Journal of Psychology in Africa, 2026
Vol. 36, No. 5, 887–896, http://doi.org/10.32604/jpa.2026.081622

Senior high school students' lived experiences with high-stakes exam preparation: A phenomenological study framed by the question "Am I ready?"

Bereket Merkine Gebresilase[1], Chuanxia Zhang[1] and Zebdewos Zekarias Elka[2,*]

[1]*College of General Education, Shandong Xiehe University, Jinan, China*
[2]*College of Education and Behavioral Science, Wolaita Sodo University, Soddo, Ethiopia*

**Correspondence: Zebdewos Zekarias Elka,* zebdewos95@gmail.com
Received: 05 March 2026; Accepted: 13 June 2026; Published: 30 October 2026

Abstract: This study employed a transcendental phenomenological design to explore the experiences of Ethiopian senior high school students preparing for the national examination. A purposive sample of 21 Grade 12 students were informants. They completed in-depth interviews and kept reflective journals about their experiences preparing for the national examination. Data analysis, following Moustakas's modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, revealed four core themes defining their lifeworld: (1) Sudden knowledge loss, characterized by anxiety-induced cognitive crashes; (2) Fluctuating self-belief acting as an internal performance regulator; (3) Strategic study as a mechanism for cognitive and psychological control; and (4) The teacher's dual role as an instructional and emotional anchor. The study concludes that the central question, "Am I Ready?" evolves from an academic inquiry into an existential exploration of self-worth. These findings align with Bandura's social cognitive theory, which holds that the sources of self-efficacy are subjectively experienced, interpreted, and managed by students in real time. By implication, effective educational support for students taking the national examination must integrate cognitive, emotional, and relational dimensions, moving beyond simplistic, performance-focused approaches.

Keywords: cognitive crash; ethiopia; lived experience; phenomenological study; self-efficacy; senior high school

Introduction

The period of high-stakes examinations is a significant and challenging rite of passage in educational systems worldwide. Importantly, national exams serve as a crucial gatekeeper to higher education, scholarships, and career paths, particularly in the final years of secondary schooling (Banks & Smyth, 2015; Putwain, 2019). For instance, the Gaokao in China and the Suneung national examination in South Korea are key determinants of future opportunities, resulting in significant societal and familial pressures on adolescents (Wang et al., 2024; Kwon et al., 2017). Although justified by ideals of meritocracy and standardization, evidence reveals a gap between the intended goals of these assessments and the actual experiences of students, educators, and schools (Au, 2011; Barrett & Moore, 2009; Lingard & Sellar, 2013). This disjunction creates a complex issue in which educational systems, focused on measurable outcomes, often overlook or harm the holistic student experience. National contexts significantly influence students' experiences, and research has not utilized a lived-experiences approach in Ethiopia.

Student national examinations have been analyzed globally using various methodologies that highlight different lived experiences. In Africa, studies vary from broad descriptive analyses, such as Chakwera et al. (2004) on Malawi, to qualitative investigations identifying school-level strategies through interviews, as shown by Msangi (2024) in Tanzania. Quantitative methods are also significant, with Okitowamba et al. (2018) in South Africa utilizing longitudinal designs and Rasch modeling to observe changes in mathematics achievement.

In Indonesia, studies have shown a significant correlation between self-efficacy and exam anxiety (Qudsyi & Putri, 2016). Additionally, Musnandar et al. (2024) reviewed national examination policies, emphasizing legal and pedagogical critiques, especially regarding their effects on madrasah education. In their 2017 study, Löfgren and Löfgren from Sweden utilized a narrative, qualitative methodology with group interviews to investigate student identity performance in relation to national testing.

Despite extensive research, the lived experiences of students regarding high-stakes national examinations have not been thoroughly explored. Notably, previous studies did not utilize transcendental phenomenology, a qualitative methodology that effectively captures the essence of these experiences from the first-person perspective.

Theoretical basis

The study integrates Bandura's social cognitive theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) with a transcendental phenomenological framework, highlighting that self-efficacy is not a static variable. It reveals how the four sources of self-efficacy—mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states—are subjectively experienced, interpreted, and managed by students in real time. Bandura's social cognitive theory students' exam readiness is shaped by their self-efficacy, perceptions of family support, their peers' collective efficacy, and school preparation. In this regard, social comparison among students may reflect participation in a collective efficacy assessment system rather than individual self-assessment. The phenomenological framework considers the role of verbal persuasion on students' efficacy, and how

Copyright © 2026 The Authors. Published by Tech Science Press.
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

this varies by personal history and emotions, highlighting the complexity through phenomenological analysis.

Thus, the combination moves beyond measuring self-efficacy as a predictor of performance to highlight the existential question "Am I ready?" This indicates that readiness is a dynamic, embodied, and relationally mediated phenomenon, allowing the study to present both a structured social-cognitive and a deeply interpretive phenomenological account of exam preparation.

The Ethiopian context

In Ethiopia, the competition for university admission is intensely rigorous. Since the implementation of stricter grading in 2022, pass rates have remained alarmingly low. Only 3.3% of approximately 900,000 candidates achieved at least 50% in 2022, declining to 3.2% in 2023 (Mitiku, 2023). Over the last four years, more than three million students have taken the national Grade 12 exam, with over 95% failing to reach the passing score of 50% (NORRAG, n.d.). In 2025, over 1249 schools had no students who passed, with only 50 achieving full pass rates (Mitiku, 2023; The Reporter Ethiopia, 2025). Since reforms began, more than a thousand schools each year have recorded no successful candidates (Mitiku, 2023).

Students who do not meet the university entrance cutoff face limited options; a remedial program is available only for those near passing marks (Ethiopian Monitor, 2025b). Failing the Grade 12 exam results in having to repeat the year, and a second failure disqualifies students from attending government schools (Kassa Matebu, 2024).

Access to secondary education in 2024 remains low, with Gross Enrolment Ratios of 32% for Grades 9–12 and 14.8% for Grades 11–12 (Kassa Matebu, 2024). Challenges persist, including low educational quality, high dropout rates, and significant gender and rural-urban disparities (Kassa Matebu, 2024).

Goal of the Study

The main research question guiding this study was:What are the lived experiences of senior high school students preparing for *high-stakes* examinations, as they navigate factors such as self-belief, study habits, and interactions with teachers?

The following sub-questions were used to investigate this main question.

1. How do students perceive and describe their self-belief, including aspects like confidence, anxiety, and self-efficacy, as evolving during the high-stakes exam preparation period?
2. What meanings do students attribute to their study habits and routines as significant factors influencing their feelings of preparedness?
3. How do students interpret their interactions with teachers—such as support, feedback, and pressure—as influential in shaping their preparedness?

Methods

Research design

This study utilized transcendental phenomenological investigation (Moustakas, 1994) into Ethiopian senior high school students' lived experiences during national examination preparation. This approach focuses on students' first-person perspectives regarding their preparation. The use of transcendental phenomenology allows researchers to bracket their biases (epoché), enabling genuine student voices and experiences to be authentically expressed (Zahavi, 2019).

Participants and setting

The study included a purposive sample of 21 senior high school students from 10 public schools selected from rural areas of southern Ethiopia (females 11(52%), males 10(48%), mean age = 21.5, SD (age) = 2.38). Participants were categorized into three academic performance groups based on their last semester transcripts: high achievers (scores above 75), medium performers (scores between 50 and 75), and low performers (scores below 50). The researchers particularly focused on students in the lowest-performing group, who could benefit most from targeted attention.

Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually to explore the research questions' prompts. The interviews aimed to explore students' lived experiences in depth regarding their readiness for the high-stakes exam. The questions explored students' perceptions of self-belief during high-stakes exam preparation, focusing on their confidence, anxiety, and self-efficacy. They examined the significance of study habits and routines in shaping feelings of preparedness, as well as the influence of teacher interactions, including support, feedback, and pressure, on student readiness.

The interviews, conducted in Amharic by a native speaker fluent in English, were audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed. A professional translator, unaware of the research questions, translated them into English. An independent bilingual researcher back-translated the transcripts, resolving discrepancies through team discussion. Culturally specific terms were retained and clarified. Participants reviewed both versions to ensure their meanings were preserved.

In a pilot study, we refined the interview protocol to evaluate the validity, clarity, and sequence of questions. This process ensured alignment between the central research question, sub-questions, and the interview questions asked of participants.

Procedures

The Institutional Review Board of Wolaita Sodo University (reference number: WSU/40/01/2025) approved the study. In addition, the school district granted study permission. Selected participants provided informed consent, which included agreements on data anonymity, the right to withdraw, and audio recording of interviews.

The primary method used is in-depth phenomenological interviews, consisting of two individual sessions per participant spaced 3 weeks apart. The first interview lasts 40–45 min and is designed to establish rapport and explore the participant's overall lived experience through open-ended, grand-tour questions. Participants maintained

a structured journal for two weeks after the first interview, focusing on specific moments tied to the three study themes.

Second interviews, lasting 30–35 min, serve to verify and deepen insights gained from the first interview, sharing emerging themes and ambiguous statements for participant clarification and elaboration. This process also facilitates the exploration of how experiences have evolved.

Interviews took place in a private, quiet room at the school, chosen according to participant preference and accessibility. All interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim by the researcher under a confidentiality agreement.

Interviews were led by a researcher trained in qualitative methods, particularly phenomenological interviewing, with graduate coursework in qualitative research design, in-depth interviewing, and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), alongside supervised practice in bracketing and reflexive journaling.

Data analysis

Data Analysis was conducted using Moustakas's (1994) adaptation of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method.

1. In the process of horizontalization, the researcher thoroughly reviewed each transcript and journal entry, identifying and listing significant statements related to the experience of exam preparation.
2. Redundant statements were removed, and the remaining statements were evaluated for their relevance to the research question regarding the phenomenon "Does this statement inform the experience of 'Am I Ready?"
3. Clustering and thematization involved grouping invariant meaning units into themes, which were utilized to create textural descriptions of each participant's experiences.
4. Using imaginative variation, the researcher created structural descriptions for each participant by reflecting on textural descriptions, detailing how their experiences manifested in specific contexts, conditions, and dynamics.
5. The researcher created a composite description through textural and structural descriptions that captures the universal essence of students' experiences in preparing for a high-stakes exam.
6. Finally, the participants' validation was conducted. Member checking involved sharing a composite description and individual summaries with participants to validate their experiences, as per Lincoln and Guba (1985). Feedback from this process was incorporated into the final composite description and thematic analysis.

Findings

Data analysis using Moustakas's modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Moustakas, 1994) revealed four interconnected themes describing students' experiences as they prepared for the Ethiopian Higher Education Entrance Examination. Each theme includes a composite textural description of participants' experiences and a structural description of the underlying conditions, supported by verbatim quotations.

As indicated in Table 1, the demographic analysis of 21 respondents shows a fairly even gender distribution with 10 males and 11 females. The group consists of 9 individuals from social sciences and 12 from natural sciences, with an average age of 21.5, reflecting age heterogeneity.

Table 1. Respondents' (N = 21) characteristics

Participant	Sex	Age	Stream
Participant 1	Male	19	Natural Science
Participant 2	Female	21	Social Science
Participant 3	Male	22	Social Science
Participant 4	Male	25	Natural Science
Participant 5	Female	24	Natural Science
Participant 6	Female	23	Social Science
Participant 7	Male	19	Natural Science
Participant 8	Male	18	Natural Science
Participant 9	Female	19	Natural Science
Participant 10	Male	20	Natural Science
Participant 11	Female	22	Social Science
Participant 12	Female	21	Natural Science
Participant 13	Male	18	Social Science
Participant 14	Male	26	Social Science
Participant 15	Male	23	Social Science
Participant 16	Female	25	Natural Science
Participant 17	Female	22	Natural Science
Participant 18	Female	22	Social Science
Participant 19	Female	23	Social Science
Participant 20	Male	19	Natural Science
Participant 21	Female	20	Natural Science
Total	Male = 10 Female = 11	Mean age = 21.5	Natural Science = 12 Social Science = 9

Table 2. Emergent themes, subthemes, and an explanation of the experience

Themes	Subthemes	An explanation of the actual experience
The sudden loss of knowledge	A crashed computer	The student's mind resembles frozen hardware, where information is visible but inaccessible. Attempts to restart their brain only exacerbate the situation, resulting in a complete mental lockout.
	Negative experience	Past failures interfere with the current exam experience, causing the student to relive previous blank-outs. This history generates mental noise that obscures the subject matter at hand.
	Insomnia	The knowledge drain is worsened by fatigue, as insufficient sleep leads to micro-blanks in the brain due to inadequate glucose and rest, hindering the transition from long-term storage to active recall.

Table 3. Emergent themes and subthemes highlight the significance of self-belief during the preparation phase

Themes	Subthemes	An explanation of the actual experience
Fluctuating Self-Belief as an Internal Regulator .	Self-belief as performance expectations	Self-belief influences academic performance by setting a mental ceiling; students who aim for lower grades, like a D or C, may restrict their study efforts. While high expectations can encourage thoroughness, they may also lead to perfectionism, causing anxiety that hinders progress.
	Self-belief as an emotional factor	Self-belief acts as crucial emotional fuel for academic study. A high level of self-belief fosters academic flow and resilience when faced with challenging subjects, whereas low self-belief can lead to sadness for anticipated failures that have not yet occurred.
	Self-belief is presented as a dynamic	Belief is variable, changing throughout the day; a student may feel confident after solving a problem in the morning but can feel incompetent after encountering difficulties later, resulting in a fluctuating preparation experience.
	Self-talk as a conscious strategy	Self-talk is the role of an internal coach for students, emphasizing the use of verbal cues to manage stress and refocus attention during moments of difficulties.

Theme 1: The sudden loss of knowledge

Participants experienced a sudden, involuntary interruption in their cognitive processes during exam preparation and testing, when previously mastered knowledge became inaccessible, as if a door slammed shut between memory and conscious retrieval (Table 2). This phenomenon is marked by overwhelming helplessness, akin to a computer crash, with thoughts trapped in an endless loop. The loss of capability occurs suddenly, often triggered by the first exam question or a spike in anxiety.

> *I feel a sense of helplessness when faced with the first question, knowing I have the answer but unable to recall it, as if I have a lost lifeline* [Participant 7].
>
> *My brain feels frozen, like an overheated laptop. Despite my attempts to refresh my thoughts, I'm unable to articulate coherent ideas, resulting in a complete mental block* [Participant 19].
>
> *My mind functions like a computer, efficiently storing information, but occasionally struggles with retrieval due to forgetfulness* [Participant 21].

The sudden knowledge loss is triggered by high perceived pressure, physiological distress such as sleep deprivation before exams, and the reactivation of memories associated with past academic failures. Participants described a vicious cycle where past failures led to anticipatory anxiety, increasing physiological symptoms such as insomnia and a racing heart, which then impaired cognitive functions. This experience resulted in a sense of involuntary disconnection from mental resources, despite adequate preparation. The convergence of biological fragility and psychological vulnerability culminated in what one student likened to "a crashed computer."

> *I sense a sleepless night filled with anxiety and racing thoughts leading up to an exam, resulting in physical exhaustion and mental fog that fosters a sense of defeat before the exam even begins* [Participant 20].
>
> *I feel trapped in hopelessness, destined to repeat past mistakes that obstruct my accomplishments* [Participant 11].

Theme 2: Fluctuating self-belief as an internal regulator

Students viewed self-belief as a dynamic force impacting their preparation (Table 3). High self-belief made study materials seem approachable, turned challenges into opportunities, and facilitated effortless engagement in study efforts. Self-belief significantly influences students' performance, as those with lower self-belief perceive challenges as formidable obstacles, leading to excessive

discouragement from minor setbacks. This mental ceiling causes students identifying as "C students" to limit their efforts to align with that identity, overshadowing their true capabilities. Additionally, participants used internal self-talk to manage their fluctuating confidence levels.

> *When I feel confident in my abilities, studying is productive and energizing; conversely, low self-belief makes the material seem daunting. My self-efficacy influences how I perceive and engage with my information appetite* [Participant 12].
>
> *I often limit my performance based on preset expectations, such as seeing myself as a C student. This mindset leads me to stop working once I grasp basic concepts without striving for deeper understanding, as my beliefs create a boundary on my potential achievements* [Participant 6].
>
> *My internal voice helps me manage my unstable beliefs and panic. When I feel overwhelmed, I consciously remind myself of past problem-solving experiences. Self-talk effectively calms me during difficulties, acting as a mental coach that encourages me to stay composed* [Participant 13].

The dynamics of self-belief are influenced by four interacting sources (consistent with Bandura, 1997): past mastery experiences (e.g., mock exam performance), vicarious comparisons (peers' successes or struggles), verbal persuasion from teachers or parents, and physiological states such as anxiety or fatigue. Students adapt their beliefs based on monitored sources, with social comparison acting as a gauge. Those with resilient self-belief find motivation in a friend's success ("If they can do it, so can I"), while those with fragile self-belief feel inadequate by comparison ("I am falling behind"). The structure involved active management where students engaged in self-talk, selective comparison, and effort adjustment to maintain functional self-beliefs. However, this effort was exhausting, leading to a paradox: the greater the struggle to believe in oneself, the less energy available for actual learning.

> I see that my self-belief shapes my emotions: high self-belief makes me curious, but self-doubt discourages me and makes challenging work feel heavy [Participant 18].
>
> *I experience fluctuating confidence that can quickly shift from feeling like an expert to feeling inadequate. This instability is a significant challenge in my preparation process, as I navigate between feelings of assurance and fear of failure* [Participant 20].

Theme 3: Strategic study as a mechanism for cognitive and psychological control

Participants differentiated between passive studying and active, strategic studying, with the latter seen as a structured approach applied to an otherwise chaotic syllabus (Table 4). Students segmented complex subjects into manageable parts, analyzed previous exam papers for recurring topics, and developed organized revision schedules, including color-coded plans. Strategic studying transformed anxiety into actionable steps, providing psychological security by reducing fear of the unknown and offering a sense of order during moments of panic.

> *Instead of feeling overwhelmed by the need to study chemistry, I used a strategy of summarizing each module on a single page and focusing on diagram-based questions* [Participant 15].
>
> *Practicing timed past papers under exam conditions helped me identify areas of struggle, such as panic during calculation questions, leading to a focused improvement strategy* [Participant 11].
>
> *Having a clear plan provides comfort during moments of panic, reinforcing the idea that structured strategies can be effective in managing uncertainty* [Participant 16].

The strategic study had a two-layered structure: the cognitive layer focused on evidence-based techniques like retrieval practice, spaced repetition, and self-testing to improve memory and metacognitive awareness, while the psychological layer utilized the same strategies to manage anxiety. A revision timetable serves as a symbolic assertion of control over an uncertain future. Effective strategic study relies on access to past papers, a quiet environment, and ample time. However, students experienced that high anxiety could hinder the execution of even the best strategies, emphasizing the importance of managing self-belief alongside study techniques.

Theme 4: The teacher's dual role as instructional and emotional anchor

Students view experienced teachers as fulfilling dual roles: instructional guides who clarify content and exam techniques, and emotional anchors who provide recognition and care, creating a safe learning environment (Table 5). Effective teaching involves simplifying complex concepts, curating essential topics, and providing actionable feedback. However, this support is most effective when paired with an emotional connection, in which teachers recognize students as individuals and express belief in their potential. Such connections foster an environment where students feel safe asking questions and expressing confusion; without them, even high-quality instruction may feel ineffective.

> *I appreciate a teacher who simplifies complex ideas and guides me through the curriculum without making me feel lost* [Participant 4].
>
> *I need a teacher who cares about my comfort and recognizes me as an individual, as this bond creates a safe environment for me to learn from failures* [Participant 1].
>
> *My teacher recognized my potential despite a poor performance. The teacher's support transformed my perspective from despair to determination, providing essential emotional encouragement that fueled my perseverance through challenges* [Participant 13].
>
> *I value feedback that not only highlights mistakes but also challenges my thinking and guides me to improve* [Participant 2].

Table 4. Emergent themes and subthemes highlight the significance of study strategies

Themes	Subthemes	An explanation of the actual experience
Strategic Study as a Mechanism for Cognitive and Psychological Control	Effective strategy & cognitive mastery	Effective study strategies involve choosing and applying evidence-based techniques that improve the encoding, retention, and recall of information.
	Strategies & metacognitive awareness	Students demonstrate awareness and regulation of their learning processes by planning, monitoring, and evaluating their study strategies, knowing when and why to apply specific strategies based on the task at hand.
	Revision timetable	Students actively engage in strategic planning and scheduling of study and review sessions to ensure systematic coverage and consolidation of educational materials.

Table 5. Emergent themes and sub-themes highlight the significance of teacher-student relationships

Themes	Sub-themes	An explanation of the actual experience
The Teacher's Dual Role as Instructional and Emotional Anchor	Instructional support	A teacher's effectiveness hinges on their capacity to make content accessible, offer appropriate scaffolding, and uphold high expectations for student achievement. Key indicators of effective teaching include clear explanations, varied teaching strategies, and patience throughout the learning process.
	Emotional connection	The establishment of safety, belonging, and mutual respect between teacher and student involved active listening, expressing interest in students' lives beyond the classroom, and fostering an environment where mistakes are welcomed.
	Feedback	A good communication encourages growth and self-reflection by providing specific, timely advice and formative feedback focused on the process rather than solely on grades.

The teacher-student relationship during exam preparation was characterized as dyadic and recursive. Instructional support enhances cognitive abilities by scaffolding challenging material and teaching exam-taking strategies, thus fostering competence. Emotional connection, encompassing empathy, recognition, and psychological safety, functions on the affective level to foster trust and resilience. Both elements are necessary, as the most effective relationships incorporate a blend of both. Feedback plays a crucial role in shaping student performance and self-perception, depending on its delivery. Specific and caring feedback fosters improvement, while impersonal or harsh feedback can lead to self-doubt. This dynamic is influenced by the teacher's emotional availability, which varies among different teachers and schools.

Composite textural-structural description of the entire phenomenon (the essence)

Integrating all themes, the essence of Ethiopian senior high school students' lived experience preparing for the national examination revolves around their challenges, aspirations, and educational journeys as they achieve readiness for this significant academic milestone.

"The what" (Textural description): Students often endure significant cognitive, emotional, and relational stress, which can lead to sudden knowledge loss, such as a "brain crash." This phenomenon is frequently triggered by anxiety, memories of past failures, or lack of sleep. Their self-belief fluctuates, serving as both motivation and hindrance. They create structured study plans to bring order to chaos, finding comfort in established routines. Additionally, they rely on teachers for both academic guidance and the emotional safety necessary for learning and taking risks. At the core of these experiences lies the question, "Am I ready?" which evolves from an academic evaluation into an existential exploration of self-worth.

"The how" **(**Structural description): This experience is characterized by intense competition for university admission, with low pass rates, alongside significant societal and familial pressure, and material limitations such as overcrowded classrooms, textbook shortages, and unreliable electricity during evening study. The structure is precariously balanced as students navigate cognitive load, emotional regulation, relational support, and self-narrative. Alignment among these elements leads to a sense of readiness despite anxiety, while misalignment can cause even prepared students to falter. The question "Am I ready?" is a holistic assessment of the alignment between internal and external systems necessary for effective performance, rather than merely a measure of content knowledge.

Member checking validated that the composite description accurately reflected participants' experiences, with two participants (P4 and P17) noting it captured "the true feelings of exam preparation" and resonated with their own experiences "in every theme."

Discussion

One significant finding from a phenomenological study in Ethiopia indicates that the question "Am I ready?" transforms into an existential concern about self-worth, unlike findings from quantitative studies. Indonesian students showed anxiety, but the link to identity wasn't established (Qudsyi & Putri, 2016). In Sweden, students likened national tests to The Hunger Games, emphasizing the severe implications of failure (Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017). In Malawi, failing the Malawi School Certificate Examination can prevent access to jobs and education, exacerbating feelings of inadequacy due to systematic issues (Chakwera et al., 2004). This suggests that the existential aspects of educational pressure are universally felt but best understood through qualitative, phenomenological methods.

The theme of "the sudden loss of knowledge" deeply encapsulates the experience of test anxiety, presenting a phenomenological perspective that goes beyond the conventional psychological assessments typically captured by self-report scales (von der Embse et al., 2018; Zeidner, 2014). Participants experienced anxiety as a significant disruption to their cognitive processes, likening their minds to a "crashed computer," where information was visible but inaccessible, reflecting a deep psychological rupture. This reflects participants' struggle with a lost lifeline, illustrating profound helplessness where control over one's memory is involuntarily relinquished.

The phenomenological analysis indicates that the disruption is not isolated but rooted in past academic experiences. The sub-theme "Negative experience" highlights how prior failures shape expectations that heighten anxiety during current exam challenges, increasing the likelihood of a blank out. Participants noted that past failures and memories of mistakes create a "mental noise" during testing, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. This creates a vicious cycle in which memory intertwines with prior forgetfulness. This pattern aligns with recent views of test anxiety as a stable trait that activates during evaluations, leading to negative thoughts, physiological arousal, and poor coping mechanisms (Pekrun, 2022; Zeidner, 2014).

Self-belief is identified as a central component in students' narratives, providing a detailed exploration of Bandura's social cognitive theory. This emphasis reflects the theory's focus on context and its variability, as discussed in recent studies by Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020). The data indicate that academic self-efficacy is a dynamic, domain-specific state rather than a stable trait. It serves as an "internal regulator," shaping performance expectations, and acts as "emotional fuel," influencing engagement with challenging material. This supports the view that efficacy beliefs affect choice, effort, perseverance, and resilience (Bandura, 1997).

The phenomenological lens highlights how self-belief functions as a "mental ceiling" that affects students' study efforts. For instance, Participant 6 noted that viewing oneself as a "C student" imposed a psychological boundary, exemplifying a self-fulfilling prophecy. This reflects Dweck's (2017) "fixed mindset" concept in an academic context, indicating that believing in unchangeable ability limits strategic effort. Conversely, high self-belief can lead to perfectionism, in which an inflexible need for flawless mastery turns minor struggles into overwhelming failures, leading to anxiety. Recent research (Stoeber, 2018) indicates that successful academic agency relies more on calibrated, resilient self-efficacy—a belief that is robust yet adaptable- than high self-efficacy, allowing confidence while accepting the learning process.

Strategic studying emphasizes the distinction between passive learning and active, intentional study methods. This active approach allows students to exercise agency over their learning, helping them impose order on a chaotic syllabus and construct a navigable personal lifeworld. This theme connects strongly with self-regulated learning and metacognition, which are increasingly important in educational psychology (Dent & Koenka, 2016; Panadero, 2017; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2011).

The strategies discussed, including breaking down the syllabus for better cognitive structure, analyzing previous exam papers, and establishing systematic revision schedules, aim to improve "cognitive mastery" through evidence-based methods. Practices such as retrieval practice, spacing, interleaving, and self-explanation, which students independently discovered, are validated by cognitive science as effective for durable learning (Dunlosky et al., 2013; Weinstein et al., 2018). However, phenomenological data reveal that a secondary function is the establishment of psychological security and ontological control, as Participant 16 observed that a clear plan offers comfort during panic. A revision timetable serves not only a practical purpose but also acts as a ritual of order, symbolically containing anxiety related to the unknown. It enables a transformation of the overwhelming uncertainties of knowledge into a manageable, actionable format, as van Manen (1997) describes as a "world-making" function.

This proactive approach enhances metacognitive awareness, as students utilize mock exams for active diagnostics to identify struggles, engaging in a continuous cycle of monitoring, evaluation, and strategy adaptation essential to self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2013). Participant 3's strategic choice to focus on strengths instead of weaknesses illustrates a practical approach to metacognitive calibration and resource management. This decision highlights a realistic understanding of preparedness as a strategic optimization within temporal and cognitive limits, rather than an unattainable ideal of total mastery. Such pragmatic resilience serves as an essential adaptation to systemic pressures, in stark contrast to the maladaptive perfectionism typically encouraged by the same system.

The fourth theme highlights that academic and psychological readiness are fundamentally linked to relationships. Students noted that effective instructional support requires a genuine emotional connection. Teachers were appreciated for offering clear scaffolding, clarifying exam formats, and curating complex syllabi, a role supported by existing literature on teacher effectiveness (Carter, 2009).

In summary, this phenomenological study highlights the experiences of students facing a significant academic and personal transition, emphasizing that the question

"Am I Ready?" leads to a complex lifeworld. It illustrates the intertwined nature of cognitive preparedness and emotional resilience, the careful construction of personal agency through strategic actions, and the crucial role of teacher-student relationships amidst uncertainty and pressure. The findings advocate a fundamental shift in educational systems to foster genuine readiness, which harmonizes competence with well-being. This shift requires moving away from viewing students merely as metric producers to recognizing them as whole individuals navigating complex developmental challenges. By grounding educational practices in students' lived experiences, we can humanize learning and cultivate resilience, even amidst high-stakes testing environments.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Professional development for educators should focus on relational pedagogy and emotional support rather than just content knowledge. Training programs must equip teachers with skills in empathetic communication, fostering psychologically safe classrooms (Wachs, 2023), giving constructive feedback, and recognizing anxiety and self-doubt. The emotional connection in teaching should be viewed as a vital pedagogical competency, particularly in high-pressure settings. Additionally, teachers should be encouraged to teach metacognitive and self-regulatory strategies as essential components of the academic curriculum.

Professional development for teachers in high-stakes environments should incorporate caring practices, addressing the balance between testing and caring discourse. This includes providing non-judgmental feedback, fostering psychologically safe environments, and recognizing anxiety indicators. The concept of "teacher as emotional anchor" identified in the Ethiopian study should be translated into actionable classroom strategies.

Policymakers should lessen the psychological pressure of examinations by providing multiple educational and employment pathways. This includes options like second-chance exams, vocational alternatives, and portfolio-based admissions, thereby separating self-worth from a single test score. Additionally, funding for high-quality professional development in areas such as student well-being and social-emotional learning is essential for enhancing academic outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Limitations

Self-report data relied on students' verbal accounts from interviews and reflective journals without corroborative observational or physiological measures. Retrospective recall may be affected by memory biases, social desirability, or emotions post-exam, which could influence reports of "sudden knowledge loss" or anxiety.

The study examined experiences at a single time point, suggesting that a longitudinal design could provide insights into the evolution of these experiences from Grade 12 through various testing stages. Repeated interviews could enhance understanding of the dynamic nature of "fluctuating self-belief."

Failed to include perspectives from teachers or parents in the study. While students acknowledged teachers as both instructional and emotional supports, teachers were not interviewed, limiting insights. Similarly, parental expectations were noted but not thoroughly examined. Incorporating views from multiple informants would enhance the validity of the findings.

Future research directions

Future research should integrate physiological measures and collect biomarkers of acute stress and anxiety during examination conditions. This includes measuring cortisol levels through saliva samples, utilizing wearable devices to monitor heart rate variability and skin conductance, and employing electroencephalography (EEG) to assess cognitive load. These objective indicators can validate students' self-reported anxiety and cognitive crashes.

Longitudinal phenomenological designs monitor a cohort of Grade 12 students at three intervals: the start of the school year, one month before the national exam, and one month following the results. This approach aims to trace the progression of "fluctuating self-belief" and pinpoint critical junctures for effective interventions.

Triangulation with multiple data sources involves combining student interviews, teacher interviews, parent focus groups, and classroom observations. To validate self-reports of "cognitive crashes," psychophysiological measures such as heart rate variability and skin conductance should be employed during simulated exam conditions.

Conclusion

The study identified four key dimensions shaping preparedness: (1) Cognitive stability is threatened by "sudden knowledge loss," often due to anxiety, past failures, and insomnia. (2) Self-belief significantly affects performance, requiring strategies like "self-talk" to maintain focus. (3) Preparedness is enhanced through strategic studying, utilizing evidence-based techniques, and structured revision. (4) A supportive teacher-student relationship fosters academic growth through effective scaffolding, emotional safety, and feedback. In essence, "readiness" is the ability to navigate both internal psychological factors and external academic demands.

Acknowledgement: The authors acknowledge all Grade 12 students, teachers, school principals, and administrators who took part in the study.

Funding Statement: No financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

Author Contributions: The authors contributed to the paper as follows: methodology and analysis: Bereket Merkine Gebresilase; Validation and review: Chuanxia Zhang; problem identification, draft manuscript preparation, methodology, analysis, and submission: Zebdewos Zekarias Elka. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Availability of Data and Materials: Data are available upon reasonable request. However, interview transcripts

are confidential and not publicly available due to agreements.

Ethics Approval: All procedures involving human participants adhered to the ethical standards established by the Institutional Ethics Review Committee at Wolaita Sodo University (reference number: WSU/40/01/2025), in accordance with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent amendments, or equivalent ethical standards. In addition, the school district granted study permission. Selected participants provided informed consent, which included agreements on data anonymity, the right to withdraw, and audio recording of interviews.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

Au, W. (2011). Teaching under the new Taylorism: High-stakes testing and the standardization of the 21st-century curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *43*(1), 25–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2010.521261

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W H Freeman/Times Books/Henry Holt & Co.

Banks, J., & Smyth, E. (2015). Your whole life depends on it': Academic stress and high-stakes testing in Ireland. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *18*(5), 598–616. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2014.992317

Barrett, B. D., & Moore, R. (2009). A Review of "High-Stakes Testing and the Decline of Teaching and Learning: The Real Crisis in Education". *Educational Studies*, *45*(1), 90–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131940802546910

Carter, M. (2009). Visible learning: a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement. *Educational Psychology*, *29*(7), 867–869. https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410903415150

Chakwera, E., Khembo, D., & Sireci, S. G. (2004). High-stakes testing in the warm heart of Africa: The challenges and successes of the Malawi National Examinations Board. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *12*(29), n29.

Dent, A. L., & Koenka, A. C. (2016). The relation between self-regulated learning and academic achievement across childhood and adolescence: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, *28*(3), 425–474. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-015-9320-8

Dunlosky, J., Rawson, K. A., Marsh, E. J., Nathan, M. J., & Willingham, D. T. (2013). Improving students' learning with effective learning techniques: Promising directions from cognitive and educational psychology. *Psychological Science in The Public Interest*, *14*(1), 4–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612453266

Dweck, C. (2017). *Mindset-Updated Edition: Changing the Way You Think to Fulfill Your Potential*. London, UK: Constable & Robinson.

Ethiopian Monitor (2025b). Grade 12 exam results: 8.4% of the students get a passing mark—Remedial program to continue. [cited 2026 Jan 1]. Available from: https://ethiopianmonitor.com

Kassa Matebu, A. (2024). Improving the quality of secondary and TVET education in Ethiopia [Policy brief]. [cited 2026 Jan 1]. Available from: https://acetforafrica.org

Kwon, S. K., Lee, M., & Shin, D. (2017). Educational assessment in the Republic of Korea: Lights and shadows of a high-stakes exam-based education system. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, *24*(1), 60–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2015.1074540

Lincoln, Y. S., Guba, E. G., & Pilotta, J. J. (1985). Naturalistic Inquiry. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *9*, 438–439. https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8

Lingard, B., & Sellar, S. (2013). Catalyst data': Perverse systemic effects of audit and accountability in Australian schooling. *Journal of Education Policy*, *28*(5), 634–656. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2012.758815

Löfgren, R., & Löfgren, H. (2017). Swedish students' experiences of national testing in science: A narrative approach. *Curriculum Inquiry*, *47*(4), 390–410. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2017.1368350

Mitiku, M. (2023). In-depth: Is Ethiopia's education system under a serious threat? [cited 2026 Jan 1]. Available from: https://addisstandard.com/in-depth-is-ethiopias-education-system-under-a-serious-threat/

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658

Msangi, E. R. (2024). The status, strategies, and consequences of focusing on national examinations in secondary schools' curriculum implementation: The case of Mbeya City, Tanzania. *Mbeya University of Science and Technology Journal of Research and Development*, *5*(2), 749–758. https://doi.org/10.62277/mjrd2024v5i20045

Musnandar, A., Sutrisno, S., Hidayati, S., Wahyudin, A., & Arifin, T. (2024). Critical study of national examination policy in the students' learning achievement and its implications for madrasah. *International Journal of Educational Narratives*, *2*(5), 424–438. https://doi.org/10.70177/ijen.v2i5.1302

NORRAG (n.d.). Ethiopia's education crisis continues—Millions are left with uncertainty. [cited 2026 Jan 1]. Available from: https://resources.norrageducation.org

Okitowamba, O., Julie, C., & Mbekwa, M. (2018). The effects of examination-driven teaching on mathematics achievement in Grade 10 school-based high-stakes examinations. *Pythagoras*, *39*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.4102/pythagoras.v39i1.377

Panadero, E. (2017). A review of self-regulated learning: Six models and four directions for research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *8*, 422. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00422

Pekrun, R. (2022). Emotions in education: The role of achievement emotions in self-regulated learning. In: Schunk, D. H., Greene, J. A. (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation of learning and performance* (2nd ed., pp. 123–138). London, UK: Routledge.

Putwain, D. W. (2019). An examination of the self-referent executive processing model of test anxiety: Control, emotional regulation, self-handicapping, and examination performance. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, *34*(2), 341–358. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-018-0383-z

Qudsyi, H., & Putri, M. I. (2016). Self-efficacy and anxiety of national examination among high school students. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *217*, 268–275. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.02.082

Schunk, D. H., & DiBenedetto, M. K. (2020). Motivation and social cognitive theory. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *60*, 101832. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2019.101832

Schunk, D. H., & Zimmerman, B. (2011). *Handbook of self-regulation of learning and performance* (1st ed.). London, UK: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203839010

Stoeber, J. (2018). The psychology of perfectionism: An introduction. In: Stoeber, J. (Ed.), *The psychology of perfectionism: Theory, research, applications* (pp. 3–16). London, UK: Routledge.

The Reporter Ethiopia (2025). Ethiopia's education crisis: A call for urgent reform. [cited 2026 Jan 1]. Available from: https://www.thereporterethiopia.com

van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy (2nd ed.)*. London, UK: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315421056

von der Embse, N., Jester, D., Roy, D., & Post, J. (2018). Test anxiety effects, predictors, and correlates: A 30-year meta-analytic review. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *227*(2), 483–493. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.11.048

Wachs, S., Valido, A., Espelage, D. L., Castellanos, M., Wettstein, A., & Bilz, L. (2023). The relation of classroom climate to adolescents' countering hate speech via social skills: A positive youth development perspective. *Journal of Adolescence*, *95*(6), 1127–1139. https://doi.org/10.1002/jad.12180

Wang, Y., Song, Z., & Lu, Y. (2024). How do the Chinese Gaokao tests narrate the history of other countries? A textual analysis of the other in official representations of history. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, *52*(2), 245–272. https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2023.2224248

Weinstein, Y., Madan, C. R., & Sumeracki, M. A. (2018). Teaching the science of learning. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, *3*(1), 2. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-017-0087-y

Zahavi, D. (2019). Applied phenomenology: Why it is safe to ignore the epoch'e. *Continental Philosophy Review*, *54*(2), 259–273.

Zeidner, M. (2014). Anxiety in education. In: Pekrun, R., Linnenbrink-Garcia, L. (Eds.), *International handbook of emotions in education* (pp. 265–288). London, UK: Routledge.

Zimmerman, B. J. (2013). From cognitive modeling to self-regulation: A social cognitive career path. *Educational Psychologist*, *48*(3), 135–147. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2013.794676