

UNVEILING THE MATHEMATICS EDUCATION GRADUATES' LIVED EXPERIENCES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE LICENSURE EXAMINATION JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT: This study explored the lived experiences of mathematics education graduates in the Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET). It targets to uncover the diverse factors that influenced their LET performance, including emotions, and overall journey throughout the examination process. Nine participants were purposively invited to a Focus Group Discussion from the different Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) offering Bachelor of Secondary Education major in Mathematics. This study utilized the six-phase thematic analysis of Clarke and Braun. The study concluded that success in LET is the result of the interplay from the eight themes that emerged which are considered factors - unwavering social and institutional supports, pervasive financial and occupational barriers to success, effective strategies and diverse approaches to learning, emotional and psychological well-being in academic settings, the influence of superstitious and spiritual beliefs on learning, critical impact of health and physical condition, exam administration and logistical factors affecting performance, and the importance of conducive learning environment. Recommendations include fostering robust support networks, improving resource accessibility, encouraging effective learning strategies, prioritizing mental health support, recognizing spiritual and superstitious beliefs, promoting healthy lifestyles, improving examination logistics, and facilitating conducive learning environments. The insights gathered could inform educational institutions, policymakers, and teacher education programs in shaping strategies to enhance the LET preparation process and outcomes.

Keywords: Factors affecting LET Performance, Teacher Education Institutions, Bachelor of Secondary Education

1. INTRODUCTION

The Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET) plays a crucial role in determining the professional capabilities of aspiring teachers in the Philippines. However, the national passing rate for the LET remains alarmingly low as only less than half performed above the national average, while more than half perform below, grounding from the 8-year LET results data in 2009-2017 from Professional Regulatory Commission (PRC) [1]. The mean generated from the national performance for both the Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) and the Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd) fall to 43.70% for the last four recent examinations since 2019. Further, the Bachelor of Secondary Education LET performance records 44.29% for the same exams from 2019 to 2022 [2].

The data mentioned indicates that there exist significant challenges faced by Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) in preparing their students adequately. The need to understand the factors influencing performance in the examination has prompted numerous studies across the country. While these studies have shed light on various predictors, there is a dearth of research focusing on the lived experiences of individuals who have undergone the licensure examination process.

A number of studies regarding the factors that could influence passing the LET were undertaken in different institutions in the country. Results of [3] revealed significant predictors in passing the board exam such as high school average grade, college entrance score, gender, academic performance, and attendance to review classes. The study of [4] discovered that a very significant group of predictors for passing the LET included teachers' educational level and their length of service, the students' IQ including the grade point

average (GPA) as well as the quality of library and laboratory facilities.

Within the Northern Mindanao region, where Teacher Education Institutions are grappling with underperformance, only a small percentage of institutions have maintained exemplary overall licensure passing percentages. The PRC data of LET results from 2009-2017 as affirmed by the non-The government organization Philippine Business for Education (PBEd) exposed that most of the poorly performing TEIs are from Mindanao [1]. Furthermore, the region has experienced fluctuations in the overall passing percentage, with many institutions struggling to meet the 60% national passing standard.

Hence, this study aims to explore the gap by gathering first-hand data from the lived experiences of teacher education graduates of different TEIs in Northern Mindanao, with a specific concentration on those that only offer a Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) in Mathematics. By digging deeper into the lived experiences of the graduates, this study targets to uncover the unique factors that possibly influenced their LET performance, including emotions, and overall journey throughout the examination process.

This study aims to offer actionable recommendations such as to improve the preparation and performance of aspiring teachers, which eventually be contributing to the enhancement of the overall quality of teacher education in the region.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using phenomenological research design through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) of the teacher education graduates based on their experiences in taking the LET. The phenomenological research method aims to emphasize the first-person perspective or the awareness structure of the subjects' lived experiences [5]. This makes an

effort to set prejudices, preconceived ideas about human experiences, feelings, as well as reactions to a circumstance. An attempt to discover themes or, if possible, develop generalizations regarding how a phenomenon is viewed or experienced is included in the analysis [6].

To identify the factors that possibly impacted the teacher education graduates in the LET, a semi-structured interview questionnaire was prepared. The items of the questionnaire underwent content validation from 3 experts in the field prior to its conduct. The participants of the study were purposively selected teacher education graduates with the degree of Bachelor of Secondary Education major in Mathematics. The data were gathered from the graduates of both private and public TEIs in Northern Mindanao particularly in the province of Misamis Occidental. The province has more than 20 higher education institutions with more than 50% offering Teacher Education Programs and 33% offering Bachelor of Secondary Education major in Mathematics. The TEIs are dispersed among the 3 cities such as Ozamis City, Oroquieta City, and Tangub City, and the 14 municipalities across the province.

The set of samples included in the study was taken from the roster of TEIs which qualified for the set criteria. The researcher examined the results from the PRC and selected TEI participants having an average below the national passing rate of the Secondary Level from the 2018 to 2022 licensure examination for the teachers. After identifying the TEIs that offer BSEd Mathematics which also had low performance in LET, participants who directly experienced the phenomenon of interest were included in the study. This study employed a typical case sampling to demonstrate typical or normal situations of phenomena and compare them to the population's typical individuals [7]. There were 5 among 7 TEIs qualified for the first criterion and there were 9 research participants. The six-phase thematic analysis of Clarke & Braun [8] was utilized to analyze the qualitative data gathered.

Table 1. Profile of the participant

Focus Group Discussion	FGD (n=9)
Sex	
Male	6
Female	3
Year Graduated	
2018	3
2019	1
2020	2
2021	3
LET Attempts	
Once	5
Twice	2
Non-passer	2

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results below reveal the various factors that affected the performance in the licensure examination for teachers capturing the overall journey during the examination process. It highlights how each element of the licensure examination journey can impact the outcomes.

There were 8 overarching themes that emerged from the focus

group analysis. The results of the discussion below unravel interconnections, presenting a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of teacher education graduates as they embarked on the LET.

Unwavering Social and Institutional supports

This theme highlights the importance of social dynamics in academic success. It's not simply about personal ability or hard work, but the network of relationships that offers moral support, guidance, and a sense of belonging. This goes to show that a supportive network can properly guide the individual's LET journey toward success. During the interview, they shared: *"My family and friends were very supportive. They supported me throughout my preparation. I received support from my professors and classmates. One of the factors that helped me was when I messaged my previous instructor right after the exam to share my experiences. They provided different forms of resources and helped me deal with the stress."* Hence, this suggests that there is a need to engage in LET preparation that fosters collaboration. Prior to taking the exam, one should consider the role of peer support and mentoring as part of the learning process.

In fostering academic success, it is important to have a supportive network. Family, friends, and academic peers are crucial in providing emotional and practical support to easily cope with academic stress [9]. The value of a collaborative approach to education is supported by the availability of resources, the sharing of experiences, and stress management support from a support network.

Pervasive Financial and Occupational Barriers to Success

The economic factors that impede academic pursuits are indeed alarming. It's sad to know how many potential graduates don't have access to quality LET preparations due to these barriers. During the interviews, they shared: *"Maybe what hinders me to be confident is because I was working while I prepare for the examination. Juggling a teaching job and review was really challenging. I cannot attend the review classes during weekdays and had to cope after work. Financial worries and the strain of work made it difficult for me to fully concentrate on my preparations."* With these, this theme underscores the importance of scholarship programs and financial aid for graduates as they embark on the review period.

The difficulty that the students have juggling their work obligations and academic goals is confirmed by research studies. Financial hardship and work-related stress can have a negative effect on academic achievement [10]. The necessity for financial stability can often outweigh the importance of academic success, leading to compromised exam preparation.

Effective Strategies and Diverse Approaches to Learning

This theme suggests that employing the right strategy suited to one's learning style could help in academic success. It's interesting how different BSEd graduates find various effective strategies and techniques. It emphasizes how diverse and flexible the learning process can be. During the interviews, participants shared: *"I made myself aware and understanding of the Table of Specification (TOS) of the LET and read it to be guided in the exam. I trained myself for 3 hours straight in reading as suggested by our resource exam reviewer and that after each, there should be intervals of another 3 hours to relax the mind. I used a mnemonic device*

as a strategy, I tend to memorize the first letters of the words like in Bloom's

Taxonomy. The review center gave me online hand-outs and I reproduced those. I also source online videos like Gurong Pinoy, Teacher Co". This indicates a need for flexible and adaptable strategies to learning that caters to different learning styles while engaged in LET preparation.

The necessity for strategic and structured learning is important especially when one is about to take big exams like LET. According to [11], one can study more confidently and get ready for exams with the help of a study plan. Further, it may be more beneficial to plan ahead, use practice exams, and concentrate on understanding rather than memorization. This emphasizes the importance of implementing active learning strategies to enhance the comprehension and retention process.

Emotional and Psychological Well-being in Academic Settings

There are instances that mental health is sometimes overlooked in the pursuit of academic excellence. The narratives under this theme highlight just how important psychological support and wellness are to success especially when taking exams. The participants shared: *"I had a Latin honor, that's why it added to my pressure that what if I may fail in the exam. I tried hard because it is a shame for me if I cannot pass the exam. I was pressured since my colleagues were conclusive that I could pass the exam. I said to myself that I need to condition my mind, disregard worries and pressure because I know it can affect my performance".* With this, part of the LET preparation process, there's a need to put a stronger emphasis on mental health by possibly incorporating good mental health activities.

One study highlights the significant impact of psychological well-being on academic performance. The study of [12] argued that academic achievement and psychological well-being were inversely correlated, meaning that students who encountered more stress at school performed better than those who had less stress. This study opposed to the argument above insisting that one may perform better when faced with pressures. Further, so long as one seeks help from professional counselors and adopts mental conditioning techniques to manage fear and anxiety, one can eventually improve exam preparation and outcomes.

Influence of Superstitious and Spiritual Beliefs in Learning

Some superstitious and spiritual beliefs which are often dismissed in academic discussions, can substantially provide solace and confidence. This suggests that educational experiences are deeply entwined with some personal beliefs and spirituality. It emphasizes the importance of respecting and understanding these dimensions as they apply it during the LET. During the interview, they shared: *"Trusting myself and faith in God were among my techniques to succeed in the exam. My trust in God added confidence and I found comfort in my faith. I hold even many verses in the bible during the exam. I applied some superstitious beliefs during the exam such as wearing something red, cracking the pencil after answering, and attending nine churches before the exam."* With this, one should be mindful of spiritual beliefs as they can impact performance and motivation.

This theme suggests a comforting role of faith in stressful situations. The superstitious beliefs were developed to allay the students' anxieties and to protect their emotional world from unpleasant emotions and undesirable scenarios [13]. Superstitious beliefs have both positive and negative effects.

Critical Impact of Health and Physical Condition on Learning

This theme shows the direct connection between physical health and academic performance. It's a reminder that the minds and bodies are deeply interconnected, and one cannot thrive without the other. This underlines the necessity of promoting healthy lifestyles and adequate rest especially when one is about to engage in LET. In the interviews, they shared: *"For me, a healthy lifestyle like healthy foods and no sleep deprivation was essential to passing the exam. There was one who suggested, that I should not review formulas in math the night before the exam so it won't cloud my mind during the actual exam and that I need to sleep early."*

There's a need for more health and wellness engagements as part of the preparation in LET, possibly including regular physical activity with healthy eating and sleeping habits.

The correlation between physical health, sleep, and academic success is well established. It is better able to handle the physical and emotional challenges of daily life when one is healthy [14]. Further, being in good health enables one to unwind and concentrate. When one is not dealing with interruptions, it is easy to absorb and remember knowledge better than when ill.

Exam Administration and Logistical Factors Affecting Performance

The proper exam administration aspects often go unnoticed until they negatively affect performance. The setting, the proctors, the exam administration orientation

- all these can either aid or hinder one's success. This theme draws attention to the often overlooked "behind-the-scenes" elements of the licensure examination for teachers. During the interviews, participants shared: *"I experienced stress by the time my phone was confiscated by the officers in PRC, it gives me chills since the proctor did not clearly orient us the process and protocols during the exam. When I traveled going to the exam site, I was splashed with the coffee I was bringing in the Motorcab because I found it uncomfortable to sit. The venue was very cold, it made my stomach upset. During the last time I took the exam, I had LBM."* There is a need to consider all logistical aspects of exams so that it can provide the most conducive environment possible. This could involve improving the comfort of the physical space, and training proctors.

This theme suggests the need for optimal testing conditions. Studies show that environmental factors can impact exam performance as such learning ability can be impacted by a number of things, including seating, light, noise, and even color [15]. Increased student motivation, engagement, and general learning capacity have all been linked to positive learning environments. In an examination context, an intimidating invigilator or uncomfortable test room can add stress and distract from the task at hand.

Importance of a Conducive Learning Environment

This theme highlights the importance of a conducive learning environment. A quiet and focused study environment significantly impacts learning. However, not everyone has the privilege of such an environment. This shows the inequalities present in access to proper learning spaces which can be true also in the LET preparation. While in the interviews, they shared: *"I had my review in my girlfriend's house where it has a peaceful environment. I stayed in my sister's house during the review to have no distractions. Sometimes, I allot 1 hour at night to review since I felt tired from work and had it continued early in the morning in a quiet and comfortable space to study."* Inequities in access to quality learning environments need to be addressed to have sustained learning while preparing for the LET.

It has been demonstrated that having a productive study environment enhances student performance. The learning environment is a crucial factor in the attitudes of students [16]. Emphasizing the value of supportive surroundings in successful and effective exam preparation, a calm and comfortable study space can promote focus and learning.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study clearly showed that success in the licensure examination for teachers is not determined by a single factor but is rather the result of the interplay of multiple elements which all play significant roles.

There are eight overarching significant themes emerged. These are the unwavering social and institutional supports, pervasive financial and occupational barriers to success, effective strategies and diverse approaches to learning, emotional and

psychological well-being in academic settings, the influence of superstitious and spiritual beliefs in learning, the critical impact of health and physical condition on learning, exam administration and logistical factors affecting performance, and the importance of a conducive learning environment.

Each theme captured a unique aspect of the teacher education graduates' experience in the LET that further highlights the intricacy of their licensure examination journey. Financial and professional obstacles could impede advancement; however, social support was essential for preserving tenacity and resilience. Effective learning strategies and good physical and mental health were seen as vital, while spiritual beliefs provided comfort and hope. Examination logistics, which include the transportation to the exam venue and a conducive learning environment were identified to have possibly impacted the overall experience and success in the licensure examination.

Hence, it is recommended that institutions should make an effort to bolster strong social, institutional, and financial support networks to lessen academic and financial barriers. It should employ the use of efficient learning techniques, including structured study plans and active learning techniques, to enhance exam preparation. Alongside, the availability of psychological support services, such as counseling and stress management, can greatly boost emotional well-being and exam performance. Furthermore, improvements in exam administration and logistics, at the same time fostering conducive learning environments, are

vital in promoting a more efficient and less stressful licensure examination journey.

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