz açıqlanmadan yalnız cavablarınız tədqiqat məqsədləri üçün ümumiləşdirilmiş şəkildə istifadə olunacaq. Bu müsahibə Sizin razılığınızla aparılır. Müsahibəni istənilən vaxt dayandıra bilərsiniz.

Söylədiyiniz bütün fikirləri yadda saxlamaq və ya qeyd etmək çətin olduğu üçün söhbətimizi diktofona yazmaq üçün razılığınızı xahiş edirəm. Bu müsahibədə iştirak etdiyinizə görə Sizə əvvəlcədən öz dərin təşəkkürümü bildirirəm.

Müsahibəçi

Fidan Nəcəfova

(Ad, soyad)

(Tarix)

(İmza)

Respondent

(Ad, soyad)

(Tarix)

(İmza)

Məlumatlı razılıq

Məktəb İctimaiyyətinin IX cu Sınıf Tələbələrinin Buraxılış İmtahanları Nəticələrinə Töhfə Verən
Amillərlə Bağlı Qavrayışları.

Salam. Mənim adım Fidan Nəcəfova. Mən ADA Universitetinin Təhsil üzrə Menecment fakultəsini təmsil edirəm. İkinci kurs magistr tələbəsi olaraq 9cu sinif buraxılış imtahanlarında şagirdlərin nəticələrinə təsir edən faktorların araşdırılması üçün müsahibələr keçirməliyəm. Bu sənəd sizə övladınızın tədqiqatda iştirak etməsi ilə bağlı razılığınızı almaq üçün təqdim olunur. Məlumatınız olsun ki, övladınızın verdiyi cavablar məxfi və anonim saxlanılacaq, onun şəxsiyyəti və adı açıqlanmadan yalnız cavabları tədqiqat məqsədləri üçün ümumiləşdirilmiş şəkildə istifadə olunacaq. Övladınız müsahibəni istənilən vaxt dayandıra bilər.

Söylənilən bütün fikirləri yadda saxlamaq və ya qeyd etmək çətin olduğu üçün övladınızla söhbətimizi diktofona yazmaq üçün razılığınızı xahiş edirəm. Tədqiqatıma töhfə verdiyiniz üçün Sizə əvvəlcədən öz dərin təşəkkürümü bildirirəm.

Müsahibəçi

Fidan Nəcəfova

(Ad, soyad)

(Tarix)

(İmza)

Respondent

(Ad, soyad)

(Tarix)

(İmza)

Appendix 2.

Interview Protocol

Research study: School Community's Perceptions of Factors Contributing to Students' Grade IX School Leaving Examination Results.

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Fidan Najafova

Interviewee:

Position of the interviewee:

This study aims to investigate the factors that influence the results obtained by general secondary school students in state exams. The study seeks to understand the views and opinions of school principals, teachers, students and parents on the issue. Interviews will be one of the main instruments to reveal the participants' perceptions. Protecting the participants' privacy will be one of the main aspects of the study. The identity of the participants will be kept confidential, and the collected data will be available only to the researcher and her supervisor.

Introduction: The researcher will introduce herself to the person being interviewed and give information regarding her educational background and professional experience. After that, she will remind the study's topic and its purpose. Then the person being interviewed will be asked whether they are ready to begin the interview.

Procedures: The researcher will inform the participants that the interview will likely last between 45 and 60 minutes, and an audio recording will be made of the interview. In addition, the

participants will be notified that their names will not be used in any way related to the study.

Instead, pseudonyms will be used to highlight the respondents' interview quotations.

Consent: The participants will be informed about the format of the interviews, which is voluntary participation. The researcher will explain to the respondents that they have the right to choose whether or not to answer the questions based on their preferences.

Interview Questions for School Principals

- 1) Nə qədər müddətdir ki məktəb direktoru kimi fəaliyyət göstərirsiniz?
- 2) Hal hazırda fəaliyyət göstərdiyiniz məktəbdə nə qədər müddətdir ki fəaliyyət göstərirsiniz?
- 3) Məktəbinizdə doqquzuncu sinif buraxılış imtahanlarına hazırlıq prosesini necə təsvir edərdiniz?
- 4) Buraxılış imtahanlarında şagirdlərinizin göstərdikləri nəticələr haqqında düşüncələrinizi paylaşa bilərsinizmi? Sizin fikrinizcə şagirdlər hansı fənn üzrə daha uğurludurlar və ya hansı fənnə nisbətən aşağı nəticələr göstərirlər?
- 5) Şagirdləriniz əsasən hansı növ suallarda çətinlik çəkirlər? Nə üçün?
- 6) Buraxılış imtahanlarında şagirdlərinizin yüksək nəticələr göstərməsini dəstəkləyən faktorları necə təsvir edərdiniz?
- 7) Bəş şagirdlərin imtahanlarda zəif nəticə göstərməsinə səbəb olan amillər haqqında nə düşünürsünüz?
- 8) Şagirdlərin buraxılış imtahanlarına hazırlanmasında məktəbin rolunu necə təsvir edərdiniz?
- 9) Buraxılış imtahanlarına hazırlıq prosesində şagirdlərinizə necə dəstək verirsiniz?
- 10) Müəllim təcrübəsinin şagird nailiyyətindəki rolunu necə görürsünüz? Şagirdlərinizin buraxılış imtahanlarında hazırlanmasında müəllim təcrübəsi rolunu necə dəyərləndirərdiniz?
- 11) Müəllim-şagird münasibətlərinin rolu haqqında nə deyə bilərsiniz?

11) İmtahana hazırlıq prosesində valideynlərin rolunu necə görürsünüz? Sizcə şagirdin ailə vəziyyətinin onun hazırlıq prosesinə hansı müsbət və ya mənfi təsirləri ola bilər?

Interview Questions for Teachers

1) Neçə yaşınız var?

2) Neçə ildir müəllim kimi fəaliyyət göstərirsiniz?

3) Hansı fənni tədris edirsiniz?

4) Buraxılış imtahanlarında müəllim təcrübəsinin və təlimatının tələbə nailiyyətindəki rolunu necə görürsünüz ?

5) Buraxılış imtahanlarında yüksək nəticələr göstərmiş tələbələrinizin xüsusiyyətlərini necə təsvir edərdiniz?

6) Bəs aşağı nəticə göstərmiş tələbələrin xüsusiyyətlərini necə təsvir edərdiniz?

7) Tələbələrinizin buraxılış imtahanlarında yüksək nəticə göstərməsinə təsir edən amilləri necə təsvir edərdiniz?

8) Bəs aşağı nəticə göstərən tələbələrə təsir edən amillər haqqında nə deyə bilərsiniz?

9) Sizcə buraxılış imtahanlarında düşən mövzular məktəb proqramı ilə uyğunluq təşkil edirmi?

9) Tələbələriniz əsasən hansı sual növlərində çətinlik çəkir? Nə üçün?

11) İmtahana hazırlıq prosesində müəllim-şagird münasibətlərinin rolunu necə təsvir edərdiniz?

10) Sizcə valideynlərin təhsil səviyyəsi və təhsilə olan mövqeyi şagird nailiyyətinə necə təsir edir? Nümunə verə bilərsinizmi?

11) Az təminatlı və ya natamam ailələrdən olan şagirdlərin digərləri ilə müqayisədə daha zəif nəticələr göstərdiyi fikri ilə razısınızmi?

12) Doqquzuncu sinif buraxılış imtahanlarına hazırlıq prosesində həmyaşd təsirini necə təsvir edərdiniz?

- 13) Sınıd  şagird sayının  ox olmasının şagird nailiyy tin  t sir etməsi il  fikri il  razısınızımı?
- 14) Buraxılış imtahanlarında şagird nailiyy tinin y ks ldilm si  c n hansı t klifl riniz ola bil r?

Interview Questions for Students

- 1) Buraxılış imtahanları siz  t sirini t svir ed  bil rsinizmi?
- 2) İmtahan hazırlıq prosesində qarşılaşdıđınız  sas  etinlikl r hansılardır?
- 3) Buraxılış imtahanlarından topladıđınız bal sizin t hsil h yatınızda nec  rol oynayır?
- 4) Sınaq imtahanlarında  n  ox hansı f nnd n bal toplamısınız? Sizc  bunun s b bi n dir?
- 5) B s z if bal topladıđınız f nn hansıdır? S b bini izah ed  bil rsinizmi?
- 6) M kt bd n  lav  repetitor d st yindən istifad  edirsinizmi?
- 7) Daha  ox hansı suallarda  etinlik   kirsiniz? A ıq yoxsa qapalı suallarda?
- 8) Sizc  buraxılış imtahanlarında d ş n suallar sinifd  işl diyiniz d rs materialı il  uygundur?
- 9) Sınaq imtahanlarında iştirak edirsinizmi? Sizc  bu t cr b  sizin  c n faydalıdırımı?
- 10) İmtahan hazırlıq  r f sində sizi motivasiyadan salan amill ri nec  t svir ed rdiniz?
- 11) Bu prosesd  h myaşıdlarınızın siz  t sirini nec  t svir ed rdiniz?
- 12) İmtahan hazırlıq prosesində m  lliml rinizin rolunu nec  g r rs n z?
- 13) B s ail nizin rolu haqqında n  dey  bil rsiniz? Bu yolda valideynl riniz siz  nec  d st k olur?
- 12) İmtahanlara daha yaxşı hazırlaşmaq  c n hansı t klifl riniz ola bil r?

Interview Questions for Parents

- 1)  vladınızın sınaq imtahanlarındakı n tic l rindən razısınızımı?
- 2)  vladınız hansı f nnd n daha  ox bal toplayır? Sizc  buna s b b n dir?

- 3) Bəs övladınızın zəif nəticə göstərdiyi fən hansıdır? Sizcə buna səbəb nədir?
- 4) Övladınız imtahandan qabaq stressli hiss edirmi? Sizcə bu onun nəticələrinə necə təsir göstərir?
- 5) İmtahan hazırlıq ərəfəsində övladınızı necə dəstəkləyirsiniz?
- 6) Müəllim-şagird münasibətlərinizin övladınızın nailiyyətlərini təsirini necə təsvir edərdiniz?
Nümunə çəkə bilərsinizmi?
- 7) Bəs sinifdə şagird sayının təsiri haqqında nə deyə bilərsiniz?
- 8) Sizcə ailənin maddi vəziyyətinin şagird nailiyyətinə necə təsiri var?
- 9) Məktəb tərəfindən övladlarınıza necə dəstək olunur? Övladlarınızla imtahana hazırlığı və ya psixoloji dəstək vermək məqsədilə maarifləndirici görüşlər olurmu?
- 10) İmtahanlara hazırlıq ərəfəsində həmyaşıdlarının övladınıza təsirini necə təsvir edərdiniz?
- 12) Övladınızın imtahana daha hazırlıqlı olması üçün hansı təklifləriniz ola bilər?

Appendix 3

Demographics of Interviewed Participants

Table 1. *Demographics of Interviewed School Principals*

Value	Value label	N	N(%)
Gender	male	1	34%
	female	2	66%
Year of experience	14 years	1	33.3%
	7 years	1	33.3%
	5 years	1	33.3%
School type	Urban	2	66%
	Rural	1	34%

Table 2. *Demographics of the Interviewed Teachers*

Value	Value label	N	N(%)
Gender	male	1	5%
	female	16	95%
Year of experience	0-5 years	4	12%
	5-10 years	7	20%
	10-15 years	6	18%
School Type	Urban	12	35%
	Rural	5	15%
Content area	Math	6	35%
	Azerbaijani language	6	35%
	English	5	30%

Table 3. *Demographics of the Interviewed Students*

Value	Value label	N	N(%)
Gender	male	6	40%
	female	9	60%
Grade	ninth	12	80%
	tenth	3	20%
School type	urban	10	66%
	rural	5	34%

Table 4. *Demographics of the Interviewed Parent*

Value	Value label	N	N(%)
Gender	male	1	9%
	female	11	91%
Employment Status	employed	7	59%
	unemployed	5	41%
School Type	Urban	8	64%
	Rural	4	36%