

The Road to the Top: A Phenomenological Exploration of Social Work Topnotchers' Journeys

Rhea Lynne M. Estrosos, RSW., Dr. Ines V. Danao, RSW, MSSW

Graduate School Department, MSSW, Lourdes College Inc, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

The professional competence of the aspiring social workers in the Philippines is determined by the Social Work Licensure Examination (SWLE). Although there is a growing body of literature on licensure examination performance, there remains a scarcity of studies that explore the lived experiences of those who excel in the examination. This study involved five SWLE topnotchers from a university in Region XIII that has consistently produced topnotchers in SWLE. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, the data were gathered through Seidman's interview series and analyzed using Colaizzi's method. The study generated five themes: Resilience and Purpose-Driven Aspiration, Enabling Socio-Environmental Supports, Positive Adaptations, Continuing Personal Growth, and Service Oriented Professional Identity. The findings revealed that success was not only attributed to academic capability but also a combination of their purpose-driven aspirations, resilience and socio-environmental support system, which further strengthened their desire to serve others. It is concluded that the experiences of SWLE topnotchers are consistent with the Resilience Theory, Cognitive Behavioral Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory. The study highlights the significance of the personal, cognitive, and environmental factors in the topnotchers' excellent performance in the SWLE. The results may be used by social work educators, institutions, and prospective examinees to improve the review programs, support systems, and preparation strategies for the licensure examination.

Keywords: Lived Experiences, Phenomenology, Resilience, Social Work Licensure Examination, Topnotchers

INTRODUCTION

The journey towards excellence is a challenging path. It involves putting effort, hard work, self-control, and perseverance into a goal (Celestin, 2025). This can be observed in the journey of topnotchers in the Social Work Licensure Examination. Topnotchers experienced self-doubt, difficulties, burnout, and uncertainty on their way to success (Pirro, 2024). Therefore, the end outcome is that these people become successful not only because of chance but also because of their hard work and faith. Success was not overnight but a result of years of hard work and sacrifice.

The Social Work Licensure Examination (SWLE) continues to uphold the ethical standards and qualifications that define the competency of social work graduates, as well as the elements of professionalism identified by the community as necessary (Professional Regulation Commission [PRC], n.d.). Only licensed individuals can legally practice social work in the country, as stipulated by Republic Act No. 4373, the Social Work Law, enacted in June 1965. This legislation helped the profession become highly qualified, and the licensure exam became a milestone for aspiring social workers (Republic Act No. 4373, 1965).

The relevance of structured mentorship programs and preparatory schools (Abao et al., 2023), test anxiety management and academic self-efficacy and study habits (Nicolas & Arambulo, 2023), and growth mindset, grit, and resilience (Calo et al., 2022) has been noted in the literature. These results indicate that psychological and institutional support is crucial in enhancing academic preparedness and achievement in licensure examinations. Within the Philippine context, institutional support, mentorship, and family assistance (Manuel et al., 2024), personalized preparation, discipline, and motivation (Bayawa et al., 2021), and intrinsic

motivation, institutional support, and resilience (Alih et al., 2024) have been identified as contributors to their success.

Most research in the Philippines has focused on licensure passers and undergraduate students. Even studies on topnotchers in other disciplines, including Bayawa et al. (2021), highlight a limited focus on the personal experiences and coping mechanisms of the high achievers. While these studies are noteworthy, there remains a lack of research exploring the lived experiences of social work topnotchers, particularly within the context of a high-performing yet emerging academic program such as this state university in Region XIII. Therefore, this study aims to describe the topnotchers' mental and emotional strategies for efficiently managing their preparation and the examination experiences, the coping mechanisms they develop, and their resilience (Calo et al., 2022; Nicolas & Arambulo, 2023).

Moreover, this paper conforms to and relates to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4- Quality Education. By improving the preparedness and effectiveness of future social workers by passing the licensure examination, the findings contribute to developing a competent workforce capable of boosting social protection systems and promoting inclusive development, particularly in marginalized communities. The pursuit of excellence highlighted in this research ensures that future social workers are well-positioned to address societal challenges and provide effective support to vulnerable populations.

The researchers in this study assume that Social Work Licensure Examination (SWLE) topnotchers are resilient individuals who use cognitive coping strategies and environmental support systems to excel. This study is further supported by Resilience Theory, Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT), and Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. In connection with the study, resilience theory helped support and explain how SWLE topnotchers handled the intense stress of exam preparation, persevered despite obstacles, and developed coping mechanisms to sustain the institution's high performance (Glowacz & Born, 2015; Van Breda, 2018). CBT postulates that learners with a resiliency and success-oriented mindset are most likely to engage in cognitive restructuring by replacing negative thoughts processes, and to know the cognitive strategies they employ to stay motivated, confident, and concentrated under pressure (Beck, 1979). Lastly, the researchers analyzed how the motivation and preparation strategies of the topnotchers changed in response to family support, academic mentorship, institutional support, and societal influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The data collection, analysis, and interpretation in the research were based on the above theories to present a holistic analysis of the external and internal variables in becoming a topnotcher.

This research aimed to understand what topnotchers have gone through on their path to licensure and the elements that describe their exemplary performance. In particular, the following are the research questions:

1. What is it like to be a SWLE topnotcher in Region XIII?
2. How do topnotchers overcome the challenges they experience during their preparation for the social work licensure exam?
3. How do topnotchers find meaning in their experiences of topping the board exam?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Social Work Licensure Examination (SWLE) is one of the most important milestones in the lives of aspiring social workers in the Philippines since it is a formal test of professional competence. It determines the knowledge, skills, and values required for successful professional practice. The history of the SWLE dates back to the passing of the Republic Act No. 4373. Since that time, it has been developed to meet the changing needs of social work practice. Nevertheless, these results also indicate that the performance is not only a matter of cognitive ability but is influenced by a broader learning condition, such as access to institutional resources and quality of practicum experiences.

In addition to academic predictors, the literature is increasingly indicating the importance of self-regulation and strategic preparation for licensure success. Research on LET passers and topnotchers indicates that goal setting, disciplined studying, and enrollment in organized review programs are essential elements of effective preparation (Alih et al., 2024; Bayawa et al., 2022). It is worth noting that these studies also emphasize the significance of social support systems, such as family, peers, and mentors, which implies that the success in licensure examinations is embedded in the relational and environmental contexts. This is consistent with social work views that focus on the interplay between the individual and the environment, which means that the success of licensure can be viewed in a multidimensional perspective as well.

Besides cognitive and behavioral aspects, researchers have focused on the emotional and psychological aspects of licensure preparation. It has been shown that the test takers tend to develop high rates of stress and anxiety, which may negatively influence the performance unless properly managed (Graybow, 2019). Combined interventions involving test-taking strategies and anxiety reduction methods have been demonstrated to be effective, which supports the significance of psychological preparation in addition to academic preparation (Smith et al., 2023). Meanwhile, issues about equity in licensure results are related to structural inequalities, which are reflected in the dissimilar pass rates among racial groups in the United States (Senreich & Dale, 2022). These results pose significant concerns regarding the equity and inclusivity of licensure systems, indicating that the performance outcomes can also be indicative of systemic inequalities.

This is further complicated by institutional factors. According to Apgar (2021), a portion of social work educators indicate that they are not well acquainted with licensure requirements, which can be a barrier to successful student preparation. Simultaneously, the recent debate on the incorporation of artificial intelligence into licensure assessment questions the conventional examination paradigm, casting doubt on its validity, accessibility, and future competency evaluation (Hammer, 2023; Apgar & Nienow, 2023). Such changes indicate that licensure examinations are not fixed but are constantly influenced by technological, institutional, and societal changes.

Although much has been done to investigate predictors of licensure examination performance, research on topnotchers sheds more light on excellence in professional examinations. The available sources in the literature of various fields of study all point to a mix of good academic backgrounds, good test-taking skills, and adaptive personality traits among high-achievers in exams (DeCarlo, 2022; Smith et al., 2023). In addition, high levels of discipline, motivation, and resilience, as well as stress management and long-term effort, are typical of topnotchers (Dela Rama et al., 2015; Buted & Herrera, 2024). Also, family, peer support, and mentorship have been identified as important in the process of topnotchers. The institutional variables, including quality mentorship and emotional support of educators, have been found to have a significant influence on the preparedness of students to licensure examinations (Manuel et al., 2024).

Despite these insights, there is a significant lack of research in the SWLE context that explores the lived experiences of topnotchers, especially how they make sense of their experiences, how they manage to cope with their challenges, and what they derive from their success. This gap is critical to developing a more detailed concept of the licensure success beyond the measurable indicators and the meaning-making processes that underlie the excellence in the social work licensure examination.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach, as the purpose of the study is to focus on capturing the meanings and essence of experiences by searching for a complex description of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). According to Husserl, from whom Moustakas developed his ideas, phenomenology is transcendental because it reflects on subjective acts and correlates them to what appears in our consciousness (Moustakas, 2011). This approach highlighted the process of bracketing, wherein the personal experiences and presumptions of the researcher are set aside to uncover the pure, unaltered meanings of the phenomenon under study.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in one of the universities in Region XIII. This university has consistently produced high-performing graduates in the Social Work Licensure Examination (SWLE). From its first batch of graduates in 2021 up to 2023, it has demonstrated an exceptional performance of 100% and 99.92% in 2024, producing eight topnotchers in total. The national SWLE passing rates were 37.75% in August 2021, 44.01% in February 2022, 62.57% in September 2022, and 56.75% in September 2023 (Professional Regulation Commission [PRC], 2023). These figures highlight the university's success in preparing its graduates for the licensure exam. The university's setting offers an ideal context for exploring the phenomenon of topnotchers.

Sampling Procedure and Research Participants

A purposeful sampling method was applied in the conduct of this study. This is a non-probability sampling method in which the researchers believe they must select a sample most likely to provide rich information to discover, understand, and gain insight into the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria were as follows: a) must be among top 1 to 10 in the SWLE from 2021-2024 from a state university in Region XIII, b) must agree to participate in the study, and c) must be willing to answer questions that are related to their experiences. The exclusion criteria include those who are not topnotchers from the target population and those who may provide biased information for the study. The target population consists of eight topnotchers, five of whom met the inclusion criteria, hence, the sample size for this study is five (5). These five topnotchers represented both the COVID pandemic period and post-pandemic era, offering a diverse range of experiences related to excelling in the SWLE.

Data Gathering Procedures

The researchers first sought permission from the selected topnotchers. All procedures adhered to the established protocols in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2022, to ensure the protection of each participant's identity and the confidentiality of their data. Participants were fully informed about their roles in the study, the research process, any potential risks associated with participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. An informed consent form was provided to affirm the confidentiality and voluntary nature of participation. The researchers employed Seidman's (2006) three-interview model, which comprises sessions focused on life history, details of experience, and reflections on meaning. Each interview lasted 90 minutes and was scheduled weeks apart due to participants' busy schedules, spanning sixty days (two months). Since in-person visits were largely not feasible, alternative communication methods were used to ensure the continuity of data collection. All interviews were audio recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The audio files, transcripts, and consent forms were stored in password-protected digital folders accessible only to the researchers, with no hard copies produced. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports, and no identifying information appeared in the final write-up. Digital and hard copies will be permanently deleted after 5 years, following the ethical research standards.

Data Analysis

In this study, the Colaizzi method, commonly used in phenomenological research, was employed as it provides a clear and rigorous approach of deriving meaning from participants' narratives without distorting their experiences (Gumarang et al., 2021). Coding was guided by Saldana's (2018) coding framework and assisted by HyperRESEARCH software. To ensure the quality and integrity of this research, the study adhered to the four key standards outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. One of the researchers remained conscious of her dual positionality as a social work faculty member and a former topnotcher in the Social Work Licensure Examination (SWLE) in Region XIII, acknowledging how this might influence interpretation (Holmes, 2020). Ethical considerations were guided by the three fundamental ethical principles of Belmont Report: respect of persons, beneficence, and justice (Tariq, 2025). No particular population was unduly burdened or excluded from potential benefits, reflecting attention to ethical concerns highlighted by the past research misconduct, such as the Tuskegee Study (Seidman, 2006).

Scope and Limitations

This study included only five participants, all SWLE topnotchers of a high-performing state university in Region XIII. While phenomenological research typically involves a limited number of participants to enable deep exploration of experiences, the findings may not reflect the experiences of topnotchers in other institutions or regions. Different universities may offer varied academic contexts, preparation methods, and institutional support, which could influence outcomes. The participants' experiences may have been shaped by the university's academic culture, mentorship systems, and review practices. Additionally, the focus was solely on topnotchers' perspectives and did not include insight from faculty, mentors, or review lecturers, whose experiences could provide further understanding of factors contributing to licensure success. Despite these limitations, the study remains valuable and highlights opportunities for future research to examine SWLE examinees in varying institutional settings and perspectives.

RESULTS

The information obtained with the help of the participants has been critically examined, which led to the identification of five key themes, namely, (1) Resilience and Purpose-Driven Aspiration, (2) Enabling Socio-Environmental Supports, (3) Adaptive Resilience, (4) Continuing Personal Growth, and (5) Service-Oriented Professional Identity. These themes are the common and unique experiences of topnotchers in SWLE as manifested in their narratives.

Resilience and Purpose-Driven Aspiration

Perseverance. The participants reported that they had faced various difficulties in their preparation to take the licensure examination, such as natural calamities, unreliable internet connectivity, financial factors, professional duties, and pressures. One of the participants described how the external conditions disrupted the flow of review as he stated, "During my review nadisturb kay nagtrabaho ko... nawala ang internet... wala na jud ko kabali-bali." (*During my review, I was disturbed because I was working... the internet was lost... I really could not continue reviewing.*) (P1, Int 1, Line 12-15). Likewise, the other participant stressed the psychological weight that comes with financial difficulty when mentioned, "Na pressure ko sa amo sitwasyon, ang kapobrehon, if di ko kapasar mag unsa nalang ko." (*I felt pressured by our situation and poverty; if I failed, I did not know what would happen to me.*) (P4, Int 2, Line 347-348). Such circumstances caused disturbances in their reviewing schedules and brought about uncertainty that necessitated constant adaptation and emotional control.

Deepened Spirituality. The participants also reported a sense of spirituality that intensified during their training and success. One participant stressed the importance of humility and reliance on faith, sharing, "Kanunay jud nako ginapray, please humble me Lord, instrument rako, imoha ni." (*I always prayed, 'Please humble me Lord, I am only Your instrument. This is Yours.'*) (P3, Int 3, Line 171-172). Similarly, a participant recounted how the review process has made his relationship with God stronger, stating, "Sa ako experience, naa jud touch sa spiritual aspect, nagkagrabe ako relationship with Lord." (*In my experience, there was really a spiritual aspect; my relationship with the Lord deepened.*) (P4, Int 2, Line 373-374). The participants demonstrated spirituality as an emotional and psychological stabilizer.

Determined to Top. In addition to spiritual grounding, the participants also explained how their mindset guided their efforts towards excellence in the process of preparation. One participant explained that the aim to become a topnotcher was always reinforced by self-directed thinking, sharing, "Mao na during sa review, permi jud e mindset mag top jud ko. Bahala mabagsak ko sa drills, wala jud ko nibackdown, mindset jud nako magtop jud ko, sa libro, sa pencil case." (*During the review, I always conditioned my mindset that I would really top. Even if I failed the drills, I never backed down; my mindset was really to top, written in my books and pencil case.*) (P2, Int 2, Line 104-106). In a similar case, one of the participants stressed the importance of the moment when they made the choice to become the best, recalling, "Firm najud ako resolve adto pagdeclare nako nga gusto ko mag top wala jud ko niuli sige rako basa sa boarding house." (*My determination was strong when I said I wanted to top; I did not go home and continued my studies in the boarding house*) (P3, Int 1, Line 309-310)

Social Visibility. The participants said they became more recognized and visible as topnotchers. One of the participants clarified that success brought benefits in the employment opportunities, noting, “Of course, nay edge moaply ka trabaho. Mas dali ko nakapangita trabaho.” (*Of course, there is an advantage when applying for jobs. It became easier for me to find work.*) (P1, Int 3, Line 25-26). Another participant reported having been observed by other people during normal interactions, reflecting, “Pagkabuntag naulaw ko mogawas kay di ko anad og compliment... makakita ko silingan moingon sila grabe ni bata ani.” (*I was shy to go outside because I was not accustomed to compliments... when my neighbors saw me, they would show their amazement*) (P3, Int 3, Line 167-170). Their narratives showed that success gave them a chance to be heard, recognized publicly and professionally, but it also came with a lot of attention and expectations of others.

Disciplined Preparation. The participants reported that they embraced disciplined schedules and strict time management habits in their efforts to study to pass the licensure examination. One participant pointed to the importance of organized schedules and study practices, noting, “Nalearn pod na nako during sa nag skwela pako, ang study techniques, study habit ginaconsider, one of those mag schedule jud.” (*I learned during my studies that study techniques and study habits are important, and one of those is really making a schedule.*) (P1, Int 2, Line 9-10). Likewise, one more participant mentioned the time-disciplined learning practices, sharing, “Morning 9am set najud sugod na tuon, taman alas 11 kapin, unya balik napod ko tuon 1-5.” (*In the morning, I set my time to start studying at 9:00 until passed 11:00 then I will return in studying from 1:00-5:00.*) (P2, Int 2, Line 110-111). The participants did not just study but ensured it was disciplined and structured, which is the manifestation of self-regulated learning behaviors.

Enabling Socio-Environmental Supports

Support System. Support from other people reflected in their accounts as a significant aspect in their journey as topnotchers. One of the topnotchers remembered that teachers made them feel a supportive environment that enhanced their attachment to the program, sharing, “Instructors wise kay nindot the way sa pag amoma, di lang the way they teach but giunsa jud nila pag care ang student para magstay and ma love ang program.” (*The instructors were good in the way they nurtured us, not only in how they taught but how they cared for students so we would stay and love the program.*) (P1, Int 1, Line 75-76). Another topnotcher explained that just having supportive family helped to relieve the stress and to focus more in studying: “During review, nindot surrounded ka positive people, sa balay raman ko nagreview. Pag makita gane sila mama pag mag review ko, wala jud na mag videoke, hari-hari ko ana nga time. Pasalamat ko sa ako parents ana, makabantay jud na sila pag naa nako sa kwarto di na mogawas, hatdan ko pagkaon. (*During review, it was good because I was surrounded by positive people. I had my review in our home, if my parents notice that I’m having my review, they will not have a videoke session, it was my time then. I am thankful to my parents for that because they noticed when I stayed in my room and did not go out, and they would bring me food*) (P2, Int 2, Line 85-88). The support was manifested in more intimate and silent situations.

Supportive Conditions. Topnotchers also shared that the presence of supportive environments was one of the reasons why they managed to remain calm, focused and ready to go through the licensure journey. One of the topnotchers remembered how the school community in general was a consistent support in the preparation, highlighting, “Sa school environment maam, makakita ka area asa mag study... ang ..., ginatan aw nila pirmi ang sitwasyon sa studyante... safety first jud ang student... if wala klase gapangita sila way maapadayon ang learning.” (*In the school environment, you can find places to study... always considers the situation of students... safety first for students... if there are no classes, they find ways to continue learning.*) (P4, Int 1, Line 462-466). Another topnotcher elaborated, explaining, “I would say dako help ang free education kay na mold ako foundation and TES pod kay napurchase nako laptop, printer, books nga kailangan.” (*I would say free education assisted a lot since it molded my foundation and with the help of TES I was able to purchase a laptop, a printer, and books, which I needed.*) (P5, Int 2, Line 491-492). Availability of resources minimized the financial constraints and enabled the topnotcher to prepare more effectively.

Positive Adaptations

Self-care. The topnotchers shared various self-care mechanisms for stress and pressure within the review period. One participant emphasized the role of personal reflection in coping with stress in the preparation,

highlighting, “Ga ‘me’ time ko, reflection, galingkod, huna-huna lang.” (*I take ‘me time,’ reflect, sit down, and just think.*) (P1, Int 2, Line 42. Another participant described, “Naa pod time magrelax ko if feel nako sobra na... like laag sa nature, falls sa cbr.” (*There are times I relax when I feel it’s too much... like going out in nature or visiting the falls in CBR.*) (P4, Int 2, Line 333-334). These measures served to ease them of emotional pressure at the same time keeping them focused on their preparation.

Self-efficacy. A topnotcher shared that determination increased because he decided to believe in himself after years of doubt, articulating, “Mao to ang uban nagpatahal, ako-ako jud nagtahal sa ako kaugalingon. Sa pila ka tuig nga gadoubt ko sa ako self, this is the time motuo ko sa akoa self. Symbolism, I will do my own luck.” (*While others have their pencil done by others, I choose to work on my own pencil. After years of doubting myself, this was the time I chose to believe in myself. Symbolically, I will create my own luck.*) (P3, Int 2, Line 265-267). An additional account presented the way of how the confidence in one’s ability would lead to more effort over time: “Mas gi grabe nako akong effort. If ever mo stop ko, wala nako na nahuna-huna an. Mas mostudy pa jud ko. Naa ra lage kabag ohan, nakita man nako nga the more jud nagkadaghan ako nakat onan, kaya na nako maexplain.” (*I intensified my effort. When I ever contemplated quitting, it did not cross my mind anymore. I studied more, and as I learned more, I realized I could explain things better.*) (P4, Int 2, Line 352-354). Advancement in learning strengthened the participant’s belief in his capability, and further effort became worthwhile.

Continuing Personal Growth

Greater Self-growth. Topnotchers talked about continuing to improve themselves than being content with their accomplishment. One of the participants explained that success increased personal expectations and encouraged continued growth, remarking, “Of course, mas higher ang aim. Di pod nimo e degrade imo self kay naa man ka credentials. (*Of course, your aim becomes higher. You should not undermine yourself since you already have credentials*) (P1, Int 3, Line 10-13). Another participant highlighted the necessity to stay on track with specific goals, emphasizing, “Dapat naa jud ta goal in life kay mao na mahimo motivation nga maningkamot ta. Dapat naa direction.” (*We really need to have goals in life because that becomes the motivation to keep striving. There should be direction.*) (P2, Int 3, Line 121-122). Their thoughts revealed that the acknowledgment turned out to be a driving force that compelled them to strive for greater responsibilities and opportunities in the future.

Enhanced Flexibility. Most of the participants also highlighted flexible outlook rather than stagnation of capacity. One of the participants voiced this viewpoint by rejecting the fixed labels concerning intelligence, noting, “Pero ako di ko motuo og bright ug bulok, continues learning jud”. (*For me, I don’t believe in being simply bright or not; learning should really be continuous.*) (P3, Int 3, Line 170-171). The other participant pointed out that success was not the end of learning, sharing, “After all wala man nag end ang learning sa pag top, nag continue man ang learning.” (*After all, the learning did not end after topping, learning continues.*) (P4, Int 3, Line 217-218). Success was valued and at the same time was seen as a section of a bigger developmental process.

Persistent Efforts. When the participants talked about enhanced flexibility even after they achieved something, they also expressed how their persistence was molded by the difficulties they went through in the process. One of the participants reflected on the past efforts and acknowledged the importance of long-term diligence, expressing, “Kugihan jud diay ka nga tao, all those kahago nimo, gi set nga standards sa life, true jud diay to puslanon jud diay.” (*You are really a hardworking person; all the sacrifices and standards you made in life were really truly useful*) (P1, Int 3, Line 32-33). Another topnotcher spoke of persistence as doing one’s best no matter whether one was likely to fail or not, sharing, “Bahala ma fail ka but when you die at least gibuhad nimo imong best. Ako jud iingon sa ako self, at least gbuhat nako ang tanan.” (*Even if you fail, at least you know you did your best. I always tell myself that at least I did everything I could*) (P3, Int 3, Line 192-193). The statements represent an attitude in which diligence itself was valuable regardless of the result.

Realizing One’s Value. Topping the examination seemed to make them feel more confident in their identities and enabled them to see their capabilities and value more clearly. One participant shared how success changed the perception that they had towards themselves, reflecting, “Ni improve ang panglantaw sa self, naa diay koy

value.” (*My perception of myself improved; I realized that I have value.*) (P1, Int 3, Line 46-47). Another topnotcher shared the growing confidence following the success, noting, “Mas nadungagan akong confidence, sauna man gud kay low key rajud... Pag top nako, okay, naa diay ko something, naa ko ikahatag. But confidence with a heart.” (*My confidence increased because before I was very low-key... when I topped, I realized that I have something to offer. But confidence with a heart.*) (P2, Int 3, Line 125-127).

Service-Oriented Professional Identity

Service Orientation. Participants also mentioned having the desire to serve other people based on what they had acquired through their experiences. As one of the participants expressed, “Ang akosa karun naa nako sa academic, I wanted to share to others akoang nalearn.” (*Now that I am in the academe, I would like to share with others what I have learned.*) (P1, Int 3, Line 9-10). Service was also shared as a priority that transcends career position or status. This point of view is relayed in the reflection: “Bahala dili ko mo moabot SWO III basta mo serve jud ko. (*Even if I do not reach SWO III, as long as I can serve.*) (P3, Int 3, Line 181-182). In this case, the focus is made on the purpose and not on the rank and it is demonstrated that commitment to service was kept central regardless of professional promotion.

Professional Commitment. Participants described greater commitment to the social work profession following their success. One of the participants emphasized the role of decisiveness in the choosing the profession, highlighting, “Be pursigido kun unsay gusto kab-oton, stick sa mind nga gusto jud nimo mag social work kay kun ga duha-duha ka basin di ka para ani. (*Be determined in what you want to achieve. Keep in mind that you really want social work because if you keep doubting, maybe this is not for you.*) (P2, Int 3, Line 131-133). Another topnotcher underlined the necessity of being able to represent what was studied at school, noting, “You really have to embody. The theories are not just theories, magamit jud na, para maappreciate nimo.” (*You really have to embody it. Theories are not just theories; they are really useful so that you can appreciate them.*) (P3, Int 3, Line 205-206). Commitment in this narrative implied the translation of knowledge into actual practice.

DISCUSSION

This section presents the discussion of the findings from the study.

Resilience and Purpose-Driven Aspiration

Perseverance. The findings suggest that perseverance in SWLE topnotchers is cultivated in non-ideal and frequently unstable environments, with preparation being influenced by environmental and socioeconomic limitations. According to the Resilience Theory, adversity is not only a challenge but a context that facilitates the emergence of adaptive abilities and entrenched goal-focused behavior (Glowacz & Born, 2015). The challenges were experienced as obstacles and as incentives, which strengthened a sense of increased responsibility in achieving success (Albina et al., 2021; Coles, 2023; Hernandez et al., 2025). This observation aligns with Daga and Gupit (2025), who observed that reviewees encountered serious difficulties in balancing work, review, and health, but were able to endure with the help of strategic time management, self-initiative, and good family and social support. Furthermore, the results indicate that these stressors served as the turning points and enabled them to transform the potential challenges into the motivations to become more disciplined (Pueblo et al., 2024).

Deepened Spirituality. The participants also reported a deepened sense of spirituality during both preparation and success (Ramirez et al., 2024). Spirituality served as a strength, grounding, and meaning especially in times of doubt and pressure (Imron et al., 2023). This kind of framing seemed to lessen performance-related pressure by turning the emphasis on personal ego to service and gratitude (Srivastava & Iqbal, 2023). The spiritual development was not only achieved following success but also during the process of strenuous preparation (Pueblo et al., 2024). They were able to control anxiety and maintain motivation (Edara et al., 2021). The recurrence of spiritual terminologies shows that faith created the meaning-making mechanisms that helped them to view struggles as meaningful instead of de-motivating (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Resilience Theory agrees in considering spirituality as a protective influence that enhances adaptive coping in the face of

adversity by promoting hope, optimism, and persistence (Glowacz & Born, 2015). Under the Ecological Systems Theory, spirituality also denotes factors in the microsystem, such as personal beliefs, family values, and orientations of cultures that determine how individuals react to stress and success (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The same has been observed in licensure examiners who utilized prayer and spiritual guidance as the source of comfort and strength during the examination preparation (Binayao & Dales, 2020). The fact that participants used prayer and faith-based self-talk to help them feel resilient demonstrates that spiritual meaning aided in success, which contributes to the view that success has been perceived as a personal and transcendental accomplishment (Gallardo & Chavez, 2022).

Determined to Top. The participants stressed the role aiming to top in their preparation, especially how they deliberately focused their mind on excellence instead of merely passing the examination (Agabon & Allanic, 2025; Bayawa et al., 2022). Their narratives showed that they had an inner drive to be topnotchers, and mindset served as a driving force that kept them going, motivated, and focused despite failures and exhaustion (Ramirez et al., 2024; Tan, 2022; Wirth et al., 2020). In line with Cognitive Behavioral Theory, these experiences can be seen as cognitive restructuring, in which thoughts are intentionally conceived in such a way as to justify adaptive behavior and persistence (Beck, 1979). The results imply that excellence among SWLE topnotchers was not only attained due to effort but also a deliberate mindset building (Ba et al., 2025), which indicates the strong influence of self-directed language on performance when preparing to perform on high stakes.

Social Visibility. Being a good performer was not limited to individual success and it also affected their perception in their workplaces (Debus et al., 2024), as well as their visibility in their communities. This recognition acted as social capital, facilitating career opportunities and visibility reinforcing professional credibility (Hwang, 2024; Modesto, 2020). Although recognition brought pride, it also introduced new social expectations, requiring participants to adjust to evolving roles (Suarez & Sawatsky, 2024). From an Ecological Systems Theory perspective, this reflects adaptations across the mesosystem and exosystem, as relationships, institutions, and networks responded to participants' accomplishments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, success shaped not only professional identity but also social presence, where the participants had to face the visibility and applause which were not sought after.

Disciplined Preparation. Participants described discipline not as an inherent trait but as a behavior deliberately developed to sustain focus and continuity in the review process (David et al., 2024). This aligns with the evidence highlighting structured schedules and self-motivation as critical to academic achievement (Mulchandani, 2020). Time management functioned as an organizing mechanism that enabled efficient use of time and minimized distractions, thereby supporting consistent engagement in review activities (Theobald, 2024). From the perspective of Cognitive Behavioral Theory, these practices reflect the interaction between cognition and behavior, where goal-oriented thinking translates into adaptive behavior that enables success (Beck, 1979). Consistent with prior licensure studies, organized study patterns and self-regulated learning emerged as key contributors to performance (Alih et al., 2024; Bayawa et al., 2022). These results imply that disciplined preparation represents a behavioral manifestation of a developing achievement-oriented mindset, enabling participants to translate motivation into sustained, goal-directed action.

Enabling Socio-Environmental Supports

Support System. Participants emphasized that guidance from the faculties and the emotional support from personal relationships provided stability throughout the licensure preparation process (Bayawa et al., 2022). Preparation was not an isolated endeavor but a relational experience, in which encouragement and reassurance mitigated doubt and sustained motivation (Albina et al., 2021). This indicates the nature of mentorship that was not confined to academic teaching. Consistent with existing literature, positive relationships in immediate environments enhance motivation and persistence in demanding academic context (Derasin, 2025; Manuel et al., 2024). Resilience research similarly highlights that social and emotional support functions as a coping resource, enabling individuals to adjust to pressure and adversity effectively (Farchi & Peled-Avram, 2025). The supportive people and environments ensured that the preparation process is manageable and meaningful to the topnotchers (Ramirez et al., 2024).

Supportive Conditions. Participants highlighted that supportive environments helped them remain calm, focused, and prepared throughout the licensure journey. Organized school arrangements, review settings, and even the mood during the examination itself were recollected as valuable elements that contributed to a decrease in anxiety (Dimas, 2024). These conditions extended beyond physical spaces to include institutional programs that supported learning. This aligns with literature emphasizing the role of academic settings and formal support systems in enhancing student engagement and licensure readiness (Manuel et al., 2024; Alih et al., 2024). From an Ecological Systems Theory perspective, these findings illustrate how enabling environments influence individual development and success (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, topnotchers' achievements reflect not only personal effort but also the cumulative effect of structured, supportive contexts.

Positive Adaptations

Self-care. The topnotchers used various self-care practices to cope with stress throughout the review period, such as reflection, intentional rest, and having a positive attitude. The participants did not concentrate on a negative mindset, which reduced the emotional burden of the difficulties in the preparation process and enabled them to stay motivated (Raghunathan & Izadi, 2024). This is similar to Cognitive Behavioral Theory, which states that individuals are capable of regulating the emotional responses by altering the maladaptive thought patterns and replacing them with the more adaptive ones (Beck, 1979). Furthermore, the literature on resilience also highlights that positive thinking is useful in terms of adaptive functioning and the capacity to continue with the stressful situation (Glowacz & Born, 2015; Van Breda, 2018). Likewise, research on exam preparation emphasizes the importance of restorative breaks and healthy coping mechanisms in ensuring long-term engagement and improved performance (Graybow, 2019; Alih et al., 2024). The participants were aware of their emotional boundaries and used emotion-focused, problem-focused, meaning-focused, and reflective coping strategies to balance themselves. This implies that self-care in topnotchers is not accidental but a deliberate and self-managed process that facilitates long-term academic performance (Foong et al., 2021).

Self-efficacy. Participants persevered even when faced with difficulties during preparation because they believed in their abilities, which kept them going. Similar studies highlight the importance of goal commitment and intrinsic motivation in fostering perseverance during the rigorous exam preparation (Alih et al., 2024; Bayawa et al., 2022). The participants demonstrate how doubts turn into confidence, and it can be concluded that persistence is not only motivated by external factors but also by internal conviction. In line with the resilience literature, adaptive coping is developed when people redefine problems as growth opportunities and use personal agency (Glowacz & Born, 2015; Van Breda, 2018). As participants experienced learning advancement, their competence is strengthened, supporting self-efficacy and forming a cycle in which effort enhanced confidence, which, in turn, further perpetuated persistence. Research shows that perceived mastery and the growing self-efficacy sustain high-pressure preparation engagement (Nicolas & Arambulo, 2023; Smith et al., 2023). From a CBT perspective, these experiences are cognitive reframing, in which changes in thought patterns affect behavior and perseverance (Beck, 1979). Further, self-efficacy among topnotchers is not only about working hard but also about sustaining the determination to keep going even when the challenges persist.

Continuing Personal Growth

Greater Self-growth. Topnotchers expressed a desire to develop themselves rather than being satisfied with their success. The examination gave them a sense of direction, which inspired them to continue their personal growth. Their thoughts indicate that recognition served as a stimulus, prompting them to assume more responsibilities and explore future opportunities. This is consistent with research on personal development, which suggests that success tends to prompt people to re-establish their objectives and pursue further development (Steyn & Barnard, 2024). The literature also confirms that meaningful goals increase persistence and lead to long-term professional growth, especially among high achievers entering new career stages (Van Breda, 2018). This view aligns with the resilience and developmental literature, which highlights that success is often seen as a stepping stone to further improvement rather than an endpoint (Farchi & Peled-Avram, 2025; Glowacz & Born, 2015). In general, increased self-development became a self-managed, and continuous process that influence how participants planned and pursued their future goals.

Enhanced Flexibility. Success was not the end, but it increased the awareness that the professional development needs continuous adjustment. Passing and topping as experiences supported the perception that learning is an ongoing process, fostering a flexible attitude rather than a fixed one. The literature supports the idea that high achievers tend to have a learning-focused outlook, which continues to advance their careers throughout their lives, not just through personal achievements (Steyn & Barnard, 2024). This consciousness indicates that professional competence is built up and is not necessarily based on prior success. The same is observed in studies of resilience and professional adaptation, which find that continuous learning enhances flexibility and further growth in changing environments (Glowacz & Born, 2015; Farchi & Peled-Avram, 2025). Studies of early-career professionals emphasize the need to adopt a lifelong learning approach to cope with new duties and expanding roles (Niyomves et al., 2024; O'Brien et al., 2024). Moreover, these stories show that flexibility was a natural outcome of the desire for personal development, enabling participants to continually accumulate knowledge and skills, overcome challenges, and advance their professional growth.

Persistent Efforts. The participants stressed that their perseverance was influenced by the challenges they faced during the preparation process. Challenges were not perceived as obstacles to success but as life experiences that strengthened determination and support personal values. The setbacks also made the participants more ready to work towards their objectives, even when the results were unclear, an attitude that holds that hard work is good in itself, irrespective of the outcome. The perception of success as personal integrity enabled the participant to work without fear of failure. The academic persistence studies also indicate that redefining effort as valuable encourages participation in demanding professional training (Alih et al., 2024; Bayawa et al., 2022). The importance of perseverance was strengthened by reflecting on the past experiences that proved that hard work is not in vain. The literature on resilience also notes that understanding the advantages of past difficulties strengthens the motivation in the future (Glowacz & Born, 2015; Farchi & Peled-Avram, 2025). The participants were committed to learning and perseverance, which affects their self-concept and prepares the way for further personality development.

Realizing One's Value. The participants shared a change in their sense of self following their success. Success was not only a recognition but also boosted self-image and self-esteem. Excelling in the examination strengthened their sense of identity and made their abilities and personal worth clear. This realization was not only informed by recognition but also by the process that led to it. Personal development studies emphasize that self-exploration, self-awareness, and self-acceptance contribute to identity formation and transformation (Steyn & Barnard, 2024). Participants described a shift from self-doubt to a confident yet humble perspective. Resilience and psychological development literature note that overcoming challenges fosters recognition of strengths while maintaining self-awareness (Glowacz & Born, 2015; Farchi & Peled-Avram, 2025). They also influenced professional identity, as participants recognized responsibilities and accountability that extend beyond examination results. Research professional readiness also suggests that success can catalyze the development of role-identity and early-career responsibilities (Adiego et al., 2022). Moreover, this development emerged from both effort and reflection, demonstrating that achievement shaped not only their accomplishments but also their self-concept and identity.

Service-Oriented Professional Identity

Service Orientation. Participants also mentioned a strong desire to serve others, shaped by their experiences. Achievement was not seen as a personal credit to be stored, but as an incentive to help and give back, especially to the future examinee and clients who might be going through the same predicament. These reflections demonstrate how success reinforced a service-oriented attitude, consistent with social work values. The literature suggests that achievement can inspire individuals to share learning and support colleagues and future professionals (Steyn & Barnard, 2024). Resilience and identity development research further highlights that purpose-driven motivations sustain long-term engagement in helping professions, particularly when the service is perceived as personally meaningful (Glowacz & Born, 2015; Farchi & Peled-Avram, 2025). Participants' experience shows that the service orientation was grounded in empathy and mutual understanding, and that the ability to relate to others' challenges strengthens their commitment to making a difference in social work practice. The social work education literature also emphasizes that personal experiences are often shaped by motivations to help and strengthen dedication to service-focused practice (Simmons et al., 2024).

Professional Commitment. The participants perceived their success as bearing responsibilities for how they ought to practice and demonstrate professional values. Their decision to become a topnotcher gave them clarity about choosing a career as a social worker as a lifelong vocation, not just because they had passed the board examination. Demonstration of commitment was not only about motivation but also a conscious decision to be determined to meaningful professional practice. This aligns with the literature, which indicates that prolonged suffering may increase adherence to social justice and advocacy, thereby enhancing the profession's purpose and commitment (Scheffert & Henson, 2025). Professional commitment in this context was associated with purpose clarity and translation of knowledge into practice. The participants demonstrated a combined understanding of professional learning, as they were aware of the practical application of theories rather than treating them as abstract concepts. Their thoughts indicate that success justified the understanding and application of social work values, which developed a sense of responsible professional practice. The focus on purpose, reflective learning, and value-based action underscores a new professional identity based on meaningful service and long-term commitment. Although past research on board examination topnotchers has focused on preparation strategies, institutional support, and resilience (Manuel et al., 2024; Alih et al., 2024), the current study builds on these findings by analyzing the interpretation of success after achievement. The participants viewed success as an ongoing process of self-development and service dedication, demonstrating that licensure success in social work is not only the result of successful preparation but also the process that changes the identity and values of the profession.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of the social work licensure examination (SWLE) topnotchers in a state university in Region XIII, Philippines. The findings revealed that these topnotchers are resilient and purpose-driven individuals. They persevere amidst challenges and firmly aim to top, backed up by deepened spirituality, disciplined preparation, and enabling socio-environmental supports. Moreover, the topnotchers find meaning in their experiences, which motivates them to continue pursuing personal growth and realizing their service-oriented professional identity. This implies that these individuals did not become topnotchers by chance; rather, they had a clear intention to excel in the board examination, reinforcing their desire to serve others. Based on these findings, future examinees may consider developing a strong sense of purpose that extends beyond passing the examination, utilizing existing support systems and a supportive environment to help mitigate stress, and anticipating future challenges by applying self-care strategies and enhancing self-efficacy. Social work educators and deans may foster self-efficacy by instilling the belief that topping the licensure examination is possible, enhancing mentorship programs, formal review programs, and conducive learning environments. Institutions may consider incorporating stress-management programs and cognitive preparation techniques in the review programs to increase the students' preparedness for licensure examinations. Future researchers may consider examining the experiences of SWLE topnotchers in different institutions or regions to expand the knowledge of licensure success. In this digital era, future research may also explore how technology-mediated factors influence preparation strategies and performance in licensure exams. Lastly, future studies may examine the cognitive strategies used in the preparation and determine which are most effective. While this study focused on a small group of topnotchers from a single institution in Region XIII, the findings can provide insights for future exam takers in this helping profession and, therefore, help them pursue excellence to better serve the people.

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