



Navigating the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads: Insights from a Multiple Case Study Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative multiple case study investigates the experiences and strategies of National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) passers in their preparation for, administration of, and coping with challenges before, during, and after the exam. The study addresses three research questions: (1) What are the experiences of NQESH passers in the preparation and administration of the examination? (2) How do the NQESH passers cope with the challenges they encountered before and during the examination? (3) What insights and recommendations can the NQESH passers share with aspiring school leaders who plan to take the examination in the future? This study used a qualitative multiple-case study design with three cases of teachers, school heads, and academic heads, utilizing interviews for data collection. The cross-case analysis identified

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several themes: Comprehensive and Structured Preparation, Balancing Multiple Responsibilities, and Support Systems and Motivation. Passers emphasized setting priorities and time management, seeking social support and encouragement, and mental and emotional resilience. Structured preparation and time management, understanding strengths, continuous learning and professional development, and commitment, patience, and self-motivation were crucial. The study contributes to educational leadership by providing practical recommendations for aspiring school leaders, such as structured preparation, continuous learning, and fostering commitment and self-motivation, to enhance their readiness for the NQESH examination.

Keywords: National qualifying examination for school heads; multiple case study; davao del norte.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) is a way to select school leaders in the Philippines. Passing it is a must for those who want to be Principal I or Assistant Principal in public elementary or secondary schools. It tests if candidates have the skills needed to lead a school, like strategic leadership and managing resources. These skills are outlined in the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH).

However, NQESH is renowned for its difficulty and low passing rates. In 2021, only 36.93% of the 5,954 examinees qualified for the next stage in the Principal I selection process. The exam, which includes conceptual and situational critical thinking questions, utilizes the Rasch Model to compute question difficulty and candidate ability on the same scale [1-9]. It also employs the Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes (SOLO) taxonomy to assess learning outcomes. For those who didn't qualify, 35.10% were advised to undergo coaching and mentoring, while 28% were recommended to undertake an intensive School Heads Development Program (SHDP) before retaking the exam (DM_100, s. 2022).

The Rasch Model, named after Danish mathematician Georg Rasch, is a psychometric model used for analyzing data from assessments such as tests and questionnaires. It estimates both the difficulty of test items and the ability of individuals to take the test, ensuring one-dimensionality and measurement invariance, which allows for fair comparisons across different groups (Rasch, 1960). On the other hand, the SOLO (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome) taxonomy, developed by John Biggs and Kevin Collis, is a framework for evaluating the complexity of students' learning outcomes

[10-14]. It progresses through five levels: pre-structural, uni-structural, multi-structural, relational, and extended abstract, each representing increasing complexity and depth of understanding [15].

The difficulty level of the NQESH is not unique to the Philippines. In the international setting, many countries also have similar examinations or assessments for selecting and appointing school leaders, such as the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) in England, the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA) in the United States, the Principal Certification Examination (PCE) in Canada, and the School Leadership Assessment (SLA) in Singapore (Nguyen & Williams, 2019). These examinations or assessments also have rigorous standards and criteria that reflect the complex and demanding roles and responsibilities of school heads in the 21st century [16-19]. They also require candidates to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and competencies in various aspects of school leadership, such as vision and mission, curriculum and instruction, school improvement, staff development, school culture, stakeholder engagement, resource management, and ethical and legal issues [20]

The research gap that this study intends to address is the lack of empirical evidence on the experiences and strategies of the passers in the preparation and taking of the NQESH. While some studies have explored the attributions and perceptions of the NQESH passers in other divisions or regions, there is no existing study that has specifically investigated the cases of the NQESH passers in the DepEd Division of Davao del Norte.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this multiple case study is to thoroughly explore the experiences of individuals who have successfully passed the National

Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH). By focusing specifically on those who have overcome the hurdles posed by this rigorous examination, the study aims to uncover the distinct challenges faced by NQESH passers throughout the preparation, administration, and post-examination phases. Additionally, the research endeavors to identify the opportunities that arose from these challenges, shedding light on the strategies and coping mechanisms employed by successful candidates. Through a nuanced examination of the experiences of NQESH passers, the study seeks to provide valuable insights and recommendations to aspiring school leaders who plan to undertake the examination in the future, thereby contributing to the enhancement of educational leadership practices within the Philippines.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of NQESH passers in the preparation and administration of the examination?
2. How do the NQESH passers cope with the challenges they encountered before and during the examination?
3. What insights and recommendations can the NQESH passers share with aspiring school leaders who plan to take the examination in the future?

1.4 Theoretical Lens

This study is anchored on the Expectancy-Value Theory, a psychological framework developed by John Atkinson [21] that posits individuals' motivation and behavior are influenced by their expectations of success and the perceived value of the pursued task or goal. According to this theory, motivation is a product of two key components: expectancy, which reflects an individual's belief in their ability to succeed, and value, encompassing the perceived importance or worth of the task at hand [21,22].

In the context of the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH), applying the Expectancy-Value Theory allows for a nuanced exploration of how school leaders experience the preparation and administration of the examination, as well as how they navigate the challenges encountered throughout the process. By examining the expectancy component, this study seeks to understand the extent to which NQESH passers believed in their capability to succeed in the examination. This

perspective sheds light on the cognitive processes and self-perceptions that influence their engagement with the preparation and administration phases [22].

Furthermore, the value component of the Expectancy-Value Theory is integral in unraveling the motivations of NQESH passers. The theory contends that individuals are more likely to be motivated when they perceive a task as valuable and meaningful [22]. In the case of the NQESH, this could involve assessing the intrinsic and extrinsic values associated with obtaining the qualification, such as personal fulfillment, professional advancement, and contributions to the educational sector.

The challenges faced by NQESH passers, encompassing the period before and during the examination, are also examined through the lens of the Expectancy-Value Theory. Understanding how individuals cope with challenges is crucial for elucidating the motivational processes at play. This theoretical framework allows for an exploration of the coping mechanisms employed by NQESH passers, providing insights into how their expectations and values contribute to resilience and adaptability in the face of difficulties [22].

The Theoretical implications of this study highlight the importance of understanding the motivational processes of NQESH passers through the lens of the Expectancy-Value Theory. To implement these findings in practice, the Department of Education could develop targeted support programs that enhance both the expectancy and value components for aspiring school leaders. This could involve creating preparatory workshops that build candidates' confidence in their abilities and underscore the significance of their roles in the educational sector. Potential challenges in implementing these recommendations include resource constraints and resistance to change among current staff. Addressing these barriers might require phased implementation and continuous feedback mechanisms to ensure the effectiveness of the new policies.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study holds significant implications for various stakeholders, particularly benefiting School Principals, Aspiring School Principals, and Policy Makers in the Department of Education.

School Principals: By exploring the experiences of NQESH passers, current school leaders can gain valuable insights into effective strategies for navigating the demanding examination process. Understanding the challenges and opportunities encountered by successful candidates provides School Principals with a nuanced perspective on the competencies and skills necessary for effective school leadership.

Aspiring School Principals: By offering a detailed examination of the experiences of those who have successfully navigated the NQESH, the research provides aspiring leaders with a roadmap for effective preparation and a clearer understanding of the demands they may face.

Policy Makers in the Department of Education: By gaining insights into the challenges faced by NQESH passers, policymakers can tailor policies and interventions to address specific areas of need.

1.5.1 Definition of terms

In this study, the following terms are defined by their operational definition.

Experience: The firsthand accounts and observations of NQESH passers regarding their journey through the examination.

Strategies: The specific methods and approaches employed by NQESH passers to prepare for and succeed in the examination.

National Qualifying Examination for School Heads: Abbreviated as NQESH, this refers to a standardized examination conducted in the Philippines. Also known as the Principals' Test, it serves as a crucial mechanism for selecting and appointing school heads within the public education sector.

NQESH Passers: This term refers to individuals who have completed and passed the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads. In the context of this study, these individuals have demonstrated the proficiency and competencies required to assume leadership roles as school heads.

1.6 Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

This multiple case study aimed to provide a comprehensive exploration of the views and experiences of NQESH passers, with a specific focus on the responses and experiences of nine (9) participants. However, it is essential to

acknowledge certain limitations and delimitations inherent in the research design.

The study deliberately delimited its scope to the perspectives of NQESH passers, specifically concentrating on the experiences of nine participants. The intention was to gain in-depth insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by this select group, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. The data collection was confined to the results of in-depth interviews, providing a qualitative lens to the participants' experiences. While this approach allowed for rich, detailed narratives, it also meant that certain aspects of the participants' experiences might not have been fully captured through this method alone.

A notable limitation is the challenge of generalizing the findings to the broader population of NQESH passers. The study recognizes that the perspectives shared by the nine participants may not be representative of the entire population, given the diversity of experiences among NQESH takers.

While this study provides valuable insights, it has certain limitations that must be considered in the broader context of educational policy and practice. Firstly, the study's findings are based on a specific sample from the Davao del Norte division, which may not be generalizable to other regions. Additionally, potential biases inherent in self-reported data could affect the reliability of the findings. These limitations suggest that while the strategies identified are useful, they should be adapted carefully to different contexts, considering local educational policies and resources. Future research could explore similar examinations in other cultural settings to validate and expand upon these findings.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This qualitative research employed an investigative methodology to explore various aspects of individuals who passed the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads in the Division of Davao Del Norte. Employing a qualitative approach was imperative to identify and delineate the diverse cases and realities of NQESH passers. The research method involved data analysis, coding, interpretation, personal reflections, and past research, culminating in a report that incorporated personal biases and a flexible structure [23].

Using a multiple-case design, this study aimed to provide specific descriptions of NQESH passers' experiences while incorporating constructs and a literature review. Yin [24] highlighted the importance of multiple cases in reinforcing outcomes by replicating styles and increasing the robustness of findings through literal and theoretical replications. The selection of cases was based on analytical rather than statistical generalizations, providing substantial evidence to support the findings.

Case studies employed various data collection techniques such as interviews, questionnaires, observation, archives, and records. The researcher purposefully selected NQESH passers to share their realities, employing utmost variation sampling to document variations and construct a purposeful sample based on specific criteria [25]; (Kuzel, 1999; Vohra, 2016).

The choice of the multiple case study methodological analysis was justified by its ability to offer a holistic view of NQESH, capture emergent properties, address exploratory inquiries, and facilitate generalizations (Gummesson, 1991; Hartley, 1994); [24]; (Mohd Noor, 2008). Examining three distinct cases - plain teachers, school heads, and academic heads who took the examination - allowed for an in-depth exploration of a unique phenomenon experienced by select individuals.

In-depth interviews were conducted with nine NQESH passers to elicit comprehensive descriptions of their experiences and perspectives. This methodological choice aimed to explore their viewpoints and challenges thoroughly, ensuring a nuanced understanding of their journey through the NQESH examination process.

This qualitative case study method facilitated an in-depth examination of a phenomenon within its context, utilizing various data sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding from multiple perspectives (Yin, 2011). The research process aligned with Mack et al.'s [26] framework for qualitative research, emphasizing systematic inquiry, evidence collection, and relevance to broader contexts beyond immediate study limitations.

2.2 Research Participants and the Local of the Study

In this multiple case study, participants were drawn from the NQESH passers within the DepED Division of Davao del Norte. The

selection process employed purposive sampling; a common strategy that identifies participants based on preselected criteria relevant to the research question. This approach involves selecting participants based on specific criteria that are directly relevant to the research question, ensuring that the selected individuals possess the characteristics necessary to provide rich and detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

The criteria for selecting participants in this study included passing the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) and representing diverse roles within the educational system, such as teachers, school heads, and academic heads. By choosing participants who had successfully passed the NQESH, the study aimed to capture the experiences and strategies of those who had navigated the challenges associated with preparing for and taking this rigorous examination. The purposive sampling strategy was chosen to ensure a comprehensive exploration of the different perspectives and experiences of NQESH passers.

The sample size was determined iteratively, following the principle of saturation, which occurs when new data no longer provide additional insights into the research questions. This iterative approach to determining sample size helps ensure that the collected data are both sufficient and robust for analysis. According to Creswell [23], a minimum of five participants within each case is generally adequate to achieve the study's objectives and extract essential themes for cross-case analysis. To further ensure the richness of the data, participants were selected from various schools within the DepEd Division of Davao del Norte. This geographical focus allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the local context and specific challenges faced by NQESH passers in this region. The study sought to include a diverse range of participants to capture the broad spectrum of experiences and strategies employed by different educational roles.

Each participant was provided with formal informed consent, a crucial step in qualitative research methodology. Ensuring that they were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any point, was essential. To safeguard their confidentiality, codes were used in place of their actual names.

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

The data-gathering process for this study followed a structured approach comprising several steps, as delineated.

Firstly, the study adhered to Creswell's five-step framework for qualitative data collection, recognizing its significance in impact evaluation by elucidating processes behind observed outcomes and assessing changes in individuals' perceptions of their well-being.

The initial step involved seeking permission to conduct the study, which necessitated a clear understanding of the research's nature and purpose. As such, the researcher obtained approval from the Schools Division Superintendent in the Division of Davao Del Norte. To ensure voluntary participation, assurances were provided regarding participants' rights to withdraw from the study at any point.

The subsequent step entailed purposively selecting participants and sites conducive to comprehensively understanding the phenomenon under investigation. Participants were chosen from various schools in Davao del Norte to represent diverse perspectives.

Next, the researcher identified data from multiple sources relevant to understanding the study's objectives, aligning with the articulated evaluation questions and information requirements. Following data identification, protocols such as observational and interview protocols were employed to administer and record data. Creswell emphasized the importance of developing protocols for recording information to ensure consistency and accuracy in data collection.

Additionally, the researcher remained cognizant of potential field issues that could compromise data integrity or lead to premature departure from the field. Sensitivity to individuals and sites was prioritized throughout the data collection process to foster trust and facilitate open communication.

Drawing from Yin's (1989) framework, the study incorporated various forms of data collection, including documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical activities. For interviews, key informants were briefed on the study's purpose and provided consent forms for confirmation. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded, and subsequently transcribed

for analysis, adhering to ethical guidelines and ensuring thorough documentation of participants' perspectives.

2.4 Data Analysis

This study employed both content analysis and thematic analysis for data analysis. Qualitative content analysis, as described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004), involves systematically coding and categorizing the manifest content of data to identify themes and patterns. Thematic analysis, as advocated by MacQueen and Namey (2012), involves identifying and describing implicit and explicit ideas within the data. Codes were developed to represent themes and applied to the data for analysis. To ensure reliability and validity, multiple coders reviewed the data independently, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Additionally, member checking and triangulation were used to enhance the credibility of the findings.

Thematic analysis, as advocated by MacQueen and Namey (2012), requires more involvement and interpretation from the researcher. It focuses on identifying and describing implicit and explicit ideas within the data, known as themes. In this study, codes were developed to represent the themes and were applied to the raw data for subsequent analysis. Thematic analysis places a greater emphasis on reliability due to the interpretative nature of coding and theme identification, making it a commonly used method in qualitative research.

Data from interviews were transcribed, with statements related to the topic extracted and grouped into core ideas reflecting specific thoughts. Major themes reflecting various aspects of the phenomenon were then identified from participants' responses and analyzed about the research questions. Transcription played a crucial role in qualitative language data analysis, representing an interactive event.

Responses and statements from participants were encoded and submitted for proper coding of essential themes and thematic statements. Within-case and cross-case analyses were conducted, with each case analyzed comprehensively before synthesizing data across cases to identify essential themes and thematic statements.

In identifying study themes, important phrases from transcripts were identified as thematic

statements, and grouped to determine patterns and connections. Regrouping reduced essential themes into fewer items, with numeration indicating the frequency of thematic statements or emergent themes in transcripts. Themes were considered significant if highlighted by at least two participants in a group, excluding those occurring only once.

2.5 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework utilized both content analysis and thematic analysis to analyze the collected data. Following Graneheim and Lundman's approach, the content analysis involved a systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content in the data, allowing for the identification of conflicting opinions and unresolved issues regarding concepts, procedures, and interpretation. Thematic analysis, as advocated by MacQueen and Namey (2012), required more involvement and interpretation from the researcher. It focused on identifying and describing implicit and explicit ideas within the data, known as themes. Codes were developed to represent these themes and applied to the raw data for subsequent analysis. The thematic analysis emphasized reliability due to the interpretative nature of coding and theme identification. Transcriptions of interviews were thoroughly reviewed, with statements related to the research topic extracted and grouped into core ideas reflecting specific thoughts. Major themes were identified from participants' responses and analyzed about the research questions. This process involved within-case and cross-case analyses, with each case analyzed comprehensively before synthesizing data across cases to identify essential themes and thematic statements. Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness included triangulation, member checking, and maintaining an audit trail. Triangulation involves using multiple data sources and methods to cross-verify findings. Member checking allowed participants to review and validate the findings. An audit trail documented the research process, enhancing the study's credibility and transparency.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section delves into the experiences of three distinct cases of individuals who passed the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) in the Philippines. These cases include a Teacher NQESH Passer, a School Head NQESH Passer, and an Academic Head

NQESH Passer. Each case provides insights into their preparation process, challenges faced, coping strategies employed, and recommendations for aspiring school leaders. Additionally, a cross-case analysis is conducted to identify common themes across the cases, shedding light on the various strategies utilized by NQESH passers. The analysis draws on Creswell's [23] definition of cross-case analysis, emphasizing the examination of patterns across multiple cases to uncover shared themes or variations.

The findings reveal several common themes among NQESH passers, including the importance of structured preparation, effective time management, balancing multiple responsibilities, leveraging support systems, and maintaining mental resilience. These themes are explored in detail, highlighting the strategies employed by NQESH passers to navigate the challenges of exam preparation and administration. Furthermore, insights and recommendations are provided based on the experiences of the participants, offering valuable guidance for aspiring school leaders planning to take the NQESH in the future.

Moreover, this segment presents the analysis of the cases, each offering unique perspectives on their journey to passing the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH). The first case consists of Teachers NQESH Passers, individuals who have served as classroom teachers, holding positions of Teacher III and Master Teacher I for more than five years. Their backgrounds in classroom instruction and educational pedagogy equipped them with the necessary expertise to navigate the exam successfully. The second case encompasses School Head NQESH Passers, composed of experienced Head Teachers who have acted as school principals for over two years. With firsthand experience in school leadership and administration, they brought practical insights into the exam's requirements. Lastly, the third case comprises Academic Head NQESH Passers, individuals with extensive experience as academic heads of large school departments for more than five years. Their backgrounds in academic leadership provided them with valuable insights into curriculum development and educational policy, enhancing their preparedness for the exam. Together, these cases offer diverse perspectives rooted in their respective roles within the education sector, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of preparing for and passing the NQESH.

3.1 Case 1 Analysis (Teacher NQESH Passer)

This section presents the case analysis of Teacher NQESH Passers, outlining their experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights gained from preparing for the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH). Teachers emphasized the importance of comprehensive preparation, effective time management, and robust support systems in achieving success. Their strategies ranged from setting priorities and managing time to seeking social support and relying on intrinsic motivation and faith. These insights underscore the significance of structured preparation, self-awareness, commitment, patience, and faith in aspiring school leaders' journeys toward examination success and professional development. Through their experiences and recommendations, these teachers offer valuable insights into the multifaceted process of preparing for and succeeding in the NQESH examination, highlighting the qualities and strategies essential for effective education leadership.

3.1.1 Experiences of case 1 (Teacher NQESH Passers)

Teachers preparing for the NQESH exam emphasize the importance of comprehensive preparation, effective time management, and robust support systems. Teachers emphasized the need for detailed study plans, effective time management to balance commitments, and reliance on support from family and intrinsic motivation. These themes illustrate the essential factors in navigating the rigorous preparation process and achieving success in the examination.

3.1.1.1 Thorough and organized planning

The experiences of teachers who passed the NQESH examination underscore the importance of thorough and organized planning. Candidates implemented strategies such as creating detailed study schedules, understanding the exam format, and participating in targeted review sessions. These methods were crucial for covering the extensive material and improving test-taking skills, thereby increasing their likelihood of success.

"Preparing for the NQESH examination requires a comprehensive approach to cover all the necessary topics and improve test-taking skills such as creating a study

schedule, understanding the exam format or the type of test to be taken, joining review classes, and staying focused on one of my goals which is to become one of the competent principals in the Department of Education-Division of Davao del Norte." (E-SCH)

"Some of the strategies to manage my time effectively while preparing for the examination are the following; creating my study schedule, setting my priorities, and focusing on one of my goals in terms of my personal career plan." (E-SCH)

"Engage in self-review sessions: Installing and utilizing NQESH aligned mobile application, Reading NQESH reviewers, Time management, Preparing and religiously following a timetable of tasks to be accomplished within the day." (MT-SCH)

"In order to ensure a thorough preparation for the NQESH exam, I made use of various study resources, attended review sessions, and adhered to a strict study timetable. These practices helped me cover all the necessary topics and significantly improved my confidence and test-taking abilities." (T1-SCH)

Research by Zimmerman [27] emphasizes that setting clear goals and adhering to a structured study plan leads to higher academic success. This finding aligns with the strategies employed by NQESH candidates, reinforcing the significance of comprehensive preparation in achieving examination success.

3.1.1.2 Balancing commitments and managing time

Balancing commitments and managing time effectively are critical challenges for teachers preparing for the NQESH examination. Candidates often need to juggle their study schedules with work responsibilities and personal lives. Effective time management and support from family play crucial roles in overcoming these challenges, helping candidates to maintain focus and prioritize their exam preparation.

"For me, the most challenging time during the preparation phase is time management that is balancing my study time with my other commitments such as work and my personal life because during that time I also worked as a classroom teacher in the Department of

Education when I decided to take the NQESH for the first time." (E-SCH)

"The support from family to the extent that the majority of my schedules were prioritized, sacrificing our family schedules." (MT-SCH)

"Managing my time was essential; I had to create a detailed schedule that balanced my teaching duties, family obligations, and study time to ensure I was fully prepared for the exam." (T1-SCH)

Research by Claessens, Van Eerde, Rutte, and Roe (2007) highlights that effective time management is linked to improved academic performance and reduced stress. This finding supports the experiences of Teacher NQESH passers, emphasizing the importance of balancing various commitments and receiving support from family to successfully prepare for high-stakes exams.

3.1.1.3 Encouragement and support

Encouragement and resources are essential components for teachers preparing for the NQESH examination. Intrinsic motivation, spiritual support, and familial assistance play significant roles in sustaining candidates' efforts and determination. These support systems help candidates remain focused, manage stress, and maintain a balanced approach to their rigorous study schedules.

" I could say that the most helpful resources or support system during my preparation was my intrinsic motivation that I could be one of the successful principal test passers in Region XI, Division of Davao del Norte." (E-SCH)

"God's Divine support." (MT-SCH)

"The support from family to the extent that the majority of my schedules were prioritized, sacrificing our family schedules." (MT-SCH)

Deci and Ryan [28] emphasize the critical role of intrinsic motivation and support systems in achieving academic success. Their research indicates that individuals who possess intrinsic motivation and robust support networks are more likely to persevere and excel in challenging tasks. This finding aligns with the experiences of NQESH candidates, who underscore the importance of motivation and support in their successful exam preparation. By maintaining a strong sense of internal drive and leveraging support from family, peers, and mentors, these candidates navigate the rigors of the NQESH with resilience and determination.

3.1.2 Coping mechanism of case 1 (Teacher NQESH Passers)

The National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) is a critical and challenging step for teachers aspiring to become school heads. Coping with the various challenges associated with this examination requires effective strategies and mechanisms. From managing time and setting priorities to seeking social support and relying on intrinsic motivation and faith, NQESH passers employed diverse approaches to navigate the pressures before, during, and after the exam. The following themes highlight the key coping mechanisms as expressed by the teachers themselves.

Table 1. Emerging Themes of Case 1 (Teacher NQESH Passers)

Case/pseudonym	Research questions	Emerg ed themes
Case 1 (Teacher NQESH Passers)	What are the experiences of NQESH passers in the preparation and administration of the examination?	Thorough and Organize Planning Balancing Commitments and Managing Time Encouragement and Support
	How do the NQESH passers cope with the challenges they encounter before, during, and after the examination?	Prioritization and Scheduling Peer Support and Motivation Intrinsic Motivation and Faith
	What insights and recommendations can the NQESH passers share with aspiring school leaders who plan to take the examination in the future?	Organized Planning and Time Structuring Competency Assessment Devotion and Endurance

3.1.2.1 Prioritization and scheduling

Setting priorities and scheduling were essential for the teacher NQESH passers to handle their responsibilities effectively. These strategies enabled them to balance their workloads and focus on their career goals. Teachers highlighted the importance of careful planning and maintaining focus amidst various demands. This approach helped them manage the complexities of their personal and professional lives while preparing for the exam.

"The most significant challenge I encountered before the NQESH examination was managing my workloads & responsibilities, then peer & family expectations. I overcome it by setting my priorities between work and my future career plans and focusing on my personal goals." (E- SCH)

"It took me 3 years to successfully submit my NQESH application (1st-late submission; 2nd- failure to comply with 1 step in the online application; 3rd-successful NQESH application)." (MT-SCH)

"Proper time management, a lot of preparations, to have a focus on my goals, to have self-confidence, to be patient at all times and that life is a continuous process of learning." (E- SCH)

Setting priorities and managing time effectively are crucial skills for success in high-stakes assessments. These skills enable individuals to balance various responsibilities, such as professional duties, personal commitments, and academic preparation, thereby maintaining focus on their primary objectives (MacCann et al., 2020). For candidates preparing for the NQESH, this approach ensures that they can systematically allocate their time and resources to cover the extensive study material required for the exam. By creating detailed schedules, setting clear goals, and identifying high-priority tasks, candidates can optimize their study sessions and enhance their productivity. This method not only helps in managing the academic workload but also reduces stress by providing a structured framework to navigate the complexities of exam preparation. Consequently, effective time management and prioritization are instrumental in helping candidates successfully integrate their preparation for the NQESH with other aspects of

their lives, ensuring a balanced and focused approach to achieving their goals.

3.1.2.2 Peer support and motivation

Peer support and motivation from family and friends were important for NQESH passers. This support provided emotional and practical assistance, helping them stay motivated and focused. Teachers noted that encouragement from close connections helped alleviate the stress associated with exam preparation and provided a network of reassurance and motivation, enabling them to maintain their focus and confidence.

"Seeking social support such as encouragement from family and very close friends, and positive visualization that I could pass the test and achieve one of my dreams in terms of my career path." (E- SCH)

"The support from family to the extent that the majority of my schedules were prioritized, sacrificing our family schedules." (MT-SCH)

"Believing in myself that passing the examination would be my ticket to hold a school." (MT-SCH)

Social support systems are crucial in providing emotional, motivational, and practical assistance, significantly impacting one's ability to manage stress and achieve goals (Haslam et al., 2018). This support network plays a vital role in helping individuals stay resilient and persistent, particularly during the demanding preparation for the NQESH.

3.1.2.3 Intrinsic motivation and faith

Intrinsic motivation and faith were significant driving forces for many NQESH passers. Teachers emphasized their commitment to their career goals and their reliance on personal determination and spiritual belief to maintain their motivation throughout the process. A strong sense of purpose and belief in themselves, often supported by faith, provided the necessary drive to persevere.

"This is my motivation for why I took the test, passing the NQESH exam is important to me so that I could be able to advance my career and make a positive impact in the school or community if ever given the chance to manage a school after passing the NQESH." (E- SCH).

"I need to believe in myself that I could do it with the help of my Almighty GOD. That was one of my greatest motivations." (E- SCH)

"Possessing self-determination, zeal, and focus on the goal to pass the exam." (MT-SCH)

"Prepare your mind, body, and spirit to nurture resilience in achieving your goal." (MT-SCH)

Intrinsic motivation, driven by personal goals and internal rewards, is a critical factor in sustaining long-term efforts and overcoming challenges (Legault, 2020). For NQESH passers, this intrinsic drive, coupled with faith, provided the resilience and determination needed to succeed in the examination and advance in their careers.

3.1.3 Insights of Case 1 (Teacher NQESH Passers)

Successful NQESH teacher passers have valuable insights and recommendations for aspiring school leaders preparing for this examination. Their experiences underscore the importance of structured preparation, understanding personal and professional strengths, and maintaining a commitment fueled by patience and faith. The following themes encapsulate the key insights shared by these teachers.

3.1.3.1 Organized planning and time structuring

Structured preparation and efficient time management are crucial for success in the NQESH. Teachers emphasized the need for early and organized study plans, consistent efforts, and balancing study with work and other responsibilities. Their insights highlight that starting preparations early and adhering to a well-organized schedule can significantly enhance one's readiness for the examination.

"Start preparation earlier, implement a more structured study plan, seek additional support or resources, stay consistent and persistent in your career plans, and above all, trust GOD that He can make a difference in your life if you believe in HIM." (E- SCH)

"One of the strategies I did was setting my targets clear. Setting what particular task that I need to accomplish in a day so I could

manage my time for work and study and thinking of my future career plans." (E- SCH)

"Manage your time wisely, efficiently, and effectively." (MT-SCH)

Effective time management and organized preparation are critical components for achieving success in competitive exams. By setting clear goals and maintaining a consistent study schedule, candidates can better manage their time and improve their performance (Sahu, 2020).

3.1.3.2 Competency assessment

Understanding personal strengths and weaknesses and focusing on professional development are essential insights shared by NQESH passers. Teachers stressed the importance of self-awareness, continuous learning, and expanding professional networks. These elements help in honing leadership skills and ensuring alignment with educational policies and practices.

"The valuable insights I gained from my experience of preparing for and taking the NQESH examination is understanding my strengths and weaknesses, developing my self-study skills, and enhancing my professional networks." (E- SCH)

"It took me years to nurture my desire to become one of the school heads in the division. My enrollment in doctoral studies has helped me a lot to sustain my desire, honed my heart, and sharpen my knowledge on the concepts of leading and managing a school." (MT-SCH)

"If you are already a school head, perform tasks by policies. If you are under the tutelage of a school head, do assigned tasks, and take time to read and refer to policies for alignment and confirmation." (MT-SCH)

Professional development and self-awareness are pivotal for effective leadership. Continuous learning and understanding one's strengths and weaknesses can significantly enhance a leader's ability to manage educational settings successfully [29].

3.1.3.3 Devotion and endurance

Teachers highlighted the importance of staying focused on their goals, being patient throughout

the process, and having faith in their journey. These qualities help maintain motivation and resilience during the demanding preparation for the NQESH.

"Just focus on their goals and priorities in life. To be a leader requires commitment, a lot of time and focus." (E- SCH)

"It taught me patience and being dependent on what God has planned for my career." (MT-SCH)

"Ask, pray, and work on what your heart desires and you will succeed." (MT-SCH)

"Remember to prepare, keep, nurture, focus and pray on what you dreamed to happen in your career." (MT-SCH)

Commitment, patience, and faith are essential attributes for successful leadership. These qualities enable individuals to remain dedicated and resilient, ensuring they can overcome challenges and achieve their professional goals (Northouse, 2018).

3.2 Case 2 Analysis (School Head NQESH Passer)

This section presents the case analysis of Case 2, focusing on School Head NQESH Passers. These participants, who have successfully navigated the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH), offer valuable insights into their preparation strategies, challenges faced, and lessons learned. Their

experiences shed light on the multifaceted journey of aspiring educational leaders, providing practical recommendations and valuable perspectives for future candidates.

3.2.1 Experiences of Case 2 (School Head NQESH Passers)

The National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) is a significant milestone for educators aspiring to leadership positions within the education sector. School heads who have successfully passed the examination offer valuable insights into the preparation and administration of this rigorous assessment. Their experiences shed light on the strategies employed, challenges encountered, and lessons learned during the preparation process. The following themes highlight key aspects of their journey, providing guidance and recommendations for future aspirants.

3.2.1.1 Comprehensive and rigorous preparation

Comprehensive and rigorous preparation is paramount for success in the NQESH, as underscored by school heads who have navigated this journey. They highlight the need for a multifaceted study approach, including a thorough review of essential materials, regular practice with past exams, and engagement with supplemental resources like professional publications and workshops. Comparing these findings with existing literature reveals that effective preparation strategies align with

Table 2. Emerging Themes of Case 2 (School Head NQESH Passer)

Case/pseudonym	Research questions	Emerg ed themes
Case 2 (School Head NQESH Passer)	What are the experiences of NQESH passers in the preparation and administration of the examination?	Comprehensive and Rigorous Preparation Managing Various Duties Utilizing Resources and Support Systems
	How do the NQESH passers cope with the challenges they encounter before, during, and after the examination?	Strategic Planning and Time Management Leveraging Networks and Study Techniques Coping with Stress and Technical Challenges
	What insights and recommendations can the NQESH passers share with aspiring school leaders who plan to take the examination in the future?	Early and Strategic Preparation Time Management and Self-care Continuous Learning and Self-motivation

established educational theories, such as those proposed by Fullan [29] and Day and Antonakis [30], which stress the importance of continuous professional development and structured learning.

"In preparing for the NQESH examination, I adopted a multifaceted strategy. Firstly, I thoroughly reviewed the PPSSH, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the assessed competencies. To solidify my knowledge, I diligently practiced past exams and engaged in practice quizzes. Furthermore, I sought out supplemental resources like professional publications and attended relevant workshops to gain deeper insights. Finally, to simulate exam conditions and enhance time management, I completed mock exams under timed constraints." (R-SCH)

"I created a detailed study schedule, allocating specific times for each topic based on complexity. This allowed me to dedicate more time to challenging areas while efficiently covering stronger subjects. Practicing with mock tests further honed my time management skills, helping me develop strategies to tackle questions within the allotted time frame." (R-SCH)

"Engaging with online forums and discussion groups allowed me to access a wealth of additional study materials and insights from fellow educators. This collaborative approach enhanced my understanding of key concepts and provided valuable support throughout my preparation journey." (HTI-SCH)

Comprehensive preparation involving diverse study methods and resources is crucial for mastering the content and format of the NQESH, enabling candidates to approach the examination with confidence and competence [31].

3.2.1.2 Managing various duties

Balancing multiple responsibilities poses a significant challenge for NQESH aspirants, particularly school heads who must manage various professional and personal commitments alongside exam preparation. These educators highlight the need for effective time management and prioritization to navigate the demands of daily work responsibilities while dedicating sufficient time to study and review.

"One key challenge is the breadth of material covered. The NQESH assesses leadership competency across various domains, requiring in-depth knowledge of curriculum, school administration, and educational policy. Balancing this comprehensive review with daily work responsibilities can be demanding." (R-SCH)

"I made my daily 'task to-do' / timeline. I had divided my time for tasks as a school head, as a student, as an NQESH taker, and as a mother. But before the examination, 2 weeks before the examination, I concentrated more on self-reviewing. I refused gatherings and travels to give way to my preparations." (EV-SCH)

"It required careful planning and prioritization to ensure I could dedicate sufficient time and focus to my exam preparation without neglecting my other obligations." (HTI-SCH)

Effective time management and strategic prioritization are essential skills for navigating the complexities of exam preparation alongside professional and personal responsibilities, enabling candidates to maintain focus and achieve optimal performance [32].

3.2.1.3 Utilizing resources and support systems

Utilizing available resources and support systems is vital for effective NQESH preparation, as highlighted by successful school heads. They stress the value of official study materials, collaborative peer networks, and institutional support in boosting their readiness and confidence for the exam. This aligns with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory [33], which underscores the importance of social interactions and collaborative learning in cognitive development. Incorporating such resources into educational policy could involve developing structured peer mentoring programs and providing access to comprehensive study materials and workshops.

"In preparing for the NQESH, I found several resources and support systems to be immensely valuable. Firstly, official NQESH study materials, including practice exams, proved instrumental in familiarizing me with the test format and content areas. Additionally, collaborating with peers who were also preparing for the NQESH fostered

a supportive learning environment where we could share knowledge and motivate each other." (R-SCH)

"I found the assistance, particularly training, given by the leaders in the Division of Davao del Norte as the most helpful one in my preparation." (EV-SCH)

"Engaging with online forums and discussion groups allowed me to access a wealth of additional study materials and insights from fellow educators. This collaborative approach enhanced my understanding of key concepts and provided valuable support throughout my preparation journey." (HTI-SCH)

The effective utilization of resources and support systems, including official study materials and peer collaboration, empowers candidates to enhance their knowledge, skills, and confidence in preparation for the NQESH (Dixon & Worrell, 2019).

3.2.2 Coping mechanism of case 2 (School Head NQESH Passers)

In examining how NQESH (National Qualifying Examination for School Heads) passers cope with the challenges encountered before, during, and after the exam, three prominent themes emerge: strategic planning and time management, utilizing support systems and study techniques, and coping with stress and technical challenges.

3.2.2.1 Strategic planning and time management

School head NQESH passers highlighted the importance of effective study strategies to tackle the extensive exam content. They emphasized the need for detailed study schedules, allocating specific time for each subject area, and prioritizing topics based on their exam weight. For example, one participant mentioned prioritizing NQESH as the exam date approached. Another stressed creating a study schedule that allocated time for each NQESH section.

"The dates of final defense and date of NQESH were considered the most significant challenge...I had overcome those by making a timeline and prioritizing NQESH as it drew closer." (EV-SCH)

"Prioritization and Time Management: I created a study schedule allocating time for each NQESH section, prioritizing areas requiring extra focus." (R-SCH)

"Strategic planning and time management are crucial in preparing for NQESH. I allocated specific study hours for each subject area and adjusted my schedule as the exam date approached." (HTI-SCH)

According to Covey (2013), effective time management is crucial for achieving goals. By prioritizing tasks and allocating time wisely, individuals can optimize their productivity and overcome challenges efficiently. The NQESH passers' emphasis on creating detailed study schedules reflects this principle, demonstrating their proactive approach to managing time effectively.

3.2.2.2 Leveraging networks and study techniques

School Heads recognized the benefits of forming study groups with peers to foster accountability and facilitate knowledge sharing. Through discussions and collaboration, they found support and encouragement throughout the preparation process. One participant noted the advantage of being enrolled in graduate school while preparing for the exam. Another highlighted the encouragement and knowledge-sharing provided by study groups.

"Having enrolled in graduate school and taking the NQESH is similar to hitting two birds with one stone...will give you more chances of reading which is beneficial in taking any test." (EV-SCH)

"Support System: Connecting with fellow examinees or a study group could have provided encouragement and a platform for knowledge sharing." (R-SCH)

"Engaging with a study group for discussions and knowledge-sharing proved invaluable." (HTI-SCH)

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory [33] underscores the importance of social interactions and collaborative learning in cognitive development. By engaging in study groups, NQESH passers not only received academic support but also benefited from collective knowledge and perspectives, enhancing their understanding and preparation for the exam.

3.2.2.3 Coping with stress and technical challenges

School Heads shared their experiences of coping with stress and technical difficulties during the online NQESH examination. They faced challenges like internet lag and system issues but remained composed and adhered to exam regulations. These experiences highlight the need for robust technical support and stress management training as part of the preparation process. Educational policies should address these aspects by ensuring reliable technological infrastructure and providing stress management resources for exam candidates.

"Sometimes I was locked out of the system...I did prepare for this possibility by familiarizing myself with the testing platform beforehand." (R-SCH)

"Before the examination, I started with a silent prayer and focused on reading and answering only...I made sure that I did not waste my time on reading." (EV-SCH)

"By staying composed and following exam guidelines, I was able to navigate these unexpected challenges and complete the NQESH examination." (HTI-SCH)

Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress and coping [34] emphasizes the role of cognitive appraisal and coping strategies in managing stress. The NQESH passers' ability to remain calm and focused during technical challenges aligns with this model, highlighting the importance of adaptive coping mechanisms in overcoming obstacles during high-pressure situations.

3.2.3 Insights of Case 2 (School Head NQESH Passers)

Preparing for the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses early preparation, effective time management, and continuous self-improvement. Academic heads who have successfully passed the exam offer insights into their strategies and experiences, shedding light on key themes that contribute to their success.

3.2.3.1 Early and strategic preparation

The school heads of NQESH passers emphasize the importance of prioritizing early preparation for the exam. They advocate for dedicating ample time to studying the Philippine Professional

Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) framework, enrolling in review courses, and familiarizing themselves with past exam formats to manage time effectively during the actual test.

"Aspiring school leaders aiming to excel in the NQESH exam should prioritize early preparation. Devote ample time to studying the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) framework. Consider enrolling in review courses or joining online communities for focused guidance and practice tests. Familiarize yourself with past exam formats to manage time effectively during the actual test." (SNT)

"If you want to become a dog, walk like a dog. If you want to become a celebrity, practice becoming a celebrity. If you want to become a leader, think, feel, and act like being a leader." (SNT)

"To balance life, preparation cannot be simply done overnight. It takes many years to prepare just to master the knowledge and skills that we are aiming for." (SNT)

"Strike while the iron is hot, have a timetable, and believe in yourself." (SNT)

The emphasis on early and strategic preparation aligns with recent research on the benefits of proactive study strategies (Roussel et al., 2020). By prioritizing early preparation and familiarizing themselves with the exam content, the school heads of NQESH passers optimize their readiness and enhance their performance potential. Moreover, continuous learning fosters professional growth and development, ultimately contributing to success in the NQESH and beyond [35].

3.2.3.2 Time management and self-care

The school heads of NQESH passers stress the importance of effective time management and self-care practices in NQESH preparation. They recommend creating realistic study schedules, prioritizing tasks, and incorporating regular breaks to prevent burnout and enhance focus during studies.

"Create a realistic study schedule that allocates dedicated blocks for studying, working, and leisure. Utilize tools like calendars and planners to maintain consistency." (SNT)

"Prioritization: Identify important tasks in each aspect of your life and prioritize them effectively. Address urgent work demands while scheduling study sessions around them." (SNT)

"Self-care: Don't neglect your well-being. Schedule regular breaks for relaxation and hobbies to prevent burnout. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle will enhance focus and concentration during studies." (SNT)

"I recommend them to read more DepEd memos, take vitamins, and take a lot of sleep before the examination day." (SNT)

The emphasis on time management and self-care aligns with recent research highlighting the importance of well-being in academic success (Aristovnik et al., 2020). By prioritizing self-care and effective time management, the school heads NQESH passers sustain productivity and mitigate burnout, ultimately improving their performance in the NQESH. Moreover, self-care practices contribute to overall well-being and resilience, facilitating success in high-stress environments (Datu & Mateo, 2019).

3.2.3.3 Continuous learning and self-motivation

The school heads of NQESH passers reflect on the importance of continuous learning and self-motivation in their NQESH journey. They emphasize the value of self-reflection, ongoing education opportunities, and intrinsic motivation in driving their success as school leaders.

"The experience highlighted my strengths and weaknesses, prompting me to identify areas for further development. This self-reflection has fueled my motivation to pursue

continuing education opportunities and stay abreast of current trends in the field." (SNT)

"Self-motivation. Be a practitioner. If you want to become a school head, think that you are a school head even if you are just an ordinary teacher. Always put yourself in the position that you are aiming for. Be in the right perspective." (SNT)

"It helps me to become motivated and inspired to work as a leader." (SNT)

Continuous learning and self-motivation align with recent research on the role of intrinsic motivation in academic achievement [36]. By engaging in self-reflection and pursuing ongoing education, the school heads NQESH passers enhance their knowledge base and motivation, contributing to their success in the NQESH and their effectiveness as school leaders.

3.3 Case 3 Analysis (Academic Heads NQESH Passers)

This section presents the analysis of Case 3, focusing on Academic Head NQESH Passers. These individuals offer insights into their preparation journey, highlighting structured preparation methods, utilization of external support, and coping mechanisms for exam day challenges. Through strategic planning, resource utilization, and mental resilience, these passers navigate the demands of the NQESH, providing valuable insights for aspiring educational leaders. From creating detailed study schedules to leveraging familial support and maintaining composure during technical difficulties, their experiences shed light on the multifaceted nature of preparing for this examination.

Table 3. Emerging Themes of Case 3 (Academic Head NQESH Passers)

	Research questions	Emerged themes
Case 3 (Academic Head NQESH Passers)	What are the experiences of NQESH passers in the preparation and administration of the examination?	Structured and Comprehensive Preparation Utilization of External Resources and Support Coping with Exam Day Challenges
	How do the NQESH passers cope with the challenges they encounter before, during, and after the examination?	Systematic Planning and Time Allocation Utilization of Support Systems and Resources Psychological and Emotional Fortitude

Research questions	Emergед themes
What insights and recommendations can the NQESH passers share with aspiring school leaders who plan to take the examination in the future?	Strategic Planning and Time Management Utilization of Support Systems and Resources Mental and Emotional Resilience

3.3.1 Experiences of case 3 (Academic Head NQESH Passers)

Preparing for the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) demands strategic approaches from academic heads. This discussion delves into their experiences across three main areas: structured preparation, external support utilization, and coping with exam day challenges. NQESH candidates emphasize structured study methods and leverage external resources to enhance their readiness. Additionally, they exhibit resilience in overcoming unforeseen challenges during the examination process. Through these insights, we gain a nuanced understanding of the preparation journey of academic heads for the NQESH.

3.3.1.1 Structured and comprehensive preparation

NQESH passers emphasized the importance of structured study approaches to effectively prepare for the examination. They engaged in self-review sessions, utilized mobile applications aligned with NQESH content, and adhered to rigorous study schedules. For example, one participant described installing and utilizing NQESH-aligned mobile applications, while another highlighted creating a detailed study schedule allocating specific times for each topic.

"Engage in self-review sessions: Installing and utilizing NQESH aligned mobile application, reading NQESH reviewers, time management, preparing and religiously following a timetable of tasks to be accomplished within the day." (ANP-1)

"In preparing for the NQESH examination, I adopted a multifaceted strategy. Firstly, I thoroughly reviewed the PPSSH, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the assessed competencies. To solidify my knowledge, I diligently practiced past exams and engaged in practice quizzes." (ANP-2)

"I created a detailed study schedule, allocating specific times for each topic based

on complexity. This allowed me to dedicate more time to challenging areas while efficiently covering stronger subjects." (ANP-3)

The structured and comprehensive preparation described by NQESH passers aligns with research emphasizing the benefits of deliberate practice and focused study techniques (Ericsson et al., 2018). By engaging in self-review sessions, utilizing tailored study materials, and adhering to detailed study schedules, candidates optimize their preparation efforts and enhance their readiness for the exam.

3.3.1.2 Utilization of external resources and support

The participants acknowledged the significance of external resources and support systems in their preparation journey. They attended training aligned with school management and supervision, enrolled in post-graduate studies, and sought support from family members. One participant highlighted the value of official NQESH study materials and the support received from family in prioritizing study schedules.

"Attendance to training aligned to school management and supervision sponsored by non-DepEd organizations/associations." (ANP-1)

"Enrollment to postgraduate studies (educational management)." (ANP-2)

"In preparing for the NQESH, I found several resources and support systems to be immensely valuable. Firstly, official NQESH study materials, including practice exams, proved instrumental in familiarizing me with the test format and content areas." (ANP-2).

"The support from family to the extent that the majority of my schedules were prioritized, sacrificing our family schedules." (ANP-3).

The utilization of external resources and support networks reflects a proactive approach to exam preparation, aligning with research highlighting the benefits of collaborative learning environments and diverse learning opportunities [37]. By attending professional training, enrolling in educational programs, and leveraging familial support, candidates broaden their knowledge base and improve their chances of success.

3.3.1.3 Coping with exam day challenges

Academic Head NQESH passers shared their experiences in coping with various challenges encountered on the examination day. From managing time constraints due to traffic delays to overcoming technical difficulties with online platforms, participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability. Additionally, interactions with familiar faces in unexpected roles, such as encountering a college classmate serving as a proctor, added unique dimensions to their exam experiences.

"The most memorable experience was when I came to the testing room late due to the heavy traffic that I encountered as I traveled from home to the testing venue. But I was able to manage my time and finish answering all the test items." (ANP-1)

"During the NQESH 2022 exam, I encountered difficulties with the first online platform used for the assessment. These could have included technical glitches such as lagging or crashes, impacting test-taking ability." (ANP-2)

"There were a lot of items in the test that I guessed the answer to. The proctor of the examination was my college classmate who happened to be one of the Regional EPSs that year." (ANP-3)

Coping with exam day challenges requires candidates to demonstrate adaptability and resilience in unforeseen circumstances [34]. By effectively managing time constraints, overcoming technical difficulties, and navigating unexpected interactions, candidates can maintain focus and performance during high-stakes examinations.

3.3.2 Coping mechanism of case 3 (Academic Head NQESH Passers)

Preparing for the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) demands not only academic proficiency but also

strategic planning, resource utilization, and mental resilience. Academic heads who have navigated this process offer invaluable insights into their experiences, highlighting key themes essential for success.

3.3.2.1 Systematic planning and time allocation

The academic head of NQESH passers stressed the significance of strategic planning and purposive time allocation in their preparation journey. They describe creating detailed study schedules, allocating specific time for each subject area, and prioritizing tasks based on their importance and exam weight.

"There were 2 most significant challenges I had encountered before the NQESH examination. First, the vast amount of exam content demands effective study strategies. To conquer this, I created a detailed study schedule, allocating specific time for each subject area and prioritizing topics based on their exam weight." (ANP-1)

"I made my daily 'task to-do' timeline. I had divided my time for tasks as a school head, as a student, as an NQESH taker, and as a mother. But before the examination, 2 weeks before the examination, I concentrated more on self-reviewing. I refused gatherings and travels to give way to my preparations." (ANP-2)

"It took me 3 years to successfully submit my NQESH application (1st-late submission; 2nd- failure to comply with 1 step in the online application; 3rd-successful NQESH application)." (ANP-3)

Systematic planning and time allocation are crucial components of successful exam preparation (Roussel et al., 2020). By devising detailed study schedules and allocating time efficiently, school heads NQESH passers optimize their preparation efforts and enhance their readiness for the exam.

3.3.2.2 Utilization of support systems and resources

The participants the importance of leveraging support systems and resources during their preparation phase. They highlight the significance of seeking encouragement from family and friends, engaging in positive visualization, and benefiting from study groups for discussions and knowledge-sharing.

"Seeking social support such as encouragement from family and very close friends, and positive visualization that I could pass the test and achieve one of my dreams in terms of my career path." (ANP-1)

"The support from family to the extent that the majority of my schedules were prioritized, sacrificing our family schedules." (ANP-2)

"The NQESH examination demands sustained focus and motivation. I achieved this by setting clear goals and crafting a detailed study plan. Regularly reviewing my progress and rewarding myself for milestones kept me energized. Engaging with a study group for discussions and knowledge-sharing proved invaluable." (ANP-3)

Utilizing support systems and resources enhances exam readiness and performance [37]. By seeking encouragement from family and friends and engaging in collaborative learning environments, school heads NQESH passers bolster their preparation efforts and develop a deeper understanding of exam content.

3.3.2.3 Psychological and emotional fortitude

Mental and emotional Fortitude are key factors highlighted by the school heads of NQESH passers in overcoming challenges during the examination process. They emphasize the importance of self-determination, focus, and maintaining a positive mindset in navigating unforeseen obstacles.

"As I remember, I think there were no obstacles that time that I experienced during the examination except for thinking, 'What if I fail in this examination? What will be the reactions of my family, friends, and co-workers?' But I needed to believe in myself that I could do it with the help of my Almighty GOD. That was one of my greatest motivations." (ANP-1)

"Possessing self-determination, zeal, and focus on the goal to pass the exam." (ANP-2).

"The online NQESH examination presented several unforeseen obstacles. One instance involved temporary internet lag, causing a brief interruption during the test. To address

this, I remained calm and waited for the connection to resume, without attempting any actions that could violate exam regulations." (ANP-3)

"Prepare your mind, body, and spirit to nurture resilience in achieving your goal." (ANP-3)

Developing mental and emotional resilience is crucial for success in high-stakes examinations [33]. By maintaining a positive mindset, staying focused on their goals, and effectively managing stress, school heads NQESH passers enhance their capacity to overcome challenges and perform optimally during the exam.

3.3.3 Insights of case 3 (Academic Head NQESH Passers)

Preparing for the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) necessitates not only academic competence but also strategic planning, resource utilization, and mental resilience. Academic Heads who have successfully navigated this process offer valuable insights into their experiences, highlighting key themes essential for success.

3.3.3.1 Strategic planning and time management

The academic heads stress the significance of strategic planning and effective time management in their preparation journey. They describe creating detailed study schedules, allocating specific time for each subject area, and prioritizing tasks based on their importance and exam weight.

"There were 2 most significant challenges I had encountered before the NQESH examination. First, the vast amount of exam content demands effective study strategies. To conquer this, I created a detailed study schedule, allocating specific time for each subject area and prioritizing topics based on their exam weight." (ANP-1)

"I made my daily 'task to-do' timeline. I had divided my time for tasks as a school head, as a student, as an NQESH taker, and as a mother. But before the examination, 2 weeks before the examination, I concentrated more on self-reviewing. I refused gatherings and travels to give way to my preparations." (ANP-2)

"It took me 3 years to successfully submit my NQESH application (1st-late submission; 2nd- failure to comply with 1 step in the online application; 3rd-successful NQESH application)." (ANP-3)

Strategic planning and time management are crucial components of successful exam preparation (Roussel et al., 2020). By devising detailed study schedules and allocating time efficiently, school heads NQESH passers optimize their preparation efforts and enhance their readiness for the exam.

3.3.3.2 Utilization of support systems and resources

The participants emphasize the importance of leveraging support systems and resources during their preparation phase. They highlight the significance of seeking encouragement from family and friends, engaging in positive visualization, and benefiting from study groups for discussions and knowledge-sharing.

"Seeking social support such as encouragement from family and very close friends, and positive visualization that I could pass the test and achieve one of my dreams in terms of my career path." (ANP-1)

"The support from family to the extent that the majority of my schedules were prioritized, sacrificing our family schedules." (ANP-2)

"The NQESH examination demands sustained focus and motivation. I achieved this by setting clear goals and crafting a detailed study plan. Regularly reviewing my progress and rewarding myself for milestones kept me energized. Engaging with a study group for discussions and knowledge-sharing proved invaluable." (ANT-3)

Utilizing support systems and resources enhances exam readiness and performance [37]. By seeking encouragement from family and friends and engaging in collaborative learning environments, school heads NQESH passers bolster their preparation efforts and develop a deeper understanding of exam content.

3.3.3.3 Mental and emotional resilience

Mental and emotional resilience are key factors highlighted by the school heads of NQESH passers in overcoming challenges during the examination process. They emphasize the

importance of self-determination, focus, and maintaining a positive mindset to navigate unforeseen obstacles.

"As I remember, I think there were no obstacles that time that I experienced during the examination except for thinking, 'What if I fail in this examination? What will be the reactions of my family, friends, and co-workers?' But I needed to believe in myself that I could do it with the help of my Almighty GOD. That was one of my greatest motivations." (ANP-1)

"Possessing self-determination, zeal, and focus on the goal to pass the exam." (ANP-2)

"The online NQESH examination presented several unforeseen obstacles. One instance involved temporary internet lag, causing a brief interruption during the test. To address this, I remained calm and waited for the connection to resume, without attempting any actions that could violate exam regulations." (ANP-3)

"Prepare your mind, body, and spirit to nurture resilience in achieving your goal." (ANP-3)

Developing mental and emotional resilience is crucial for success in high-stakes examinations [34]. By maintaining a positive mindset, staying focused on their goals, and effectively managing stress, school heads NQESH passers enhance their capacity to overcome challenges and perform optimally during the exam.

3.4 Cross-case Analysis

This section provides a cross-case analysis of three (3) of the study's cases. Each instance presented had commonalities that were highlighted to provide more details on this study. Creswell [23] defines cross-case analysis as the process of examining patterns across multiple cases in qualitative research. It involves comparing and contrasting data from different cases to identify common themes, patterns, or variations.

3.4.1 Cross-case analysis of the emerging themes on the experiences of NQESH passers

Based on the analysis of the three cases (Teacher NQESH Passer, School Head NQESH

Passer, and Academic Head NQESH Passer), several common themes emerge regarding the experiences of NQESH passers in the preparation and administration of the examination. These themes are Comprehensive and Structured Preparation, Balancing Multiple Responsibilities, and Support Systems and Motivation.

3.4.1.1 Comprehensive and structured preparation

All participants highlighted the importance of a detailed and systematic approach to their exam preparation. This included creating study schedules, understanding the exam format, and engaging in various forms of review such as practice tests and review classes.

A consistent theme across all three cases is the need for comprehensive and structured preparation. This involves not only studying the content but also strategically planning the study process. The passers emphasized the importance of organizing their study time effectively, engaging with multiple resources, and practicing under conditions similar to the actual exam. This approach ensures a deep understanding of the material and enhances test-taking skills, ultimately leading to successful outcomes. This is supported by the participants when they said that:

"Preparing for the NQESH examination requires a comprehensive approach to cover all the necessary topics and improve test-taking skills such as creating a study schedule, understanding the exam format or the type of test to be taken, joining review classes, and staying focused on one of my goals..." (TNP)

"In preparing for the NQESH examination, I adopted a multifaceted strategy. Firstly, I thoroughly reviewed the PPSSH, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the assessed competencies..." (SNP)

"Engage in self-review sessions: Installing and utilizing NQESH aligned mobile application, reading NQESH reviewers, time management, preparing and religiously following a timetable of tasks to be accomplished within the day." (ANP)

The value of a structured preparation strategy in achieving academic success has been widely recognized in educational research. Studies indicate that students who adopt a comprehensive and well-organized approach to exam preparation are more likely to perform better. For instance, research by Brown et al. [38] underscores the significance of deliberate practice and structured study schedules in enhancing learning outcomes.

Table 4. Emerging Themes of Cases 1, 2 and 3

Research Question	Case 1 (Teachers)	Case 2 (School Heads)	Case 3 (Academic Heads)	Common Themes
What are the experiences of NQESH passers in the preparation and administration of the examination?	Thorough and Organize Planning	Comprehensive and Rigorous Preparation	Structured and Comprehensive Preparation	Comprehensive and Structured Preparation
	Balancing Commitments and Managing Time	Managing Various Duties	Utilization of External Resources and Support	Balancing Responsibilities
	Encouragement and Support	Utilizing Resources and Support Systems	Coping with Exam Day Challenges	Support Systems and Motivation
How do the NQESH passers cope with the challenges they encounter before, during, and after the examination?	Prioritization and Scheduling	Strategic Planning and Time Management	Systematic Planning and Time Allocation	Setting Priorities and Time Management
	Peer Support and Motivation	Leveraging Networks and Study	Utilization of Support Systems and Resources	Seeking Social Support and Encouragement

Research Question	Case 1 (Teachers)	Case 2 (School Heads)	Case 3 (Academic Heads)	Common Themes
		Techniques		
	Intrinsic Motivation and Faith	Coping with Stress and Technical Challenges	Psychological and Emotional Fortitude	Mental and Emotional Resilience
What insights and recommendations can the NQESH passers share with aspiring school leaders who plan to take the examination in the future?	Organized Planning and Time Structuring Competency Assessment Devotion and Endurance	Early and Strategic Preparation Time Management and Self-care Continuous Learning and Self-motivation	Strategic Planning and Time Management Utilization of Support Systems and Resources Mental and Emotional Resilience	Structured Preparation and Time Management Understanding Strengths, Continuous Learning, and Professional Development Commitment, Patience, and Self-Motivation

Similarly, Zimmerman and Schunk [39] emphasize the role of self-regulated learning strategies, which include goal setting, time management, and self-assessment, in improving academic performance. The participants' experiences align with these findings, demonstrating that meticulous preparation and strategic study planning are crucial for success in high-stakes examinations.

These findings also align with the literature on effective time management and structured planning. According to Huang and Liao [40], effective time management and structured planning significantly enhance academic performance and reduce stress. Their study found that students who implemented detailed study plans and prioritized their tasks achieved better outcomes and maintained higher levels of well-being. Similarly, Schunk and DiBenedetto [39] emphasize the importance of goal-setting and self-regulation in academic success, highlighting that clear, achievable goals and a structured approach to studying are critical components of effective learning strategies.

3.4.1.2 Balancing multiple responsibilities

Participants discussed the challenges of managing their study time alongside other professional and personal commitments. This balancing act was crucial in ensuring that they

could dedicate adequate time to their exam preparation without neglecting other responsibilities.

Balancing multiple responsibilities emerged as a significant challenge for NQESH passers. They had to manage their professional duties, personal lives, and exam preparation simultaneously. Effective time management strategies, such as creating detailed to-do lists and prioritizing tasks, were essential for handling these diverse responsibilities. This balancing act underscores the complexity of preparing for a high-stakes examination while maintaining other aspects of life. This is supported when the participants mentioned that:

"For me, the most challenging time during the preparation phase is time management, balancing my study time with my other commitments such as work and my personal life..." (TNP)

"One key challenge is the breadth of material covered... Balancing this comprehensive review with daily work responsibilities can be demanding." (SNP)

"I made my daily 'task to-do' / timeline. I had divided my time for tasks as a school head, as a student, as NQESH taker and as a mother..." (SNP)

Research by Häfner, Stock, and Oberst [41] highlights the importance of time management

and the use of organizational tools to cope with multiple demands. Their study indicates that individuals who employ structured time management techniques can better balance work, study, and personal life, thereby reducing stress and improving performance. Likewise, Trockel, Barnes, and Egget [42] found that effective time management significantly contributes to academic success and overall well-being. The experiences of the NQESH passers align with these findings, demonstrating that strategic planning and prioritization are vital for managing the concurrent demands of professional and personal responsibilities.

3.4.1.3 Support systems and motivation

The significance of support systems, including family, peers, and professional networks, was a recurring theme. Intrinsic motivation and personal drive also played a crucial role in sustaining their efforts throughout the preparation process.

Support systems and intrinsic motivation were vital in helping NQESH passers navigate their preparation journey. Family support, peer collaboration, and professional guidance provided emotional and practical assistance. Additionally, intrinsic motivation, such as the desire to achieve career goals and personal aspirations, fueled their persistence and resilience. This combination of external support and internal drive was crucial in overcoming the challenges associated with the preparation and examination process. This theme is supported when the participants explained that:

"I could say that the most helpful resources or support system during my preparation was my intrinsic motivation that I could be one of the successful principal test passers..." (TNP)

"The support from family to the extent that the majority of my schedules were prioritized, sacrificing our family schedules." (TNP, ANP)

"In preparing for the NQESH, I found several resources and support systems to be immensely valuable... collaborating with peers who were also preparing for the NQESH fostered a supportive learning environment..." (SNP)

Study shows that social support significantly influences academic achievement by providing

emotional encouragement and practical help [43]. Their study found that students with robust support networks performed better and were more likely to persist through challenging academic endeavors.

Moreover, self-determination theory emphasizes the role of intrinsic motivation in achieving long-term goals. They argue that individuals who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to engage deeply and persistently in their tasks. These findings align with the experiences of the NQESH passers, who credited both their support systems and intrinsic motivation for their success [44].

These narratives also align with existing literature which underscores the essential role of social support in academic endeavors. According to Altermatt [45], social support from family and peers significantly contributes to academic success by providing emotional encouragement and practical assistance. Thomas and Azmitia [46] also discuss that collaborative learning environments, such as study groups, enhance understanding and academic performance through shared resources and collective problem-solving. The participants' experiences serve as a testament to the power of social support in navigating the challenges of exam preparation effectively.

3.4.2 Cross-case analysis of the common emerging themes on the coping strategies of nqesh passers

From the analysis of the three cases (Teacher NQESH Passer, School Head NQESH Passer, and Academic Head NQESH Passer), several common strategies emerge in how they coped with challenges before, during, and after the NQESH exam. These strategies include Setting Priorities and Time Management, Seeking Social Support and Encouragement, and Mental and Emotional Resilience.

3.4.2.1 Setting priorities and time management

Effective time management and strategic planning were critical in managing the extensive content and balancing it with other responsibilities.

NQESH passers emphasized the importance of creating detailed study schedules and timelines to allocate sufficient time for each subject area. They prioritized their tasks by focusing on more challenging topics and setting clear goals to ensure they remained on track. This structured

approach allowed them to effectively juggle their professional duties, personal commitments, and exam preparation. This is supported when the participants mentioned that:

"Proper time management, a lot of preparations, to have a focus on my goals, to have self-confidence, to be patient at all times and that life is a continuous process of learning." (TNP)

"I created a detailed study schedule, allocating specific time for each subject area and prioritizing topics based on their exam weight." (SNP)

"I made my daily 'task to-do' timeline. I had divided my time for tasks as a school head, as a student, as an NQESH taker, and as a mother." (ANP)

These findings align with the literature on effective time management and goal-setting strategies. According to Huang and Liao [40], effective time management and structured planning significantly enhance academic performance and reduce stress. Their study found that students who implemented detailed study plans and prioritized their tasks achieved better outcomes and maintained higher levels of well-being. Also, Schunk and DiBenedetto [39] emphasize the importance of goal-setting and self-regulation in academic success, highlighting that clear, achievable goals and a structured approach to studying are critical components of effective learning strategies.

3.4.2.2 Seeking social support and encouragement

Support from family, peers, and mentors played a significant role in maintaining motivation and providing practical help during preparation.

Participants relied on social support systems to help manage the pressures of exam preparation. Encouragement from family and close friends, as well as collaboration with peers through study groups, provided emotional support and facilitated knowledge sharing. This communal approach not only helped them stay motivated but also enriched their study experience by allowing them to discuss complex concepts and share resources. This is supported when the participants said that:

"Seeking social support such as encouragement from family and very close

friends, and positive visualization that I could pass the test and achieve one of my dreams in terms of my career path." (TNP)

"Engaging with a study group for discussions and knowledge-sharing proved invaluable." (SNP)

"The support from family to the extent that the majority of my schedules were prioritized, sacrificing our family schedules." (ANP)

These narratives align with existing literature, which underscores the pivotal role of social support in academic endeavors. According to Altermatt [45], social support from family and peers significantly contributes to academic success by providing emotional encouragement and practical assistance.

Thomas and Azmitia [46] also discuss that collaborative learning environments, such as study groups, enhance understanding and academic performance through shared resources and collective problem-solving. The participants' experiences serve as a testament to the power of social support in navigating the challenges of exam preparation effectively.

3.4.2.3 Mental and emotional resilience

Building mental resilience and staying composed during unforeseen challenges were crucial for dealing with exam stress and technical difficulties.

Participants highlighted the importance of maintaining mental and emotional resilience throughout the preparation and examination process. This involved staying focused, believing in their abilities, and relying on intrinsic motivation and faith. By nurturing a positive mindset and preparing for potential technical issues, they were able to handle stress and remain calm during the exam, ensuring they could complete it successfully despite any obstacles. This is supported when the participants explained that:

"I need to believe in myself that I could do it with the help of my Almighty GOD. That was one of my greatest motivations." (TNP)

"The online NQESH examination presented several unforeseen obstacles. One instance involved temporary internet lag, causing a brief interruption during the test. To address

this, I remained calm and waited for the connection to resume..." (SNP)

"Prepare your mind, body, and spirit to nurture resilience in achieving your goal." (ANP)

These narratives resonate with the findings of contemporary research on resilience and academic performance. According to Masten and Barnes (2018), individuals who exhibit greater resilience demonstrate better adaptation to stressors and higher levels of academic achievement. Moreover, Pidgeon et al. [47] assert that cultivating resilience involves developing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral strategies to effectively cope with adversity. The participants' experiences highlight the importance of mental and emotional resilience as indispensable tools in confronting the challenges of high-stakes examinations.

3.4.3 Insights and recommendations for aspiring school leaders taking the NQESH

Based on the experiences of Teacher NQESH Passers, School Head NQESH Passers, and Academic Head NQESH Passers, several common themes emerge as valuable insights and recommendations for aspiring school leaders preparing for the NQESH exam. These themes include Structured Preparation and Time Management, Understanding Strengths and Continuous Learning, and Commitment and Self-Motivation. Implementing these strategies requires specific changes in educational policy, such as providing more resources for professional development and creating support systems that encourage continuous learning and self-improvement among school leaders.

3.4.3.1 Structured preparation and time management

Early and strategic preparation is crucial. Aspiring school leaders should create a detailed study plan well in advance of the exam date. This plan should allocate specific times for each subject area, prioritize topics based on their complexity, and include both study and relaxation periods to avoid burnout. Utilizing tools like calendars and planners can help maintain consistency and ensure all necessary content is covered comprehensively. This is supported when the participants mentioned that:

"Start preparation earlier, implement a more structured study plan, seek additional support or resources, stay consistent and persistent in your career plans, and above all, trust GOD that He can make a difference in your life if you believe in HIM." (TNP)

"Create a realistic study schedule that allocates dedicated blocks for studying, working, and leisure. Utilize tools like calendars and planners to maintain consistency." (SNP)

"I made my daily 'task to-do' timeline. I had divided my time for tasks as a school head, as a student, as an NQESH taker, and as a mother. But before the examination, 2 weeks before the examination, I concentrated more on self-reviewing. I refused gatherings and travels to give way to my preparations." (ANP)

These strategies align with contemporary literature on effective study habits and time management. According to Duckworth and Seligman [48], structured planning and consistent effort are integral components of successful goal pursuit. Furthermore, Schraw et al. [49] emphasize the importance of time management skills in academic achievement, noting that effective allocation of study time leads to better learning outcomes. The participants' experiences underscore the significance of structured preparation and time management as fundamental pillars of success in the NQESH examination.

3.4.3.2 Understanding strengths, continuous learning, and professional development

Aspiring leaders should focus on understanding their strengths and weaknesses to target areas that need improvement. Continuous professional development through courses, seminars, and further education can significantly enhance their knowledge and skills. Engaging with professional networks and seeking feedback from peers can also provide valuable insights and support.

"The valuable insights I gained from my experience of preparing for and taking the NQESH examination is understanding my strengths and weaknesses, developing my self-study skills, and enhancing my professional networks." (TNP)

"Aspiring school leaders aiming to excel in the NQESH exam should prioritize early

preparation. Devote ample time to studying the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) framework. Consider enrolling in review courses or joining online communities for focused guidance and practice tests." (SNP)

"The NQESH examination demands sustained focus and motivation. I achieved this by setting clear goals and crafting a detailed study plan. Regularly reviewing my progress and rewarding myself for milestones kept me energized. Engaging with a study group for discussions and knowledge-sharing proved invaluable." (ANP)

These strategies align with contemporary literature on leadership development and continuous learning. According to Day and Antonakis [30], effective leadership development involves self-awareness and ongoing skill enhancement. Furthermore, Reeves and O'Donnell [50] emphasize the importance of professional networks and collaborative learning in fostering leadership excellence. The participants' experiences underscore the significance of understanding strengths, continuous learning, and professional development as essential components of success in the NQESH examination.

3.4.3.3 Commitment, patience, and self-motivation

A strong commitment to their goals, patience, and self-motivation are key to succeeding in the NQESH. Candidates should maintain a positive attitude, believe in their abilities, and stay focused on their long-term objectives. Balancing exam preparation with self-care and stress management techniques is essential to maintain overall well-being. This is supported when the participants explained that:

"Just focus on their goals and priorities in life. To be a leader requires commitment, a lot of time and focus." (TNP)

"If you want to become a dog, walk like a dog. If you want to become a celebrity, practice becoming a celebrity. If you want to become a leader, think, feel, and act like being a leader." (SNP)

"Prepare your mind, body, and spirit to nurture resilience in achieving your goal." (ANP)

These strategies align with contemporary literature on goal setting, resilience, and self-motivation. According to Duckworth [51], grit—the combination of passion and perseverance—is a key predictor of success in challenging endeavors. Moreover, Luthans, Avolio, Avey, and Norman [52] emphasize the importance of positive psychological capital, including self-efficacy and optimism, in fostering resilience and motivation. The participants' experiences underscore the fundamental role of commitment, patience, and self-motivation in achieving success in the NQESH examination.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The analysis of the experiences of NQESH passers reveals several common themes that provide valuable insights for aspiring school leaders preparing for the examination. These themes include Comprehensive and Structured Preparation, Balancing Multiple Responsibilities, and Support Systems and Motivation. The findings underscore the importance of meticulous planning, effective time management, and leveraging support networks to navigate the challenges of exam preparation successfully. From the examination of the participants' experiences, it is evident that a structured preparation strategy significantly contributes to academic success. By adopting comprehensive study plans and strategically organizing their study process, aspiring school leaders can enhance their understanding of the material and improve their test-taking skills. Moreover, effective time management and the ability to balance multiple responsibilities are crucial for managing the demands of exam preparation alongside professional and personal commitments.

Furthermore, the significance of support systems, intrinsic motivation, and mental resilience in sustaining efforts throughout the preparation process cannot be overstated. Leveraging support from family, peers, and mentors, as well as nurturing intrinsic motivation and resilience, play pivotal roles in overcoming challenges and maintaining momentum towards achieving success in the NQESH examination.

Lastly, aspiring school leaders should heed the recommendations derived from the insights of NQESH passers. Structured preparation and time management, understanding strengths and continuous learning, and fostering commitment,

patience, and self-motivation are key strategies for success. By incorporating these recommendations into their preparation strategies, aspiring school leaders can enhance their readiness for the NQESH examination and embark on a path toward leadership excellence in the education sector.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

As per international standards or university standards written ethical approval has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

CONSENT

As per international standards or university standards, Participants' written consent has been collected and preserved by the authors.

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DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Authors hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of manuscripts.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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