

# Senior School Students' Low Performance: Teachers' Beliefs

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The article presents the results of a study that explores the teachers' beliefs concerning low-performing senior schoolchildren in one of the regions of Kazakhstan. Until recently, the issue of low-achieving students was largely absent from the agenda of secondary education and has not got attention from Kazakhstani researchers. A case study methodology was applied as the principal research method, facilitating an in-depth examination of teachers' belief systems concerning low-performing students. 22 high school and first-year college teachers participated in a qualitative study in May and June 2022. We analyzed teachers' ideas about low-achieving students within an ecological framework using an inductive thematic analysis of individual interviews and focus group discussions. We identified the categories of teachers' individual, in-school and systemic beliefs. These beliefs collectively contribute to the conceptualisation of a low-performing students, their educational trajectories, and their potential for success or failure in life.

**Keywords:** teachers' beliefs; low-performing students; ecological model; case study; Kazakhstan.

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# Убеждения педагогов о слабоуспевающих учащихся старших классов

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В статье представлены результаты исследования, раскрывающие убеждения педагогов о слабоуспевающих учащихся старших классов в одном из регионов Казахстана. Стоит отметить, что до недавнего времени проблема слабоуспевающих учащихся практически отсутствовала в повестке среднего образования и оставалась вне поля внимания казахстанских ученых. В качестве основного метода исследования был выбран метод кейс-стади, который позволил углубленно изучить систему убеждений учителей относительно слабоуспевающих учеников. В мае—июне 2022 года 22 педагога старшей школы и первого курса колледжей приняли участие в качественном исследовании; в результате индуктивного тематического анализа индивидуальных интервью и фокус-групп с учителями в рамках экологической модели были изучены убеждения педагогов в отношении слабоуспевающих учащихся. Были определены категории убеждений индивидуального, внутришкольного и системного характера, формирующие образ слабоуспевающего учащегося, его образовательную траекторию и жизненную (не)успешность.

**Ключевые слова:** убеждения педагогов; слабоуспевающие учащиеся; экологическая модель; кейс-стади; Казахстан.

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## Introduction

As the results of the PISA-2018 study showed, Kazakhstan, along with the signifi-

cant successes of gifted students, is experiencing a notable lag in functional literacy among adolescents from regular schools

compared to their peers in OECD countries and even neighbouring countries [34]. However, despite a general understanding of the relevance of the problem of low academic achievement, its causes and socio-economic consequences at the national level remain insufficiently studied.

Among the most significant reasons for the increase in the number of low-performing students, scholars highlight socio-economic factors [16; 38], an underdeveloped system of support for children with special educational needs [24], an unfavourable school climate [33], as well as issues related to teaching methods and assessment in secondary schools [39]. In Kazakhstan, the most likely factors for the low academic performance of school students include their socio-economic status, the culture and system of values in the region and students' environment, the language of instruction, and teacher qualifications [26].

The theory of human capital describes the relationship between a high proportion of low-performing schoolchildren and the socio-economic development of the country, which is confirmed by numerous studies [22; 35; 36]. Increased percentages of low-performing school students have long-term negative economic and social consequences for the country [21; 28; 33; 37].

The conceptual framework for this study of the reasons behind the increase in the proportion of low-performing students was the OECD classification of factors contributing to low performance [29; 33], grounded in the ecological model [17], as well as the frame for the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices [18]. Teachers' beliefs shape their interpretation of educational content and school events, their ability to define problems and solutions, and also influence their self-efficacy [23]. Thus, M. Gasinets, A. Kapuza, and M. Dobryakova found that Russian teachers attribute a more significant role in students' academic success to the family and the students themselves, with 50 to 75% of teachers convinced that schools are incapable of ensuring high levels of student

achievement. As a result, they demonstrate low levels of agency and a reluctance to change their practices [1]. Conversely, the school's context and climate also affect teachers' beliefs. For example, teachers in schools with a high number of academically unsuccessful children tend not to feel responsible for student outcomes [8].

In this article, we propose examining teachers' beliefs about low-performance students on three levels: beliefs concerning individual student characteristics, teachers' beliefs about the school and systemic aspects of the problem.

The first group encompasses teachers' beliefs regarding students' socio-economic backgrounds and behaviour, including their motivation for learning and involvement in school life [13], health status, and the social and financial situations of their families. In this context, teachers can either downplay the issues of academic failure or become a source of "pedagogical stigma" [2].

At the school level, educators' beliefs reveal reasons related to school policies, practices, and resources. The reasons for the increase in the number of low-performing students at the educational organization level include the school climate, classroom environment, availability of opportunities for extracurricular education in the school, the quality of teaching staff, and the resource provision of the school.

Teachers' beliefs at the system level in our analysis include beliefs about the entire educational system of the country, as well as the national education agenda [11]. These beliefs include those on curricula and final qualification exams. Additionally, teachers' beliefs about the structure of the region's labour market, which partially determine the professional orientation of high school students and their career expectations, play an important role here [7; 26].

In this paper, we focus on the following questions: What are teachers' beliefs about low-performing secondary school students? How, according to educators, can the individual characteristics of students, the school, the education system,

society, and the state as a whole shape this agenda?

### Context and Research Methods

As a case study to examine the challenges faced by low-performing students, a specific area in southern Kazakhstan was selected: the Turkestan region and the city of Shymkent. Until 2018, Shymkent served as the administrative centre of the South Kazakhstan region, now renamed Turkestan. In Shymkent, the issue of a large number of low-performing students is particularly serious. The city records some of the lowest average scores in the country for external student achievement assessments (ESAA<sup>1</sup>). Additionally, it has a notably high proportion of young individuals not in employment, education, or training (NEET<sup>2</sup>). Both the Turkestan region and Shymkent are prominent for their high number of school graduates who do not pursue further studies. Notably, as of November 2022, the percentage of low-performing students in grades 5—11 in the region was 39%, which is 5% above the national average.

As of 2020, the Turkestan region was characterized by a predominantly agricultural workforce, minimal industrial employment, low-income levels, and a substantial shadow economy, where 50—70% of the income comes from sources outside wages, pensions, and state benefits. Importantly, the region exemplifies how high employment in unproductive sectors is not necessarily linked to educational levels but rather to a lack of economic opportunities for the populace. In contrast to other regions, leaving the agricultural sector (which employed 23% of the workforce in 2020) often results in an income decline. Meanwhile, the more lucrative industrial sector offers limited employment opportunities (accounting for only 5% of the workforce). In 2021, the per-

centage of self-employed individuals in the Turkestan region was 46%.

Shymkent is distinguished by its high population density and elevated birth rates, coupled with a significant influx of residents from rural areas. This migration contributes to the socio-economic diversity of the city's population. The region accommodates schools that provide education to ethnic groups including Uzbeks, Uyghurs, and Tajiks, in their native languages, alongside the Kazakh and Russian languages.

These factors, inter alia, crucially impact the level of secondary education in the area. Notably, during Kazakhstan's participation in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Turkestan region and the city of Shymkent recorded some of the lowest results in reading literacy. However, it's important to acknowledge the region's marginal positive development in this period.

**Methods.** Within the framework of the constructivist paradigm, the case study method was employed, enabling a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon within its "real-life" context [32; 40]. The case was constructed through a thorough study of the region's individual characteristics. Detailed interview protocols and focus group guidelines were developed, drawing from analysed regulations and literature pertinent to the issue of low student performance.

To investigate the factors contributing to the rise in the proportion of low-achieving students, qualitative data was gathered in May-June 2022 from four secondary schools and two colleges in and around Shymkent. These institutions represent both urban and rural environments. Participants were selected using the purposive non-representative and snowball sampling methods [19; 20]. The study aimed to deeply understand the social ramifications

<sup>1</sup> External Students' Achievement Assessment (ESAA) — a kind of teaching and learning quality monitoring independent of educational organizations.

<sup>2</sup> NEET — young people who are not in employment, education or training due to a number of factors of economic, social, and political nature.

of poor academic performance. Therefore, participants included not only educational organization administrators, teachers, and students but also class teachers, social educators, psychologists, and members of the parent community [12]. This article discusses the perspectives of 18 subject teachers who participated in focus groups and 4 class teachers who engaged in individual interviews.

### Findings of the Study

**Teachers' beliefs about low-performing students.** Teachers' beliefs about students play a crucial role in the educational process and significantly influence student development. Studies indicate that teachers' expectations considerably affect students' academic performance. Furthermore, there is a tendency for teachers to adopt a more positive attitude towards students who exhibit higher levels of success in their educational pursuits.

The findings of the research, derived from interviews and focus group discussions with teachers, corroborate this viewpoint. Teachers tend to allocate more attention towards students who perform well academically, reasoning that assisting low-performing students is often more time and energy consuming. Additionally, there is a prevailing belief among teachers that concentrating excessively on lower-performing students may detrimentally impact the academic achievements of their higher-performing counterparts.

Teacher 3: *"I typically offer this advice: If student is aware that they are unlikely to pass the UNT<sup>3</sup>, why should they waste their time? It would be more beneficial to acquire a skill or master a craft during this period. However, I do not coerce anyone into making this choice. Ultimately, it is the parents who decide. As a teacher, I do not have the authority to instruct a student to leave school. The school's doors are always open, regardless of a student's academic*

*performance. For instance, I had a student, an exemplary performer, who expressed a desire to leave. In response, I suggested considering taking the UNT".*

Teacher 2: *"Why should a student, who is not engaging in their studies, waste time? Such students are likely to skip classes in grades 10-11 anyway. They might as well be working. We would require them to attend classes. This will lead to conflict with the parents. Wouldn't it be more sensible for the student to learn a profession during this time?"* (focus group with teachers\_54).

While discussing the causes of students' underperformance, teachers often attribute it to the personal characteristics of the students, such as their socio-economic status (SES), behavioural traits, and their parents' education levels. Specifically, they identify a challenging family socio-economic situation as the primary factor in academic failure. Financial constraints experienced by students from lower-income households restrict their access to extracurricular activities and private tutoring. In more severe instances, these economic hardships necessitate early employment for some students, resulting in frequent school absences.

*Children with low academic performance often struggle to communicate effectively with teachers and peers. They fail to grasp the material and are unable to respond to questions. When we inquire about these students with the class teacher, we typically find that they come from challenging backgrounds. Many are from single-parent families or families facing financial difficulties. Essentially, these children are dealing with familial issues (participant 6, focus group with teachers\_31)*

*In this region, children are accustomed to assisting their parents from a young age, especially in large families. The necessity to work and contribute to their family's needs often leaves them with insufficient time to combine work and study. This dual responsibility might also be a contributing*

<sup>3</sup> Unified National Test — the type of test taken by school graduates to enter Kazakhstani universities.

*factor to their academic challenges (class teacher\_30).*

Teachers' beliefs also influence the parents of low-performing students, whom teachers perceive as being less involved in the educational process. This lack of involvement is often attributed to parents with heavy workloads and those with multiple children. Teachers typically view these parents as shifting responsibility to the school and label them as "problematic." They observe that low parental involvement is more common among students who exhibit low motivation, anxiety, and deviant behaviour. According to teachers, it is these students who are at risk of becoming chronically unsuccessful.

*Teacher 3: "High-achieving students often have parents who closely monitor their education. For instance, students who bring the necessary materials to class usually have parents who are more involved and demanding in their learning process. Conversely, students performing at a lower level often have parents who do not pay much attention to their education. They may lack the time or inclination to oversee their children's academic responsibilities. When such children are pushed to achieve more, their parents tend to complain. The key difference lies in the level of parental involvement".*

*Teacher 2: "Absolutely. It largely depends on the parents. Children whose parents do not control their academic activities often fail to bring even the basic necessities, like textbooks, to school. While all children are provided with textbooks, some consistently neglect to bring them. This lack of oversight sometimes extends to school uniforms as well" (focus group with teachers\_54).*

*"More likely, it is not the children who influence society, but rather their educational deficiencies and those of their parents. For instance, when I analyzed the academic performance in my class, I found a correlation with the parents' educational backgrounds. Many parents lack higher or even secondary education, typically resulting in*

*their employment in lower-paid jobs" (class teacher\_30).*

Educators categorize these students as "children at risk," attributing their challenging behaviours to underlying emotional, behavioural, and psychological issues. Addressing these issues is essential for sustained academic progress. Such students often struggle with adhering to school discipline, by frequently violating norms, provoking conflicts, and encountering difficulties in relationships with both teachers and peers. The study's results highlight a lack of teacher preparedness for working with these children. This finding aligns with the observations of S. Kosaretsky, T. Mertsalova, and N. Senina, who note that teachers often perceive expulsion as the solution for children who disrupt discipline [8].

Students with poor motivation and insecurity also face an increased risk of academic failure, necessitating specialist intervention [25]. A lack of interest in learning may stem from psychological factors. Teachers observe that students, particularly in grades 5—7, encounter pivotal and crisis moments linked with the transition to secondary school and developmental changes. During this phase, students may experience a waning interest and motivation for their studies, adversely affecting their academic performance.

Teachers also recognize that students with special educational needs (SEN) are at risk of underperforming academically. Despite the availability of tutors and the option of home-based learning, the physical and cognitive conditions of children with SEN can significantly impede their academic achievement.

*There is a student with hearing difficulties. We are preparing specialised materials and simpler tasks for him. Additionally, we tend to assign higher grades (participant 3, focus group with teachers\_43).*

Furthermore, teachers generally harbour scepticism regarding the capabilities of these students. Almost all teachers participating in the study expressed the belief that academic underperformance is a com-

mon attribute of students with special educational needs.

**Teachers' beliefs in the school context.** The study highlighted educators' perceptions of low-performing students, revealing a notable absence of standardized guidelines for schools and educators. This deficiency hampers teachers' ability to swiftly identify and assist students requiring additional help and support. Additionally, not all teachers possess the required professional skills and competencies to effectively engage with low-performing students. Teachers acknowledge that working with such students is often the domain of highly specialized experts: school psychologists and social pedagogues. This indicates that the responsibility for assisting these children typically rests with specialists and is approached predominantly through "corrective activities."

*One might question why schools should bear this responsibility. Schools fulfil their role by providing education. In my view, parents and the state should play a larger part. Why should the burden fall solely on schools? Schools are not mandated to educate children in the broader sense; their primary function is to teach. Other institutions or families should have a more significant role in the broader education and upbringing of children (class teacher\_30).*

*At the elementary level, interactions among students are generally harmonious, but this dynamic changes with teenagers, particularly in the 9th grade, where disputes and conflicts become more common. In such cases, we often seek assistance from a psychologist... requesting their intervention (participant 3, focus group with teachers\_43).*

While highly specialized professionals are indeed capable of effectively working with low-performing students through sessions, tests, and individual lessons, it is crucial to acknowledge that students spend the most of their time with subject teachers and class teachers. Therefore, it is vital for these teachers to grasp and apply psychological principles in their teaching [15]. Teachers

tend to view school psychologists more as support for themselves rather than as specialists dedicated to helping children. This perspective is prevalent in Kazakhstan [9] and other post-Soviet countries [10], where the role of a school psychologist is often limited to "correcting" children with problems.

The lack of necessary professional skills among teachers, coupled with their negative attitudes towards low-performing students, leads to the intentional simplification of the curriculum and the setting of low expectations for these students. A significant consequence of such school practices is the educational stigmatisation and labelling of students as "failed," which influences their future educational paths, including the risk of becoming part of the NEET youth group [2].

*There are students who enroll in tuition-free education programs but are unable to complete them. If a child is unable to attend college, they face the challenge of earning a living through physically demanding work. This situation undoubtedly impacts society. It is beneficial when children pursue university education or at least obtain a vocational education, where they can develop skills in areas such as cooking or electrical work. It is not necessary for everyone to pursue higher education (class teacher\_31).*

#### **Teachers' beliefs at the system level.**

At the systemic level, the beliefs of teachers regarding poor academic performance, as identified in our research, are influenced by multiple factors. First, many teachers in our study directly associate students' poor academic achievements with the regional socio-economic context. Specifically, in this region, a substantial portion of the population is engaged in family businesses or works in family-owned agricultural enterprises. Consequently, children's involvement in these businesses or their need to contribute financially is a frequent occurrence in local communities.

*There are those who choose their parents' profession. A lot depends on the parents. If their parents had forbidden them to leave [the school], they would have stayed.*

*If your parents say, 'that's it, just leave, you will work with me', for example, they leave [the school] (participant 1, focus group with teachers\_109).*

From the teachers' perspective, this poses a significant barrier to the educational progress of low-performing students. This view is based on observations that students engaged in out-of-school activities often lack the sufficient time for studying and completing homework. The dependency of academic achievement on socio-demographic circumstances underscores the link between educational outcomes and students' living conditions. Therefore, teachers argue that addressing and fostering the development of low-performing students cannot be effectively achieved within the educational system alone; it requires consideration of a broader spectrum of social and economic factors.

Moreover, the interviewed teachers highlighted the role of Kazakhstan's current educational system in the issue of low academic performance. Many educators believe that the system fails to adequately address this problem, hindering effective support for low-performing students. Supporting their viewpoint, teachers cite the insufficient time allocated to assisting students with learning difficulties. This is closely linked to the emphasis on preparing high-achieving students for various Olympiads and Unified National Tests, which considerably adds to the teachers' workload. Furthermore, the present teacher certification system evaluates performance based on the number of competition and Olympiad winners and medallists they teach. However, the demanding task of working with low-performing students, often seen as more challenging, remains unrecognized. Teachers also note a lack of competencies in dealing with low-performing students, which is not remedied by the state's system of advanced training or other professional development opportunities available to educators.

*"There's not enough time and sometimes the desire to spend it on them [low-*

*performing students]... I think it's better to pay [attention] to children with high motivation... Sometimes I want to work with a good student, but I have to teach low-performing students so that they don't fall behind [high-performing students]" (class teacher\_30).*

Educators have raised concerns regarding the structure of curricula and teaching materials. They believe that these resources are primarily designed for gifted children and fail to facilitate effective learning for low-performing students.

*"I have a recommendation regarding the selection of textbooks. They are excellent and engaging. However, they are specifically designed for gifted children and can be exceedingly challenging for students with average or below-average academic abilities. If these students receive different materials, they might feel disadvantaged" (participant 1, focus group with teachers\_109).*

Furthermore, according to some participants of the study, the discontinuation of repeated teaching for lower-performing students has exacerbated the issue. This practice was previously seen as a way for students to catch up and prevent the widening of the educational gap.

Another systemic belief identified in our research concerns the societal view of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions. These are often seen as the default path for students with lower academic performance. Interviews with educators revealed two perspectives: some believe that the fear of failing in high school drives students to choose TVET, while others noted pressure from school management to guide low-performing students towards TVET.

A class teacher mentioned, *"In some schools, they openly suggest to children that 'you'd be better off going to college.' They recommend it, anyway" (class teacher\_30).*

Another teacher observed, *"Some students fear they won't get into university because they might not pass the UNT; they also can't afford the fees for paid programmes. So, they opt for tuition-free col-*



*lege education. Nowadays, with the challenging [UNT] questions, not everyone can pass" (class teacher\_109).*

This stereotyping becomes an obstacle in recognizing and addressing underachievement. Low-performing students are often viewed as candidates for TVET rather than being supported within the school system. This stereotype contributes to social inequality by perpetuating negative perceptions of low-performing students, thereby influencing their educational and social advancement opportunities.

### Conclusions

Research into teachers' beliefs has highlighted several critical issues regarding the perception and treatment of low-performing students in educational settings. Specifically, studies indicate that teachers often view academic achievement as an attribute inherent to students, influenced by factors such as their family's socio-economic status and their own physical and cognitive characteristics [1; 30; 31]. Furthermore, the task of working with low-performing students is commonly perceived as falling under the purview of highly specialized professionals, such as school psychologists and social workers, who employ various corrective methods [9; 10]. This viewpoint fosters diminished expectations for the academic success of low-performing children, erecting barriers to teachers' engagement for additional work with these students and the cultivation of a stimulating educational environment for all. Consequently, children facing learning challenges frequently experience marginalization and stigmatization within the school environment [2].

These beliefs are compounded by systemic factors, including the socio-economic traits of the region, the education system's focus on nurturing gifted students, and the perception of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as a predetermined pathway for low-performing students. Consequently, educational practices emerge that chart a distinct trajectory for these students. From elementary and

middle grades, they are often labelled as a separate group of "problem" children, a categorization that acts as a precursor to their eventual removal from mainstream schooling in higher grades and transition to TVET institutions [12].

Examining this case draws parallels with the medical model of disability in inclusive education theory [27], where the focus is on identifying and rectifying deficits and deviations, rather than nurturing each student's potential and social integration. This approach exacerbates social inclusion issues and deprives students of developmental and learning opportunities tailored to their unique abilities and interests. Furthermore, it poses substantial barriers to social mobility, perpetuating social inequality and diminishing the economic potential of a significant portion of the young population.

In this context, the creation of a more inclusive educational environment is imperative. Such an environment would embrace student diversity and individuality, respect and accommodate children's varied learning needs in teaching methods, and eliminate the stigmatization of low performers. Adhering to the social model of disability in inclusive education theory, this can be achieved if educators reevaluate their beliefs, moving away from the notion of low performance as an immutable student trait and acknowledging their part in the social formation of low-performing students.

On one hand, this requires a targeted development of teachers' competencies, encompassing changes in teaching approaches, assessment, and the provision of resources and methodological support. On the other, it necessitates a reassessment of current educational policies to motivate teachers to work not only with gifted students but also with those who are low-performing.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the findings of this study, based on one region, are not generally applicable, given the limited sample size and focus on an in-depth understanding of individual cases. While the case study method

and qualitative research methodology play a vital role in gaining deep insights into social phenomena, they also have inherent limitations, such as subjectivity, limited generalizability, challenges in data analysis, and restricted representativeness, all of which can affect the validity of the findings.

Therefore, to enhance the representativeness and generalizability of the results, a more comprehensive approach to study-

ing the problem of low academic performance is needed. Specifically, conducting research using quantitative methodologies across all regions of Kazakhstan would allow for the consideration of cultural and socio-economic variances between regions and to statistically identify predictors of low student performance. This would facilitate the timely identification and addressing of factors impeding children's academic success in Kazakhstan.

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