

## **Primary and Middle School Teachers' Perception about their Pedagogical Competency and Associated School Factors in Bench-Sheko, and West Omo Zones: Implications for Teacher Education**

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### **Abstract:**

*The main purpose of this study was to examine primary and middle school teachers' perception about their pedagogical competency and associated school factors using concurrent QUAN + qual design. Three hundred seventy-four primary school teachers selected through simple random sampling have participated in the study. The finding shows two sets of clusters with a statistically significant difference in pedagogical competency. The first cluster, consisting of n=107 (29%) teachers, perceived they had good pedagogical competency, while teachers in the second cluster n=267 (71%), reported poor pedagogical competency at p<0.01. Lack of capacity building training, working environment, teachers' qualifications, and teachers' training program are factors associated to teachers' pedagogical competency. Finally, the study presented the implications of the findings on teacher education programs with regard to the preparation of teachers, admission to the profession, the quality of the training, and continuous professional development practices.*

**Keywords:** Primary schools, teaching competency, quality education, teachers' training

### **Introduction**

The Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia, launched in 2023, aims to enhance the quality of education at all levels. It recognizes the shortcomings of the previous 1994 policy and its negative impact on student learning. The new policy introduces several changes regarding the structure, language, content, and other aspects of the curriculum in both general and higher education (MoE, 2023a). It views education as a vital tool for addressing long-standing issues, highlighting Ethiopia's understanding of education's role in national development. Consequently, the emphasis on improving educational quality at the policy level is promising.

Additionally, the new policy prioritizes the enhancement of teacher professionalism through various capacity-building initiatives. This underscores the importance of teacher competency in realizing education's potential for nation-building.

Teachers play a crucial role in shaping the future generation through the process of teaching and learning, as people entrust them with this responsibility (Shaughnessy, 1998). However, for this responsibility to be fulfilled, teachers must possess professional competencies and commitment and be empowered to perform their multiple tasks in the classroom, school, and community in a genuinely professional manner. This chain reaction can lead to high-quality student learning in cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains of human development (Kaldi & Xafakos, 2017). To bring about a positive impact on student learning, teachers must possess the required teaching competencies for their grade level. According to Çayir (2017) competency is more than just knowledge and skills; it involves the ability to meet complex demands by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources, including skills and attitudes, in a particular context. Competency is essential to an educator's pursuit of excellence (Keller-Schneider et al., 2020).

Today's world presents complex challenges that require teachers to possess a wide range of competencies (Breeze & Guinda, 2017). Teaching competency is a result of an effective training process that aspires to contribute to the welfare of a particular teacher's success. Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018) of Ethiopia aims to develop citizens with a humane outlook, countrywide responsibility, and democratic values, possessing the necessary productive, creative, and appreciative capacity to participate fruitfully in development and the utilization of resources and the environment at large. In this sense, a teacher's professional competency is the main agenda to bring about the desired changes on the side of the learners.

Poor-quality teaching has a debilitating and cumulative effect on student outcomes. The effects of quality teaching on educational outcomes are greater than those that arise from students' backgrounds (Floyd et al., 2009). Relying solely on curriculum standards and statewide assessment strategies without paying attention to teacher quality is insufficient to achieve the desired improvements in student outcomes. Evidence suggests that the quality of teacher education and teaching is more strongly related to student achievement than class sizes, overall spending levels, or teacher salaries (Timperley et al., 2007).

The education system's failure to ensure student learning and acquisition of basic skills, such as literacy and numeracy, is a significant contributor to poor attainment and achievement. In particular, the Southwest Peoples Region, where study zones are part is experiencing a shortage of qualified primary and middle school teachers, with only 17% and 69.6% of the target being met in the study area, compared to 50% at middle and 81% at the primary level (MoE, 2023b). This lack of qualified teachers is one of the factors affecting the pedagogical competency of teachers in the study area.

Despite efforts to increase primary school attendance, higher attendance does not necessarily result in high-quality learning outcomes, as evidenced by the findings of the MoE's 2018 study. Primary school graduates often lack the necessary competency, which requires the integration

of knowledge, skills, and essential values. The emphasis on factual knowledge means that a significant percentage of young students fail to grasp basic learning abilities by the end of the first cycle. The quality of Ethiopian education is deteriorating due to various factors, including poor teacher preparation, limited professional development opportunities, an emphasis on quantity over quality, and the commercialization of teacher training colleges, according to Gemedā & Tynjälä (2015). This multifaceted problem is critical in the study area, where teachers are scarce, particularly in remote areas of the zones. Shockingly, students who have completed grade 10 and failed to join preparatory schools were employed as elementary school teachers without any professional pre-service training.

Therefore, it is imperative to study the pedagogical competency of teachers and examine the school context they are working in. Hence, the study aimed to answer the following three basic research questions.

1. How do primary school teachers perceive their pedagogical competence?
2. What is the context of the primary and middle school teachers are working in?
3. What implications does the finding have on teacher education programs?

### **Review of Related Literature**

Teachers play a vital role in delivering education, as the quality of their instruction has a direct impact on the success of their students. According to Masino & Niño-Zarazúa (2016), it is essential for teachers to continuously improve their performance, as they have a close relationship with their students and are constantly working to help them reach their full potential. A quality education produces quality students, and instructors are crucial elements of success because they provide high-quality education (Shishigu et al., 2017).

However, the status of the practice of teaching in primary school is low. Today's teachers should be proficient in managing pupils, identifying student needs, and using technology in the classroom (Schleicher, 2012). The quality of instruction is not solely determined by credentials and knowledge; it also depends on the teacher's aptitude for using instructional strategies, creativity in choosing teaching methods and media, and other factors (Hollins, 2011).

Regarding the standard of the teaching profession, it is more than just a job; it is a unique career that requires expertise (Keller-Schneider et al., 2020; Zheng, 2014) also confirmed that each teacher must possess the credentials and proficiencies that serve as the fundamental building blocks for the execution of learning. A career in teaching that is expert, has teaching competencies, and employs effective teaching methods is thus one that is in the teaching industry (TSC, 2016) In today's global information society, teaching and learning have become complex and multifaceted endeavors that require extended teacher professionalism. The importance of lifelong learning in the continuum of teacher education and learning cannot be overstated, as

teachers need to keep up with the ever-evolving educational landscape (Keller-Schneider et al., 2020; Klassen & Tze, 2014; Kyriacou, 2009).

However, despite the need for extended teacher professionalism, there is a lack of consensus among experts, policy makers, and reformers about what is most important in teacher preparation. This lack of agreement is due to the full range of formal, informal, and non-formal learning opportunities available to teachers (Maba & Mantra, 2018).

One of the challenges facing stakeholders and decision-makers responsible for policy development and implementation is the possibility of reaching an international agreement on a framework that describes different levels of teacher expertise, considering all pertinent aspects of such a multifaceted activity. This debate over teacher standards and competencies is crucial in ensuring that teachers are equipped with the necessary skills to provide quality education to their students (Maba & Mantra, 2018).

One of the key skills required of teachers today is pedagogical competency. This includes the use of suitable strategies and approaches, as well as how teachers interact with their students. The ability to comprehend learners, create instructional materials, implement learning diagnoses, assess learning, and foster learning is the essence of the concept of pedagogical competence (Hakim, 2015). Shukla, (2014) further classified the ability of educators to oversee students' learning, including their understanding of them, creating and implementing learning plans, being able to assess learning outcomes, and assisting students in realizing their full potential. It is important to note that pedagogical competence is not the only topic related to teaching, as there are other areas that are equally important.

Pedagogical competence refers to the ability of individuals to effectively combine various sources of knowledge, including books, articles, skills, experience, and other sources, to enhance their teaching abilities. According to Brundrett & Silcock (2002) this approach is crucial for achieving successful pedagogical outcomes. Çayir (2017) further defines pedagogical competence as the capacity to employ attitudes, knowledge, and teaching skills to effectively assist pupils.

In today's educational landscape, pedagogical competence is a critical quality that instructors must possess. The effectiveness of pedagogic skills is directly related to the way teachers instruct pupils, making teaching proficiency a crucial component of high-quality learning (Hakim, 2015). As (Brandenburg & Wilson, 2013) notes, pedagogical expertise is essential for creating and achieving a high standard of quality education.

To achieve this standard, it is necessary to enhance and improve the pedagogical competencies that teachers already possess. This requires a focus on professional development, which is crucial in enhancing the teaching competency of teachers.

In summary, teachers are essential to the success of education, and their role is becoming increasingly Important. To provide high-quality education, teachers must continuously improve their performance, be proficient in managing pupils, identifying student needs, and using technology in the classroom. The teaching profession requires expertise, pedagogical competencies, and effective teaching methods to produce quality students. Therefore, pedagogical competence is a critical quality that teachers must possess to achieve high-quality learning outcomes. By combining various sources of knowledge and enhancing their teaching skills, teachers can effectively assist pupils in their educational journey.

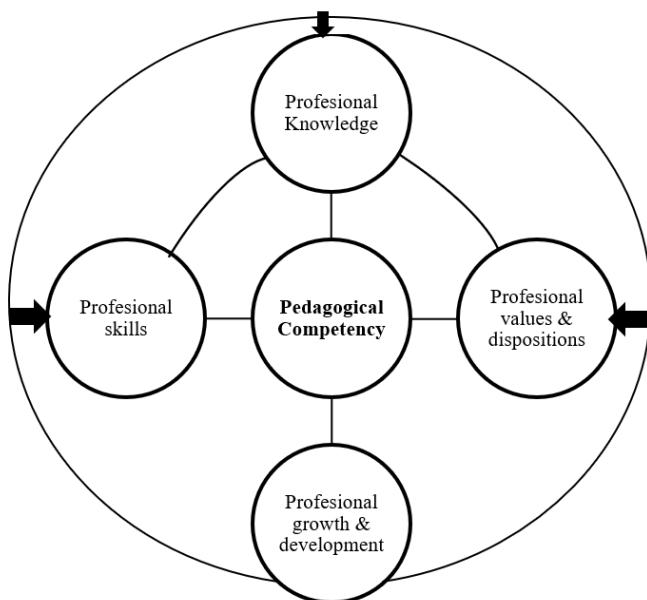
### **Conceptual Framework on Perceived Teaching Competency**

In this study, teachers' pedagogical competency has been dealt with from three domains, namely, professional knowledge, Professional skills, and professional values and dispositions. These are the competency domains expected from teachers to successfully practice their teaching profession. Throughout their professional teaching career, the role of professional growth and development is vital in improving their competency across the three domains. Therefore, considering the role of professional development in discussing teachers' teaching competency becomes important.

Hence, pedagogical competency consists of the three domains of knowledge, skills and values, and dispositions while all could be improved through teachers' professional development. The following diagrams show the relationship between the three domains of pedagogical competency and the role of professional development.

Effective teaching requires a combination of professional knowledge and skills. Professional knowledge encompasses a deep understanding of pedagogical knowledge. In this study, pedagogical knowledge is defined as the ability to effectively navigate curriculum objectives and pedagogical strategies. On the other hand, skill refers to a teacher's ability to manage a classroom and facilitate the learning process.

In addition to knowledge and skill, professional values and dispositions are also crucial for successful teaching. Teachers who are emotionally invested in their profession and their students are more likely to create a positive and engaging learning environment. Finally, professional growth and development are essential for teachers to stay current and effective in their practice. Engaging in ongoing professional development activities is key to improving teachers' pedagogical competency. In general, in this study, pedagogical competency is conceptualized as the sum of a teacher's pedagogical knowledge, skills, values, and professional development activities.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Framework on Pedagogical Competency

## Methods and Materials

### *Study Site Description*

Bench-Sheko and West Omo Zones are located in the former South Nation Nationalities and Peoples Region, currently under the Southwest Peoples Region, in Ethiopia. The area is found around 600 kilometers from the center, Addis Ababa. Its remoteness from the center has not attracted high-quality professionals, including teachers. In our stay in this area, we have witnessed that a prevalence of teacher scarcity, poor school infrastructure, and even an underserved area in all infrastructural aspects.

### *Design of the study*

The research employed a descriptive survey design to investigate the perception of primary and middle school teachers' pedagogical competency and the associated school factors. Besides, the study has used both primary and secondary sources of data to identify.

### *Population and Samples of the Study*

The study population comprises 5776 teachers, with 3951 males and 1825 females, spread across eleven woredas of the two zones. To determine the sample size, we utilized the Yemane (1973) formula, as cited in Uakarn (2021).

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

$$n = \frac{5776}{1 + 5776 * 0.05^2} = 374$$

Where  $n$  = sample size,  $N$  = population size = 5776,  $e$  = error (0.05), and reliability level 95%. To increase the response rate, the number of sample teachers was increased to 431. The researchers have randomly selected five woredas (Bero, Menit Goldia, Semen Bench, Mizan Town Administration, and Sheko) considering their geographic distribution. Therefore, sample respondents were selected from these five woredas using simple random sampling. Therefore, the sample size selected from each woreda include Bero ( $n=61$ ), Menit Goldia ( $n=98$ ), Mizan Town administration ( $n=98$ ), Semen Bench ( $n= 97$ ), and Sheko (76).

The study involved 431 randomly selected teacher participants. A questionnaire was distributed for them, and the study has secured 374 respondents returning complete data for analysis. Additionally, school principals, supervisors, and Zonal education officials were included in the study as they are key stakeholders in the leadership of the school and the education sector in general.

**Table 1:** Number of Teachers in 11 Woredas of the two Zones

Woreda	Number of Teachers by qualification			Total
	Certificate	Diploma	Degree	
Bero	70	86	7	163
Debub Bench	319	579	19	917
Guraferda	172	217	8	397
Maji	114	238	2	354
Menit Goldia	471	355	9	835
Menit Shasha	221	162	13	196
Mizan Town Admn.	49	471	41	561
Semen Bench	131	614	6	751
Sheko	212	430	22	664
Shey Bench	109	646	27	782
Surma	111	43	2	156
<b>Total</b>				<b>5776</b>

### ***Data collection tools and procedures***

To gather data, the study utilized a questionnaire, two focus group discussions, and document reviews. A self-prepared five-point Likert-type scale questionnaire requesting their level of agreement and consisting of 33 items (9 items measuring Professional knowledge  $\alpha = .82$ , 8 items measuring professional skills and practices  $\alpha = .91$ , 10 items measuring professional values and dispositions  $\alpha = .86$ , and 6 items measuring professional growth and development  $\alpha = .84$ ) was used to measure teachers' perception about their teaching competency. This questionnaire was piloted in another woreda teachers resulting in a total reliability score of  $\alpha = .879$ . Focus group discussions were held with educational leaders to gain information on teachers' pedagogical competency and the associated school factors. The study also reviewed documents indicating the school performance evaluation, professional development, and qualifications of

teachers. The main reason to use all these techniques is to examine the issue from different sources.

### ***Methods of data analysis***

The study used both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. This is to substantiate the data obtained from different sources. The quantitative analysis was conducted using statistical tests such as cluster analysis, ANOVA, and an independent t-test, substantiated with qualitative thematic analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations and Approval**

This study has considered important ethical concerns, with the full consent of the respondents to participate in the study. The researchers have made it a priority to protect the dignity of those who participated. Respondents were told they had the right to decline participation in the study, and their data were kept confidential and protected from unauthorized access.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Teachers' Pedagogical Competency***

The study operationalizes pedagogical competency as a multifaceted construct that encompasses a teacher's professional knowledge, skills, practices, values, and dedication to ongoing professional development. Table 1 below shows the result of cluster analysis.

**Table 2:** Mean (and standard deviation) cluster scale Z-scores for pedagogical competency

<b>Domains of competency</b>	<b>Cluster one N (107) teachers</b>	<b>Cluster two N (267) teachers</b>	<b>p</b>
Pedagogical competency	1.20(.58)	-.489(.67)	0.00
Professional knowledge and understanding	.81(.83)	-.33(.87)	0.00
Professional Skills and Practice	.52(1.02)	-.21(.92)	0.00
Professional Values and Dispositions	.74(.58)	-.30(.98)	0.00
Professional growth and development	.66(1.11)	-.27(.81)	0.00

To assess the competency level of teachers, a self-report survey was conducted and analyzed using cluster analysis. The results yielded a two-cluster solution, with the first cluster consisting of n=107 (29%) teachers who reported being competent in their pedagogical competency. Conversely, the second cluster, consisting of n=267 (71%) teachers, perceived their pedagogical competency as inadequate. This indicates that many respondents reported low competency levels in their pedagogical competence. It is worth noting that the two clusters were significantly different across all components of competency at  $p < 0.01$ .



***Professional knowledge and understanding***

A teacher's ability to effectively instruct in the classroom is dependent on their professional knowledge and understanding. This includes not only expertise in their subject matter, but also a strong grasp of pedagogy and the teaching profession. In this survey of teachers' perceptions regarding their subject matter expertise and understanding of teaching found that out of 374 responders, the average score was 29.76 with a standard deviation of 4.4. While this indicates a moderate level of knowledge and understanding, it falls slightly above the projected average of 27.

Teachers must have a comprehensive understanding of their profession to deliver quality instruction to their students. Without this knowledge, they may struggle to effectively engage and educate their students.

Educational leaders in the region and zone must take action to improve the situation and ensure that teachers have the necessary resources and support to enhance their professional knowledge and understanding. By doing so, we can ensure that our students receive the high-quality education they deserve.

***Professional Skills and Practices***

The domain of teacher professional skills and classroom teaching procedures is of utmost importance. It is imperative that teachers possess the necessary knowledge and apply it effectively in their teaching practices. This not only ensures the efficacy of their activities but also enhances the overall learning experience of their students.

However, the data acquired for this domain, with  $n=374$ ,  $\bar{x}=17.73$ , and  $s=3.21$ , indicates poor competency when compared to the expected mean of 24. This domain assesses teachers' ability to design lessons, use a student-centered approach, conduct assessments, provide feedback, create a positive learning environment, and manage classrooms. Unfortunately, all the teachers have reported below-average results, indicating poor classroom teaching practice. Furthermore, the focus group discussion data reveal that teachers are not utilizing a student-centered approach in their teaching. This directly impacts the execution of policies. As evidenced by the following excerpt from a discussion held with the supervisor at Kitte Primary School:

*"The lack of a student-centered approach in our teaching practices is concerning. We need to focus on creating a positive learning environment that caters to the needs of our students. This will not only enhance their learning experience but also improve our overall competency as teachers."*

Pantić & Wubbels (2012) found that knowledge is a basis for skills. Though he respondents of this study claimed they have the required knowledge competency, they failed to practice it effectively. Teachers must possess the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively conduct

classroom teaching. The data acquired for this domain highlights the need for improvement in this area. By utilizing a student-centered approach and creating a positive learning environment, teachers can enhance their teaching practices and improve their overall competency. Another discussant from the same school said

*Educational leaders often request that teachers implement a student-centered approach and continuous assessment in their classrooms. However, the challenges that teachers face in implementing these strategies are often overlooked. For instance, how can a teacher engage all seventy students in a 40-minute session? This makes it incredibly challenging for teachers to incorporate active learning approaches in such large classrooms.*

This indicates that teachers are not operating in an environment that encourages the use of a student-centered approach. Additionally, their evaluation skills and feedback provision were rated as insufficient.

Educational leaders must acknowledge the difficulties that teachers face in implementing these strategies and provide them with the necessary support and resources to overcome these challenges. By doing so, teachers can effectively create a student-centered learning environment that promotes continuous assessment and active learning.

Overall, the primary school teachers who participated in this survey displayed inadequate professional abilities and classroom practices. This highlights a lack of knowledge in this field and calls for all stakeholders to contribute to the enhancement of teacher professional abilities in the area.

To improve the situation, it is essential to create a supportive environment that fosters student-centered teaching practices. Teachers should be provided with adequate training and resources to enhance their evaluation skills and feedback provision. This will enable them to provide quality education and improve the learning outcomes of their students.

### ***Professional Values and Dispositions***

Teaching competency is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various dimensions, including instructors' values and attitudes towards their work. In this domain, teachers' beliefs and personal attributes regarding their career are crucial indicators of their effectiveness. These attributes include being a role model, having a strong devotion to their profession, following laws and regulations, understanding and managing differences, respecting community culture and customs, and caring for students' intellectual growth.

A response obtained from 374 elementary school teachers in the zone revealed that they possess positive professional values and attitudes. The study's results showed that the mean score was

34.5, with a standard deviation of 5.4, and an estimated mean of 30. This indicates that teachers in this area have shown a good perception of their pedagogical competency in this domain.

It is essential to note that having positive professional values and attitudes is crucial for effective teaching. Uztosun (2018) found that teachers who possess these qualities are more likely to inspire and motivate their students, create a positive learning environment, and foster a sense of community in the classroom.

In general, the study's findings suggest that elementary school teachers in the zone have positive professional values and attitudes, which are a crucial aspect of teaching competency. This underscores the importance of nurturing and preserving these qualities in teachers to enhance their effectiveness in the classroom.

### ***Professional growth and development***

In order to excel in their profession, teachers must actively engage in reflective practice and strive for continuous professional growth and development. According to (Goldman & Grimbeek, 2015), critically reflective teachers take ownership of their actions, analyze and evaluate them, and consider how they relate to the larger organizational and societal context in which they operate. This level of self-awareness and introspection is crucial for improving teaching abilities and achieving success in the field.

However, a recent study of 374 teachers revealed that their engagement in professional growth and development activities is below average, with a mean score of only 14 (compared to a projected mean of 18). This is concerning, as modern teaching demands that educators be reflective practitioners who are constantly seeking to improve their skills and knowledge. The lack of participation in professional development activities suggests a weak commitment to this ideal in the study area. Hakim (2015) revealed that continuous professional development enables teachers to improve their competency.

One teacher from Mizan-Aman primary school summed up the issue well, stating: "We need to prioritize our professional growth and development if we want to be effective teachers. It's not enough to simply go through the motions - we need to actively seek out opportunities to learn and grow." By embracing a culture of reflective practice and ongoing learning, teachers can enhance their abilities and make a positive impact on their students and the wider community.

On the other hand, a female discussant from Shewa bench said that "Although we recognize the importance of continuous professional development for teachers, our current working conditions do not support its implementation. With overwhelming teaching responsibilities and large class sizes, it becomes challenging to provide effective teaching, assessment, and management. Moreover, opportunities for professional learning are scarce, making it difficult for us to engage in such activities".

Through a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), we discovered a significant impact of experience on teaching competency. The findings indicated a statistically significant difference in teaching competency between two groups of teachers with varying levels of experience, with an  $F=4.426$  and  $p<0.005$ . This suggests that teachers become more skilled in their teaching as they gain more experience.

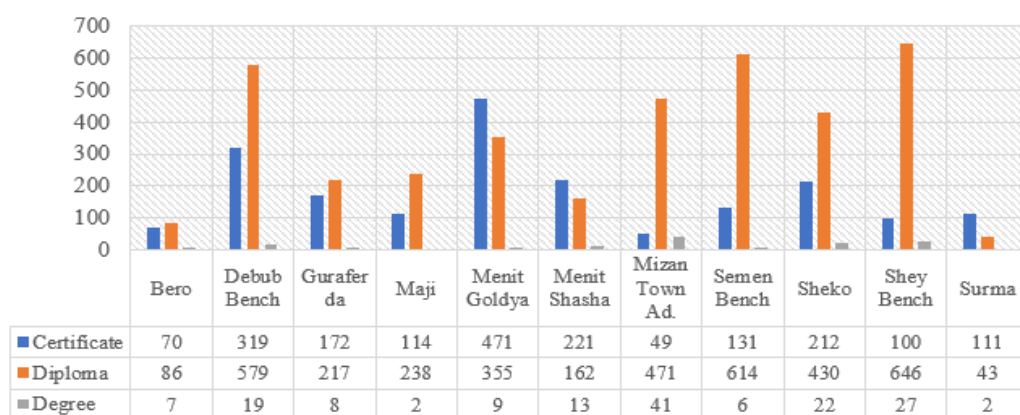
### *Associated School Factors*

During focus group discussions and document reviews, teachers and principals identified various factors that contribute to inadequate pedagogical competency. The following challenges are associated with the pedagogical competency of primary school teachers in Bench Maji Zone:

### *Educational Qualification*

The general education curriculum framework of Ethiopia requires primary and middle school teachers to have a minimum of a diploma and a first degree, respectively (MoE, 2020). According to the MoE (2023b), only 50% of the national plan for middle school and 81% for primary school is met. However, the Southwest West Ethiopia People Regions (SWEP), where the study zone is located, has achieved 69.6% of the primary school qualification target and 17.2% of middle school teachers' qualification, which is among the three least performing regions in this regard. This indicates that the qualification of teachers is a significant challenge to their pedagogical competency.

The study zones are experiencing a low rate of rate of qualified teachers for the respective grade level. The graph below illustrates the qualifications of teachers in different woredas found in the zones.



**Figure 2:** Bench-Sheko and West Omo Zones primary and middle school teachers by qualification in 2021, source: Each Zone's Education Bureau

The two zones currently have a total of 33% certificate instructors and 64.4% diploma holders. Unfortunately, only 2.6% of teachers possess a bachelor's degree and meet the necessary requirements for their level. This lack of qualifications among teachers is contributing to a low

level of pedagogical competency, which demands an intervention. It is imperative that the Ministry of Education provide opportunities for teachers to upgrade their qualifications.

One solution to this problem is to hire new teachers who possess a first-degree. More importantly, the government should also consider providing diploma holders with the chance to earn their degree through various training modalities, such as summer programs. This will not only improve the quality of education in the area but also provide teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to excel in their profession.

Improving the educational qualification of teachers is crucial to enhancing their pedagogical competency. The government and other stakeholders should prioritize efforts to increase the number of qualified teachers in the region. This can be achieved through targeted training programs, incentives for teachers to pursue higher education, and other initiatives that support professional development. By investing in the education and training of teachers, the government can ensure students can receive the high-quality education they deserve.

### ***Limited Capacity Building In-Service Training***

Improving the knowledge and teaching skills of teachers is crucial to enhancing their competency. In-service training is an effective way to achieve this goal. However, in the Bench Maji Zone, primary schools are facing a significant challenge in accessing such training opportunities. The data collected from the sample schools indicates that the lack of teacher capacity-building training is a major issue. This confirms the conclusions given by Hakim (2015) which say, without access to various training programs that can enhance their knowledge and abilities, the chances of improving their competency and educational quality are slim.

To address this issue, all responsible bodies, including Zone and woreda Education officers, higher education institutes, and volunteers, must contribute to teacher skill development. It is essential to establish partnerships between Zonal educational leaders and nearby educational institutes to ensure the implementation of effective training programs. By working together, we can provide teachers with the necessary tools and resources to improve their teaching skills and enhance the quality of education in the Bench Maji Zone.

Therefore, it is imperative to prioritize teacher capacity-building training to improve the quality of education in the Bench Maji Zone. By investing in the professional development of teachers, we can ensure that they are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to provide high-quality education to their students.

### **Poor reflective practice**

In contemporary pedagogy, practitioners need to engage in reflective practice. By reflecting on their own teaching methods, educators can identify areas of strength and areas that require

improvement. This self-evaluation process is crucial in enhancing their profession and ensuring that they are providing the best possible education to their students.

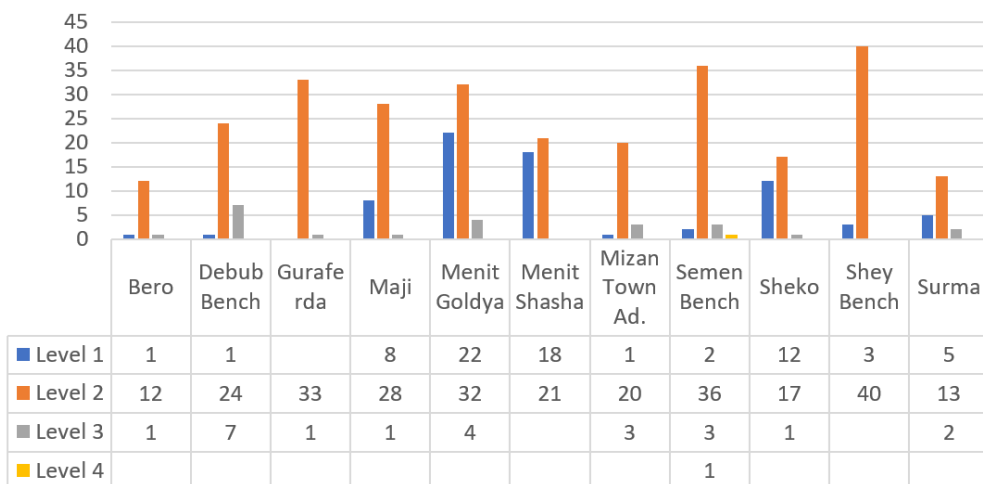
Unfortunately, primary school teachers in Bench Maji Zone have not had the opportunity to engage in reflective practice. As a result, they continue to teach in the same way without any improvement. Kyriacou (2009) found that this lack of self-evaluation is particularly notable given the rapid technological advancements in the education sector.

To address this issue, it is critical to promote and assist teachers in becoming reflective practitioners. This requires a collaborative effort from all parties involved. By creating a culture of reflection, teachers can benefit from their own insights and improve their skills over time.

### ***Poor supportive working environment***

The environment in which teachers operate is a crucial factor that impacts their teaching competence. A conducive working atmosphere is essential for delivering effective instruction and bringing about a positive change in the students. The physical environment of the school, leadership, school buildings, infrastructure, learning resources, internet connectivity, and other relevant resources all play a significant role in enhancing teachers' teaching competency.

As Çayir (2017) stated, when teachers work in a comfortable atmosphere with ample resources, they have more opportunities to refresh their knowledge and skills. This, in turn, leads to better teaching results and improved student performance. Therefore, it is necessary for schools to provide a supportive environment that fosters professional growth and development.



**Figure 3:** School standard classification of Bench-Sheko and West Omo Zones in 2021, source: each Zones Education bureau

To assess the quality of schools, external inspections are conducted, and the results are depicted in the graph below. The graph provides a visual representation of the school's standard, which

is a crucial factor in determining the quality of education provided to students. By improving the school's standard, we can enhance the learning experience of students and enable teachers to deliver their best.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) established a standard in 2006 that requires primary schools in the country to maintain a level four rating to ensure a quality learning environment. Unfortunately, the two zones are experiencing low school standards, as shown in Figure 3. Many schools in the area are only at level one or two, indicating poor school standards. This means that the input, process, and outcome are below the standard. According to inspection reports, only one school has met the standard, indicating that the poor standard of schools in the study area might affect the teaching competency of teachers.

The reality in the sample schools is troubling, as the working climate is not conducive to learning. Teachers and school managers reported a scarcity of educational resources, with few schools having poorly furnished and equipped pedagogical centers. Access to the internet is unimaginable in all schools, and libraries are not up to par. Leadership practices do not support teachers' professional development in the area, exacerbating the scarcity of basic facilities that have a significant impact on the effectiveness of instruction.

Efforts must be made to minimize these challenges and scale up the standards of schools in each zone to meet the required level four rating. All stakeholders must work together to provide an enabling atmosphere for teachers' professional betterment. Klassen & Tze (2014) indicated that teachers must also engage in establishing an environment in which they can grow professionally. By doing so, it can ensure that all students have access to a quality learning environment that will prepare them for success in the future.

### ***Poor quality teacher education program***

Goldman & Grimbeek (2015) indicated that the quality of a teacher's training program is crucial in determining their performance in the classroom. Unfortunately, the current teacher training program in Ethiopia is has a limited impact on the competency of teachers. The system has undergone frequent changes, resulting in the hiring of untrained teachers. According to a report by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in 2018, frequent changes in teacher training modalities for primary schools have been a serious handicap in teacher training. Graduates who passed through a given modality are uncertain about their future due to these changes. Additionally, the existing modality is not aligned with the country's primary school education structure and does not produce effective graduates for the specified level.

Moreover, teachers are not interested in attending professional courses in summer programs, despite the benefits it could have on their teaching practice. They only seek the certificate to receive a salary increment, disregarding the program's role in improving their teaching skills.

Hence, the current teacher training program in Ethiopia needs to be re-evaluated and improved to ensure that teachers receive adequate training to provide quality education to students.

### ***Implications on Teacher Education programs***

Teachers play a crucial role in the learning process and are considered the most important human factor among all the elements involved in implementing educational policies. In Ethiopia, the Ministry of Education (MoE) emphasizes the importance of teachers having the necessary qualifications and competencies through pre-service and in-service training (ETP, 1994). This includes basic knowledge, professional code of ethics, methodology, and practical training.

However, despite the policy, there is a gap between what is expected and what is happening on the ground. This study aims to summarize the implications of this gap in teacher education programs.

One of the major issues is the preparation of adequate teachers. While the new education development and road map suggest that primary school teachers should be degree holders, only 12% of teachers at the national level have fulfilled this requirement. This means that the preparation of teachers is not meeting the demand, and the pool of teacher education candidates at the primary level is often from low achievers and low socio-economic status backgrounds. This leads to a vicious cycle of inadequate quality, which further deteriorates the quality of education.

To address this problem, universities and colleges that train teachers should increase their intake capacity so that an adequate number of teachers can enter the job market. Additionally, more universities should take on the responsibility of training teachers to meet the growing need for qualified educators in schools.

Therefore, it is essential to bridge the gap between policy and practice in teacher education programs in Ethiopia. By doing so, we can ensure that teachers are equipped with the necessary qualifications and competencies to provide quality education to students.

The second is admission to the teaching profession. Nowadays, many individuals who are unable to obtain a university education are turning to diploma programs at teachers' training colleges to pursue a career in teaching. Unfortunately, this has resulted in a widespread lack of interest and competency among primary school teachers. To address this issue, it is critical for all stakeholders in the education sector to work together. One key solution is to establish a strong connection between primary schools and training colleges, which would provide aspiring teachers with sufficient knowledge about the teaching-learning process, primary school curriculum, and learners. The Ministry of Education (MoE) has also emphasized the importance of admitting only those with the necessary qualities who have performed well in national and entrance exams to the teaching profession.



Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is another crucial factor for teachers to enhance their teaching competency. While preservice training is offered to teachers, in-service training opportunities should also be made available to help them improve their skills. A recent study has revealed that teachers are not engaging in professional development activities, indicating poor practice in professional growth and development (Akalu, 2016; Gemedu et al., 2014). This is a concerning issue that demands immediate attention.

To address this problem, it is essential to encourage teachers to consider CPD as an integral part of their job and support them in conducting their development activities effectively. Educational leaders should plan and execute professional development opportunities to ensure that teachers have access to the necessary resources. Teacher training programs should also include strategies on how teachers can develop their professional competency while at work placement.

It is important to note that engaging in CPD activities is not only beneficial for teachers but also for their students. Teachers who continuously develop their skills are better equipped to provide quality education and create a positive learning environment. Therefore, teachers must take the initiative to engage in CPD activities and make it a priority in their professional lives.

Hence, CPD is an essential aspect of teaching competency that should not be overlooked. Teachers must be encouraged and supported to engage in continuous professional development activities to enhance their skills and provide quality education to their students. Educational leaders should take the lead in planning and executing professional development opportunities to ensure that teachers have access to the necessary resources.

### **Limitation of the study**

This study has a limitation that upcoming researchers in this area should consider. The study has employed a self-report questionnaire to measure teachers' perceived teaching competency. It could have been better to administer tests to check teachers' teaching competency. As a result, the study presents how teachers perceive their own teaching competency. However, the researchers made efforts to triangulate their findings by conducting focus group discussions and reviewing documents. Therefore, upcoming researchers should take this into account when designing their own studies.

### **Conclusions**

The study has revealed a pressing need for robust interventions to address the challenges related to teaching competency and to enhance the professional development of teachers. In the study area, teachers reported good competency in professional knowledge and understanding, as well as professional values and dispositions. However, they also reported poor competency in professional skills and practices, as well as professional growth and development. The researchers have perceived that the area is experiencing a significant deficit in teaching

competency among teachers, compared to the required level of professional competency. Specifically, the domains of professional skills and practices, as well as professional growth and development, require a concerted effort from both teachers and educational leaders to effect change.

The study also provides valuable insights into the preparation of teachers, admission criteria, mode of delivery, quality of training, and the issue of continuous professional development. These findings underscore the importance of ongoing professional development for teachers, as well as the need for educational leaders to prioritize the development of professional skills and practices among teachers. By doing so, we can ensure that teachers are equipped with the necessary tools and knowledge to provide high-quality education to students.

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