

Success Stories of Top Performers in Teacher Education and Liberal Arts

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Abstract. This study was conducted to describe the journey of topnotchers from a private Catholic higher education institution in Tuguegarao City. Employing a phenomenological study approach, this study explored the lived experiences of the four topnotchers from the School of Education, Criminology, Arts, and Psychology between 2013 and 2023. Using thematic analysis to analyze the answers of the top notchers to the validated semi-structured interview questionnaire, several key factors that contributed to their success in achieving top placements in the board examinations were revealed. These factors were strong institutional support, effective teacher mentorship, good personal characteristics, a supportive family, peer support, and strategic personal interventions. These emphasize how important it is to have a solid support system inside and outside the school setting. Based on these results, the study offers various recommendations for the institution to enhance further its support for those students who are determined to succeed. These include strengthening academic and emotional support strategies from the school, family members, and peers. Moreover, it is important to invest in faculty development, enrich library resources, and intensify board exam review courses to incorporate meaningful learning experiences and test the effectiveness of a certain practice. Additionally, assessing students' study routines to improve effective study habits and leveraging more top-notch testimonies for promotional purposes to attract more enrollees. These could serve as a source of inspiration for students and a means of enhancing the school's standing as a producer of high scorers on board exams. Therefore, this study encourages students to pass and ace the board examinations.

Keywords: Education; Exam preparation; Licensure examination; Topnotchers.

1.0 Introduction

Education is the journey through which individuals acquire knowledge, essential skills, values, and attitudes, equipping them to thrive as globally competitive professionals. It plays a crucial role in an individual's development as it helps hone career pursuit and all aspects of human being. Moreover, having quality education ensures that all learners have access to a safe, inclusive, and conducive environment that fosters holistic development. It is also necessary for societal progress and global development because it goes beyond transmitting knowledge, encompassing cultivating talents, critical thinking, and a love for lifelong learning. Thus, having quality education helps students succeed, as it is critical to passing and being on the board licensure examination.

With that, the licensure examination serves as a symbol of professionalism recognized by both the government and the public, setting high standards of excellence, ethical conduct, and criteria for selection (Alipante et al., 2017). It is crucial in ensuring professional competency across various fields (Abao et al., 2023). Thus, this is essential because examination outcomes not only indicate students' intellectual capabilities but also represent the overall efficacy of the educational institution (Ognayon & Afalla, 2022). Forty-five Professional Regulatory Boards (PRB) have jurisdiction over specific areas of professional expertise, all of which fall under the larger organization, the Professional Regulation Commission. The exam administered by PRB guarantees that it meets professional, legal, and technical standards (Abao et al., 2023). Also, they release many professionals every year and consistently produce top-notch professionals.

Meanwhile, the PRC administers board examinations in education and liberal arts. These include teacher education, criminology, psychology, and social work. The PRC and the Board for Professional Teachers (BPT) announced that 23,782 out of 50,593 (47.01%) elementary teachers and 53,995 out of 95,969 (56.26%) secondary teachers passed the September 2023 exams. There are 84 top scorers at the elementary level and 39 at the secondary level. Also, the PRC announced that 6,133 out of 8,370 people passed the Psychometricians Licensure Examination, 64 of whom scored highly. In August 2023, 5,743 out of 17,576 (32.68%) passed the criminologist licensure exam with 14 topnotchers. In the social worker licensure exam, 3,878 out of 6,833 (56.75%) passed, with 17 topnotchers. This data shows that more exam takers correlate with a lower pass rate. However, liberal arts colleges face particular difficulties in establishing meaningful global collaborations. This is primarily due to their significantly smaller size, limited resources, and emphasis on an intimate culture centered around undergraduate teaching and learning (Penprase & Schneider, 2023).

On the other hand, there are top notchers in every board examination. They are the ones who achieve the highest scores and often receive widespread admiration for their exceptional performance. They serve as role models, drawing upon their life experiences to inspire others and provide insights into their journey to success (Bayawa et al., 2022). Moreover, excelling in licensure examinations brings graduates pride and motivates future students to consider enrolling in higher education institutions (Ognayon & Afalla, 2022).

Given the significant impact of higher education institutions on program performance, as reflected in favorable licensure examination outcomes, there is a critical responsibility to gather and comprehend narratives from top-performing students. These narratives hold the potential to offer valuable insights beneficial for the institution's progress and development (Quitoras & Abuso, 2021). Through this, the researchers aimed to develop an esteemed name for their department, emphasizing that despite having a limited number of enrollees, they can still produce topnotchers in their respective fields and the Civil Service Examination.

Therefore, the researchers embark on a journey to uncover the lives and experiences of education and liberal arts topnotchers, offering invaluable lessons for future generations striving for excellence and to have a 100% rating in the board examination. Thus, their stories will inspire others, encourage more students to enroll in the institution and empower future generations to pass and secure the top spot in the examination.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This research used a qualitative method employing a phenomenological research design to describe the lived experiences of the top notchers in the licensure examination. This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors contributing to their success. It also enabled the exploration of patterns and causes of behavior, providing valuable insights into their journey toward achieving top rankings.

2.2 Research Participants

The participants in this study were four (4) topnotchers from one of the Catholic institutions in the northern Philippines. Total enumeration was used to select the informants, who were selected by the following criteria: (1) top notchers who took the licensure examination between 2013 and 2023 and (2) must have earned their bachelor's degree from the institution.

2.3 Research Instrument

The researchers formulated semi-structured interview questionnaires for the study and ensured the content experts validated it. The questions focused on the experiences and the journey of the topnotchers, including their strategies, challenges faced, motivations, and other factors contributing to their achievement. The researchers devised these questions to identify the influential factors and interconnectedness of the various elements influencing their top placement spot. Thus, the study provided a comprehensive view of the topnotchers' experiences as they reached the top.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers reached out to the top notchers through their messenger accounts. After they gave their consent to participate in the study, a schedule was set according to the top notchers' schedules. The semi-structured interview was conducted through Zoom or Google Meet. Each interview lasted about 15 to 20 minutes.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Before the data collection, participants were given a consent letter and informed of the study's rationale. The interviews were conducted voluntarily, and participants could withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer questions that made them uncomfortable. The confidentiality of participants' responses was strictly observed. Moreover, participants were assured of the best benefits they could get from participating in the study and were informed they could access any information regarding the study's findings.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The influential factors in becoming topnotchers include Institutional Support, Teacher Mentorship, Personal Characteristics, Supportive Family, Peer Support, and Strategic Personal Intervention. These collectively contribute to the journey of Teacher Education and Liberal Arts Topnotchers.

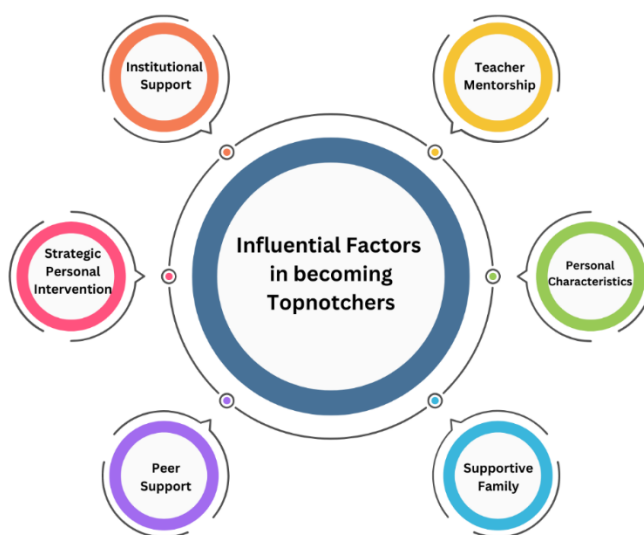


Figure 1. Factors in becoming topnotchers

3.1 Institutional Support

Institutional support encompasses a wide range of services and initiatives that promote student excellence and development. It provides a structured network of resources designed to address students' diverse needs, fostering academic and personal growth. In this theme, the top notchers highlighted the importance of their respective universities' programs and resources in preparing them for the board exam. These programs included course enrichment, prayer vigil, and good resources, highlighting their contribution to the top notchers' overall educational experiences and success.

Program Preparation

The informants of this study highlighted the significant impact of the institutions' programs on their ability to excel academically by providing them with essential knowledge, skills, and support. They emphasized that the university's course enrichment was instrumental in their preparation for board examinations, resulting in remarkable results. In particular, their success was significantly influenced by the six-unit course specifically designed to cover the examination content. Teachers provide comprehensive coverage of potential exam topics and discussion, which significantly aids their preparation for the teacher education program, which occurs every Saturday. Similarly, for the psychology program, different speakers are invited to discuss various topics for the board exam during the weekend. The informants' statements of how the course enrichment of the institution benefited them are as follows:

The institution equipped us with the things that we needed. There are many practices like Course Enrichment; we have discussed the topics, test questions, tips, and what to expect on the board. It prepares us really before entering the review center. TO1

Course enrichment is a great help before graduating. Its function was to help us get ready to enter the review center because, after four years of studying, you will study again. It was helpful in gradually refreshing what we learned in four years. TO2

Before we graduated, this program in the school, like course enrichment or something like that, served as a review. I think every Saturday, we have to attend that for at least three hours, and then some of our instructors in the department take time to review you, so it is like going back to the different subjects. I think it is a big help. TO4

The claims made above indicate that the course enrichment programs of the institution have proven to be essential and effective in preparing the informants before taking the board exam. By integrating regular discussions, tips, test questions, and test simulations tailored with guidance, the institution deeply reinforces academic learning and cultivates a supportive learning environment conducive to achieving success. Course enrichment programs are comprehensive and promote learning experiences for students by developing supportive activities that can enhance student learning and lead to positive outcomes (Carter, 2013). High-quality enrichment programs, activities, and experiences are also designed to support students' knowledge and development. It significantly benefits and positively affects students' well-being, creativity, critical thinking, self-esteem, and overall foundation for success (Blazer, 2016). Moreover, vigil for board takers was also highlighted as a great support from the university. One of the informants stated:

I also saw our organization's support, as they even organized a vigil for our board exams. TO2

Conducting prayer vigils for board takers at one of the Catholic Higher schools in the northern Philippines exemplifies a comprehensive support system, addressing academic needs and spiritual guidance. This initiative underscores its commitment to nurturing student well-being and personal development and recognizing the integral role of spirituality in their academic journey. In line with the study of Clayton (2021), spirituality plays an uplifting impact on students' academic environments. This is through prayers and a strong connection with Him. It fosters a sense of interpersonal closeness to God in individuals, particularly at trying times when they require guidance (Jeppsen, 2015).

In light of this, the findings underline the essential role of institutional support in facilitating students' success by offering vital resources, programs, and opportunities to prepare for board exams. This demonstrates the commitment of the institution to embedding its Core Values into the students, particularly Christian Living and Excellence. The dedication to these values extends beyond academic achievement to incorporate holistic development in all aspects of student life. The institution's emphasis on Excellence encourages students to strive for proficiency in diverse areas, creating continuous improvement and achievement. Moreover, Christian Values, cultivated through CFED subjects each semester, add to students' spiritual growth and well-being. With these ideals, the institution's program to establish these values contributes positively to the informants' success. Additionally, this allows the institution to display its unique technique in incorporating a beneficial impact for students who aim to be at the top or successful in their endeavors.

The result is supported by Aronson (2017), who emphasizes that institutional support enhances students' academic success and seeks to develop innovative programs that better meet their needs and make their learning experiences meaningful. These programs provide an environment for the students to be ready for their future undertakings (Hendawi & Nosair, 2020) as well as essential to the student's success in taking the board examination (Amanonce, 2020). Like the study of Micabalo & Cruspero (2022), school and administrative support positively impacts the graduates' readiness to take the licensure examination through constant review, refreshment, and reminders from the faculty and staff.

Resource Accessibility

Ensuring that students have access to suitable resources, particularly books relevant to their study, is valuable to their academic achievement. By guaranteeing equal access to educational resources, institutions motivate students to excel academically and foster lifelong learning. Just like the informants of this study who had positive comments on the resources of the institution's library. Their experiences are conveyed in these statements:

I did not have a hard time with resources because books were available in the library, which was enough. I remember I borrowed books back then. TO1

The books in the library are indeed good. TO2

Many books are available on the Main Campus, which interests many students. TO3

We have a very good library. I stayed there from my first year to my fourth year. You can borrow many books and get the sources there. TO4

This finding indicates an outstanding appreciation for the library's services, as the topnotchers have regularly accessed its resources throughout their academic journey. This emphasizes the institution's commitment to giving students access to an excellent library, enabling them to study different resources and books to enhance their intellectual capacities, especially in preparing for the board examination. This result is supported by the study of Crawford (2015), which states that an established library program with proper staffing, resources, and financing may result in better student academic achievement. It allows them to explore and deepen their understanding of different course materials (Chipana, 2018). With this being said, it is recommended that the institution continue providing the students with good resources from the library to create opportunities for academic growth because this also contributes to the success of the informants.

3.2 Teacher Mentorship

Mentorship from teachers has become a critical component in meeting students' academic and emotional needs. The informants of this study highlighted their teachers' invaluable assistance throughout their educational journey, which is essential in overcoming academic obstacles and achieving success. The informants also underlined teachers' importance in inspiring them to excel, helping them toward their goals, and nurturing their well-being. This support enabled them to improve their skills, attain academic success, and show their full potential. Here is how the influence of teachers was evident in the preparation of the informants:

Our teachers are our mentors. Our teachers have always been supportive during our preparation on the board. We entered the review center with preparations from our teachers. TO1

Our instructors would check on us while we were reviewing, asking if we were okay. It is a big deal that our instructors still check on us even though we have already graduated. TO2

The instructors at the institution are like our teachers there; they are confident. That is the first thing you must have: competent teachers. TO4

The result reveals that the institution has supportive and competent teachers who cater to the needs of its students. This was reflected by the topnotchers, whom the teachers helped throughout their journey in preparation for the board exams. This notably helps their performance as teachers guide and monitor their preparation, providing

support to optimize their readiness for the exam. This is supported by the theory of educational productivity, wherein instruction quantity, quality, and classroom climate contribute to students' success (Walberg, 1981). Similarly, the study of Pattaguan (2018) states that teachers are one of the contributors to the success of the topnotchers from CPALE. Also, the study by Owolabi and Oginni (2013) found that mentorship increases interaction between students and teachers, which leads to the transfer of skills that depend upon guidance and social support. It is done through supervision, support, and collaborative self-improvement (Yiga, 2016). Thus, the result acts as an excellent means to help meet the needs of the students.

On the other hand, teacher competence is positively related to teaching quality, which affects student outcomes (Baumert et al., 2013). As observed in the study of Gusmida et al. (2017), the teaching and learning process in schools will run well if the learning system or model is one of the factors that influence learning activities chosen and implemented with the right strategies and implemented by teachers who are competent in the field of teaching and education. This exemplifies that having a qualified teacher means that the students' learnings will be meaningful and relevant in their lives, especially when preparing for an exam.

3.3 Personal Characteristics

This theme explores the diverse personal qualities exhibited by top notchers that help them navigate challenges and attain success. They have shared the following personal characteristics: Consistency and Discipline, Academic achievement, Confidence and Perseverance, Goal-Orientedness and Determination, academic proficiency and Love for Learning, Faith, Time Management, and Self-Reliance. These characteristics collectively shaped their journey to top placements, reflecting their dedication and commitment to excellence.

Consistency and Discipline

Consistency is beneficial as it allows individuals to perform the same way each time and keep the same behavior. Discipline can be found in this characteristic, as it helps an individual to have the self-control to attain their goal. Thus, consistency and discipline were essential factors during the preparation of the informants. Relating this to the Theory of Productivity by Walberg, one of the nine key factors that lead to a student's success is their ability. The ability of the informants to stay constant and disciplined for their goals has been recognized as contributing to their success. As they said:

Every day I wake up, I try to become consistent. Consistency and discipline are my foundation and a significant factor in preparing for the board exam. It would be best if you had discipline in your time and your routines. TO1

It started at the review center, where they probably observed that my scores were becoming consistent. They suddenly started saying that Patrick had a chance, they would say. But I did not want my head to swell. I just wanted to stay level-headed; I just worked hard. TO2

This is very important self-discipline, okay? For example, you were asking me a while ago if I got distracted with social media, and that is where discipline comes in. TO4

The result shows that these two characteristics are essential in their routine while preparing for the board exam. Topnotchers laid a strong foundation supporting sustained effort and progress toward their academic goals by prioritizing discipline in time management and routines. Thus, this came along with focus and hard work, which, in turn, rely on consistency in forming discipline and creating habits. These qualities are seen as essential for maintaining focus and adhering to study schedules, which are crucial factors in the preparation for the board exam. In the study of Espiritu et al. (2022), discipline is one of the six factors that characterize the success of Filipino MTLE Topnotchers. This is aligned with the study of Mutakwa (2023), stating that consistent practice enhances discipline, which helps everyone overcome challenges, maintain attention, and withstand distractions. The study of Fadrigon et al. (2019) also showed that having this trait is important in preparing for the licensure examination. These two become an asset for the informants to reach their goals and get that top placement they aim for.

Consistent Academic Awardee

Personal achievements such as being an achiever and having a competitive disposition are pillars of the informants' success. Their innate drive for excellence compels them to set high standards and continuously strive

for excellence, exemplifying personal achievement's power in reaching success. They are inherently driven by a desire for individual achievement because, at an early age, they naturally aim for excellence, setting high standards for themselves. Here are their responses when asked about being an achiever:

Of course, that is my foundation, what I achieved throughout my academic life. That is my foundation in my professional life because I always say to myself and other people that if you work hard, that becomes your weapon later on when you are a professional. TO1

These achievements boost my confidence. I was a dean's lister and then achieved the President's lister. TO2

Being an achiever trained me to have a competitive disposition. TO3

Being an academic achiever and the competitiveness of the informants add up to the factor in their success. It is evident from the findings of this study that the informants were achievers, which is considered one of the foundations of why they became topnotchers. This becomes their foundation as they set high standards for themselves to achieve their desired achievements. Thus, students' academic performance has profound implications for their future endeavors. This is also evident from one of the topnotchers, who shared that educational achievement is an asset in future endeavors. This is supported by the study of Kutnick et al. (2022), who stated that it is a crucial determinant of career aspirations and future accomplishments. Additionally, the extent of a student's competitiveness and the overall competitive atmosphere within a school can profoundly influence student achievement (Nebel et al., 2016). Thus, this exemplifies that competitiveness and achievement result in better outcomes.

Confidence and Perseverance

The informants in this study display exceptional self-confidence and perseverance, maintaining a strong self-image, creating good attitudes, and demonstrating resilience on their journey to success. These defining characteristics enable them to overcome challenges and have a positive outlook throughout all their experiences. Fueled by a self-driven mindset, they approach their academic goals with an unwavering devotion to excellence. As the informants stated:

You should be optimistic that you should have a positive attitude towards the situation. Self-confidence, it must not be lost. Another quality is perseverance, wherein I did not give up that time, even though I was under pressure because I was rushing for my review. TO2

I am not that grade-conscious; it is like I am confident that I will ace the exam. TO3

I cannot afford to fail the LET, so you have to persevere. TO4

This shows that being confident and persistent enough with your aims will result in a good end since these two crucial attributes boost the informants toward their success. Thus, it was found that there is a strong relationship between academic success and confidence (Dinsmore & Parkinson, 2013). Thus, successfully overcoming challenges can lead students to experience a sense of accomplishment, thereby enhancing their self-confidence. It also demonstrated that perseverance is a crucial quality for success (Duckworth, 2016). Therefore, it is vital to encourage students to cultivate these attributes because they are good contributors to studying and striving for outstanding performance.

Goal-Oriented and Determination

Setting clear goals, working diligently, and remaining determined throughout the preparation are common traits among topnotchers. Individuals use goals to direct their actions, assess their progress, and drive their learning over time. According to the informants, their goal is what motivates them. Relating this to one of the nine critical variables in the Theory of Productivity by Walberg, motivation drives someone to success. In addition, setting goals is a motivation that helps these topnotchers achieve their success. They are determined to achieve the goals that they set for themselves. As they shared:

I always set goals, and as much as possible, by all means, I will find ways to reach my goals. TO1

You need to set your mind to take the board exam. It is important that once you have decided to take the board, push it. You have enrolled in a review center and reviewed for several months, so push through and keep going. There is no turning back. TO2

Despite the problem, your goal motivated me to review more. You set a goal already. You set the goal that, okay, I applied for this, I paid for this, and I registered for this exam. Therefore, even though I face these challenges, I have to make sure that I see the end of it because you are on the journey to pass, so you have to work on that. TO4

The informants of this study are renowned for their ability to set clear goals combined with perseverance throughout the process. These traits become fundamental before embarking on their academic journey because they serve as their guiding actions and driving force as they prepare for the examination. It can boost motivation and promote skill development and engagement in learning. Thus, students should establish realistic goals to manage their time effectively (Adams & Blair, 2019). On the other hand, informants are driven by the determination to achieve their goals. In Cherry's study (2021), it was stated that self-determination fosters success in many different domains of life goals.

Love for Learning

The informants of this study emphasize proficiency in critical subjects like Mathematics and Reading Comprehension, coupled with a love for learning and solid formation. In connection with the Theory of Productivity by Walberg, one key variable is ability. An individual's ability to solve problems in mathematics leads to academic success, and as Sudiarta and Widana (2019) state, this helps in the individual's analytical skills. On the other hand, one's ability to read and comprehend is also a factor in achieving academic success. The study by Bastug (2014) states that this is a crucial determinant of academic success. That is why being academically proficient is a major contributor to academic success. However, this is not enough to attain success because one needs to couple it with a love for learning and eagerness for excellence, as shown by the top notchers. These are the statements of the informants:

I am good at Math and love to read. I did not have a hard time with Math, and the same goes for paragraphs and vocabulary. My education upbringing, especially from a school that excelled in science and math, means that arithmetic has always been a challenge for me. I am happy when I excel. TO3

The second is solid formation. You need to have a solid foundation, for example, in theories like education, which are very important subjects. It is one solid foundation, and you need to have a very good understanding of those lessons. TO4

The result shows that the success of the informants is rooted in a combination of academic proficiency and love for learning. Thus, exceptional proficiency in academic subjects such as Mathematics and Reading comprehension enables them to comprehend easily. In the study of Ponkshe (2013), students who excel in English reading comprehension are likely to excel academically. With that, prioritizing developing reading comprehension skills is essential for enhancing academic achievement. Moreover, their love for learning and pursuit of excellence is also important for the informants. Instead of viewing education as a means to an end, they approach it with genuine curiosity and a thirst for knowledge.

Faith

Faith is keeping a strong relationship with God, which inspires the informants to face challenges and stay focused on their goals. Their faith is very important in their preparation for the board examination. When combined with hard work, prayer helps them believe and be confident that they will pass the exam. Their faith provides emotional, mental, and spiritual support, allowing the informants to deal with the pressure they feel for the examination. They claimed that:

I do not have to prove anything; I will do what I can. I did my part, and I leave the rest to God. TO2

First you need to have a strong faith in God. You need to pray, but you have to couple it with hard work. For example, you can pray on one, but if you are not going to prepare, then it is useless. That is the first one. TO4

This finding shows the value of the existence of God as a factor in reaching success. The informants shared how they are guided with faith and surrendering the outcome to His power. Also, one of the top notchers highlighted the power of prayer, which acknowledges the role of heavenly direction that provides strength while putting efforts to ensure that they will pass the board exam. The study of Albite (2019) shows that faith contributes to the success of BEED topnotchers. In fact, in the research conducted by Binayao & Dales (2020), participants emphasized that the most crucial aspect never to be overlooked by takers is seeking God's intervention. Their increased dedication to prayer fosters a more optimistic outlook on the licensure exam outcome. Thus, success and fulfillment come from effort and faith (Alsaraj, 2023). Therefore, having faith in God truly becomes a factor in success because nothing is impossible with Him.

Time Management

Balancing study time and other obligations, such as work or personal responsibilities, can be challenging. For candidates working while preparing for the exam, prioritizing duties and effectively managing study time is crucial for adequate preparation. Thus, time management skills are important to success. One of the informants revealed that she is working while preparing for the board exam. She stated it was challenging but not an issue because she knows how to maximize her time and prioritize things. This is how her statement goes by:

It was time management. Of course, it is challenging. For example, I go to work, and then I have to leave at 3:30, let us say 3:30, but after 3:30, you have to prepare for tomorrow's lesson, or maybe for the next week, you have to prepare materials so it is challenging because sometimes like I am already tired, I already work for how many hours and I have to prepare again so where will I squeeze this schedule of reviewing it is a challenge but it is not a problem just a matter of prioritizing. It is just a matter of priority. TO4

This finding aligns with the study by Goetz et al. (2017), which indicated that effective time management strategies are linked to academic success. Postgraduate students who work while studying recognize the necessity of wise time management to balance work and educational responsibilities. For this, students must adopt the personality applied by the informant, as effective time management impacts examination performance.

Self-Reliance

Self-reliance indicates trust in one's capabilities and skills despite the problems one may encounter. Two informants displayed this trait, wherein they still believed in themselves despite having uncertainties about their environment and themselves. One topnotcher said that she encountered technical concerns, such as her paper becoming smudged with the ink of her ballpen. Despite this, she believed she could pass the exam since she estimated her likely score. This exhibits her trust in herself with her statement:

My pen had a problem. I felt like the ink was put on the paper – the paper that you have to pass. Of course, I am thinking, what if that is stained on the barcode or it spreads, so my paper will not be accepted? That is my worry. Modesty aside, I think I am going to pass because I counted the number of items that I am confident in. I counted the number, I am sure. TO4

On the other hand, one of our informants also wondered about her ability to pass the exam. However, she overcame these fears by being self-reliant because she was secure in her knowledge and thought she had prepared for the exam. With her statement:

The number one challenge was having doubts during the preparations because you kept questioning, and I asked myself several times if it was worth it to review. So, it is me against myself. I think every day, as much as possible, as I am motivated to wake up every day, I have to condition myself that I do not doubt myself. That is why you are preparing; you have a goal to make sure you pass the board exam. TO1

This indicates that before, during, and after the exam, it is crucial to have trust in oneself. The self-reliance that whatever occurs, everything will be okay. Thus, encountering challenges and stress during examinations is common among takers preparing for exams. Whether it is the pressure to do well or the dread of failure, many individuals battle uncertainties about their abilities. Thus, students with high self-reliance are confident in themselves and can step out of their comfort zone and help themselves overcome and face challenges (Liang, 2013). Furthermore, having this skill allows the informants to conquer the challenges, and they are more adept at

facing these obstacles because they believe they can go through the problems with their skills and capacities. The study of Mishra et al. (2023) stated that one benefit of self-reliance is that it improves the decision-making competence of an individual, which shows that they are accountable and responsible for how they face challenges. In addition, being responsible for handling these challenges and relying on one's abilities helps the informants deal with their problems.

3.4 Supportive Family

Family support considerably improves the success of all the informants in this study. Family is a significant component of becoming a top achiever, motivating to reach goals. From delivering resources for preparation to providing emotional support, family support is a powerful motivator, pushing students to strive for success. A good relationship with family and a conducive home environment promote educational achievement and contribute to general well-being. Additionally, the urge to repay family sacrifices is a major motivator for top performers, driving them to thrive in their board examinations. These are their statements:

They have been very supportive ever since college like they are always there, and they make sure that all I need to do is to study. They have been supportive throughout; I do not know how I would have gotten through everything without them. Family is my source of motivation; as I said, the people in this house sacrificed a lot for me. I acknowledge their sacrifices and efforts to make it easier for me. I want to reach my goal to make sure no wasted efforts are coming from my family so that their sacrifices will be worth it. TO1

First is the family. Of course, my ever-supportive family truly believed in me during my board exam journey. My family is one of my motivations because I want to repay their support, especially the decision to go to another place to review. I will do this for them. TO2

They are always supportive of other endeavors. For example, if there are school events or competitions, they are the first ones to cheer. They are the first ones who will be proud that I got something. TO3

My parents and my siblings are very supportive. They are very supportive; they do not pressure me. TO4

These findings indicate that having a supportive family can greatly affect performance in different areas. This was reflected in the experience of the topnotchers, who emphasized their family roles during their preparation. Thus, this finding aligns with the study of Mardiana and Sugyaningsih (2018), where family motivation plays a crucial role in cultivating learning motivation. The encouragement, recognition, and commendation provided by parents and close associates are believed to elevate students' motivation levels and academic accomplishments (High & Scharp, 2015).

3.5 Peer Support

Support from friends is helpful for cognitive skills and emotional support, as mentioned by the topnotchers. They underlined that working together in study groups increases critical thinking and analytical skills. By sharing knowledge, discussing concepts, and asking questions, they helped each other properly understand exam matters. This collaborative method fosters a supportive learning setting where students learn from others and increase their understanding of numerous academic fields. Moreover, peer support also provides emotional assistance during stressful times. Thus, this encouragement pushes the top performers to try harder toward reaching their goals alongside their fellow takers. As the top notchers stated:

At the review center, when we are together, for example, one of my classmates has already studied, and my other classmate as well as I have also studied the other topics, so it is like sharing what you understood and where you are having trouble with, in which they can be able to explain to you. It is really all about helping one another because the goal is to pass. TO1

That is how group study helped us. We exchanged information on why this is the correct answer and why not that. If one does not understand, we share our insights to support one another. This helped us analyze. TO2

This exemplifies that peer support helps individuals develop essential skills required for board examinations. This is supported by the study of Chen and Yang (2019), who found that collaborative work and study groups have been proven to enhance students' performance and learning outcomes. With this aspect, students are propelled

by a robust internal drive to excel academically, with the notion that active participation in collaborative learning environments may yield greater cognitive advantages (Kirschner et al., 2018).

However, having peer support is not only for academics; they are present to give comfort when things seem not to be going well. One of the informants mentioned the value of having friends who accompanied him emotionally. Since then, he has had homesickness, which weakened his emotional well-being in part due to a long distance from his parents. This is how he expressed how his peers help him cope:

Because I get homesick quickly, I want to go home immediately. I cannot focus on reviewing. Instead of thinking about reviewing, I was thinking more about how many more days I have before I can go home to Cagayan. What seems to be the solution to that problem is the presence of my classmates and friends, who seem to distract me from the fact that I am away from my family and from the people I am always with. TO2

Coping strategies for those who suffer from homesickness and emotional distress should assert a sensation of connectedness and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, and valued by people, relaxation techniques, and seeking social support (Saigal, 2017). Thus, establishing a support network, staying connected with home, and creating a comfortable living space can effectively cope with homesickness and maintain emotional well-being. The findings of this study indicate that peer support significantly enhances both critical thinking skills and the emotional well-being of individuals. This contributed to the informants' success as this created a supportive environment where collaborative efforts, such as group discussions and mutual encouragement, were identified as components in building good relationships with peers, especially during their preparation for the board exam.

3.6 Strategic Personal Intervention

Another theme is the various methods that topnotchers utilize to prepare for board examinations. The study demonstrates that unique tactics and approaches contribute to their extraordinary success. In this section, the informants provided strategies that they found beneficial in approaching the exam quickly. These components are as follows: Questions Drills and Practice; Consistent Study Routine; Active Reading and Repetition; Test-Wise Strategies; Balancing Social Media Use; Preference for Individual Study; and Test-Taking Skills Development.

Question Drills and Practice

Engaging in regular question drills and practice sessions is an essential aspect of exam preparation for the informants, as it helps them familiarize themselves with the exam format, material, and timing limits. By answering a considerable number of questions daily, they gain essential skills and strategies that are crucial for success in board exams. Topnotchers added a goal scorer in every question drill to monitor their progress. In this case, these are their statements about this strategy:

I take drills, practice drills, and question drills. What I do there is answer 100 questions within 2 hours as much as possible. It is not really that you should get many correct answers, but more to familiarize yourself with taking the test. Every night, I answer 100 questions and practice drills for 2 hours. TO1

Testing skills are very important, and when I answer, for example, the review material, after I answer it, of course, I check. There is a target, there is a target score, and I will only stop once I get a high score. TO4

This shows that this strategy is a big factor in sharpening their knowledge as they review the examination. They practice incredibly hard by conducting exercises and establishing challenges for themselves in everyday preparation, achieving a positive end. In line with the study of Kurniawan and Mylsidayu (2017), question drills are very effective and have a good impact on easier understanding and application. Moreover, it develops proficiency and understanding of the subject matter more swiftly (Kani & Sa'ad, 2015). With that, engaging in regular question drills and practice sessions is essential to success in board exams.

Consistent Study Routine

The informants of this study found this technique beneficial for preparation for the examination. Maintaining a consistent study schedule, such as creating specified study hours, including frequent breaks, and allocating review

days, boosted their focus, productivity, and overall performance. These behaviors help them stay organized, manage their time correctly, and ensure complete preparation for their tests. Here is how they shared their experiences:

I wake up between 5:30 and 6:00 a.m., and by 8:00, I should have eaten. So after that, by 8:00 to 12:00 p.m., I will read, and after I read, I will have lunch by noon and a social break. TO1

I do have four board subjects. So, in a week, I read all of them. For example, on Monday (subject) and Tuesday (subject), I alternate them to maintain balance so I can review different subjects in a week. What is important to me is that I review something in a day. TO2

This finding occurs in the study of Tagud & Valle (2023), which states that effective study habits ensure academic success. This enhances productivity and efficiency as it becomes accustomed to dedicating specific periods to studying, thereby reducing procrastination and avoiding last-minute cramming (Rozhenkova et al., 2023). It becomes helpful for the informants as they easily track their goals for being consistent in their study routine.

Active Reading and Repetition

Active reading and repetition are significant strategies for academic performance to prepare the topnotchers for the board examination. They are fond of reading, which helps their comprehension, retention, understanding, and mastery of study topics. When the informants were asked about their techniques, they said:

For me, the most effective method since college was repetitive reading. Even after reviewing the lecture material multiple times, I still need to read it repeatedly. Once is not enough for me; a single reading does not retain me. TO2

I do have my rules that I always follow. Everything in the module I rewrite like I write everything, like I make my own version of the module. So, I have a reviewer. And because of extensive reading, I can comprehend easily. TO3

I remember that the Dean then told us that there was one topnotcher, and there was this national topnotcher from Nueva Vizcaya, and she said that we have to read read read, and I love reading. TO4

This shows that topnotchers perceived reading as an indispensable instrument to learn. Also, building their version of the module adds significantly to their active memory of various subjects. This is why the topnotchers deeply show that reading and repetition are essential for reaching success. In line with this finding, the study by Al-Din and Al-Afoun (2022) stated that reading strategies are crucial for developing comprehension skills and learning, as they enhance understanding, promote self-education, and engage students actively in the learning process. Also, it imparts wisdom and involves an interactive process of constructing meaning from knowledge (Sadiku, 2015). Alternatively, good note-taking practices lead to efficient learning, improved outcomes, and increased retention of the studied content (Friedman & Kern, 2014). Reviewing the notes created is crucial for transferring information from short-term to long-term memory.

Test-wise Strategies

By understanding and executing test-wise strategies such as item elimination, strategic pacing, and targeted studying of test formats, the informant increased her test-taking skills and improved her overall performance by knowing the proper movement on the test during the exam. She gave priority to this strategy because reading is not enough for the retention of knowledge. Hence, employing this method adds to an effective foundation of knowledge, positively impacting the result of her examination. This is her statement:

Actually, you need to test-wise. You need to be more than just reading and confident with the information. Sometimes, your skills in taking the test are a big factor. That is a strategy I like. Sometimes, you do not have any idea what the answer should be or what could be, but the thing is, you practice elimination. I like doing item elimination and then studying the stem like the stem. The test is time-bound, so you have to practice it; you have to practice like it is a strategy I admire. Test skills, test-wise, you have to be, this might be effective for you. TO4

This demonstrates the importance of being test-wise, suggesting that more than merely reading and having confidence in the information is required. Also, given that tests are time-bound, practicing these strategies is

crucial because this technique helps her and might also help everyone to know the exact answer on an examination. This is in line with the study of Parkes & Zimmario (2016), which revealed that students with test wiseness approach multiple-choice tests differently from essay or short-answer tests. They may utilize strategies such as eliminating distractors based on partial knowledge or gathering clues from other test items to arrive at correct answers. Thus, it involves mental strategies students employ to boost their test scores.

Balancing Social Media Use

Managing social media use is critical for the informants during their review period, as it can significantly affect their focus, productivity, and overall well-being. Additionally, this becomes their tool for stress relief and keeping them updated on important announcements. Wherein these are their statements when asked about how they balance using social media and reviewing:

For me, not really. Social media became important during that time because it helped relieve stress. When I got tired, I would chat, browse Facebook, or watch TikTok. No, I did not deactivate it. It was important because I needed to stay updated on the announcements from the PRC. TO2

I did not stop using social media because if you are reviewing, you put down your phone first and focus on what you are doing. But I do recommend that if it easily distracts you then deactivate, leave it. TO4

Their perspective illustrates a strategy for integrating social media into a balanced and productive routine. This finding can be seen with the nine variables in the theory of educational productivity; exposure to media is one of those. It represents the influence of different social media sources on the student's academic success, which became a good contributor for the informants because, through this, they got updated, released their stress, and so on. Moreover, using the internet to distract oneself from stress has been observed in studies by Khoo and Yang (2021). It opens ways for collaboration and discourse, providing ample opportunities for content posting, sharing, coping, and utilizing online search tools effortlessly (Boateng & Amankwaa, 2016). Although social media has transformed how we interact, students must balance their online engagement and academic obligations to succeed in their studies (Brunton & Farrell, 2020). This demonstrates that social media itself is not harmful to students; the problem lies in its usage and the need for more understanding about setting limits.

Preference for Individual Study

When preparing for any examination, students have their unique style of approaching their learning. This is due to all the individual characteristics that distinguish us from others. Whereas others benefit from group study sessions, one of the informants of this study likes to study alone to keep focus and adhere to their study methods and habits. She stated:

I want to study alone. It is more effective if I approach documents and review materials in a specific way. TO1

This finding underlines that individual study offers better control over one's learning process. The informant's preference towards studying alone shows a reliance on self-directed learning processes and a preference for independence in academic endeavors. Additionally, it understands that various individuals may have unique study preferences and approaches that best suit their learning styles. This is supported by the study of Butler et al. (2022), which stated that each student has a distinct learning style and strategies that work best for them. For instance, some may favor visual aids such as diagrams or charts, while others might prefer auditory or kinesthetic learning techniques. Moreover, self-study allows students to experiment with different approaches and identify the most effective methods. They can adapt their study techniques to align with their strengths and weaknesses, optimizing their learning experience and deepening their understanding of the subject matter (Korthagen et al., 2013).

Test-Taking Skills Development

The informants of this study emphasized the development of students' test-taking skills, which they felt was a good contributor to earning a top placement in the board examination. Thus, highlighting this method allows students to practice mock exams and drills to familiarize themselves with the exam structure and improve their performance under pressure. These are their insight into this development of skill:

It is also essential for students to practice their test-taking skills. Based on my experience, I would consider test-taking skills or strategies as a significant factor in topping the board exam because even if you review, you know a lot, you have read everything, you have memorized it, but if you lack test-taking skills, especially that if it is tricking questions, you will really struggle. Sometimes, you overthink when the answer is just actually simple. TO2

The mock test practice is also good because you will know what part to focus on. TO4

With this finding, it is evident that the topnotchers prioritize cultivating test-taking skills development. They emphasize the value of providing students with practice tasks, which enhances their comprehension of questions and responses. Additionally, mock exams proved advantageous in preparing learners for various assessments. In line with the continuous administration of comprehensive or mock exams to graduates before taking the exam, it has been recommended that they enhance their chances of passing the board examination (Xu & Ye, 2014). Similar to the study of Jocson and Vizconde (2019), it showed that taking practice exams significantly predicts success in board examinations. They can learn to examine questions, evaluate information, and make decisions during tests. With that, test-taking skills are beneficial in students' practical lives, helping them to manage their time properly and ensure clarity of thought because, as per the informants, this is a crucial skill for passing and topping the board examinations.

4.0 Conclusion

Success requires specific personal characteristics that can be nurtured through support from institutions, teachers, family, and friends. This study implies that institutions are essential in developing students and encouraging them to collaborate with families to create a supportive and friendly environment. Rather than students seeking these attributes and support outside the school, institutions can foster these qualities within their own environment. It can promote family and peer involvement during the learning process and help students with any examinations. Moreover, teachers should enhance their pedagogies to meet the needs of diverse individuals. The students' qualities also can be developed through targeted interventions to reach their full potential in their respective fields. By integrating these support networks, the chances of an individual's success are increased, making it an effective model for achieving excellence.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

Jennifer Bangi was responsible for thoroughly checking each input in the paper to ensure that the content met the standards of a quality research paper. Cecille Luyun took charge of reviewing and verifying the final output. Kyla Manuel, Frances Burigay, and Tricia Diaz worked together to conceptualize and write the research paper, conducted data collection, and performed data analysis and discussion, all under the guidance of Cecille Luyun and Jennifer Bangi.

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