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Early School Withdrawal and Grade Repetition in Lower Primary Schools and Its Implications for Educators in South Ethiopia Regional State

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Abstract

Early school withdrawal has become a critical problem that hinders both individual and societal development. This study assessed trends and patterns in early children's withdrawal and grade repetition from lower primary schools in three zones in the South Ethiopia Regional State. The study employed a mixed-methods design, collecting data from 311 Grade 6 teachers and 15 school principals through questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. The study analyzed data using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and charts) and inferential statistics (independent-samples t-test & One-Way ANOVA). The study found that early withdrawal from lower primary school remains a major challenge in this region, regardless of gender, and that the dropout rate was highest among grade one pupils, especially in the Gofa zone. Repetition rates increased progressively with the grade level and were highest in the upper grades across the zones. The results show that reducing dropouts, absenteeism, and grade repetition requires concerted efforts to address challenges such as poor communication with parents, limited stakeholder engagement, low teacher commitment, and inadequate government support. In conclusion, interventions should address both genders while recognizing and responding to group-specific vulnerabilities. Also, the study recommends early identification and continuous monitoring of at-risk children, strengthened school–family collaboration, appropriate support and recognition of academic efforts, safe and supportive learning environments, and coordinated multi-stakeholder interventions to enhance school retention and successful progression through primary education.

Keywords: Educational wastage, dropout, grade repetition, lower primary schools, South Ethiopia

1.1 Introduction

Education plays a transformative role in improving individuals' quality of life and contributes to broader societal benefits. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (Art. 26, 1948) states that every child of school-going age has the right to access free education at the fundamental stages [1]. Notably, early school education is vital for children's development as it lays a foundation for children's success in school, and it contributes to a well-skilled workforce. However, the global problem of early childhood education has shifted from access to retaining children in school. Researchers (e.g., [1]) have observed that the enrollment rates at the primary school level have increased, but a considerable percentage of children withdraw from school before completing the primary cycle. Termination of schooling at this early age has consequences, as children fail to thrive in school and attain their fullest potential, leading to a waste of scarce educational resources [1]. Consequently, understanding school withdrawal is crucial for educators to develop effective strategies to retain children in school and strengthen government initiatives to reduce education wastage.

By definition, early school leaving in lower primary education refers to premature or permanent withdrawal from formal education without attaining essential educational credentials at the required level [2]. From the literature, school withdrawal or drop-out is a complex issue as it goes beyond the educational domain [3]. The phenomenon creates a chain of negative effects linked to the individual child, their family, and society as a whole. At the individual level, lack of schooling leads to an individual's inability to develop problem-solving skills, a lack of opportunities to find a stable job (or unemployment), and a reduction in an individual's lifetime earnings. Consequently, it may lead to social exclusion due to a lack of confidence to participate in social development [4].

Theoretically, premature withdrawal from school occurs due to a multifaceted process driven by issues that are individual, family, community, economic, social, or institutional in nature [5]. Researchers assert that early school withdrawal is not just an outcome, but it's a process where children are continuously disengaged from school for a prolonged period due to institutional and external factors [6]. Lee's push and pull theory argues that the decision to withdraw from school could be linked to a combination of negative internal (push factors) and/or external (pull factors) forces [7]. This implies that children's departure from school may be motivated by undesirable conditions at home, or a need to pursue better opportunities elsewhere.

Like any developing country, Ethiopia has invested heavily in primary education as a precondition for socio-economic development. However, the percentage of children completing the primary education cycle is low [8]. Children's education should be prioritized, especially in rural areas where they work beyond their capacity, earning some income to support their own lives and their families. Consequently, children may withdraw from school in search of employment opportunities to meet their own basic needs and

contribute financially to the well-being of their families [9]. As noted by Omijie and Ile, this problem is common for low-income and uneducated household heads, who lack understanding of their children's future. For example, Sabates et al. [10] noted that children may withdraw from school before acquiring essential basic skills. The limited learning experiences are further constrained by inadequate learning resources, overcrowded classrooms, insufficiently qualified teachers, and family- and individual-level factors [11, 12]. Notably, the inability to complete the primary cycle not only limits a child's opportunities in the future, but it also leads to wastage of limited resources that a country has for the provision of primary education [10].

Ethiopia has posted notable progress in school enrolment in lower primary education, especially for boys. This aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), the 2030 Agenda that seeks to ensure "Education for All." This has been achieved through the implementation of the Education Sector Development Programs (ESDP I-VI), General Education Quality Improvement Package (GEQUIP), together with the School Improvement Program (SIP) [13]. However, the Ministry of Education (MoE) report highlights several challenges, including poor access in some areas, poor quality education, inequity, and an inefficient education system. A MoE report revealed that only slightly over half of children who enroll in the 1st grade complete the primary cycle (grades 1-6) [14]. Also, Ethiopia has a high number of out-of-school children who never enrolled or dropped out of school. Based on this report, 1st grade has the highest dropout rates estimated at the national level, which decline in upper grades, with a higher dropout rate for girls compared with boys. Data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) indicate that the primary school completion rate in 2024 was 65% for girls and 69% for boys [15]. To get a better understanding of early school withdrawal in lower primary schools and the strategies used by education stakeholders in addressing these issues, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do dropout rates among primary school pupils vary across the zones and by gender?
2. What patterns can be observed in grade repetition among primary school pupils across the different zones?
3. What barriers do teachers face while promoting **s**uccessful school completion among primary school pupils?
4. What strategies do educators employ to reduce early school withdrawal in the zone?

1.2 Literature review

1.2.1 Theoretical framework

This study is informed by Lee's push and pull theory, which helps explain drivers that shape children's behavior and decisions to leave school and, in turn, engage in paid work

or street life [7]. Based on the theory, decisions to leave school could be influenced by internal (push factors) and/or external (pull factors) forces simultaneously.

Push factors are situations that force children to drop out of school and leave home [16]. According to the researchers, children may withdraw from school due to push or internal factors like financial problems, illnesses, poor living conditions, natural disasters, family needs, family changes (marriage or childbirth), and poor academic progress due to inadequate personal and schoolwork support. A study by Chimdessa identified several push factors that lead to children opting to leave school [17]. In particular, Chimdessa identified issues like poverty, parents' separation, single-parenthood, death of family members, large family size where children felt neglected, child abuse (verbal, physical, and/or sexual abuse), economic constraints, land grabbing, and family eviction for urban development, which made children leave school.

Pull factors are the opposite of push factors, as children are attracted by things seen as beneficial to them in the new location [16]. According to the researchers, pull factors that draw children into leaving school include a need for freedom, peer influence, financial independence, and city life, which can lead to children's decision to leave school.

Studies (e.g., [10, 18]) have shown that absence or departure from school has consequences, as children lose opportunities to build the skills and competencies achieved through continuous progression in schooling. Notably, competing demands with paid work and education may lead to dropout, grade repetition, and poor performance, which affects a child's holistic development, reducing opportunities for better employment in the future, and, in turn, leads to an intergenerational trap of poverty.

Education wastage and contributing factors

Progress in education is reflected by efforts made to ensure children complete their education and successfully transition to the next level without any wastage. A UNESCO (2012) report noted common parameters that indicate incidences of educational wastage, including students' repetition and dropout rates [19]. The measure is based on school cohort analysis, calculated from data on students' enrolment and the number of repeaters for consecutive years [20]. Grade repetition is a situation where a child remains in the same class for more than a year due to academic failure, physical maturity, absenteeism, or a lack of access to local education opportunities. Subsequently, school withdrawal or departure occurs when children leave school at any grade level before acquiring essential credentials due to reasons other than death or school transfer ([19, 20].

Withdrawal from school is a complex issue, especially at an early age. In Ethiopia, schooling is commonly characterized by slow progression due to grade repetition or children leaving school temporarily, which affects completion rates [21] A report by the MoE noted that nationally, Grade 1 has a 22.4% dropout rate (males=22.8% & females=22%), ranking first in terms of low progress in the education system in the 2024/25 academic year [22]. At the national level, the Grades 1-6 dropout rate is about 15.8% (males = 19.7% & Females = 18.6%), while that of South Ethiopia Regional State

is 22,2% (males = 23.2% & females = 21.2%) [22]. The MoE reports highlight a linkage between socioeconomic factors, accessibility to school, cultural barriers (rural and urban areas), poor school infrastructure, poor access to early childhood education, inadequate access to feeding programs, and withdrawal at the primary level [14, 22].

A study by Hailu et al. [23] examined reasons, experiences, and strategies to mitigate withdrawal from primary schools located in Bench-Maji Zone, Ethiopia. Employing a qualitative study design, data from principals, homeroom teachers, parents, and students revealed that students left school due to poverty, lack of interest, peer pressure, and school issues. Children left school to help their families, while others left to look for opportunities to support themselves. The study revealed that some families were unwilling to spend money to educate girls, and some were forced into marriage due to the high bride price. However, children who resumed school did so after engaging in paid work to purchase school materials. Notably, children from rural areas were found to be more likely to interrupt their education due to heavy workloads like agricultural activities and involvement in paid work, which demands much of their time at an early age. These incidents lead to slow progression in school, which is characterized by overage students for their grade.

Similarly, Alhassan and Hassan [24] examined children's decision to leave school in Sudan. Employing a qualitative research design, data were obtained from dropouts, teachers, and parents. Their results revealed that internal (school) and external factors led to children's decision to leave school. School factors included unsupportive school climate (i.e., disciplinary actions), strained child-teacher relationships (i.e., discrimination), and negative peer relationships (i.e., bullying and exclusion), which led to distressful situations. Consequently, children felt drained emotionally and, in turn, dropped out. Further, school infrastructure, a lack of extra-curricular facilities, and inadequate sanitary facilities, contributed to dropout. Additionally, school capacity (i.e., teacher qualification and curriculum relevance) and school regulations (i.e., grade retention, punishment, and dismissal due to non-payment of tuition fees) influenced a child's decision to stay in school. According to the researchers, external factors included households' financial status, family issues (i.e., family disruption and family structure), parental education, and family involvement in a child's education, which determined a child's motivation to follow through with schooling.

From the literature, early school departure has severe long-lasting implications [2]. According to the researchers, individuals who drop out early lack basic foundational skills, leading to reduced opportunities for employment, reduced lifetime earnings, limited chances for social mobility, civic disengagement, and social marginalization. Moreover, high rates of school withdrawal lead to socio-economic inequalities, which affect national productivity; in turn, there is increased pressure on social support systems.

Strategies that increase retention in schools

School dropout at the foundational stages of education is a global challenge. Key factors that correlate with dropout include poverty, household stability, and access to resources, which significantly impact a child's future and a country's economic development. From the literature, several programs have been proposed to help children at risk remain in school through early interventions and the implementation of re-entry strategies to support dropouts in resuming schooling [25, 26, 27]. Bergeson proposed two approaches, including preventive strategies and recovery strategies [25].

Under preventive strategies, Bergeson [25] proposed several strategies: 1) Early intervention including family involvement, and provision of relevant early childhood education; 2) provision of supplementary programs, such as academic support programs (i.e., learning resources), non-academic support (i.e., mental, physical, or unmet social needs), and mentorship (one-on-one guidance and support, or invisible mentorship); 3) management approaches like one-on-one support with consistent follow-up for those at risk of dropping out; 4) school and community collaborations; and 5) provision of alternative in-school programs where children at risk are put together for social or academic support (e.g., tutorial) or arranging alternative schools for those who cannot fit in a regular school.

Under recovery (re-entry) strategies, studies propose second-chance education programs, which are essential for providing alternative pathways to return and gain relevant skills in education. Second-chance education programs are flexible, accelerated learning opportunities for children who are socially and economically disadvantaged, and those who dropped out of school due to poverty, cultural issues, conflict, or other factors [25, 27, 28]. In Ethiopia, the program compresses a three-year program into a 10-12-month curriculum to help students gain literacy and numeracy skills, preparing them to re-integrate into formal education]28] According to Savelsberg and others, program flexibility and caring teacher-student relationships successfully support re-engagement in formal education [27]. The researchers noted that second-chance programs should be contextualized, tailored to learners' needs, and implemented collaboratively with meaningful community involvement to ensure access to the necessary resources.

According to Taddese, countries like Ethiopia implement various preventive mechanisms to address dropout and retention problems, such as arranging tutorial classes for low performers, engaging communities in discussions, student follow-up after frequent absenteeism, and support with school materials (i.e., textbooks, pens, etc.) [12]. Similarly, the government implements second-chance educational programs that give chance to out-of-school children a pathway to re-enter formal education [28]. Notably, re-entry to school for dropouts in Ethiopia is supported through the Education Sector Development Program (ESDP) policies. In particular, the ESDP policy supports Alternative Basic Education (ABE) centers for non-formal education and focuses on equity (ESDP VI) [14, 22]. Based on MoE reports, efforts have increased access by constructing new schools to reduce the distance from home to school; in some areas, ABE centers have been converted into regular schools as a special support program for

disadvantaged and underserved groups [14, 22]. As part of the national government initiative, South Ethiopia Regional State has 368 school feeding programs in place, benefiting about 167,947 children in elementary and primary schools. However, despite high enrollment measures, these efforts have not increased retention rates or transitions to the primary second cycle in most areas.

Empirical studies

This section reviews empirical studies focusing on education wastage, particularly on dropouts, repetition, and retention in primary schools. The review seeks to uncover existing evidence, key findings, and methodological approaches used by previous researchers. The aim is to provide a basis for understanding what is known about early school withdrawal, and to highlight gaps that the present study seeks to address.

UNICEF examined trends in school attendance, dropout, and performance in Mozambique during the 2018/2019 period [29]. The study found that roughly a quarter of students dropped out before completing 4th grade, with variation in dropout rates across regions. However, the study revealed that many dropouts returned to school by the end of the study period. Regarding gender, girls were more likely to drop out compared to boys, while a long travel time to school led to a higher number of students leaving school. Institutional practices that reduced the number of dropouts included regular presence of school heads, support with school materials like textbooks, and provision of lunch programs.

Khurram et al. conducted a study on school dropout and explored its impacts on the community in Southern Bangladesh [3]. Using a cross-sectional research design, the researchers collected data from 210 participants (dropouts and regular students). Data were analyzed using logistic regression analysis. The study revealed that family income, parental education, and distance from school significantly predict the likelihood of school dropout. It's argued that parental occupation plays a key role in a child's commitment to education, where low-income households are likely to experience food deficits, which determine whether children stay in school or not. Children from households headed by individuals with low or no education, categorized as low-income households, their children are most likely to miss school to cater to family needs. Additionally, distance to school determines accessibility, which directly impacts a child's decision to continue with education. In areas where children travel long distances, safety concerns arise. In particular, sexual harassment for girls and bullying for boys may lead to children opting out of school.

Taddese assessed the prevalence, major causes, and mechanisms that are put in place to prevent students from withdrawing from primary schools in the Gurage zone [12], Ethiopia. The study employed a descriptive survey research design and gathered data from school principals, teachers, zonal and district education experts, dropouts, and parent-teacher association members. Results revealed that, on average, about 5.6% of children drop out before the end of the academic year, with a high dropout rate of 13.59%. Factors attributed to high dropout rates included children's mindset about future success,

which leads to reduced academic effort. Additionally, economic factors related to parents' valuation of education benefits and the need for child labor led to migration to urban areas. Taddese's findings align with that of Syoum et al. [30] on child labor in Wolaita zone, which found that more than 75% of the sampled households involve their children in paid/unpaid work.

A study by Hailu et al. focused on strategies that mitigate school departure and found that stakeholders seek financial support from NGOs, government, and community-based organizations [23]. They also create awareness, put extra efforts to create good relationships with students, and they involve the community in education programs. Similarly, Montero-Sieburth and Turcatti [6] examined practices employed by teachers and parents to prevent disengagement in the classroom, leading to early withdrawal from school. They identified practices such as monitoring to identify early disengagement, strengthening teacher-student relationships, setting high expectations and challenging curriculum, encouraging classroom behavioral practices that target engagement, providing safe school environments, and encouraging strong school-parent partnerships where learning is seen as a joint venture.

Research methodology

Research design

This study examined the extent of early school withdrawal in lower primary schools, gender differences, the barriers faced by teachers in managing disengagement, and strategies used to address the issue**.** Notably, this study is part of a wider doctoral study conducted on educational wastage in lower primary schools in South Ethiopia Regional State**.** This study employed a descriptive survey research design [31]. The approach offers considerable flexibility, which enables the researchers to explore different dimensions of a research problem. In this study, the qualitative component was concurrently embedded within the dominant quantitative approach to complement the quantitative findings and provide deeper and more comprehensive insights into the research problem. Notably, in a quantitative research approach, data can be collected from a large sample, allowing generalization of findings based on statistical analysis that enables researchers to identify trends and patterns from the data. In contrast, qualitative data explains the reasons behind human behavior within a social setting [32].

Study setting

This study was conducted in Wolaita, Gedeo, and Gofa zones in the South Ethiopia Regional State. The region relies predominantly on agriculture. Gedeo Zone is a major coffee and enset producing area where coffee harvesting is concentrated primarily between October and January. During harvesting seasons, households may engage children in coffee and enset harvesting and processing activities. Like Gedeo, Gofa Zone is known for mixed farming including coffee and enset; consequently, households engage children in farming activities and transport of food produce to markets. Geographically,

Gofa Zone is characterized by rugged and mountainous terrain, which contributes to the physical isolation of rural schools. During periods of heavy rains, some rivers are impossible to cross, limiting access to schools for both teachers and students. Similarly, Wolaita is known for mixed farming, where peak periods for farming activities and harvesting (September – November) rely on children's supplementary labor, which coincides with the first semester in a school year.

The study was conducted in twelve districts, selected randomly across the three zones (Gofa = 3, Gedeo = 4, & Wolaita =5), taking into consideration the number of districts per zone. Data were gathered from 30 schools randomly selected from the 12 districts across the zones.

Sample size determination

The target population included school principals and 6th-grade teachers in primary schools. Participants were purposively included due to their knowledge regarding education wastage measured by enrolment, dropout, and repetition rates, as well as involvement in intervention programs that seek to ensure that students complete their education. Consequently, comprehensive sampling criteria were used to include all 6th grade teachers from 30 schools drawn from Gofa zone (three districts), Gedeo zone (four districts), and Wolaita zone (five districts). The sample selection was based on Cohen's et al. [33] selection criteria. From an estimated population of 950 grade six teachers across the sample districts in the three zones, the sample size was 274 teachers based on the selection criteria. To account for potential missing data and an anticipated non-response rate of 15%, the sample size was increased to 315 teachers. For the qualitative data, school principals were purposively selected to provide in-depth information on educational wastage and interventions implemented to address it. The planned qualitative sample was 30 principals, with the final number of participants determined based on data saturation. In addition, the study utilized cohort data records for grade six students from the sampled primary schools. The records covered six years (2021–2026) and included information on class enrolment, dropout, repetition, and student transfers. These records were used to examine trends and differences in educational wastage over the study period.

Data collection instruments

This study used a self-developed survey, interviews, and documents as data sources to address the research questions. An interview checklist was prepared to collect data from 30 school principals in the sample schools. To document the extent of educational wastage in lower primary schools, documents were obtained from all sample schools for the 6th-Grade cohort from enrolment in Grade 1 through to Grade six. The document checklist consisted of enrolment, dropout, repetition, and transfer between schools for the 2021 to 2026 period (2013-2018 E.C.) following measures given in the literature.

Data analysis techniques

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using a survey, interviews, and document analysis**.** Data obtained from documents were analyzed and

summarized using descriptive statistics, inferential statistics (independent-samples t-test and One-Way ANOVA), and charts. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically to display the barriers that teachers face when dealing with early school withdrawal, absenteeism, and practices used to mitigate the problem in lower primary schools. According to Alhassan and Hassan, thematic analysis allows researchers to compare and contrast informants' perspectives, generating insights regarding the research problem [24] Consequently, qualitative data were transcribed, coded, and organized into themes. The process allowed the researchers to gather informants' perspectives regarding the challenges with dropouts and mitigation strategies.

Results

Introduction

In this study, questionnaires were distributed to 315 grade six teachers, of which 311 questionnaires (i.e., return rate 98.7%) were returned with usable data. The plan was to interview each principal per school; however, interviews were terminated after reaching saturation with 15 principals. Interviews with school principals were thematically analyzed, with codes 'SP' representing school principals' and 'TS' representing teachers' responses.

Participants background information

In this study, data were collected from three zones (Gedeo, Gofa, and Wolaita). Table 1 presents participants' background information, where 223 (71.7%) were male, and 88 (28.3%) were female, indicating a predominance of male teachers across the three zones. Regarding teaching experience among 6^{th} grade teachers, male teachers (mean = 13.25, SD = 4.479) were slightly more experienced than female teachers (mean = 11.65, SD = 4.503), a pattern consistent across all three zones.

Table 1. Respondents background information

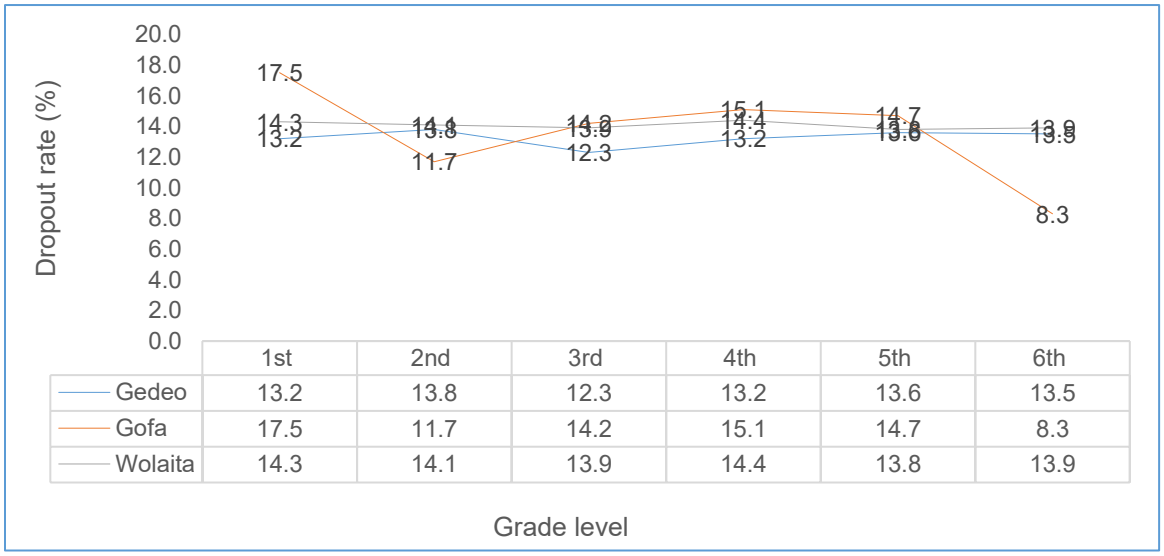
Zone	Gender		Experience
		Freq. (%)	Mean (SD)
	Male	64 (68.8)	11.89 (5.966)
Gedeo	Female	29 (31.2)	9.90 (4.419)
	Total	93 (29.9)	
Gofa	Male	41(60.3)	14.17 (2.774)
	Female	27(39.7)	13.78 (4.750)
	Total	68 (21.9)	
Wolaita	Male	118(78.7)	13.66(3.846)
	Female	32(21.3)	11.44(3.671)
	Total	150 (48.2)	

	Male	223(71.7)	13.25(4.479)
Overall	Female	88(28.3)	11.65(4.503)
	Total	311(100)	12.79(4.536)

Cohort analysis of dropout rates by zone and gender (2021–2026)

Trends in dropout rates in lower primary schools

This study sought to determine the trend in dropout rates in the three zones (i.e., Gedeo, Gofa, and Wolaita) in lower primary schools (Grades 1-6). Documents were collected from 30 sample schools for a cohort analysis that included data on enrolment, promotion, and repetition over six consecutive years. Notably, no transfers were recorded in the sample schools. Results in Fig. 1 present the trend in dropout rates for the 2021-2026 period across the three zones.



	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Gedeo	13.2	13.8	12.3	13.2	13.6	13.5
Gofa	17.5	11.7	14.2	15.1	14.7	8.3
Wolaita	14.3	14.1	13.9	14.4	13.8	13.9

Fig. 1. Cohort analysis of dropout rates by zone (2021-2026)

From Fig. 1, results indicate relatively high dropout rates in Grades 1, 4, and 5 in Gofa Zone. In particular, Gofa recorded its highest dropout rate in Grade 1 (17.5%) and its lowest in Grade 6 (8.3%). Compared with Gofa and Wolaita, Gedeo recorded slightly lower dropout rates in Grades 1, 3, and 4. The dropout rate in Wolaita was higher in Grades 1 and 4, with small deviation across the period under analysis, and an average of 14%.

Interviews with the principals indicated high dropout rates in lower grades, especially in the Gofa zone. For example, a principal from the zone said that *"the highest rate of dropout prevails in the lower grades, especially in Grade 1, 2 and 3. Both males and females are dropping out in the lower Grades" (SP_1).* From the same zone, another principal added that.

Absenteeism mostly prevails in Grades 1 and 2 because the kids need parents' follow-up. Since this is a rural area, they also walk long distances to school, which makes them tired … the following day they fail to show up in school (SP_2).

Further, dropout in upper grades (4, 5 & 6) was also considerably high. Principals attributed the dropout rates to various reasons. For example, a principal explained that.

The community doesn't give due attention to the problem … also, students and families are not interested in education. This is because the area is dominated by cash crops, and most of the community members are more interested in trading than in education. Also, students in grade six take regional exams, which makes them frustrated … they lack confidence to sit for exams, and they drop out (SP_2).

The one-way ANOVA results presented in Table 2 indicate that the differences in dropout rates among the three zones approach statistical significance ($F_{(2,308)} = 2.852$, $p = .059$). Although the p-value is slightly above the conventional significance level of .05, the result suggests a marginal difference in dropout rates across the zones (mean for Gedeo = 13.3%, Gofa = 13.6%, & Wolaita = 14.1%). Descriptively, the average dropout rate across the zones was approximately 13.6%, with zone-level averages ranging from 11.9% to 15.0% (Table 2). Thus, although some differences are evident in the observed dropout rates across grades and zones, these differences are not statistically significant at the overall zonal level.

Table 2. One-Way ANOVA analysis of dropout rates by zone

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.001	2	.001	2.852	.059
Within Groups	.073	308	.000		
Total	.074	310			

Variation in dropout rates by gender across the zones (2021-2026 period)

Fig. 2 presents results on dropout rates by gender. Across the zones, dropout rates were higher for boys than for girls. The dropout rate was higher for girls in Wolaita zone (13.9%), and higher for boys (14.6%0 in Gofa zone, compared to other zones. Gedeo zone had the lowest dropout rates for both boys and girls.

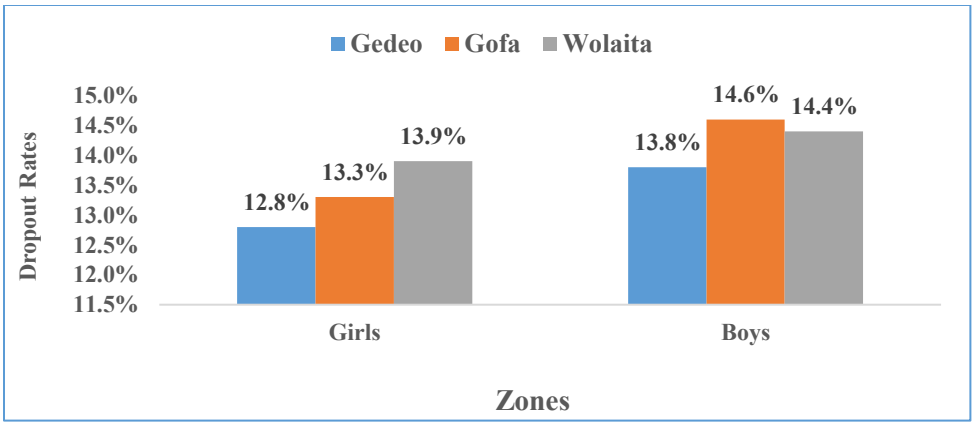


Fig. 2. Variation in dropout rates by gender across the zones

Data from the interviews also confirmed these results. A principal from Gofa zone explained that.

> *Sometimes the dropout rate is high in primary schools, especially in grade six for both male and female students. This happens because female students are approaching the puberty stage, and they are forced into early marriage, and boys are deceived by their peers who dropped out of school and live in big cities (SP_3).*

The results in Figure 3 present the boxplot analysis of variations in dropout rates between boys and girls across the three zones. As shown in Fig. 3, both groups have an identical median dropout rate of .136.

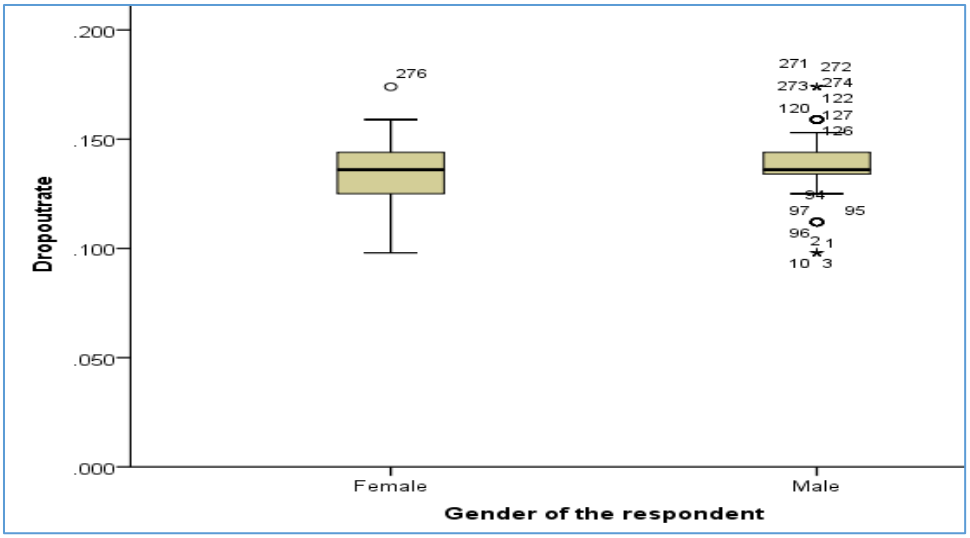


Fig. 3. Boxplot display on gender-based variation

From Figure 3, the interquartile range (IQR) is slightly wider for females than for males,

indicating greater variability in female dropout rates in the three zones. In contrast, male dropout rates show relatively less variation, suggesting a more consistent pattern across districts in the region. The analysis also identifies several outliers in terms of districts from which data were collected. Higher male dropout rates were observed in Boloso Sore District of Wolaita Zone and Oyda District of Gofa Zone, whereas the lowest male dropout rate was recorded in Zala District of Gofa Zone.

Table 3 displays dropout rates by gender, where males had a slightly higher mean of .137 (SD = .0144) than females (mean =.134 & SD = .018). The standard deviation indicates very small variation in dropout rates for both groups. Further, an independent-samples t-test was used to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between males' and females' dropout rates. Results in Table 3 indicate no significant difference (t = 1.728, df = 134.982, p = .086), equal variance not assumed.

Table 3. Independent-samples t-test by gender

Group Statistics

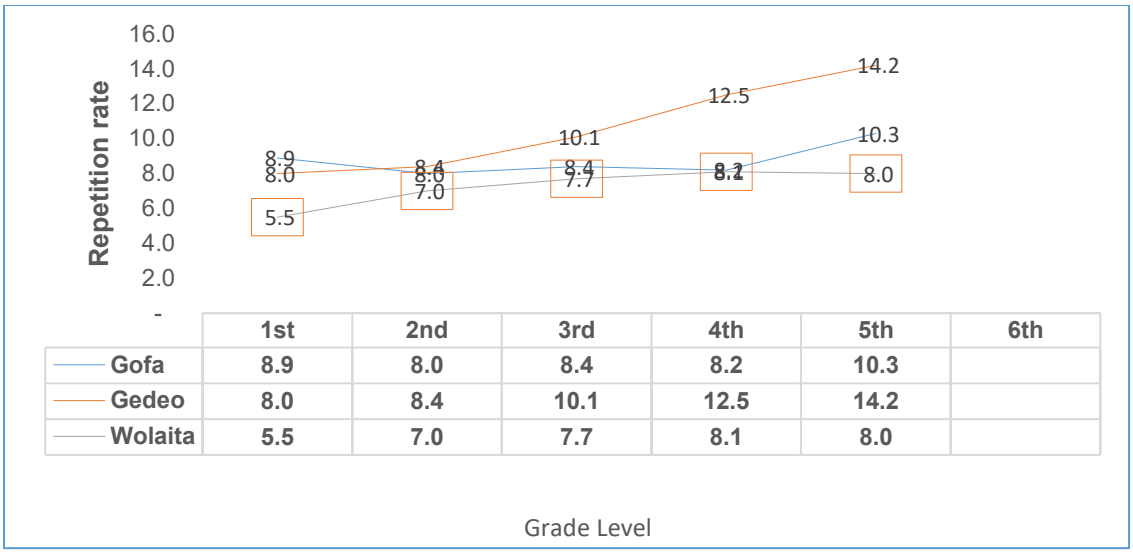
	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
Dropout rate	Male	223	.137	.014	.001
	female	88	.134	.018	.002

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Dropout rate	Equal variances assumed	7.566	.006	1.887	309	.060	.003656	.001937	-.000156	.007468
	Equal variances not assumed.			1.728	134.982	.086	.003656	.002116	-.000528	.007840

Patterns in Grade repetition rates among primary school pupils across the zones

Figure 2 presents repetition rates for the Grade 6 cohort across the three Zones during the 2021–2026 period. In Gofa Zone, relatively high repetition rates were observed in Grades 1 and 5 at 8.9% and 10.3%, respectively. In Wolaita Zone, the highest repetition rates were recorded in Grades 4 and 5, at 8.1% and 8.0%, respectively. In contrast, Gedeo Zone exhibited a gradual increase in repetition rates from Grade 1 through 5, rising from 8.0% to 14.2%. Records on Grade 6 repetition were unavailable for all three zones.



	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Gofa	8.9	8.0	8.4	8.2	10.3	
Gedeo	8.0	8.4	10.1	12.5	14.2	
Wolaita	5.5	7.0	7.7	8.1	8.0	

Fig. 4. Repetition rate by Grade level

From the interviews, participants agreed that dropout rates are high in lower grades, while the repetition rates are higher in upper grades. A principal from the Gofa zone mentioned that "… *the dropout rate is very common in the lower grades, but repetition is more common in 5th and 6th Grades (SP2).*

Results in Table 4 present the One-Way ANOVA analysis on repetition rates across the three zones. The analysis indicates a statistically significant difference in repetition rates among the zones. Table 4 also presents the group means and homogeneous subsets identified through the Tukey HSD post-hoc test. The results indicate that the repetition rate in Gedeo Zone (9.3%) differs significantly from that of Gofa Zone (7.3%) and Wolaita Zone (7.2%), indicating substantial variation in repetition patterns among the three zones.

Table 4. One-Way ANOVA of Grade repetition rates across zones

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.028	2	.014	38.330	.000
Within Groups	.113	308	.000		
Total	.141	310			

Tukey HSD

Zone	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05	
		1	2
Wolaita	150	.072	
Gofa	68	.073	
Gedeo	93		.093
Sig.		.997	1.000

Barriers to successful primary school completion

In this study, interviews were conducted with school principals to identify challenges that derail interventions to reduce education wastage. The principals were asked, *"What challenges do you face when implementing interventions to minimize student dropout, grade repetition, and absenteeism in your school?"* In addition, teachers were requested to share their views on the challenges the school community encounters in addressing education wastage, particularly student dropout, grade repetition, and absenteeism, by responding to an open-ended question. Several themes were derived from the responses and categorized into four areas: Institutional level (i.e., communication, stakeholder involvement, & teachers' commitment), student level (i.e., interest & absenteeism), community level (i.e., valuation of education), and policy/government level factors (i.e., government support).

Institutional level factors

From the responses, institutional level factors were identified, including communication with parents, stakeholder involvement, and teachers' commitment as critical issues in minimizing educational wastage.

On communication, both teachers and principals highlighted the challenge of engaging parents to discuss their children's failure to attend school regularly or withdrawal from school. A principal mentioned that *"most of the parents are not willing to attend and discuss their children's case"* (SP_1). Similarly, a teacher added that *"parents are reluctant to be involved in their children's issues related to education wastage" (TC_{156}).*

On stakeholder involvement, respondents noted the importance of involving all parties in discussions that involve educational wastage. They stated that parents' and stakeholders' lack of commitment to get involved and address the issue of children's withdrawal from school. For example, a teacher mentioned that "*stakeholders are not cooperative and Parents-Teachers-Students Association (PTSA) members are usually not attending meetings to solve the education wastage problem*" (TC_{145}). Similarly, another teacher added that "*stakeholders reject involvement to give support, … teachers are not cooperative, and there is lack of school community cooperation" (TC_{121}).* Additionally, a principal explained that *"communicating with local donors is very difficult to support students with specific needs (SP_3).*

Teachers' commitment in managing student retention is crucial in education. However, a teacher explained that *"teachers are not fully satisfied in their profession due to low salary, so they are not interested in supporting students (TC_{148}).* Notably, teachers lack the energy to help solve the problem. A teacher explained that there is *"a lack of motivation from teachers and other stakeholders to reduce education wastage" (TC_{49}).*

Students' level factors

A lack of interest in education was noted for both students and their parents. Notably, teachers explained that parents are unresponsive when asked to engage in discussions to address the dropout issue. For example, a teacher explained that *"sometimes it is difficult to reach out and communicate with the student who dropped out"* (TC_{39}). On the same line, a teacher said that *"students are not interested in the discussion, which is tied to peer pressure and problems at home … parents do not follow up to solve the problem with the school leaders*" (TC_{151}). Another teacher added that *"students do not have a strong desire for education based on the influence of their environment" (TC_{156}).* Worth noting, a teacher mentioned that *"some parents and even students think that school leaders are extremely enforcing the absenteeism rule for students"* (TC_{150}). Consequently, a teacher explained that "*students are not willing to accept the rules and the regulations of the school" (TC_{145}).* Similarly, a teacher added that "*students are unwilling to follow school leaders' advice, … they pay attention to their peers*" (TC_{148}). In turn, "*students have no motivation to follow the teaching and learning process as required … immigration is seen as the reason which makes students lose focus on education, which is a very big problem in this area" (TC_{302}).*

Students' frequent absenteeism was noted as an issue in primary schools. For example, a teacher explained that *"following up on every day attendance is challenging" (*TC_{159}). Similarly, a teacher mentioned that there is "*repetitive class absenteeism … mainly due to home responsibilities that burden the students (TC_{004}).* Another teacher suggested that absenteeism is due to "*hopelessness on the future career opportunities*" (TC_{231}).

Community level factors

Respondents agreed that parents and the community lack awareness about the value of education. For example, a teacher clarified that *"the school community lacks awareness about how education wastage affects students, community and the country in general, … so, stakeholders are not committed to work on how to solve this problem, which leads to education wastage*" (TC_{123}). Another teacher added that *"stakeholders lack a sense of ownership among the society on school activities" (TC_{195}).* Similarly, a teacher linked the problem to *"a lack of knowledge, financial struggles, and families' lack of understanding on the importance of education*" (TC_{211}). Consequently, a teacher concluded that "*parents prefer their children to do some business than stay in school* (TC_{148}). Another teacher added that "*parents give priority to petty trades and the benefits gained from children than letting them stay at school*" TC_{152}). This issue was elaborated by a principal who explained that

> *Nowadays, most of the community members are aware of the problem, but mostly, they do not follow up the practice … the community and the students do not give significant value for education because most of the students who have graduated … are jobless (SP_5).*

Policy or government level factors

From the responses, it is evident that government sectors have not given enough support to adequately address students' withdrawal in primary schools. For example, a teacher mentioned that *"the government doesn't give due attention to this issue, … and schools are increasingly concerned about the seriousness of the problem, and the lack of solution to deal with the students' early withdrawal from school" (*TC_{129}). Further, a teacher added that *"there is a lack of adequate budget like block and school grant, … and also absence of teaching-learning materials like textbooks (*TC_{143}*).* Similarly, a teacher explained that *"the amount of the annual budget has decreased … school budget is minimal, and the number of students has increased"* (TC_{220}). Inadequacy of budget and learning materials was confirmed by another teacher who noted *"an absence of textbooks, financial problems, … and low number of teachers* (TC_{231}).

Strategies that reduce early school withdrawal

In this study, themes were identified based on teachers' and principals' responses and classified into two: prevention (i.e., identifying the problem, communication, and teacher-parent relations), and intervention processes (i.e., support and appreciation, conducive learning environment, and monitoring).

Preventive measures

Participants in this study identified a need for preventive measures, which start with an initial understanding of the problem. School leaders need to assess incidences of children's withdrawal from school and absenteeism to determine children at risk and the root causes. For example, a teacher suggested that "*stakeholders and school community should identify problems related to withdrawal from school, class repetition, and absenteeism* (TC_{194}). On the same line, a principal clarified that *"we investigate the serious causes for students' dropout and absenteeism through homeroom teachers" (*SP_2*).* Similarly, a principal explained that *"we advise the student … individually or as a group to minimize the problem" (*SP_7*).*

Making contact with the student's family was mentioned as a strategy to start productive communication between a student with a specific behavior and their parents or guardian. For example, a teacher said, "… *contact the student's family, and talk with the student" (*TC_{014}*).* Similarly, a teacher added that "*make fruitful discussion with the school community about students' learning*" *(*TC_{231}*).* Additionally, a principal said that *"discussing with parents about education benefits and children's future is the most effective way to minimize the wastage" (*SP_1).

Creating a good relationship between teachers and parents was viewed as a good approach to improve student retention in school. For example, a teacher explained that *"there should be good communication between teachers and parents to discuss the students' progress* (TC_{004}). Additionally, a teacher suggested a need to create a

relationship with the student, mainly to *"learn about the background of the student"* (TC_{041}).

Intervention measures

Participants' responses identified a need to provide children with academic and psychosocial support, including mentoring and giving tutorials. For example, appreciation of students' efforts was identified as a strategy that motivates students to stay focused. A teacher elaborated on this issue and said that "*teachers' appreciation of the student's good work makes students feel valued"* (TC_{004}). Other teachers suggested mentoring and giving tutorials. Similarly, a principal suggested "*recognizing and rewarding good performance and improvement to encourage students to work harder" (SP_8).*

Facilitating students with materials was noted as a way forward to increase students' retention and reduce wastage. A teacher noted that stakeholders need to *"support students with basic needs like buying pens, books and other materials*" (TC_{220}). Similarly, a teacher suggested that "*stakeholders and the school community should participate to reduce educational wastage and support with materials*" (TC_{302}). The idea was supported by interviews from principals. For example, a principal explained that *"sometimes as a school, we provide some support for children who need help from different sources like private organizations, wealthy individuals, and others" (SP_2).* Additionally, another principal mentioned that *"we strengthen cooperation with parents so that they can support their children" (SP_6); besides, a principal said, "we give some educational materials to motivate the students" (SP_3).*

Creating a safe and supportive school environment ensures students feel valued and connected to school. For example, a teacher suggested a need to "*create a safe learning environment with adequate infrastructure that supports teaching and learning, to promote an inclusive learning environment with facilities*" *(TC_{231}).*

Regular monitoring of students' attendance and their academic performance helps track students identified as at risk, making it possible to intervene early and to evaluate if interventions are effective. A teacher suggested that "*there is a need to develop a tracking procedure, and develop strong teaching-learning activities*" (TC_{309}). Similarly, another teacher added that "*the school community and stakeholders should hold discussions at the beginning of the school session and at the end of the school breaks to discuss issues related to education wastage"* (TC_{302}). The need for monitoring was supported by principals who noted a need to gather students' daily information.

Discussion

This study assessed trends and patterns in early children's withdrawal and Grade repetition for the Grade 6 cohort from three zones in South Ethiopia Regional State. Dropout rates for the Grade 6 cohort across the three zones averaged 13.6%, lower than the South Ethiopia Regional State estimate of 22.2% and the national-level estimate of 15.8% [22]. Notably, Gofa Zone had the highest dropout rate (17.5%) at Grade 1 compared with other zones. The findings are consistent with the MoE reports, which noted high dropout rates in Grade 1 [13, 22]. This is linked to several factors that contribute to

early school dropout, including difficulties transitioning into formal schooling, household and economic activity demands, and limited access to pre-primary education that may leave children inadequately prepared for academic learning, while experiencing linguistic challenges.

This study identified marginal variations in dropout rates, ranging from 11.9% to 15.0%, across grades and zones in the study area. According to Tsemato et al. such variations may be attributed to site-specific economic activities that characterize each zone [34]. Consequently, differences among the zones may be associated with their proximity to economic centers and the seasonal demands of agricultural activities. Interviews with school principals indicated that zones such as Gofa and Gedeo are known for coffee cultivation and enset production. Consequently, the zones have intensive coffee harvesting and processing activities, particularly between October and January. During this period, households normally rely heavily on child labor to support coffee harvesting and processing, which can interfere with children's regular school attendance and potentially contribute to higher dropout rates.

Researchers have documented gender differences in school dropout rates across the region. For instance, Woldehanna et al. found that both location (rural or urban) and a child’s gender influence decisions to participate in schooling [35]. Consistent with this evidence, the present study found that the dropout rate among girls was slightly lower than that of boys. However, dropout rates varied considerably across zones. Among girls, the highest dropout rate was recorded in Wolaita Zone (13.9%), while among the boys, Gofa Zone reported the highest rate at 14.6%. The observed gender differences in dropout rates may be associated with the distinct socioeconomic roles, valuation of education by the community, peer pressure, prevalence of early marriage for girls, and labor demands placed on girls and boys across the study area. Notably, the relatively high urban growth in South Ethiopia, particularly the Wolaita Sodo City (the regional capital), may increase demand for girls’ labor in domestic and informal economic activities, including employment as house helps and babysitters, and employment in small-scale businesses. Such socioeconomic pressures may interfere with girls’ schooling and withdrawal from education [22], potentially explaining the comparatively high dropout rate among girls in Wolaita Zone. In contrast, the relatively high dropout rates among boys across the three zones may be linked to the demand for additional agricultural labor to support household livelihoods. As noted by interviewees, boys may leave school to participate in agricultural activities during peak planting and harvesting seasons, as well as processing of agricultural products such as coffee and enset, and transportation of farm produce to local markets. In particular, the demand for child labor may be particularly pronounced in Gofa Zone, where seasonal agricultural responsibilities partly account for the relatively high dropout rate among boys. Overall, the findings suggest that gendered socioeconomic responsibilities and seasonal labor demands play an important role in shaping patterns of school dropout across the study area.

In this study, repetition rates were high in the upper grades. As noted in the MoE report, students do not completely drop out, but they may rejoin education in later years [22]. The high re-entry rate in Grades 4 and 5 could be linked to the Accelerated Learning Programs (ALPs) implemented as Second-Chance Education in Ethiopia. The program compresses a three-year program into a shorter timeframe, such as Grades 1-3 into a 10-month curriculum, allowing marginalized, out-of-school, and overage children to re-enter the mainstream school system. As noted by Savelsberg et al. [27], ALPs can effectively support learners' re-entry into the mainstream schooling system when programs are tailored to their needs and communities actively engage in mobilizing additional resources.

This study identified barriers that hinder effective implementation of interventions aimed at reducing dropout rates across the zones. Areas of concern included institutional barriers like poor communication with parents, low stakeholder engagement, and poor teachers' commitment. Additionally, students' low interest in schooling and peer pressure, low community engagement, and inadequate support from stakeholders and the government deter implementation of interventions that minimize educational wastage. The findings align with Gassabo's study who identified several factors such as school-related factors (i.e., inadequate infrastructure and resources, & teachers' low motivation), students' level factors (i.e., peer influence & frequent absenteeism), and community negative value for education [11]. Results also align with a study by Taddese that linked school dropout to several interrelated factors, including students' low expectations regarding the future benefits of education, migration to urban areas influenced by peer pressure, inadequate learning environments, and parents' reliance on children for labor [12].

Several strategies were suggested as essential in reducing educational wastage, including preventive and intervention measures. In this study, preventive measures encompassed the early identification of children's challenges, effective communication with parents, and the establishment of strong and collaborative teacher–parent relationships. As noted by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), preventive measures are key in identifying children at risk of dropping out before they permanently withdraw from school [36]. Also, the measures include monitoring irregular attendance, declining academic performance, and behavioral difficulties. Additionally, the measures include communicating early with parents to understand challenges being experienced by children and, in turn, providing timely support to promote participation in school.

Intervention processes play a great role in minimizing education wastage by providing timely and targeted support to students who are experiencing certain difficulties [26]. In this study, intervention processes include support and appreciation, the provision of a conducive learning environment, and continuous monitoring of students' progress. Support and appreciation can enhance children's attitude towards schooling and a sense of belonging when their efforts are recognized and appreciated, and helping them when challenges occur. Similarly, a safe and inclusive learning environment promotes children's active participation and academic engagement. In addition, regular monitoring

of children's progress enables the school leaders to identify students at risk of dropping out and provide appropriate interventions at an early stage, thereby reducing the likelihood of permanent withdrawal from school.

Implication

The findings have significant implications for educational policy and practice. Although the dropout rate in South Ethiopia Regional State was slightly lower than the national average rate, it remained considerably high, indicating that educational wastage is a major issue to achieving universal primary education. Results suggest a need to strengthen existing dropout-prevention and intervention measures, in particular addressing the underlying socioeconomic, school-related, and community-related factors, as well as the government support system that contributes to children leaving school. Furthermore, the absence of a statistically significant difference in dropout rates between girls and boys suggests that dropout is not predominantly a gender-specific problem in the study area. Consequently, preventive and retention strategies should target factors affecting both girls and boys, while remaining responsive to any specific vulnerabilities experienced by either group.

Limitation

In this study, some limitations were inevitable. Firstly, the use of retrospective data from school records on enrolment, repetition, and progression over the previous six years presented some challenges. Some records were incomplete or inconsistently documented, which may have affected the accuracy and completeness of the data. To minimize this problem, available records were carefully reviewed and cross-checked with other relevant school documents where possible. Additionally, the issues were discussed in consultation with school principals and homeroom teachers. Nevertheless, inaccurately recorded information could not be completely excluded and may have influenced the study findings. Secondly, the relatively high financial and time requirements of the study limited the sample size and the number of districts included in each zone. Given the location-specific variations in households' livelihood activities and their potential influence on school dropout, restricting the number of districts may have limited the study's ability to capture the full range of factors contributing to dropout across different settings. Consequently, the findings may not fully reflect the diversity of local conditions within all districts in South Ethiopia, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other districts with different livelihood and socioeconomic characteristics.

Conclusion

This study examined the trend in educational wastage for the Grade 6 cohort, barriers to implementation of successful interventions, and strategies that promote retention in primary education. Findings revealed that primary school dropout remains a major challenge in South Ethiopia Regional State, despite being slightly lower than the national

average. Notably, the high Grade 1 repetition rates align with what is reported at the national level. Results highlights the need to strengthen dropout-prevention and retention measures by addressing student-related, household-related, school-related, community, and government-support factors. Since dropout rates did not differ significantly between girls and boys, interventions should target both genders while addressing any group-specific vulnerabilities. The repetition rate for Gedeo zone was higher than in other zones, which could be an indicator of strategies being implemented to motivate and retain students in school through second-chance education programs in collaboration with local communities, NGOs, and the government.

Several barriers were identified in minimizing education wastage in primary school. The findings indicate that reducing school withdrawal, absenteeism, and grade repetition requires concerted efforts to address challenges such as poor communication with parents, limited stakeholder engagement, low teacher commitment, and inadequate government support. School principals play a critical role in dealing with these challenges through both preventive and intervention measures. These measures include early identification of at-risk children by homeroom teachers; strengthening communication with parents; providing support and recognizing children's efforts in academic achievement; fostering safe and supportive learning environments; and continuously monitoring children's academic and behavioral progress. Furthermore, in contexts where households face socioeconomic constraints, principals initiate collaboration with individuals, local communities, NGOs, and government institutions to help in mobilizing the financial and material resources needed to support disadvantaged children. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of coordinated school leadership, strong school–family partnerships, continuous monitoring of children at risk, and multi-stakeholder support in promoting school retention and successful progression through primary education.

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Authors' contribution
Author WW conceptualized the study, designed the research, conducted the literature review, developed the methodology, collected and analyzed the data, and prepared the initial manuscript draft. Author MWT contributed to the study design and methodology and participated in data analysis and interpretation. Author ABE contributed to the study design and methodology, and assisted with data interpretation. All authors critically reviewed the manuscript, approved the final version, and agreed to its submission for publication.

Clinical trial number: not applicable

Declarations

Data availability
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Declaration of AI-assisted writing
AI tools were used for language editing and proofreading, but the authors are fully responsible for the content.

Informed consent
This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent amendments, and adhered to the ethical standards of relevant national ethics research committees. Fully informed and voluntary consent was obtained from each participant before taking part in the study.

Consent to participate
This study was conducted as part of a PhD study at Wolaita Sodo University and adhered strictly to the university's ethical guidelines for doctoral research. Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the study was obtained through formal letters issued by the head of the department and submitted to the relevant zonal education offices and school principals to secure the necessary approval and cooperation. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their rights, and their voluntary participation, and informed consent was obtained before their involvement. The researchers also took appropriate measures to protect participants' anonymity and maintained confidentiality of the information provided.

Ethical approval
In this study, the researchers adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with Wolaita Sodo University's ethical guidelines and regulations governing research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the College of Education Research Review Board (CERRB) of Wolaita Sodo University, after the research proposal, protocols, and informed consent procedures were reviewed and approved. In addition, the researchers obtained the necessary authorization letters from the Office of the Vice-President for Research and Community Service to conduct the study

Declaration of competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests directly or indirectly related to this research.

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