

Unveiling Success: A Qualitative Inquiry into the Determinants of Achievement Among Top Performers in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH)

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Abstract

The National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) functions as a pivotal assessment tool for identifying competent educational leaders in the Philippines. However, persistently low national passing rates highlight the imperative to examine and explore in-depth the factors that underpin the success factors contributing to the success of high-achieving examinees. This study employed a qualitative narratological approach to explore the success stories of eight top-performing NQESH passers from Region XII. Grounded in Constructivism, Self-Determination Theory, and Social Capital Theory, data were gathered through purposive sampling and in-depth interviews, then analyzed thematically.

Findings revealed four core strategies contributing to success: prioritization of official DepEd documents, use of diverse and multimodal study tools, maintenance of disciplined study routines, and engagement in collaborative learning environments. Despite challenges such as work-life imbalance, internet instability, and test-related anxiety, participants employed coping mechanisms like time management, emotional regulation, and spiritual grounding. Their leadership readiness was further enhanced

by prior roles such as officer-in-charge and involvement in school-based management, which provided practical exposure to governance and policy application. Institutional support through review programs, mentoring, and administrative flexibility also played a pivotal role in their preparation. The study proposes a multifactorial model of success encompassing: Strategic Preparation and Mindset, Institutional and Peer Support, and Personal and Professional Edge. Crucially, the study uncovered specific practices that top-performing participants recommend for future aspirants: initiating early and sustained preparation based on DepEd documents, embedding review practices into daily routines using audio-visual materials, cultivating a growth mindset, maintaining commitment despite challenges, and maximizing collaborative learning opportunities. Ultimately, top performance in the NQESH was found to result from the intersection of individual agency, systemic scaffolding, and contextual engagement. These findings inform leadership development policy by advocating for targeted mentorship, sustained review systems, and contextualized leadership capacity-building initiatives.

Keywords: educational leadership, qualitative narratology, school head preparation, Region XII, top performers, leadership development

INTRODUCTION

Effective school leadership is globally recognized as essential to educational advancement and student achievement (Fullan, 2021; Leithwood, 2020). Many countries utilize standardized assessments—such as England’s NPQH, the United States’ SLLA, and Singapore’s SLA—to certify leadership readiness (Paglinawan, 2024). In the Philippines, the Department of Education mandates the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) for aspiring principals. Grounded in the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH), the NQESH assesses five core leadership domains. However, persistently low passing rates—26.39% in 2023 and 36.93% in 2021 (DepEd Memoranda 59, s. 2024; 100, s. 2022)—highlight the need to examine the determinants of success in this high-stakes exam.

Recent reforms, including the “One Principal-One School” policy championed by Secretary Edgardo “Sonny” Angara, emphasize the urgency of cultivating a qualified leadership pipeline. With over 24,000 public schools lacking designated principals (EDCOM 2, 2023), gaps in leadership preparation and support remain a critical concern. Yet, there is limited empirical evidence connecting NQESH success to broader principalship reforms—particularly within Region XII, a region marked by socio-cultural diversity and unequal access to professional development.

Against this backdrop, this study explores the critical success factors among top-performing NQESH passers in Region XII. Anchored in Constructivism (Piaget, 1936; Vygotsky, 1978), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986), it examines the interplay of motivation, social support, and contextualized preparation in shaping success. By delving into the experiences of successful candidates, this research aims to provide evidence-based insights that aspiring school leaders can utilize to refine their preparation strategies and enhance their likelihood of success.

Furthermore, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the NQESH’s role in shaping the leadership pipeline in the Philippines, with broader implications for educational policies, leadership development programs, and equity-focused reforms. In particular, the findings aim to offer actionable recommendations for tailoring professional development initiatives to address the unique needs of candidates in Region XII and similar contexts.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

This study aims to unveil the determinants of success among top-performing NQESH examinees in Region XII. Specifically, the inquiry is guided by the following questions:

- (1) What strategies and practices do top performers employ?
- (2) What challenges do they face and how do they overcome them?
- (3) How do personal, educational, and professional experiences contribute to their preparation?
- (4) What institutional or systemic factors support or hinder success? and
- (5) What recommendations and insights can be shared with aspiring school leaders?

METHODS

A qualitative narratological research design was employed to explore the experiences of top-performing NQESH examinees. Narratological inquiry, as articulated by Denzin and Lincoln (2018), emphasizes the collection and interpretation of rich, meaningful stories to understand complex human experiences. This method was deemed appropriate for uncovering the multifaceted realities of school leadership aspirants.

The study involved eight purposively selected top-performing examinees from the 2021 and 2023 NQESH in Region XII. Participant selection was based on official rankings released by DepEd through Memoranda No. 100, s. 2022 and No. 59, s. 2024. The sample reflected diversity in demographic, professional, and educational backgrounds while ensuring the common criterion of top performance.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Each interview was recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to member checking to ensure accuracy. The interview guide was validated by a panel of doctoral experts, and pilot testing was conducted to refine the protocol. Ethical approval was obtained from Sultan Kudarat State University, and all participants provided informed consent.

Thematic analysis, following Moustakas (1994), was used to analyze the data. This involved identifying significant statements, generating codes, clustering these codes into themes, and synthesizing the themes into comprehensive insights. To establish trustworthiness, the study employed strategies of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion regarding the success stories of top performers in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH). The themes emerged after a rigorous process of thematic analysis, which included identifying significant statements, formulating initial themes, clustering these themes, and determining the emerging themes.

Emerging Themes on the Strategies and Practices of Top-Performers of NQESH

The journey to success in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) is shaped by distinct strategies and practices employed by top-performing passers. Through a careful analysis of their experiences, four major themes emerged: (1) Focusing on Official DepEd Documents, (2) Employing Diverse Study Tools and Techniques, (3) Establishing and Maintaining a Structured Study Routine, and (4) Engaging in Collaborative Learning Activities.

These themes highlighted the key approaches that contributed to their achievement, offering valuable insights into the preparation strategies that aspiring school leaders can adopt. The Department of Education (DepEd), in collaboration with the National Educators Academy of the Philippines (NEAP), administers the NQESH to ensure the selection of highly competent and qualified school leaders across the country.

Emerging Theme 1: Focusing on Official DepEd Documents

The findings emphasized that top-performing NQESH passers prioritized reviewing official DepEd documents—such as orders, memoranda, and issuances—as a foundational strategy. This approach supports Llarena (2019) and Lagua (2020), who asserted that in-depth familiarity with education policies enhances leadership competency. Participants deliberately selected authoritative resources over unreliable online reviewers, echoing Torres's (2021) findings that using government-issued references improves policy comprehension. This practice also cultivated policy literacy, a key leadership skill identified by Garcia (2021), which enables administrators to make informed decisions and implement policy effectively.

Emerging Theme 2: Employing Diverse Study Tools and Techniques

Top-performing candidates adopted a varied mix of study techniques, including structured review programs, online platforms, practice tests, and multimedia resources. Beaumont et al. (2020) highlighted the value of mock exams in enhancing test readiness by simulating real exam conditions, improving both time management and content mastery. Technology-enabled tools, such as recorded lectures and interactive modules, were favored for their flexibility, supporting the insights of Johnson and Greene (2021) on the benefits of self-paced, tech-integrated learning. Practice-based approaches helped participants internalize question formats and reduce test anxiety.

Emerging Theme 3: Establishing and Maintaining a Structured Study Routine

Participants emphasized the value of systematic, time-bound study routines organized by NQESH competency domains. This practice aligns with Ngozi and Akinlolu (2021), who recognized time management and self-regulation as pivotal to academic success. Many study schedules included early morning or late evening sessions—periods that Bangert-Drowns et al. (2020) associated with heightened cognitive absorption. Organizing study content around leadership domains, as advised by Reyes (2018), allowed participants to contextualize theoretical knowledge into practical scenarios.

Emerging Theme 4: Participating in Collaborative Learning Activities

Active involvement in group reviews, peer discussions, and institutional review programs emerged as a common success strategy. Ramos and Arambulo (2021) found that collaborative settings improve conceptual understanding through the exchange of diverse perspectives. Participants benefited from structured programs offered by school divisions and private providers, which provided expert facilitation, mock assessments, and policy analysis (Ceballos & Fernandez, 2020). Engaging in policy discussions with peers fostered deeper learning and analytical reasoning, consistent with Salovey and Mayer's (2020) conclusions about enhanced retention in social learning environments.

Emerging Themes on the Challenges and Coping Mechanisms among Top Performers

Pursuing excellence in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) entails overcoming challenges that test candidates' resilience, adaptability, and strategic problem-solving skills.

Through a comprehensive analysis of the lived experiences of top-performing passers, four major themes emerged: (1) Balancing Time and Work-Family Demands, (2) Technical and Internet Connectivity Issues, (3) Anxiety and Emotional Stress, and (4) Minimal Challenges in Group Study. These themes encapsulate the significant obstacles encountered during the preparation process and the coping mechanisms employed to mitigate their impact. The findings provide critical insights into the complex interplay between personal, technological, and psychological factors in high-stakes examination settings. This contributes to a deeper understanding of the determinants of success in leadership assessments.

Emerging Theme 1: Balancing Time and Work-Family Demands

Top-performing NQESH candidates faced significant challenges in balancing professional duties, family responsibilities, and exam preparation. As many were already in administrative roles, time constraints led to stress and fatigue (Garcia & Ramos, 2020). To address this, candidates adopted structured study routines and strategic time management techniques. Tools such as daily planners and time blocking helped maintain balance without compromising responsibilities (Lanuza & Dela Cruz, 2020). Early morning or late-night study sessions allowed for focused, uninterrupted learning (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2020). Prioritization of high-impact topics also minimized cognitive overload and supported sustained engagement (Peterson & Taylor, 2021).

Emerging Theme 2: Technical and Internet Connectivity Issues

With the transition to a digital NQESH format, many candidates encountered technological barriers, including unstable internet, unfamiliar platforms, and hardware issues—factors known to increase test anxiety (Molina & Santos, 2022). To counteract these issues, participants proactively prepared by testing systems in advance, securing backup devices, and ensuring power continuity via UPS units (Johnson & Greene, 2021). Peer support and knowledge-sharing on navigating the digital testing environment further enhanced preparedness and confidence (Ceballos & Fernandez, 2020).

Emerging Theme 3: Anxiety and Emotional Stress

Psychological pressure emerged as a common challenge, as candidates experienced self-doubt, fear of failure, and the burden of expectations. Such stress was found to impair cognitive functions like concentration and decision-making (Reyes & Manalo, 2020). In response, many employed mindfulness techniques—including deep breathing and meditation—to regulate anxiety and promote mental clarity (Carreon & Montano, 2022). Positive affirmations and cognitive reframing, where the exam was viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat, also improved emotional resilience (Sarmiento & Peña, 2020).

Emerging Theme 4: No Major Group Study Challenges

In contrast to other challenges, group study participation was largely seen as beneficial and free from significant obstacles. Structured peer collaboration facilitated focused discussions and mutual support, enhancing comprehension and retention without introducing additional stress (Ramos & Arambulo, 2021).

Participants attributed this success to strategic group organization, where members shared similar goals and maintained disciplined interactions (Ceballos & Fernandez, 2020). The use of virtual platforms such as video conferencing and shared digital resources allowed for seamless communication and flexibility, regardless of physical distance (Johnson & Greene, 2021).

Emerging Themes on Personal, Educational, and Professional Experiences and Insights in Examination Preparedness

Through rigorous data analysis and interpretation, four (4) key themes emerged, synthesized from clustered themes and significant statements. These themes include (1) Utilizing Prior Roles and Real-Life Experiences, (2) Strengthening Knowledge Through Educational Attainment, (3) Identifying Likely Exam Coverage, and (4) Harnessing Work Assignments to Develop Leadership Skills. These findings underscore the interplay between personal experiences, academic preparation, and professional responsibilities in shaping the success of top-performing candidates in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH).

Emerging Theme 1: Using Prior Roles and Real-Life Experiences

Prior leadership roles and firsthand experience in school administration significantly contributed to the exam readiness of top-performing NQESH candidates. Many had served as department heads, teachers-in-charge, or acting principals—roles that exposed them to real-life decision-making, policy implementation, and stakeholder engagement. These experiences helped them better comprehend situational judgment questions, consistent with findings by Lee and Ramos (2021), who reported that leadership roles enhance problem-solving skills in complex educational scenarios. Hands-on governance responsibilities enabled candidates to apply policy knowledge practically, reinforcing the perspective of Harrison and Wallace (2020) that direct administrative experience strengthens policy application.

Emerging Theme 2: Strengthening Knowledge Through Educational Attainment

Educational attainment, particularly at the graduate level, was found to significantly enhance candidates' preparedness for the NQESH. Participants with postgraduate degrees in educational leadership or administration demonstrated stronger policy comprehension, analytical thinking, and familiarity with governance frameworks. Peterson and Taylor (2021) emphasized that postgraduate training equips school leaders with skills such as instructional supervision and data-driven decision-making, core competencies of the NQESH. Academic coursework also helped candidates internalize legal and administrative principles fundamental to school leadership (Garcia & Jenkins, 2020).

Emerging Theme 3: Identifying Likely Exam Coverage

Strategically identifying potential exam topics through trend analysis and policy tracking was a key success strategy among top-performing candidates. Participants reviewed past NQESH items and DepEd

memoranda to discern commonly tested themes, enabling focused and efficient preparation. Serrano and Bayani (2020) emphasized that understanding assessment trends allows examinees to anticipate question types and strategically allocate study time. Familiarity with recent policy updates—especially those related to curriculum reforms, governance, and educational mandates—further reinforced content accuracy (Mendoza & Alvarado, 2021). Candidates also sought insights from previous NQESH passers and mentors to validate their focus areas and refine their approach, affirming Garcia et al.'s (2020) claim that mentorship enhances professional learning.

Emerging Theme 4: Harnessing Work Assignments to Develop Leadership Skills

The integration of day-to-day professional responsibilities into exam preparation was another vital theme. Candidates emphasized that applying theoretical concepts within their routine tasks—such as supervising teachers, managing budgets, and implementing DepEd directives—enhanced their readiness. Gonzalez and Sandoval (2020) asserted that practical engagement in school administration reinforces leadership competencies and decision-making skills. Daily experiences in school-based management, stakeholder relations, and instructional monitoring allowed candidates to translate policy frameworks into situational understanding, supporting the findings of Reyes et al. (2020), who highlighted the bridging effect of experiential learning. and future leadership roles.

Emergent Themes on Institutional or Systemic Factors Influencing NQESH Outcomes

The National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) preparation was shaped by various institutional or systemic factors influencing candidates' readiness and overall performance. Through a comprehensive analysis of the experiences of top-performing examinees, four major themes emerged: (1) Institutional Support Through Review Programs and Orientations, (2) Strategic Alignment of Preparation with School Policies, (3) Conflicting Official Responsibilities as Barriers, and (4) Support from School Administration and Human Resource Units. These themes highlight the structural and administrative factors that played a critical role in the candidates' preparation journey, providing valuable insights into the institutional mechanisms that facilitated or hindered their success in the examination.

Emerging Theme 1: Official Support Through Reviews and Orientations

Institutional support through division-initiated reviews, workshops, and orientations emerged as a key contributor to NQESH preparedness. Participants benefited from structured programs that clarified examination content, reinforced policy knowledge, and introduced effective test-taking strategies. These findings support Lopez and Reyes (2021), who emphasized that institutionalized training strengthens leadership competencies among aspiring school heads. Formal orientations also provided timely updates on educational reforms, helping candidates align their review with evolving policy expectations (Garcia et al., 2020). In particular, mock exams enhanced candidates' familiarity with exam conditions and improved their decision-making under pressure, a practice validated by Harrison and Wallace (2020).

Emerging Theme 2: Importance of Aligning Preparation with School Policies

Aligning review efforts with DepEd policies significantly contributed to candidates' success. Participants who closely studied policy issuances—such as orders, memoranda, and guidelines—demonstrated a stronger command of policy-based exam items. This affirms Reyes et al. (2020), who argued that policy comprehension is central to effective leadership assessments. Familiarity with institutional directives allowed candidates not only to answer accurately but also to internalize principles crucial to school management. Garcia and Jenkins (2020) noted that policy literacy enables leaders to make informed decisions and ensures regulatory compliance. Those with prior policy implementation experience, such as involvement in SBM or curriculum planning, could more readily contextualize exam questions (Peterson & Taylor, 2021).

Emerging Theme 3: Overlapping Official Tasks as a Barrier

The burden of simultaneous professional obligations—such as teaching loads, administrative duties, and school programs—was a prominent barrier to effective preparation. Participants expressed that managing these overlapping responsibilities resulted in fatigue and reduced study time, consistent with Molina and Santos (2022), who found workload pressures detrimental to certification performance. Work-related stress also disrupted cognitive focus and learning continuity (Johnson & Greene, 2021). In response, candidates adopted strategies like task prioritization, structured scheduling, and delegation to regain study momentum. Ceballos and Fernandez (2020) advocated such time management practices to optimize academic outcomes despite external demands.

Emerging Theme 4: School Administration and HR Support

The role of administrative and human resource (HR) support was central to streamlining the NQESH preparation process. Participants highlighted how assistance with document processing, scheduling flexibility, and resource access helped them manage exam demands efficiently. Pineda and Arce (2020) emphasized that institutional mechanisms facilitating professional growth significantly enhance learning engagement and outcomes. Administrative personnel who proactively supported candidates in fulfilling application requirements reduced bureaucratic stress, allowing for better concentration on review activities (Lopez & Reyes, 2021).

Emerging Themes on Insights and Recommendations for Aspiring School Leaders

Through rigorous data analysis, four key themes emerged, offering insights into the success of top-performing examinees in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH): (1) Alignment with DepEd Policies, (2) Recognition of Common Pitfalls, (3) Sustaining Motivation and Positivity, and (4) Strategic Advice and “Secrets to Success.” These findings offer valuable guidance for aspiring school leaders, emphasizing key strategies and best practices for exam preparation and leadership development.

Each theme is supported by relevant literature to establish its scholarly significance and implications for future school administrators.

Emerging Theme 1: Emphasizing DepEd Policy Alignment

A core insight among top-performing NQESH passers is the importance of aligning exam preparation with DepEd policies. Participants underscored the value of reviewing official documents such as DepEd Orders, memoranda, and frameworks like the PPSSH and SBM. This alignment fostered a clear understanding of governance structures and improved their ability to respond confidently to policy-based questions, affirming Reyes et al. (2020), who emphasized policy literacy as vital in leadership assessments. Integrating theoretical policy knowledge with practical experience enabled candidates to draw from real-life applications during the exam, a concept supported by Peterson and Taylor (2021). The structured organization of study content around key policy themes also proved beneficial, aligning with Garcia and Jenkins (2020), who noted that policy comprehension strengthens applied governance skills.

Emerging Theme 2: Recognition of Common Pitfalls

Participants identified several common pitfalls that aspiring school leaders should avoid. Chief among them were over-reliance on memorization, neglecting situational judgment practice, and using outdated or unofficial materials. Santos and Alvarado (2022) argued that high-stakes exams require critical thinking and problem-solving, not just rote recall. Participants noted that failing to internalize the purpose and application of policies made scenario-based questions difficult to navigate. This aligns with Lopez and Reyes (2021), who maintained that leadership assessments prioritize conceptual application over factual recall.

Emerging Theme 3: Maintaining Motivation and Positivity

Sustaining motivation and a positive mindset was a common thread among the top performers. Participants cited goal-setting, peer encouragement, and emotional self-regulation as essential practices. Psychological resilience was seen as key to persevering through the demands of preparation, echoing Sarmiento and Peña's (2020) argument that resilience underpins success in high-pressure environments. Structuring study goals and tracking progress helped maintain momentum, a method supported by Bangert-Drowns et al. (2020), who found that goal-setting enhances focus and retention. Emotional and social support—through family, peers, and mentors—also played a vital role in alleviating stress and maintaining enthusiasm (O'Connor, 2021).

Emerging Theme 4: Final Advice and “Secrets to Success”

In their concluding reflections, participants offered strategic advice for future examinees. Central to their recommendations was the cultivation of disciplined, consistent study habits. Last-minute cramming was discouraged in favor of steady, structured preparation—an approach validated by Jones and Miller

(2019), who emphasized the cognitive benefits of methodical review. Participants also highlighted the importance of self-assessment and flexibility in adjusting learning strategies. Serrano and Bayani (2020) noted that metacognitive practices, such as regular reflection and targeted revision, improve learning efficacy.

Simulacrum of the Study: A Multifactorial Model of Success

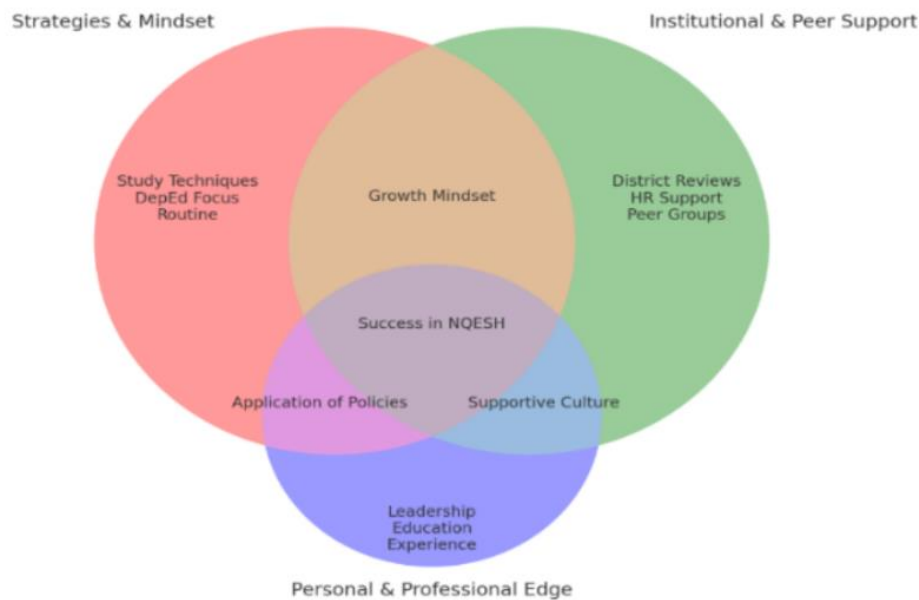


Figure 1: Simulacrum of the Study

The Venn diagram simulacrum offers a nuanced and integrative representation of the multidimensional factors underpinning success in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH). It illustrates the convergence of three interdependent domains—Strategies and Mindset, Institutional and Peer Support, and Personal and Professional Edge—each contributing distinct but overlapping influences on examinee performance. Together, these domains reflect a holistic model grounded in cognitive, social, and experiential learning theories, offering valuable insights into the determinants of high achievement in leadership assessments.

The Strategies and Mindset domain encompasses the internal cognitive and behavioral dispositions of top-performing candidates. These include structured study routines, prioritization of DepEd policies, and metacognitive techniques such as self-quizzing and reflective summarization. Such strategies align with the principles of self-regulation theory (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2020; Ngozi & Akinlolu, 2021), emphasizing time management, goal setting, and learner autonomy. The integration of a growth mindset within this sphere also reflects Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), wherein intrinsic motivation and academic perseverance are fostered through autonomy and purpose-driven engagement.

The Institutional and Peer Support domain represents the systemic scaffolds and social capital that support examinees' cognitive and emotional readiness. This includes formal review programs, mentorship

from experienced school heads, and participation in collaborative learning environments. Research by Santos and Alvarado (2022) and Garcia et al. (2020) underscores the significance of such networks in enhancing content mastery, emotional resilience, and confidence. The domain's overlap with both other spheres illustrates how supportive organizational cultures and interpersonal trust—consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) and Coleman's (1990) Social Capital Theory—enable access to critical knowledge and psychosocial resources that empower examinees.

The Personal and Professional Edge domain captures the pre-existing competencies that candidates bring to the exam, including prior leadership roles, postgraduate education, and policy implementation experience. These experiences contribute to a refined capacity to interpret and apply theoretical knowledge to situational tasks. Scholars such as Peterson and Taylor (2021), Garcia and Jenkins (2020), and Jones and Miller (2019) affirm that educational leadership experience, particularly in strategic planning and governance, equips candidates with contextualized understanding and decision-making precision critical to passing the NQESH.

At the intersection of all three domains lies the core construct: "Success in NQESH." This synergy encapsulates the ideal convergence of cognitive strategy, systemic support, and experiential expertise. Supported by Constructivist Learning Theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget, 1973), the model reinforces that meaningful learning and high-stakes performance emerge from the dynamic interaction of individual agency, social collaboration, and authentic experience. The simulacrum, therefore, serves as a conceptual framework for understanding educational leadership development and offers practical guidance for future aspirants and policymakers aiming to cultivate excellence in school leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the determinants of success among top-performing passers of the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH), uncovering key insights into the strategies, challenges, experiences, and support systems that shaped their achievement. The findings revealed that successful candidates adopted a multifaceted approach to exam preparation, combining policy review, structured study routines, use of technological resources, and collaborative learning strategies to attain comprehensive mastery of leadership concepts. Despite encountering significant challenges such as time constraints, connectivity issues, and emotional stress, candidates managed to overcome these obstacles through effective coping mechanisms, including time management, emotional regulation, and peer support. Personal, educational, and professional experiences—such as leadership roles, academic training, and real-world administrative tasks—further enhanced candidates' capacity to apply theoretical knowledge to policy and governance scenarios, thereby strengthening their decision-making skills. Moreover, institutional and systemic support, particularly in the form of structured review programs, policy alignment efforts, and administrative facilitation, played a pivotal role in reinforcing candidates' confidence and exam preparedness. Ultimately, the study concludes that success in the NQESH is achieved through a strategic, experience-driven, and institutionally supported preparation process anchored in policy alignment, resilience, and a sustained commitment to educational leadership. The examination thus serves not only as a test of knowledge but also as a validation of one's readiness to lead and make a lasting impact in the Philippine education system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings and conclusions, several key recommendations are proposed to enhance the preparation and success of aspiring National Qualifying Examination for School Heads

(NQESH) candidates. First, examinees are encouraged to adopt a strategic, policy-driven approach by prioritizing the study of official DepEd documents, organizing structured study plans anchored in the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH), and engaging in varied learning modalities such as simulations, mock assessments, and collaborative review sessions. Emphasizing situational judgment, time management, intrinsic motivation, and peer mentorship is essential in sustaining preparation. Second, school divisions and training providers should offer holistic support systems, including flexible review schedules, psychosocial interventions, technical orientations, and digital exam simulations to address common challenges such as time constraints, stress, and connectivity issues. Third, institutions are advised to promote experiential learning by involving aspiring school leaders in actual governance tasks like SIP formulation, SBM, and instructional supervision, while aligning graduate programs with practical leadership challenges. Fourth, the Department of Education and its regional offices are urged to institutionalize standardized and equitable support systems through structured review modules, policy immersion activities, simplified administrative processes, and expanded mentoring programs. Fifth, examinees should treat NQESH preparation as a component of their leadership development, emphasizing reflective practice, ethical application of policies, and continuous improvement to cultivate resilience and competence. Lastly, future research should further investigate the factors influencing NQESH success, including comparative studies, longitudinal analyses, and evaluations of institutional and technological interventions to inform evidence-based policy and practice in leadership preparation.

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