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## Cracking the Code of Excellence: Unfolding the Board Exam Journey of DNSC Topnotchers in the Licensure Exam for Teachers

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### ABSTRACT

Passing the Licensure Exam for Teachers (LET) is a significant milestone for aspiring educators, yet achieving top scores presents numerous challenges. Given the high-stakes nature of the exam, understanding the struggles and coping mechanisms of topnotchers offers valuable insights for future examinees and policymakers. This qualitative study explored the challenges faced by LET topnotchers and the strategies they employed to overcome these obstacles. Using a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with LET topnotchers from Davao del Norte State College. Participants shared their experiences related to exam preparation, difficulties encountered, and coping mechanisms. Thematic analysis revealed key challenges, including time constraints, financial difficulties, emotional stress, and health concerns. Despite these hurdles, participants demonstrated resilience by employing adaptive time management, seeking peer and social support, engaging in spiritual practices, and maintaining a balance between intensive study and personal well-being. The findings underscored the importance of a holistic approach to exam preparation, addressing both academic and non-academic factors that influence success. This study contributed to the literature on self-regulated learning, resilience, and social support in high-stakes testing. It also had practical and policy implications, highlighting the need for enhanced financial aid, well-being initiatives, and peer mentorship programs for LET takers. Future research should examine the long-term impact of these strategies on professional teaching careers and explore institutional interventions to further support aspiring educators.

### INTRODUCTION

High-stakes exams, such as the Licensure Exam for Teachers (LET) in the Philippines, play a pivotal role in determining the professional future of aspiring educators. Success in these exams marks a significant personal achievement and serves as a gateway to formal entry into the teaching profession. Despite the critical importance of passing such exams, the preparation process is often fraught with challenges that can impede academic success, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Hernandez, 2019). Financial constraints, time management issues, health concerns, and emotional stress are some common obstacles that examinees face, and preparing for these exams is a multifaceted challenge (Putwain *et al.*, 2020).

The LET, administered by the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC), tests candidates on their general and professional education knowledge and their specific subject area expertise. As the teaching profession continues to evolve and the demand for high-quality educators grows, the pressure to perform well on this exam has intensified (Marpa, 2021). Research suggests that licensure exams assess knowledge and challenge candidates' resilience, resourcefulness, and ability to manage stress under pressure (Rodriguez & Solis, 2021). This makes the preparation process as much about mental and emotional endurance as it is about academic mastery. Given the importance of licensure exams in shaping

professional trajectories, it is crucial to understand the specific challenges that topnotchers—those who excel in these exams—encounter during their preparation and the strategies they employ to overcome them. While previous studies have explored general exam preparation strategies (Dunlosky *et al.*, 2013), there is limited research focusing on the unique experiences of topnotchers in high-stakes exams like the LET. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the lived experiences of LET topnotchers, focusing on the challenges they faced and the strategies they used to achieve success.

Understanding these experiences can inform educators, policymakers, and review centers about how to support better future examinees, particularly those aiming for top scores. By exploring the interplay between academic, emotional, and social factors in LET preparation, this research contributes to the broader literature on high-stakes exam preparation. It provides insights that can enhance the effectiveness of licensure exam support systems.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Preparing for high-stakes exams like the Licensure Exam for Teachers (LET) is a multifaceted process involving academic mastery, emotional resilience, time management, and social support. The literature on exam preparation highlights several key areas relevant to this study, including self-regulated learning, financial constraints' impact, peer

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support's role, and the importance of mental health and well-being during high-stakes exam preparation.

Self-regulated learning (SRL) has been widely recognized as a critical factor in academic success, particularly in high-stakes exam contexts (Panadero, 2017). SRL involves goal setting, self-monitoring, and strategic planning, allowing students to take control of their learning process. Research by Zimmerman (2008) emphasizes that successful exam takers can effectively manage their study time, set achievable goals, and adjust their strategies based on self-assessment. Recent studies have confirmed the role of SRL in improving academic outcomes, with high-achieving students demonstrating strong self-regulation skills (McCardle *et al.*, 2021). In the context of licensure exams, SRL enables examinees to cope with the complex demands of reviewing extensive materials while managing personal and emotional challenges.

Financial difficulties are a well-documented barrier to academic achievement, particularly for students preparing for professional licensure exams (Hernandez, 2019). The stress associated with financial instability can negatively impact cognitive performance and reduce students' ability to focus on their studies (Mani *et al.*, 2013). Students from low-income backgrounds are often forced to balance exam preparation with part-time work or other financial responsibilities, which can detract from their study time (Jones *et al.*, 2020). This financial burden can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and stress, further complicating the preparation process. Studies suggest that financial support, such as scholarships or grants, can significantly improve students' ability to perform well in high-stakes exams by reducing financial-related stress (Murphy *et al.*, 2019).

The role of social support, particularly from peers, is critical in the context of exam preparation. Collaborative learning has been shown to enhance academic performance by allowing students to share resources, clarify concepts, and motivate each other (Gokhale, 1995). Recent research has demonstrated that study groups and peer networks provide academic support and emotional encouragement, which can alleviate the stress associated with exam preparation (Rutherford *et al.*, 2020). Peer support can foster a sense of community, helping students stay focused and motivated, particularly during challenging times. This social learning dimension is critical in high-stakes testing environments, where isolation can increase anxiety and reduce performance (Wilcox *et al.*, 2021).

Mental health is another critical factor in successful exam preparation. Students face test anxiety, burnout, and emotional stress when preparing for high-stakes exams (Putwain *et al.*, 2020). Emotional resilience—the ability to cope with stress and bounce back from setbacks—plays a significant role in how students manage the pressures of exam preparation (Seligman, 2011). Studies show that students with higher levels of emotional resilience are better able to handle the challenges of licensure exams and are more likely to succeed (Rodriguez &

Solis, 2021). Furthermore, interventions focusing on building resilience, such as mindfulness training or stress management workshops, have improved exam performance by enhancing students' coping ability with anxiety and stress (Pidgeon *et al.*, 2014).

Cognitive load theory suggests that overloading working memory with too much information can hinder learning (Sweller *et al.*, 2011). This is particularly relevant in licensure exam preparation, where students must absorb and retain large amounts of information quickly. Research indicates that balancing study intensity with adequate rest and well-being practices is essential for maintaining cognitive function (Schacter *et al.*, 2016). Studies have shown that students who incorporate regular breaks, proper nutrition, and physical exercise into their study routines can better manage cognitive load and perform well on exams (Schaefer *et al.*, 2017).

Spirituality and religious practices have also been found to play a role in academic success, particularly in culturally religious contexts like the Philippines. Spiritual practices, such as prayer and attending religious services, can provide emotional comfort, reduce stress, and improve focus (Park *et al.*, 2020). Research suggests that students who engage in spiritual practices are more likely to report lower levels of anxiety and greater feelings of control over their exam preparation process (Patel *et al.*, 2018). This spiritual support can serve as a coping mechanism, helping students navigate the emotional challenges of licensure exam preparation.

In today's digital age, managing distractions—especially from digital devices—has become increasingly important in academic contexts. Studies have shown that digital distractions like social media and online messaging can significantly impair students' ability to focus and retain information (Rosen *et al.*, 2013). Research by Carrier *et al.* (2015) suggests that students who actively manage their digital habits, such as limiting social media use during study periods, are more likely to maintain concentration and perform better on exams. Effective distraction management strategies, such as creating digital-free study zones or scheduling specific times for breaks, can help students stay focused during their preparation.

Recent literature on resilience in education highlights the importance of perseverance in facing challenges, especially in high-stakes exams like the LET (Rodriguez & Solis, 2021). Students who exhibit resilience are likelier to persist through difficulties, maintain a positive outlook, and adapt to setbacks. This resilience is often cultivated through both personal experiences and external support systems, such as family and mentors (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). In high-stakes testing environments, resilience is not just about academic skills but also emotional strength, resourcefulness, and the ability to maintain motivation over time (Merino *et al.*, 2020).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the challenges faced by topnotchers

in the Licensure Exam for Teachers (LET) and the strategies they used to overcome these obstacles. The phenomenological method was chosen to capture the participants' lived experiences, providing a rich and in-depth understanding of their exam preparation process. Data collection focused on semi-structured interviews with LET topnotchers, allowing for open-ended responses that encouraged participants to share their experiences in detail.

### Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had recently passed the LET with top ratings. A total of six participants who graduated from the Davao del Norte State College were recruited. The inclusion criteria required participants to have achieved topnotcher status in LET and completed their preparation from 2018 to 2023. The diverse geographic backgrounds of participants allowed for a deeper understanding of the different contexts in which LET preparation occurred. All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study.

### Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via online platforms, depending on participants' availability and geographic location. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about the participants' experiences with LET preparation, their challenges, and the strategies they employed to overcome them. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The transcripts were read multiple times to achieve familiarization with the data. Initial codes were generated by identifying key phrases and recurring ideas in the participants' responses. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences. Time management, financial struggles, emotional resilience, and peer support were identified and refined through constant comparison. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, member checking was employed, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions and interpretations of their interviews.

### Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research practices, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity for all participants. Pseudonyms were used to report the findings and protect the participants' identities. Throughout the research process, care was taken to minimize potential distress

to participants by creating a supportive and respectful interview environment.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Research Question 1:

*What was the participants' study routine or typical review day leading to the board exam?*

The findings of this study reveal a comprehensive approach to exam preparation among topnotchers in the Licensure Exam for Teachers (LET). The participants shared a range of study routines and strategies reflecting their commitment to academic excellence and their desire to succeed in the board exam. The thematic analysis identified several key themes, including structured study routines, utilization of external resources, integration of study and personal life, spiritual and mental preparation, and adaptive learning strategies. These themes align with existing literature on adequate exam preparation and shed light on the unique experiences of LET topnotchers.

### Structured and Disciplined Routine

A consistent and disciplined study routine emerged as a central theme in the participants' responses. Participants emphasized the importance of dedicating specific hours to daily study, balancing review center sessions with independent study. This finding aligns with self-regulated learning research, highlighting the importance of time management, goal-setting, and disciplined study habits in academic success (Panadero, 2017). According to Zimmerman (2008), self-regulated learners tend to be more successful in high-stakes exams because they effectively plan, monitor, and assess their learning strategies.

### Utilization of External Resources

The participants' heavy reliance on review centers, handouts, flashcards, and other learning materials underscores the importance of external resources in their exam preparation. Review centers, in particular, provided a structured environment that complemented their self-study efforts. This finding resonates with research by Reddy and Andrade (2019), which found that external resources such as coaching centers, study guides, and peer support groups can significantly enhance exam performance by providing learners access to expert guidance and additional practice materials.

### Integration of Study and Personal Life

Participants also emphasized balancing study with personal well-being, including relaxation, family time, and spiritual practices. This theme is consistent with the literature on work-life balance in education. For instance, Owens *et al.* (2018) highlight the importance of integrating personal well-being practices into academic routines to prevent burnout and maintain long-term motivation. The participants' focus on maintaining a balance between rigorous study and personal well-being reflects an understanding of the importance of self-

care in sustaining academic performance over extended periods of preparation.

### Spiritual and Mental Preparation

Spiritual practices, such as prayer and attending church, played a significant role in the participants' exam preparation. This finding is supported by the literature on the role of spirituality and religion in coping with academic stress. According to Park *et al.* (2020), spiritual practices can provide students with a sense of peace and purpose, reducing anxiety and improving focus during high-stakes exams. The participants' reliance on spirituality highlights the importance of mental and emotional preparation in addition to academic readiness.

### Adaptive Learning Strategies

Finally, the participants demonstrated adaptability in their learning strategies, tailoring their study methods to fit their individual needs and circumstances. Techniques such as flashcards, spaced repetition, and focusing on weaker areas of knowledge indicate a strategic approach to learning. This is consistent with research on adaptive learning, which suggests that students who adapt their study strategies based on their strengths and weaknesses are more likely to succeed in exams (Dunlosky *et al.*, 2013). By employing adaptive learning strategies, the participants could optimize their study time and improve their retention of key concepts.

### Research Question 2:

*What strategies or techniques were most effective for participants in understanding the review materials and retaining information?*

The findings from this study revealed several practical strategies and techniques employed by LET toppers to understand and retain review materials. The thematic analysis generated key themes: repetition and spaced repetition, active learning and comprehension, mnemonics and visualization, self-assessment and feedback, balancing study and well-being, spiritual and mental support, peer influence and support, and distraction management. These themes align with and contribute to existing research on learning strategies, memory retention, and exam preparation.

### Spaced Repetition

Participants emphasized the importance of repetition, particularly spaced repetition, as an effective method for retaining information. This aligns with research by Cepeda *et al.* (2006), who found that spaced repetition enhances long-term retention by allowing time for memory consolidation. Spaced repetition in flashcards and other review tools, such as Anki, is consistent with cognitive psychology research showing that distributing learning over time leads to more durable memory than cramming (Dunlosky *et al.*, 2013). This strategy maximized participants' ability to recall information during the LET.

### Active Learning and Comprehension

Rather than relying solely on memorization, participants highlighted the importance of actively engaging with the material to improve understanding. This is supported by constructivist theories of learning, which argue that deep learning occurs when students actively construct knowledge through meaningful interactions with the content (Piaget, 1976). Active learning strategies, such as breaking down complex concepts and analyzing information, promote a deeper understanding of the material, which, in turn, facilitates better retention (Prince, 2004). This approach is particularly effective for complex subjects requiring conceptual understanding, such as science and professional education.

### Use of Mnemonics and Visualization

Another prominent theme was the use of mnemonic devices and visualization techniques to aid memory retention. Mnemonics have been widely recognized as effective memory aids, particularly for retaining complex or abstract information (Carney & Levin, 2003). Visualization and mental imagery, on the other hand, help learners create mental representations of concepts, making it easier to recall information (McDaniel & Einstein, 1986). These techniques are beneficial for subjects like science, where visualizing processes and concepts can improve comprehension and retention.

### Self-Assessment and Feedback

Participants frequently engaged in self-assessment activities, such as taking practice tests and solving problem sets, to evaluate their understanding of the material. This strategy aligns with the concept of formative assessment, which provides learners with feedback on their progress and helps identify areas that need improvement (Black & William, 2009). Research shows that self-assessment and feedback are critical components of effective learning, as they encourage metacognitive reflection and help students adjust their study strategies to improve performance (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Participants' regular self-assessment reflects their proactive approach to mastering the material and addressing their weaknesses.

### Study-Wellness Balance

Participants acknowledged the importance of balancing rigorous study with personal well-being, including taking breaks and avoiding burnout. This finding is consistent with research on cognitive load theory, which suggests that overloading working memory can impair learning (Sweller *et al.*, 2011). Effective study routines should include regular breaks to prevent cognitive overload and maintain focus. Participants' emphasis on well-being highlights the need for self-care strategies that support sustained learning and prevent burnout during high-stakes exam preparation.

### Spiritual and Mental Support

Spiritual Routine, such as prayer and connecting with God, were essential aspects of the participants' preparation

strategies. This theme is supported by research on the role of spirituality in stress management, which suggests that spiritual practices can provide emotional comfort, reduce anxiety, and enhance resilience during stressful situations (Park *et al.*, 2020). For these participants, spiritual support was a coping mechanism and a source of motivation and confidence, which positively influenced their preparation process.

### Peer Influence and Support

The social environment, including peer support and study groups, played a significant role in participants' learning strategies. Collaborative learning has been shown to enhance understanding and retention by allowing learners to engage in discussions, clarify concepts, and receive feedback from peers (Gokhale, 1995). Participants' involvement in study groups and reliance on review buddies reflects the social dimension of learning, where interaction with peers can enhance academic performance and emotional support.

### Distraction Management

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of managing distractions, mainly digital distractions like social media, to maintain focus on their studies. Research has shown that digital distractions can significantly impair learning by reducing attention and cognitive processing capacity (Rosen *et al.*, 2013). By consciously minimizing distractions, participants were able to create a more conducive learning environment, which is critical for maintaining concentration and improving retention of information.

### Research Question 3:

*How did the participants overcome their perceived challenges and setbacks during board exam review?*

The findings from this study highlight the diverse challenges LET topnotchers face during their preparation for the board exam. Participants shared a range of obstacles, including time management difficulties, financial constraints, health issues, emotional stress, and external distractions. The thematic analysis generated key themes: time management and adaptability, financial struggles, mental and emotional resilience, support systems and social networks, health and well-being, and managing distractions and maintaining focus. These themes reflect broader issues within educational and professional exam preparation and align with existing literature on coping strategies and resilience in high-stakes testing environments.

### Time Management and Adaptability

Time management was a common challenge among participants, particularly in balancing study schedules with personal responsibilities. This is consistent with research by Schacter *et al.* (2016), which highlights the importance of effective time management skills in academic success. The ability to adapt and efficiently

use available time despite competing demands is a critical factor in maintaining consistent study routines. Participants' flexibility in adjusting their schedules and their ability to avoid wasting time reflects the resilience needed to overcome time-related obstacles (Kuh *et al.*, 2006).

### Financial Management

Many participants faced significant financial challenges during their LET preparation, including paying for review centers, study materials, and living expenses. Financial difficulties have long been recognized as a barrier to academic achievement, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds (Hernandez, 2019). Research shows that financial stress can negatively impact cognitive functioning, reducing students' ability to focus on their studies (Mani *et al.*, 2013). Participants in this study managed these challenges through resourcefulness, such as borrowing money, cutting costs, and relying on the support of peers. This underscores the importance of financial resilience and resourcefulness in academic success.

### Mental and Emotional Resilience

Participants reported facing emotional challenges such as overthinking, anxiety, and burnout during their exam preparation. This finding aligns with research on test anxiety, which is prevalent among students preparing for high-stakes exams (Putwain *et al.*, 2020). Emotional resilience—the ability to recover from stress and maintain focus—was crucial in overcoming these challenges. Participants highlighted the role of self-motivation, goal setting, and spiritual practices in managing stress and maintaining a positive mindset. According to Seligman (2011), fostering positive emotions and resilience through strategies like goal orientation and emotional regulation is essential for handling academic pressures effectively.

### Support Systems and Social Networks

Another key theme was the importance of support systems, including family, friends, and peers. Participants relied on these networks for emotional support, encouragement, and practical assistance. This finding is consistent with research by Wilcox *et al.* (2005), which shows that social support is a critical factor in academic persistence and success. Study groups and peer interactions provided participants with camaraderie, helping them stay motivated and focused. Social networks not only offered academic collaboration but also emotional resilience, reducing feelings of isolation during the intense preparation period.

### Good Health Maintenance

Physical health challenges, such as illness and fatigue, were also significant obstacles for participants. Health-related issues are everyday stressors during exam preparation, as Schaefer *et al.* (2017) noted, sleep deprivation and poor nutrition negatively impact cognitive performance.

Participants in this study addressed these challenges by focusing on nutrition, taking supplements, and ensuring adequate rest. This reflects an understanding of the connection between physical well-being and academic performance, highlighting the need for a holistic approach to exam preparation that includes self-care and healthy lifestyle choices (Schaefer *et al.*, 2017).

### Immense Focus on Review

Finally, participants identified external distractions, such as social media and personal responsibilities, as challenges to maintaining focus during their study periods. Distraction management is a well-documented issue in the digital age, with research showing that digital distractions can significantly reduce study efficiency (Rosen *et al.*, 2013). Participants overcame these challenges by minimizing distractions, such as deactivating social media accounts, and by creating conducive study environments with the help of focused peers. This reflects the need for deliberate strategies to manage attention and create a supportive learning environment (Rosen *et al.*, 2013).

### CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by LET topnotchers during their exam preparation, including time management difficulties, financial constraints, emotional stress, health issues, and external distractions. Participants demonstrated remarkable adaptability, resilience, and resourcefulness in overcoming these obstacles through effective time management, leveraging social support networks, managing distractions, and prioritizing physical and emotional well-being. The integration of spiritual practices and strong peer relationships played a crucial role in maintaining their motivation and focus throughout the rigorous preparation process. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between personal, social, and academic factors influencing success in high-stakes exams.

The implications of these findings extend to practical strategies, theoretical advancements, and policy reforms aimed at supporting aspiring LET takers and students in similar high-stakes exam contexts. By addressing the practical needs of students through enhanced financial aid, well-being programs, and peer support systems, educational institutions and policymakers can foster a more supportive environment for exam preparation. Additionally, the study enriches theoretical frameworks related to self-regulated learning, cognitive load, and social support, offering a foundation for future research. Ultimately, this research highlights the importance of a holistic approach to licensure exam preparation, emphasizing the need for structural and emotional support alongside rigorous academic preparation.

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