



The Social Studies Educators in the Philippine Licensure Examination for Teachers: Challenges and Implications

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study explores the unique challenges faced by Social Studies educators from a state university in Central Luzon, Philippines, in passing the Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET) and aims to provide implications for enhancing preparation strategies and improving overall passing rates.

Methodology: This study utilized a descriptive qualitative methodology, employing in-depth interviews, analytical memos, and self-reflective journals as data collection tools. Data analysis was conducted using Bingham and Witkowsky's (2023) Five-Phase Process of Qualitative Data Analysis with the aid of a software for qualitative data analysis. Data credibility was ensured through cross-verification.

Main Findings: Social Studies educators struggled with poor time management and job priorities which led to limited preparation time while inadequate rest and exam policy awareness contributed to poor performance. The struggles contributed to unfavorable outcomes in the initial attempts at passing the LET.

Novelty/Originality of this study: Existing research highlights the importance of passing the LET for career advancement and teaching quality, yet few studies examine the challenges affecting Social Studies educators. Addressing the gap, this study provides a deeper understanding of the challenges these educators face offering implications to improve LET preparation strategies and contribute to teacher certification research and professional development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching, often regarded as the noblest profession, requires teacher aspirants to undergo a teacher certification or licensure examination to ensure their competence in the classroom. In the United States, passing the teacher certification exam is a crucial requirement for educators to achieve promotion and access additional employee benefits, beyond meeting the minimum educational qualifications [1]. Similarly, in the Philippines, passing the Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET) is mandatory for eligibility to teach in public schools, and many private schools also require it as part of the hiring process [2]. Achieving a professional license through a teaching licensure examination is one of the most significant milestones in the professional development of aspiring educators. It represents a tangible example of educational achievement [3]. Teacher certification programs, such as the LET, serve as a critical means of occupational growth by verifying that examinees possess the essential competencies of professional educators, such as mastery of content knowledge

and classroom management principles. Successfully passing the examination assures the public that newly licensed educators have acquired the fundamental tools necessary to perform effectively in the classroom.

In the Philippines, the Republic Act 7836, or the “Philippine Teachers Professionalization Act of 1994,” mandates that teachers take the LET, which is facilitated by the Board of Professional Teachers (BPT) [4]. The LET for secondary school teachers is divided into three components: General Education (content knowledge), Professional Education (pedagogical knowledge), and Specialization (pedagogical and content knowledge) [5]. To pass the exam, candidates must achieve an average rating of at least 75%, with no score below 50% in any component. Due to the rigorous nature of the exam, many prospective teachers fail and must retake the test to earn their licensure.

Data from Region III shows that between 2009 and 2016, first-time takers of the LET had an average passing rate of 54.5%, while repeaters only had a passing rate of 18.6%, resulting in an overall passing rate of 33.29% [6]. These statistics highlight a concerning trend, particularly for Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs), as they reflect the institutional performance of colleges and universities in preparing candidates for the licensure exam. Factors such as personal, school-related, and family issues may affect individual performance on the exam [7]. Despite the transparency and quality assurances built into the LET process, passing the exam remains a significant challenge. The Professional Regulations Commission (PRC) publishes previous LET questions to ensure the transparency and efficiency of the certification process [8]. This practice guarantees that the exam content remains up to date and relevant, preventing the recycling of questions and aligning the test with current educational standards. While this transparency enhances the integrity of the exam, it also means that candidates cannot rely on familiarity with repeated questions, making it difficult for retakers to gain an advantage.

Moreover, successful candidates who pass the LET often possess qualities such as determination, perseverance, and a strong grasp of content knowledge [9]. For repeaters, taking the exam again offers the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the test format and refine their focus during preparation. However, while retaking the exam does not guarantee success, it often motivates candidates to study more intensely, particularly with the expectation of encountering similar questions. This increased motivation, coupled with improved self-efficacy, can reduce test anxiety, enhancing performance during subsequent attempts [10].

Conversely, poor study habits significantly contribute to failure, especially among candidates who are overconfident due to good academic performance during their college years [11]. Many candidates struggle with time management and fail to prioritize their preparation for the LET, neglecting areas of the exam that were not covered in their undergraduate coursework. Given the comprehensive nature of the licensure exam, a lack of preparation in these areas increases the likelihood of failure. Success on the LET demands more than just familiarity with test content; it requires dedicated time and effort to review all relevant topics, including those outside the scope of the candidates’ prior education.

While existing studies have explored the importance of passing the LET for career advancement and teaching quality, there is limited research specifically addressing the factors influencing LET performance among Social Studies educators. This gap is particularly concerning given the crucial role of Social Studies in fostering 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, values development, and civic participation among students [12]. The consistently low passing rates, particularly among repeaters, highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Social Studies educators. Exploring these challenges is essential for developing effective strategies to improve LET outcomes, which will contribute to enhancing the quality of education in the Philippines and other countries implementing teacher licensure assessments.

This study aims to address this gap by exploring the challenges faced by Social Studies educators in the Philippines in passing the Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET). By identifying these challenges, this research will contribute to the body of knowledge on teacher certification and provide valuable insights into strategies for supporting the professional growth of educators.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative methodology, which is known for offering a comprehensive and holistic description of a phenomenon through rigorous data analysis and in-depth discussion of the findings [13]. This research design is particularly suitable for social science and educational studies, as it allows for a thorough examination and clear explanation of the participants’ experiences, avoiding oversimplification of complex phenomena [14]. Additionally, qualitative descriptive research is valuable in exploring and elucidating the factors that contribute to a given phenomenon, providing a rich understanding of participants’ experiences through interaction and context [15]. Therefore, utilizing this approach to study how unsuccessful Social Studies educators, graduates of a state university in Central Luzon, faced the challenges of the licensure examination is both fitting and effective.

Participants for the study were selected using purposive sampling, a method that is especially useful in qualitative research when dealing with a specific group of participants and when the aim is to gain deep insights into the phenomenon under investigation [16]. To achieve data saturation, an initial interview was conducted

with a larger pool of participants, ensuring the collection of a sufficient and representative sample for the study. This technique is critical in qualitative research to achieve comprehensive data, as saturation indicates the point at which no new information is emerging. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were employed during participant selection, ensuring the reliability of the results while safeguarding the rights and protection of the participants [17].

Once the data was collected, the interviews were transcribed and reviewed extensively to gain deeper insights into the findings. Thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research, was employed to systematically identify and analyze patterns in the data. This approach is particularly effective in capturing the variation in responses, allowing for a detailed comparison of participants' experiences and contributing to a thorough understanding of the issue. The transcripts were processed using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software and analyzed according to Bingham and Witkowsky's five-phase process of qualitative data analysis [18].

Lastly, the study adhered to stringent ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing the data and securely storing the information. The interviews were conducted with the utmost respect and sensitivity, ensuring that the participants' rights were upheld throughout the research process. Ethical approval was granted by the institutional research office ensuring the study complied with all necessary ethical standards to protect the participants.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study collected data from six (6) Social Studies educators, revealing that they encountered various challenges both during the preparation phase and while taking the licensure examination.

3.1. Challenges while preparing for the Licensure Examination for Teachers

Based on the conducted interview, the Social Studies educators encountered challenges while preparing for the LET are limited time for preparation and prioritizing job than the licensure examination.

Limited Time Preparation

One of the challenges faced by the participants was the insufficient time for preparing for the LET. Regardless of the nature of the assessment and certification process, long-term preparation is essential for enhancing the necessary knowledge and skills that are evaluated during the examination. Consistent preparation allows test-takers to recognize key concepts and develop the critical thinking skills required for success during the exam [19]. Additionally, dedicating more time to preparation facilitates the discovery of more effective learning strategies, thereby increasing the chances of success. Although participants understood the importance of preparation for the LET, their efforts were often compromised due to limited time and competing priorities, which resulted in unfavorable outcomes. One participant expressed, *"I just did self-review back then, but I felt really lacking in what I studied because of the limited time. So, I told myself back then that whatever the outcome of my decision to take it, I'd accept it, because I was aware that my priorities were different. My real problem was the lack of time in preparation, I couldn't manage my time well."*

The participant's inability to manage time effectively hindered their preparation, limiting the chance for adequate review. Time management is a critical skill for academic success, and when not practiced well, it can undermine an individual's capabilities [20]. Efficient time management boosts productivity, reduces stress, and enhances confidence, but when neglected, it obstructs performance. Another participant shared a similar experience, stating, *"I only had limited time for reviewing the materials, so naturally, as the LET approached, I became anxious because I felt unprepared."*

The anxiety experienced by this participant was linked to the short preparation time and was intensified by the impending examination. Time management remains a significant challenge for many aspiring licensed professionals, often due to conflicting commitments such as work, school, and family [21]. This lack of time for focused study can lead to test anxiety, which negatively impacts performance. Test anxiety is a common issue, particularly among those who are underprepared, and the additional pressure of the LET further exacerbates the situation. One participant reflected, *"Even though I had decided to take the LET only a few months ago, my effort wasn't there because I was mostly working overtime, leaving no time for review. It was only when the LET was approaching that I became serious about preparation."*

This procrastination in preparing for the licensure examination was attributed to other commitments that participants faced. High-stakes assessments like the LET require a thorough review of a broad scope of content to ensure a higher likelihood of success. However, limited preparation time undermined participants' ability to perform well on their first attempt. Studies have shown that longer study durations are associated with better academic performance, as extended study periods allow for more exposure to review materials and deeper

learning [22]. Consequently, the lack of time for preparation contributed significantly to the failure of these Social Studies educators in passing the LET on their first attempt.

Prioritizing Job than the Licensure Examination for Teachers

Another challenge faced by the Social Studies educators was the difficulty of focusing on review for the exam due to job prioritization. Higher education institutions aim to equip students with knowledge and skills applicable in the workplace, and the government has increasingly emphasized employability as a goal for national higher education systems. This is evident in the growing importance of professional teaching licenses as a requirement for prospective public-school teachers [23]. However, many graduates from Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) opt to start working immediately after graduation while preparing for the LET, which can hinder their preparation. Balancing the demands of a full-time job and studying for the licensure examination can be particularly challenging.

As one participant shared, *“Lack of time management was the reason for my failure (in the LET) because I had a job and I was also preparing for the examination. What used to happen to me was that because I was tired from work, I rested, and then I'd go back to work the next day, to the point that there were days when I really couldn't review. As the LET approached, I really felt lacking in preparation because it seemed like my life just revolved around work.”*

The competing priorities, particularly the physical exhaustion from work, affected the participant's ability to review. After a full workday, rest often took precedence over study, which ultimately compromised preparation for the LET. Another participant reflected, *“I also had a problem with time management because the hours of my duty at work were only a short gap from the time I needed to be at the review center. So, I really lacked time to rest, and after attending the review center, I would go back to work, leaving me with limited time for review.”*

While most participants chose to take the LET shortly after graduation to gain the benefits of a professional license early on, working while preparing for the licensure examination introduced a significant challenge. Graduates often prioritized securing employment as soon as possible, and, as noted by another participant, *“I also needed to work to be able to file for the examination (LET filing), but after work, I was tired, so I prioritized resting over reviewing.”*

The willingness of the participants to review for the LET was evident, but their physical exhaustion from entering the workforce—especially when working in non-teaching jobs—diminished their capacity for thorough preparation. Time management is crucial for academic success, particularly in high-stakes assessments like the LET, as it allows for meaningful preparation while balancing other life demands [25]. One participant added, *“My job after graduation wasn't teaching, and I immediately started working, which made me really tired always.”*

Securing employment after graduation is a significant milestone, and while it is ideal for new graduates to work in a field aligned with their degree, the limited availability of opportunities often leads them to accept jobs outside their field. The transition from education to employment requires more than just obtaining a job—it involves adapting to the work environment and meeting its demands. The challenge of assimilating into an organizational culture and responding to job expectations can further complicate this transition [26]. Thus, it can be inferred that while Social Studies educators have a strong goal of passing the LET, the necessity of contributing to the workforce and fulfilling immediate financial needs can compel them to prioritize work, even if unrelated to their degree, over their exam preparation.

3.2. Challenges during the Licensure Examination for Teachers

The Social Studies educators encountered challenges while answering the LET aside from the struggles they faced during the preparation period. The emerging themes are physical exhaustion and mentally bothered.

Physical Exhaustion

Maintaining good physical health is crucial during the licensure examination as it directly impacts cognitive performance and overall well-being. A prospective professional's physical health plays a vital role in their ability to focus, retain information, and effectively tackle the challenges presented by the exam. Preparing holistically for the LET involves not only understanding review materials but also conditioning the body through adequate rest and a healthy diet. However, Participant V faced a problem related to food consumption during the examination. She shared: *“I wasn't informed that we could bring food to the testing site. I thought it was prohibited, so I didn't bring any. And of course, the LET lasts the whole day, so I found myself in a situation where I couldn't answer properly because I was hungry and thirsty. It's really hard to think when you're hungry.”*

The lack of awareness of Participant V about the examination policy on bringing food to the testing site resulted in hunger, which negatively affected her cognitive abilities. Hunger can impair judgment and cognitive performance, hindering the ability to concentrate, solve problems, and make accurate decisions during tasks [27].

Hunger can divert attention away from the task at hand, making it more difficult for test-takers to focus on answering questions efficiently. Similarly, Participant VI faced another challenge during the examination, sharing: *“Perhaps due to exhaustion from work, I fell asleep during the professional education portion, and it lasted for almost 30 minutes. That’s why I also hurried in answering, and I didn’t really choose carefully which ones were correct; I just wanted to finish.”*

The sleep deprivation of Participant VI was caused by working late into the night before the examination, leaving him with only a short period of rest. As a result, he struggled to stay alert during the exam, rushing through questions without carefully considering his answers. Adequate sleep before an exam is essential for optimal cognitive function, and lack of rest can significantly affect performance. Sleep deprivation increases the likelihood of poor performance, as it impairs concentration and decision-making abilities. Participant IV also encountered a similar issue due to inadequate rest the night before the examination. She recounted: *“On the actual exam day, I already felt tired in answering the first part of the examination due to the lack of securing a hotel accommodation a night before the examination and I fell asleep during the Professional Education section. I just had to wake up with the help of the person beside me.”*

In this case, lack of proper sleep and accommodation of Participant IV contributed to exhaustion during the examination, leading her to fall asleep while answering the Professional Education section. As noted, sleep-related difficulties are common before and during exams and can affect performance significantly [28]. Social Studies educators in particular are more likely to experience these challenges due to competing priorities such as work commitments, financial and logistical concerns, and the stress of preparing for a high-stakes examination.

The combination of physical exhaustion and poor time management due to competing demands can severely affect an examinee’s ability to prepare adequately and perform well on the LET. It is crucial for Social Studies educators to address both their physical health, including proper nutrition and sleep, and their time management to ensure they are fully prepared for the examination.

Mentally Bothered

Social Studies educators encountered struggles related to their mental well-being while answering the LET. Acing this high-stakes assessment stands as a primary goal for many graduates of TEIs. The degree of social pressure placed upon them can lead to various difficulties. Furthermore, the short preparation period for the LET during their first attempt can be physically and mentally draining due to the unpredictable nature of the examination. The LET encompasses a vast scope of topics, ranging from general knowledge to pedagogical and content knowledge. Consequently, examinees are often compelled to memorize various review materials and develop test-taking strategies. The intense pressure to study extensively within a limited time frequently leads to high levels of stress and mental blocks [29]. Participant I emphasized: *“Ah, I experienced mental block, especially in the specialization part of the LET. Like I mentioned, during the review, I really lacked focus and didn’t learn the strategies taught in the review center on how to properly answer the exam. I experienced a mental block back then, where I kept asking myself, ‘I don’t know.’”*

The lack of preparation left participants unprepared for the test questions, triggering mental blocks. Mental block occurs when unprepared individuals face unfamiliar or challenging questions during an assessment [30]. Insufficient review and preparation exacerbate this pressure, compromising cognition and making it difficult to recall knowledge acquired during review. In the context of the LET, experiencing mental blocks can severely hinder test-takers from effectively utilizing their knowledge. Persistent mental blocks during learning activities significantly affect academic success by limiting the ability to apply critical thinking skills efficiently [31]. Participant III shared a similar experience: *“It was really intense, my mind was confused (whether I would pass the LET because of the lack of review) during that time, so I really struggled with the exam. My problems seemed to reach their peak, which caused me to have a mental block. I didn’t know the answers and I couldn’t even understand the questions.”*

Mental block emerged as a significant factor contributing to the unsuccessful performance of aspiring professional teachers in the licensure examination [32]. The findings align with research indicating that mental resilience serves as a predictor for success in high-stakes assessments [33]. Mental well-being is critical for maintaining focus and effectively responding to assessment questions. The experiences of Social Studies educators further illustrate how mental blocks affected their LET performance, often stemming from inadequate preparation practices. As a result, their ability to maximize performance in the examination was compromised, leading to failure during their first attempt. Participant II described her experience: *“Maybe even before the results are out, I’ve already accepted that I might fail. But there’s still a glimmer of hope that I might pass because you know yourself, right? I know I lacked preparation, so I’m aware of the possible consequences. Until I got the result, of course, there was sadness, but at least I tried.”*

Despite her optimism, she acknowledged the likelihood of failing the LET due to insufficient preparation. This aligns with findings that perceived self-efficacy influences performance in the LET [34]. Hopelessness during the test can significantly impact performance, as it hampers the ability to concentrate on analyzing questions effectively. Fear of failure preoccupies the test-taker’s thoughts, further impairing

performance. Meanwhile, the positive aspiration of Participant II regarding the LET results cannot be dismissed, regardless of the effort exerted during preparation. However, it is essential to note that a positive mindset alone does not guarantee success in the LET. Prospective professionals must complement a positive outlook with effective study habits and thorough preparation to achieve favorable results [35]. Therefore, the lack of readiness left Social Studies educators mentally disturbed while answering the licensure examination, impairing their ability to accurately respond to test questions and ultimately resulting in failure.

The Social Studies educators encountered various challenges that contributed to their unsuccessful attempt to achieve a professional teaching license. These struggles were endured throughout the preparation phase and during the examination proper, making the experience demoralizing for them. However, the taste of failure in the licensure examination can serve as a source of determination, helping educators identify areas of weakness and guiding them toward more effective preparation for future attempts. Academic failures are common in the learning process but do not automatically result in self-motivation to recover without meaningful realizations [36].

4. CONCLUSION

Passing the LET is a pivotal milestone in the professional journey of aspiring educators, as it validates their readiness to meet the demands of the teaching profession and opens doors to diverse career opportunities both in the Philippines and internationally. This achievement signifies not only the mastery of academic knowledge but also the possession of practical teaching competencies needed to deliver high-quality education. The rigorous nature of the examination, which includes a wide array of questions from general knowledge to specific classroom scenarios, ensures that successful candidates are equipped for the multifaceted challenges of the teaching field. However, Social Studies educators often encounter significant hurdles that hinder their success in the LET. To address these challenges, prospective professional teachers must adopt a comprehensive and holistic approach to preparation that focuses on mental, emotional, spiritual and financial well-being. Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) play a critical role in this endeavor by designing and implementing review programs that align with the complexities of the LET. The programs should integrate test-taking strategies, mental resilience-building activities and effective time and stress management techniques to provide candidates with a well-rounded preparation experience.

The findings of this study underscore the compatibility between preparation strategies and the results, emphasizing the need for well-structured programs that lead to successful outcomes in the LET. Moreover, the findings highlight the prospect of advancing research in this area, particularly in exploring innovative approaches to LET preparation and support mechanisms for aspiring educators. Future studies could delve into the long-term impacts of these interventions on the teaching performance of licensed professionals, contributing to the development of more effective programs and strategies that ensure success in licensure examinations and professional practice.

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