

Exploring the Path to Licensure: Lived Experiences of Social Work Graduates in their Journey Towards Passing the Board Examination

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Abstract. This study focuses on the lived experiences of social work graduates in their journey toward passing the Social Work Licensure Examination, particularly those who initially failed and later persisted through repeated attempts. The pursuit of licensure has long been regarded as a critical gateway to professional legitimacy; however, existing studies have largely emphasized pass rates and structural barriers, leaving the personal and human dimensions of repeated licensure attempts underexplored. This study examines how social work graduates prepare for licensure, how they confront challenges, and how they sustain motivation despite repeated failures. The study utilized a qualitative research method, specifically transcendental phenomenology, to analyze data gathered from participants. The research was conducted in one of the higher education institutions in Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines. The participants consisted of five Bachelor of Science in Social Work graduates who were repeat takers of the Social Work Licensure Examination and had eventually passed after multiple attempts. They were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experiences with licensure failure and perseverance. Findings of the study revealed three themes: perceptions of preparation strategies for subsequent licensure, challenges in repeated board examination attempts, and motivations in the pursuit of professional legitimacy. Sub-themes included enhanced focus and commitment, from memorization to deep comprehension, utilization of review centers, financial constraints, family and social pressure, psychological stress, resilience, family support, and professional ambition. The study concludes that licensure is not merely an academic process but a deeply personal journey shaped by resilience, support systems, and adaptive coping strategies. Despite numerous challenges, social work graduates demonstrated perseverance and strength, emphasizing that repeated failure does not define professional worth but can foster growth, determination, and eventual success. Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, it is recommended that social work students may develop disciplined study habits early in their academic preparation by establishing consistent study schedules, strengthening their understanding of core social work concepts, and practicing effective time management to better prepare for the licensure examination.

Keywords: Academic Preparation; Licensure Journey; Lived Experiences; Repeat Takers; Social Work Graduates

Introduction

In the broader landscape of professional licensure, exam preparation often revealed systemic inequities that challenged aspiring practitioners worldwide. Research showed that socioeconomic barriers, limited resources, and psychological stress disproportionately affected marginalized groups, resulting in high failure rates in professions such as law and medicine (Wakeling & Kyriacou, 2010). These challenges emphasized that licensure preparation required not only academic competence but also resilience in overcoming uncertainty and pressure. Similar issues were evident in the Philippine social work licensure context, where socioeconomic inequalities and limited educational resources affected graduates' opportunities to succeed in the board examination. In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 4373 of (1965), also known as the Social Work Law, mandated licensure through the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) to ensure competence in professional social work practice. Studies revealed that social work board examinations had national passing rates of approximately 60–70%, with urban graduates achieving higher success rates than rural graduates due to greater access to review centers and educational support (Reyes, 2022). Research further showed that many graduates experienced exam anxiety, financial difficulties, inadequate preparation, and limited clinical exposure, which contributed to repeated failures and emotional

distress (Reyes & Santos, 2021; Cruz et al., 2022). These difficulties often resulted in delayed career entry, professional uncertainty, and struggles with self-worth and identity.

Despite the existing studies on licensure examinations, most research focused mainly on quantitative aspects such as passing rates, academic performance, and predictors of examination success. Limited studies explored the personal and lived experiences of social work graduates who failed the licensure examination, particularly within the Philippine setting. Previous literature also gave little attention to how repeated failures, emotional struggles, financial hardship, and resilience influenced graduates' perspectives, coping strategies, and motivation to continue pursuing professional licensure. As a result, the voices and personal narratives of non-passers remained underrepresented in the literature.

This gap in literature led to the research problem of understanding how social work graduates experienced failure in the board examination and how these experiences shaped their personal, emotional, and professional journeys. Anchored on a strength-based perspective, this study investigated the lived experiences of social work graduates who failed the board examination and continued striving toward professional licensure. Specifically, it sought to understand how setbacks, self-doubt, financial struggles, and support systems influenced their coping mechanisms, resilience, and continuing pursuit of professional growth and fulfillment.

Research Questions

This study aims to explore the experiences of social work graduates in their journeys toward passing the board examination. This study aimed to answer the central question: What were the lived experiences of social work graduates who failed the board examination, particularly repeat takers, in their journey towards passing the licensure exam?

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions;

1. How did social work graduates perceive their preparation strategies for subsequent licensure attempts?
2. What specific challenges did they encounter in the repeated journeys toward passing the board exam?
3. What were the motivations of social work graduates to persist through repeated licensure failures and continue pursuing professional legitimacy?

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study was conducted within a clearly defined scope focusing on social work graduates from a higher education institution in Zamboanga del Sur who were unsuccessful in passing the Social Work Licensure Examination (SWLE). The primary objective of the study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of these graduates in relation to their journey toward professional licensure. A qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, was employed to capture the participants' subjective experiences, meanings, and challenges associated with their licensure examination attempts. The study was geographically delimited to one higher education institution in Zamboanga del Sur offering the Bachelor of Science in Social Work program, thereby ensuring a focused contextual analysis of graduates within a single academic environment.

Literature Review

Licensure as a Professional Gateway

Licensure examinations serve as professional gateways that validate competence, ethical responsibility, and readiness for practice. In the Philippines, the Social Work Licensure Examination (SWLE) confirms that graduates possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and values required for professional social work practice (Agad et al., 2023). Under Republic Act No. 4373 (1965), the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) administers licensure examinations to ensure professional standards and public trust. Studies show that licensure not only establishes professional credibility and identity (Arndt et al., 2021; Morrow, 2022) but also functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that may reinforce inequalities among graduates with limited access to educational resources (Cherry et al., 1988; Johnson & Huff, 1986). In collectivist cultures such as the Philippines, passing the SWLE also symbolizes social mobility, family achievement, and professional legitimacy, making licensure both a regulatory requirement and a significant cultural milestone (Department of Social Welfare and Development, 2013).

Academic Preparation and Curriculum Alignment

Academic preparation plays a vital role in licensure readiness, particularly through curriculum alignment, review programs, and experiential learning. Studies reveal that inconsistencies in curriculum delivery and inadequate preparation in major subjects contribute to lower licensure performance (Caballero et al., 2023; Albina et al., 2021). CHED Memorandum Order No. 14 Series of 2006 requires social work programs to align competencies with PRC standards for the SWLE, strengthening the relationship between academic training and licensure success. Structured review programs, mock examinations, and mentoring interventions have also been shown to improve confidence, retention, and board examination outcomes among graduates and repeaters (Cabahug et al., 2024; Figuerres, 2013). Furthermore, experiential learning through fieldwork and practicum enhances contextual understanding and professional confidence, contributing positively to licensure preparedness (Sumicad et al., 2023; Butcher et al., 2015).

Psychological Factors and Self-Efficacy

Psychological factors such as self-efficacy, motivation, and anxiety significantly influence licensure preparation and examination performance. Anchored on Bandura's (1997) Self-Efficacy Theory, graduates with stronger confidence in their abilities are more likely to persist despite failures, while low self-efficacy often leads to self-doubt and avoidance behaviors. Studies indicate that repeat examinees who reframed failures as learning opportunities demonstrated improved outcomes and resilience (Sinangote & Balongoy, 2025). However, test anxiety, burnout, and emotional exhaustion remain common challenges, particularly among graduates balancing financial responsibilities and exam preparation (Daga & Gupit, 2024; Mapindan & Villocino, 2024). Motivation also shapes persistence, as intrinsically motivated graduates tend to demonstrate greater resilience compared to those driven primarily by external pressures such as family expectations (Graybow, 2014).

Socioeconomic and Structural Barriers

Socioeconomic and structural barriers greatly affect graduates' access to licensure preparation and opportunities for success. Research shows that low-income graduates often experience limited access to review centers, study materials, and adequate preparation time, placing them at a disadvantage in licensure examinations (Albina et al., 2021; Cabahug et al., 2024). International studies similarly reveal that structural inequities, discrimination, and biased testing systems contribute to disparities in licensure outcomes among marginalized groups (Ricciardelli et al., 2023; Castex et al., 2018). These findings support concerns regarding the fairness and validity of licensure examinations in measuring actual professional competence (Apgar et al., 2022). In the Philippine context, licensure outcomes are strongly associated with family expectations, career mobility, and social advancement, intensifying the personal and societal impact of examination failure (Social Work in the Philippines, 2013).

Lived Experiences and Coping Mechanisms

The lived experiences of graduates provide deeper insights into the emotional and social realities of licensure preparation beyond quantitative measures. Studies reveal that resilience, meaning-making, and persistence enable many graduates to continue pursuing licensure despite repeated failures (Graybow, 2014; Sinangote et al., 2025). Coping mechanisms such as time management, peer collaboration, spiritual support, and community solidarity help graduates manage stress and maintain motivation during preparation (Smith et al., 2021; McFarland et al., 2010). Research also highlights the importance of support systems, including mentorship, peer encouragement, family support, and psychosocial interventions from review centers, in reducing feelings of isolation and strengthening resilience among repeat examinees (Mapindan et al., 2024; Hindemarsch, 1992; Cabahug et al., 2024). These findings emphasize that coping with licensure challenges is not solely an individual effort but is shaped by relational and cultural support systems that contribute to graduates' professional journeys.

The literature examined showed that obtaining a license was a multifaceted process shaped by institutional, structural, psychological, and personal factors. Licensure functioned not only as a professional requirement but also as a cultural and symbolic milestone that validated competence, ethical responsibility, and public trust. Academic preparation, curriculum alignment, review interventions, and experiential learning emerged as essential foundations of licensure readiness, while psychological resilience, self-efficacy, motivation, and anxiety management significantly influenced graduates' perseverance and performance. Furthermore, socioeconomic limitations and systemic inequities revealed how access to licensure preparation and opportunities remained uneven, particularly for financially disadvantaged and marginalized graduates. The reviewed studies also emphasized the importance of coping mechanisms, social support, and meaning-making in helping graduates endure the challenges of the licensure journey. However, despite the breadth of existing literature, most studies primarily focused on quantitative indicators such as examination

performance, curriculum effectiveness, pass rates, and predictors of success across various professions, with limited attention given to the lived experiences of Social Work graduates within the Philippine context. Existing research often explored isolated variables without fully examining how academic, psychological, social, and structural factors collectively shaped graduates' licensure journeys. Moreover, there remained insufficient qualitative inquiry into how Social Work graduates interpreted their struggles, motivations, coping mechanisms, and support systems while preparing for and taking the Social Work Licensure Examination (SWLE). This gap in the literature highlighted the need for a more comprehensive exploration of the actual experiences of Social Work graduates in order to better understand the realities behind their preparation, challenges, resilience, and persistence throughout the licensure process. Hence, the present study sought to address this gap by examining the lived experiences of Social Work graduates in their licensure journey, with the aim of contributing insights that may strengthen academic preparation, review interventions, psychosocial support, and policy development for future examinees.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design by Moustakas (1994). Phenomenology, as a qualitative approach, sought to explore and describe the lived experiences of individuals by uncovering the essence of a particular phenomenon as it was subjectively perceived. According to Moustakas, phenomenology focused on the meanings and structures of experience rather than on objective measurements, thereby enabling researchers to access participants' inner worlds and personal interpretations. Through processes such as epoche, reduction, and imaginative variation, phenomenology provided a systematic yet deeply humanistic method of inquiry that valued participants' voices as central sources of knowledge. In this study, this approach was applied to capture the realities, struggles, and coping strategies of social work graduates as they navigated their journey toward passing the licensure examination. The phenomenological design of Moustakas (1994) was suitable for this study because the central aim was to understand the lived experiences of social work graduates who had failed the board examination, particularly repeat takers on multiple attempts, in their journey towards passing the licensure exam. Since the phenomenon under investigation was highly personal, involving emotional, academic, and social dimensions, phenomenology allowed for an in-depth exploration of how graduates interpreted and gave meaning to these experiences.

Research Locale

This study was conducted in the province of Zamboanga del Sur, which was located in the Zamboanga Peninsula Region (Region IX) of Mindanao, Philippines. This province was selected because it provided an appropriate research environment, as it was home to higher education institutions where many graduates of the Bachelor of Science in Social Work program resided or had studied. This environment presented a diverse population of potential participants who had either taken or were preparing to take the Social Work Licensure Examination. Conducting the study in this environment ensured that the voices of social work graduates from the institution were represented, providing insights into their lived experiences and the factors that shaped their journey toward professional licensure.

Research Participants

This study involved five participants. The number was based on Creswell's guidelines for qualitative phenomenological research, which focused more on exploring experiences deeply rather than having a large group. The participants were the repeat takers who had successfully passed the SWLE from one of the higher education institutions in Zamboanga del Sur. This study utilized a purposive sampling technique to choose individuals with different personal experiences as repeat taker passers of the SWLE. The participants had to fit the following inclusion criteria: firstly, they were graduates of the Bachelor of Science in Social Work; secondly, they were graduates of a State College; thirdly, they had passed the board examination on their multiple attempts. Clear details about the study, such as what participation involved, how their data would be kept private, and their right to leave the study at any time, were shared with those interested. Each potential participant was screened to confirm their eligibility and availability. Participants included individuals of all genders who had passed the SWLE on their lived experiences of social work graduates who had failed the board examination, particularly repeat takers on multiple attempts, in their journey towards passing the licensure exam. This variety of backgrounds provided a wide range of perspectives and added valuable insights into the experiences of lived experiences of social work graduates who had failed the board examination, particularly repeat takers on multiple attempts, from one of the higher education institutions in Zamboanga del Sur.

Research Instrument

The researcher-made interview questionnaires and were validated by subject matter experts to ensure they were unbiased and held substantial relevance. The study employed in-depth interviews, a qualitative method consistent with Clark Moustakas' phenomenological approach, to examine the lived experiences of repeat takers who had successfully passed the SWLE from one of the higher education institutions in Zamboanga del Sur. An interview protocol was crafted based on Moustakas' principles, emphasizing a comprehensive and systematic investigation of the phenomenon through rich descriptions and personal reflections. This method prioritized capturing the essence of the experience of the lived experience by allowing participants to articulate their journeys in detail, focusing on both the 'what' and 'how' of their examination process. The interviews aimed to reveal the fundamental meanings and structures of their experiences, including challenges such as financial instability, limited access to resources, regulatory constraints like displacement, and their coping mechanisms and aspirations. The interview process followed a structured yet adaptable format, allowing participants to express their narratives openly while ensuring that essential topics were addressed. The initial session concentrated on exploring participants' backgrounds and lived experiences, enabling them to provide comprehensive accounts of their journey as repeat taker SWLE passers. Follow-up sessions built upon these narratives, probing deeper into the reflective dimensions of their experiences. The timing and format of subsequent interviews were adjusted according to participants' preferences and the emerging themes within the data, in alignment with the phenomenological principle of letting participants' experiences shape the research process. For accurate documentation and organization of qualitative data, interviews were audio-recorded using a mobile phone voice recorder application with the participants' consent, while transcription was facilitated through Microsoft Word's transcription feature and manually reviewed by the researchers to ensure accuracy and completeness of the collected data. This approach highlighted the importance of granting participants sufficient time and space for reflection, ensuring a thorough and meaningful exploration of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Gathering Procedure

The study followed a structured data collection process to uphold ethical standards and ensure participant comfort. Firstly, individuals who were identified as repeat takers who had passed the SWLE from one of the higher education institutions in Zamboanga del Sur were engaged as research participants. Comprehensive informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring they fully understood the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. The participants were fully aware of their freedom to leave the study at any moment without facing any negative consequences. Consent forms were distributed and collected prior to the commencement of data collection, maintaining strict ethical protocols. Secondly, once informed consent was secured, participants scheduled their interview appointments. These interviews were conducted four to seven days after consent was obtained, allowing participants sufficient time to prepare and researchers adequate time to finalize interview questions and logistical arrangements. Thirdly, during the scheduled interviews, researchers utilized an in-depth, semi-structured format to encourage open discussion while ensuring that key topics were addressed. With participant permission, interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy, and detailed notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. Finally, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researchers. These transcripts underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights related to the experiences of repeat taker SWLE passers from one of the higher education institutions in Zamboanga del Sur.

Results and Discussions

Three themes emerged in this study: perceptions of preparation strategies for subsequent licensure, challenges in repeated board examination attempts, and motivations in the pursuit of professional legitimacy.

Perception of Preparation Strategies for Subsequent Licensure

Preparing for another attempt at licensure has been a crucial step for social work graduates seeking professional legitimacy. Their strategies reflect how they adjusted their study habits and approaches after experiencing setbacks. Understanding these strategies provides insight into the ways they strengthened their commitment and improved their readiness for the board examination. Five sub-themes emerge from participants' responses regarding their preparation strategies: enhanced focus and commitment, from memorization to deep comprehension, eliminating distractions and pressure, utilized review centers and peer-provided materials, and apply work experience to exam concepts.

Enhanced Focus and Commitment. Social work graduates took their preparation more seriously, setting aside regular time and adhering to set schedules. They could resist procrastination and maintain concentration on their objective of passing the licensing exam because of this dedication. Participants asserted:

"akong gi assess akong kaugalingon dayun nakita nako na ug mag take ko ug board exam ma pressure ko so mawala akong focus. So, sa katung last nako nga take wala nako nagpa dala sa pressure, focus ko sa pag review. Dayun basa ko ug Thelma Lee, nya didto ug mag basa ko ug book, maka sabut nako and ning gawas jud sya sa exam." [I assessed myself and realized that if I were to take the board exam under the same mindset, I would likely feel pressured and lose focus. In my last attempt, I chose not to put too much pressure on myself and instead focused on consistent reviewing. I also read Thelma Lee and other reference books to deepen my understanding. Fortunately, many of the topics I reviewed were reflected in the actual exam questions, which helped me significantly during the test.] P1

"sa past nako nga take wala kaayu koy focus kay tuo ko ug swerte. Pang panahon lang daw na, kung imoha, imoha jud. Ana akong pang lantaw jud. Pero kani akong last nga naka pasar ko gi change nako ang akong pang lantaw. Kani nga time mas nag focus ko ug tuon ug review. Katung time na nag focus ko sa pag review gi cut nako ang akong mga online negosyo dayun nag focus nalang ko ug review para dili ko ma destruct. Dayun one factor jud kay financial, kay naa naman gud nag support sa akong para sa kinahanglan namo. So, mas effective jud to sya na factor para maka focus ko sa akong preparation. Dayun pag ug mag study na gani ko presence of mind nako naka focus jud sa akong gihimo." [In the past, I didn't focus well because I relied too much on luck. I believed that things would happen in their own time that if something is meant for you, it will come to you. That was my perspective back then. However, on my most recent attempt, I changed my mindset. I placed greater emphasis on studying and reviewing. I also decided to temporarily set aside my online businesses to avoid distractions and fully concentrate on my preparation. Another important factor was financial support, as someone helped me with my needs, which allowed me to focus more effectively. With fewer distractions and a clearer mindset, I was able to study with better focus and full presence of mind, giving my complete attention to my preparation.] P2

"wala ko nag seryuso jud sa akong pag take ug exam. Dayun distracted ko sa akong mga barkada reasons na wala nakoy focus sa akong preparation. So, sa third attempt focus na kaayu ko, wala nakoy barkada during my third attempt dayun naka pasar ra jud." [I didn't take the exam seriously during my first attempt, and I was also easily distracted by my friends, which affected my focus and preparation. However, on my third attempt, I made a conscious decision to eliminate distractions and stay fully committed to my goal. Without those interruptions, I was able to concentrate better on my studies, and as a result, I passed.] P3

"first ug second wala jud koy focus. So diri na sa third ang mas nag focus ko, though stress sya kay nag tarbaho ko while ga review pero mas gi focus jud nako akong tuon. Sa pag third attempt nako nag focus na jud kaayu ko sa akong goal na mo pasar na jud, tuon jud ko dayun nag seryuso nako dire." [On my first and second attempts, I wasn't fully focused. For my third attempt, however, I gave it much more attention. Even though it was stressful because I was working while reviewing, I prioritized my studies and took things more seriously. I stayed focused on my goal of passing, committed myself to studying, and treated the process with the dedication it required.] P4

"first and second attempts layo ra jud kaayu syag gap, kay in my third attempt na naka pasar ko, I'm more focus and confident na jud na maka pasar ko that third attempt. And what I recognize kay mas prepared ko and aware unsa ang mga possible questions na possible mo gawas sa exam." [My first and second attempts were quite far from my third, when I finally passed. On my third attempt, I was more

focused and confident that I would succeed. I also realized that I was better prepared and more aware of the possible types of questions that could be asked beyond the exam itself.] P5

Participants' experiences indicated that enhanced focus and commitment were essential for passing the Social Work Licensure Examination. Across the transcripts, a clear shift can be observed from unfocused and pressure-driven preparation to intentional, disciplined, and goal-oriented review practices. These testimonials demonstrated that during the participants' licensure process, greater commitment and focus acted as transformative mechanisms. The shift toward structured study plans, resistance to procrastination, improved emotional control, and increased focus on review responsibilities all had a significant impact on the positive outcomes. According to the study of Dunlosky et al. (2020), effective learning requires concentrated, active interaction with learning resources rather than just time spent studying. According to their thorough review featured, students who stay focused and employ intentional techniques like self-explanation and elaborate rehearsal are more likely to gain a thorough knowledge than those who study erratically or when distracted. Their personal experiences have demonstrated that conquering the difficulties of the board exam necessitates consistent work and concentrated attention in addition to academic talent.

From Memorization to Deep Comprehension. Preparing for subsequent licensure, social work graduates recognized the need to move beyond surface learning that relied mainly on memorization. By shifting toward critical thinking, they aimed to develop a deeper understanding of concepts and apply knowledge more effectively in both examinations and professional practice. The participants articulated:

"In terms of academics struggles, tuon lang ko then focus, ug nag learn jud ko kung asa ko dapit weak didto ko mas nag focus. Pag mag study ko ako na syang gina story telling way para makasabut ko. Dayun katung pag take nako mas dali nalang sya kay maka relate nalang man dayun ko." [In terms of academic struggles, I focused on studying and paying close attention to the areas where I was weak, and I dedicated more effort to improving those. When I study, I use a storytelling approach so I can understand the material better. By the time I took the exam, it had become easier for me because I could relate to the concepts more effectively.] P1

"ning balik ko sa una ug review. Mas nag spend kog time sa pagtuon dayun nag invest jud kog effort. Then everytime mag libug ko sa akong gi tun-an mag research jud dayun ko aron maka sabut. Naa man koy mga gipang memorized pero mga republic act ra pero bisan republic act sya akong gihapon syang sabton kay once maka sabut ka mas ma familiarise nalang man nimo ang number, mas dali nalang dayun sya." [I went back to the beginning and started reviewing from the basics. I dedicated more time to my studies and put in consistent effort. Whenever I became confused about a topic, I made sure to do further research to fully understand it. I also had some memorized materials, such as Republic Acts, but even then, I made an effort to truly understand them. Once you understand the concepts, it becomes easier to recall the details, especially the numbers, and the information becomes more familiar and manageable over time.] P2

"Mas nag put kog effort sa akong pag study, balik jud ko sa start gi sabut jud nako tanan. Dayun pag ma sabtan na nako akong gina tun-an mas dali nalang sya sa akong kay mas maka relate nalang ko man ko. Unlike before mag tuon ko, grabe bisan pag ka bante beses ko mo basa sa akong handouts, dili jud ko kasabut." [I put more effort into my studies and went back to the basics so I could fully understand everything. Once I began to grasp the concepts, studying became easier because I was able to relate to the material more effectively. Unlike before, even if I read my handouts twenty times, I still struggled to understand them.] P3

"basa ug handouts nga gihatag sa nag take nga naka pasar. Dayun focus jud sa review. Study habit mag review dili sya e memorize, sabton jud sya." [I read the handouts provided to those who had already passed. I then focused on reviewing the

material thoroughly. My study habit is not to memorize, but to understand the concepts deeply.] P4

"pag mag tuon ko, gina condition nako akong utok jud, ug mas ginasabut jud nako akong pag tuon. Kay kanang giingon nila na e memorize wala jud sya maka tabang sa akong kay pag ma kulbaan na gani ko, mawala jud na tanang nakong gi memorize, so much better jud na sabton nimo imong gi review." [When I study, I condition my mind to better understand the material rather than simply memorize it. Many people rely on memorization, but in my case, it is not effective. When I become nervous, I tend to forget everything I have memorized. Because of that, I find it much more effective to focus on understanding the concepts I am reviewing rather than memorizing them word for word.] P5

As participants progressed through their licensing process, their stories showed a notable shift from rote retention to deeper, more meaningful learning. This change reflected a growing understanding that passing the Social Work Licensure Examination requires knowledge, critical thinking, and the ability to apply concepts effectively, in addition to memorization. These testimonies demonstrated how participants realized the drawbacks of memorizing information when attempting to pass a professional licensing exam. In the study of Dunlosky et al. (2020), students who predominantly depended on rote memorization fared worse than those who used active learning techniques like elaboration, self-explanation, and retrieval-based comprehension. According to the study, deep cognitive engagement improved learning transfer and long-term retention, both of which are critical for passing high-stakes licensing exams. Their own experiences highlighted the importance of a thorough understanding, conceptual clarity, and critical engagement with review materials. This cognitive shift not only improved their exam preparation but also helped them develop into intelligent, competent future social workers.

Eliminated Distractions and Pressure. The importance of creating a study environment free from unnecessary distractions and external pressures. By reducing stressors, they were able to concentrate better and maintain consistent progress in their review. The participants stated:

"akong gi assess akong kaugalingon dayun nakita nako na ug mag take ko ug board exam ma pressure ko so mawala akong focus. So sa katung last nako nga take wala nako nagpa dala sa pressure, focus ko sa pag review. Dayun basa ko ug Thelma Lee, nya didto ug mag basa ko ug book, maka sabut nako and ning gawas jud sya sa exam." [I assessed myself and realized that, if I were to take the board exam, excessive pressure would cause me to lose focus. During my final attempt, I avoided putting too much pressure on myself and instead concentrated on reviewing. I also read works by Thelma Lee and other books to deepen my understanding. Fortunately, many of the topics I reviewed were reflected in the exam questions.] P1

"Ang difficult kay katung gipa iral nako ang negatives like sa akong mga what if dili ko kapasar, so kana kay mawalaan kog pag asa. Pero that time na nagka baby ko, wala na nako gipairal ang negatives. Dapat e face jud na maka pasar ko." [The most difficult part for me was allowing negative thoughts to take control at that time. I kept thinking, "What if I don't pass?" and eventually, it caused me to lose hope. However, when I had my baby, I made a decision to stop letting negativity dominate my mindset. I chose to face the challenge head-on and commit to passing.] P3

"Every time mo take kog exam na makabalo ang akong mga kaila, dayun wala ko naka kapasar diri apektuhan jud kaayu ko. Mas sakit sya compare sa akoang na feel sa akong kaugalingon. Sa akoang third attempts wala jud ko nagpabalo na mo take ko balik kay dili ko ganahan mag expect sila. Dayun ug nay mangutana nganong busy ko sa weekend alibi lang nako na nag masteral ko. Which is that time nag attend nako sa review center. So pag gawas sa result nan aka pasar ko kuyawan sila. Dayun mas lahi ang feeling sa ingon at una pamaagi." [Every time I took an exam and my peers were aware of it, I struggled deeply whenever I received a negative result. It affected me more than I expected and was often more painful

than I could express. On my third attempt, I chose not to tell them that I was taking the exam again because I did not want to feel pressured by their expectations. When they became suspicious and asked why I was busy on weekends, I simply told them I was pursuing my master's, when in reality I was attending a review center. When the results were released and I finally passed, they were genuinely surprised. The experience felt entirely different that time more fulfilling and deeply rewarding.] P4

"Peer pressure ug pressure ko sa silingan. samot na makabalo sila na ning attempt napud kog take board exam dayun wala ko naka pasar naa jud silay ma esturya sa akoo. Sakit sya, pero kay naa man koy baby, wala ko nag padala ko sa akong gibati. So ang naa sa akong huna huna, take lang ko balik kay open raman pud ang PRC always pag tig filing." [Peer pressure and the expectations of my neighbors made the experience even more difficult. It felt even worse knowing that if they found out I had taken the board exam and did not pass, they would have something to say about me. It was painful, but having my baby with me gave me strength, and I chose not to let it affect me. Instead, I reminded myself that I could always try again, as the PRC regularly opens its filing periods for retakes.] P5

The participants' testimonies emphasized the significance of controlling pressure and reducing distractions as critical elements of successful licensing exam preparation. The participants' description highlighted the importance of reducing distractions and managing pressure as fundamental elements of successful licensure exam preparation. A study by Baik et al. (2022) found that students' capacity for deep learning is highly predicted by psychological well-being and a helpful learning mentality. According to the study, students who put less pressure on themselves and concentrated on comprehending the subject matter rather than just passing tests exhibited better exam success and retention. Their experiences demonstrated that both internal and external pressures had a major impact on their capacity to focus, and that deliberately removing these obstacles allowed for more concentrated and effective learning. Their experiences demonstrated that both internal and external demands had a major impact on their ability to concentrate, and that purposefully removing these barriers allowed for more focused and productive learning.

Utilized Review Centers and Peer-Provided Materials. Social work graduates relied on review centers and materials shared by successful past examinees, such as handouts and study notes, to guide their preparation. These resources offered practical insights, examples, and strategies that helped them focus, understand key concepts, and improve their study habits. The participants stated.

"Ang review center jud ang naka tabang sa akoo para maka pasar. Every time nay mga information gi tudlo sa center himuan nakog flyers, tap-tap sa wall. Dayun pag ug mag study na gani ko presence of mind nako naka focus jud sa akong gihimo. So more on effort jud kaayu sya." [The review center played a significant role in helping me pass. Whenever new information was taught, I would create flyers and post them on the wall as a form of visual reinforcement. When I began studying, I made sure to stay mentally present and fully focused on what I was doing. Ultimately, it was a matter of consistent effort and discipline.] P2

"ning attend jud kog review center kay mao pud na ang usa ka maka tabang jud lage para maka pasar. So sa akong pag attend sa review center katung last try nako na naka pasar ko, wala nakoy gi sayang na panahon. Mas nag tuon jud ko dayun nag focus ko. Gihimoan nakog reviewer tung gi tudlo sa review center." [I attended the review center because I felt it was the only way that could help me pass. During my final attempt, which I successfully passed, I made sure not to waste any time. I studied more diligently and stayed focused throughout. I also created my own reviewer based on the lessons and materials provided by the review center.] P3

"nag review center ko isa pud na ka reason nga naka papasar sa akoo, kay kasagara jud sa ninggawas sa board exam gi lecture sa review center. Kana bitaw'ng feeling na nag basa ko sa questions dayun ang ikong gi huna huna kay ang gi tudlo sa review center. Mao jud ang akong na experience. Nakatabang pud sa akoo ang akong kauban nga ning review kay ilaha pud ko tagaan sa ilahang mga handouts, katu pud nang gawas pud to sa exam." [I attended a review center,

which was one of the reasons I was able to pass the board exam. Typically, those who take the board exam enroll in review centers where they are guided through lectures and structured discussions. While answering the questions, I often found that what came to mind were exactly the concepts taught during those sessions. That was my personal experience. In addition, my friends who also attended review sessions helped me by sharing their handouts, which proved to be very useful in my preparation for the exam.] P4

"Actually, naa man koy mga friend na naka pasar, so ilaha kung ge offeran sa ilang mga handout. Ilahang gipa gamit sa akoo kay mao lage ang kasagara jud mo gawas sa board exam. So katu ilang mga handouts ug mga gina recommend nga book pud sa uban nga ning take na naka pasar jud. Mao rato akong gihimong reviewer." [I actually have friends who passed the board exam, and they generously shared their handouts with me. They encouraged me to use them because those were the same materials they used to pass. I followed their advice and also referred to some recommended books that were very helpful in their preparation. These resources became the basis of my review and guided me throughout my exam preparation.] P5

The stories shared by the participants make it abundantly evident how important review centers and peer-provided study materials were to their success on the Social Work Licensure Examination. The participants stated that review centers and these shared resources served as instrumental tools in their licensure preparation. They offered systematic guidance, dependable content, and a supportive learning framework that helped the graduates stay focused and accountable throughout their review journey. Peer-provided materials, such as shared notes, practice exams, and study tips, contributed significantly by offering diverse perspectives, clarifying complex topics, and reinforcing understanding through collaborative learning. Together with review centers, these resources enabled social work graduates to study more effectively, maintain focus, and develop productive study habits through clear instructions, professional advice, and organized content. Their personal experiences demonstrated how essential academic support is to successfully meeting the requirements of the licensing exam. Moreover, Almerino et al. (2020) found that while assessing the effectiveness of review centers in preparing for licensing tests, they significantly improved examinees' comprehension of basic concepts. The researchers emphasized that review centers help students go beyond memory by clarifying challenging topics, reinforcing conceptual links, and encouraging active engagement with knowledge. Peer-provided resources supplement this by promoting cooperative problem-solving, stimulating real-world scenario discussion, and offering useful insights that formal tools might miss.

Applied Work Experience to Exam Concepts. In preparing for subsequent licensure examinations, social work graduates recognized the value of integrating their practical field experiences into their study strategies. By connecting theoretical knowledge with real-life situations, they were able to deepen their understanding of exam concepts and enhance their confidence in responding to complex questions. The participant stated.

"so that time na wala ko ka pasar, nagtrabaho nako dire sa field. So naay juy mga questions nga maka relate ra nako sa exam, which is sayun sya para sa akoo na part." [At that time, although I had not yet passed, I was already working in the field. Because of this experience, I was able to relate to many of the questions in the exam, which made them easier for me to understand and answer.] P2

katung nag trabaho nako dire sa field, sayun nalang sya kay expose na kase ko sa community ug uban nga tarbaho diri sa field. So naka ila ko sa mga program and services within the local. Ug katung pag take nako sa board exam ma relate relate nalang pud nako like ang mga process sa CO and case study ug mga laws na na encounter nako diri sa work place kana nga instances. Nag base ra jud ko sa akong work experience na maoy naka tabang pud akoo." [When I worked in the field, things felt more manageable because I was already exposed to the community and various fieldwork activities. This experience helped me become familiar with local programs and services. When I took the board exam, I was able to relate many of the concepts such as community organizing processes, case

studies, and relevant laws to situations I had encountered in the workplace. I relied heavily on my work experience, which greatly helped me during the exam.]

P5

The participant's narrative demonstrated how real-world field experience acted as a crucial link between academic understanding and exam success. Jackson (2021) study found that experiential learning improves cognitive integration, enabling pupils to understand topics' real-world applicability rather than only memorize definitions. Students with relevant job experience applied appropriate theoretical frameworks, and exam questions were more contextualized. Graduates were better able to contextualize and apply concepts when responding to exam questions because they had first-hand experience with social work practice. This narrative demonstrated that utilizing work experience is a strategic component of licensure preparation. The combination of experience and study improved understanding and confidence. Social work graduates could improve their comprehension, sharpen their problem-solving abilities, and gain greater self-assurance when answering situational and application-based questions by integrating their practical experience with exam concepts. Their stories emphasized the benefits of experiential learning alongside more conventional study techniques.

Challenges in Repeated Board Examination Attempts

The journey toward passing the board examination had been a continuing struggle for social work graduates who have experienced multiple failures. Understanding the challenges they encountered provides deeper insight into the factors that affected their performance and persistence in taking the licensure examination. Six sub-themes emerged from participants' responses regarding the challenges they faced in their repeated attempts: academic difficulties and subject struggles; financial constraints; family and social pressure; personal responsibilities; psychological stress and self-doubt; and work-related challenges and perceived undervaluation.

Academic Difficulties and Subject Struggles. Passing the licensure exam requires a strong foundation of knowledge and mastery of key social work concepts, and difficulties in subject areas significantly affect performance. Although they had completed their academic degree, many found that some topics remained challenging, particularly those requiring deeper analysis, retention, and application of theories. The participants stated.

"Lisud ang exam jud, struggle ko sa tanang subject. Samot ng SWPP dira jud ko nag lisud pag human nako sa exam sa akong first attempt ko, gihilantan ko pag human. Wala ko ga expect na akong gibasa didto mura kog gidala sa laing kalibutan. As in kato pako naka bangga atung mga questiona. Gamay kaayu kog score ato pag kita nako sa result. Dira jud na subject ko nag lisud." [The exam was challenging, and I struggled with all the subjects, particularly SWPP, where I had the most difficulty after my first attempt. I even developed a fever afterward due to the stress and exhaustion. I did not expect the questions to feel so unfamiliar, as if I had been transported to a completely different context. I found myself confused by the items, and my score was very low, as reflected in the results. That experience made the subject feel especially complex for me.] P1

"Nag lisud ko sa HBSE jud even my second attempt dire ko failed, so every time coming na ang exam mag doubt jud ko sa akong ability kay basin dire ra sa HBSE ko ma bagsak. Diha ko mas nag focus ug tuon." [I struggled with HBSE, and even on my second attempt, I did not pass. Because of this, every time the exam approached, I found myself doubting my ability, fearing that I might fail HBSE again. This experience pushed me to become more focused and to study with greater determination.] P3

"HBSE ug SWPP nag lisud jud ko diri kay more on proponent man gud. Dayun sa exam tricky kaayu questions. So, kana pud ang rason na ma apektuhan akong pag tuo sa kaugalingon kay sa PRC once nga gamay kag score sa isa ka subject, ma bira man ang uban nga subject imong na pasaran." [HBSE and SWPP were particularly challenging for me because they focused more on theoretical and conceptual frameworks. I also found the exam questions to be quite tricky. As a result, my self-confidence was affected, especially knowing that

in the PRC board exams, a low score in one subject can lead to an overall failure, even if you perform well in the others.] P4

"So sa HBSE jud ko na bagsak ug sa SWPP. Galisud jud kog sabut ana nila. Sa ika tulo jud na try dira jud ko bagsak. So, sa ika upat nako na attempts dira jud ko mas nag tuon." [I initially struggled with HBSE and SWPP, as I found these subjects difficult to understand. I did not pass on my third attempt, which prompted me to take a more focused and disciplined approach. By my fourth attempt, I dedicated myself to studying more thoroughly and with greater determination.] P5

The participants' experiences demonstrated that some subjects posed severe difficulties for them as they attempted to pass the Social Work Licensure Examination. Baik et al (2022) discovered that students' self-efficacy and mental health can be adversely affected by ongoing academic difficulties in particular courses, which further reinforces surface learning tendencies. Even after receiving their degrees, many graduates found it difficult to comprehend courses that called for memory, in-depth study, critical thinking, and the application of social work concepts. These transcripts showed that academic challenges and complex subject matter are significant obstacles in the licensing process. These academic struggles directly affected both performance and self-confidence during the exam. The testimonies of the participants highlighted the need for focused review techniques, a more in-depth understanding, and experience applying theoretical knowledge in challenging situations. Building competence, confidence, and successful results on the licensing exam requires addressing these subject-specific challenges.

Family and Social Pressure. Passing the licensure exam was often seen not only as a personal goal but also as a responsibility to meet the expectations of family and society. There might be differences in individual circumstances, but the pressure to succeed was commonly felt through constant inquiries, comparisons, and high expectations from relatives, friends, and peers. The participants uttered.

"Kanang mag bikil ko sa akong papa maka dungog man ko sa iyaha nga maong wala ka kapasar kay bisag sayun ra ang instruction dili man ka kasabut. Pressure ko sa part nga ang nag provide sa amoang pamilya kay akong wife. Nya ako lalaki, bantay bata. Lahi ra biya ang pang lantaw sa mga tawo sa atung culture, lalaki jud dapat provider. Aside ana na pressure ko sa part pud nga akong wife kay MSWDO sya, nya ako kay ika pila na attempt wala jud ko ka pasar. So lisud jud sya para sa akoo." [In one instance, I had an argument with my father, and I was deeply hurt when he said that the reason I did not pass the board exam was because I could not even understand simple instructions. Hearing that from my own father was painful. I also felt pressure regarding my role in the family. My wife is the primary provider, while I take care of our child. In our culture, I am expected to be the one providing, which adds to the pressure I experience. Additionally, my wife works as an MSWDO, and my repeated unsuccessful attempts at the exam made the situation even more challenging for me.] P1

"sa akong ex-partner na sige syag post sa FB nga gipa mukha niya sa akoo na failure ko. Ang difficult kay katung gipa iral nako ang negatives like sa akong mga what if dili ko kapasar, so kana kay mawalaan kog pag asa." [My ex-partner would post on Facebook in ways that made me feel like a failure. During that time, I allowed those negative influences to affect me deeply. I kept dwelling on thoughts like, "What if I don't pass?" and eventually, I began to lose hope.] P3

"kanang mag expect ang imong kaila or pamilya na maka pasar ko. Dayun wala ka naka pasar. Mas sakit sya compare sa akoang na feel sa akong kaugalingo." [When my friends or family expect me to pass and I don't, it hurts even more than my own disappointment in myself.] P4

"Peer pressure ug pressure sa silingan kay samot nag maka balo ka na wala, ning take ka dayun wala ka naka pasar naa jud silay ma esturya sa imoha. Dayun pinaka sakit, sa work place kay ma degrade, ubos kaayu ka sa ilaha,

suguan lang ka ug tig encode ug print." [Peer pressure, including pressure from neighbors, has been a significant challenge. I feared that if they knew I had taken the exam and did not pass, they would constantly talk about me. What is even more difficult is the situation in the workplace, where failing can lead to being looked down upon and undervalued. In such cases, one may be assigned only routine tasks like encoding and printing, which further reinforces that sense of being diminished in the eyes of others.] P5

The participants' reflections demonstrated that preparing for the Social Work Licensure Examination was not simply a personal undertaking but was also heavily influenced by expectations from friends, family, and the broader social setting. Cultural norms, relationship dynamics, and societal perceptions frequently exacerbated the pressure to succeed, making the licensure process emotionally and psychologically taxing. These statements demonstrated how social and familial pressures have a dual impact on licensure preparation. They could encourage graduates to keep going, but they can also lead to emotional strain, tension, and self-doubt. To maintain focus, resilience, and well-being throughout the licensing process, it was essential to understand these dynamics. Moreover, Putwain et al. (2021) discovered that social judgment and family expectations greatly raise exam anxiety, which has a detrimental impact on focus and cognitive function. According to their findings, students who were under a lot of pressure were more inclined to doubt themselves and use surface-level learning techniques like memorization rather than in-depth comprehension.

Personal Responsibilities. Balancing individual obligations, such as household duties, family care, and personal commitments, often competes with the time and focus needed for exam preparation. While the nature of these responsibilities varied among participants, managing them effectively became crucial to sustaining consistent study habits and performance. The participants asserted.

"in preparation jud dili ko ka focus kay daghan kaayu kog responsibility. Bread winner ko sa among pamilya so pag pangita ug income ako ray gisaligan. So kanang pag take ug exam last priority na nako na, kay ug mag focus ko ana wala me kan-on. So instead na mag review review ko, akua nalang nang e spend ang time sa akong online business." [I don't focus much on exam preparation because I have many responsibilities. I am the breadwinner of my family, so I am the only one relied upon to earn an income. Because of this, taking exams becomes my last priority. If I focus on studying, I worry that we won't have enough to eat. So instead of reviewing, I spend most of my time working on my online business.] P2

The participant's experience demonstrated how personal responsibilities, especially those related to family and livelihood, can seriously conflict with the time and concentration required to prepare for a license exam. Personal responsibilities, such as being the family's primary provider, created practical constraints for many social work graduates, affecting the consistency and intensity of their study efforts. According to Robotham and Julian (2021), students' ability to engage deeply with study materials was adversely affected by time scarcity brought on by various personal responsibilities. Learners who were overburdened with outside obligations are more likely to become tired and lose focus, which made it difficult for them to maintain sufficient preparation for important tests. The story illustrated how important personal responsibilities were in determining exam readiness. Graduates must learn how to balance their daily responsibilities and career goals, finding ways to make time and effort for each. Maintaining regular preparation and succeeding in the licensing process depend on balancing these obligations with concentrated study.

Psychological Stress and Self-Doubt. Experiencing failure multiple times often led to anxiety, loss of confidence, and fear of not meeting expectations. While the intensity of these feelings varied among participants, the mental and emotional strain significantly affected their motivation, focus, and overall preparation. The participants stated.

"Second attempt nako nag assume ko na maka pasar ko kay nag review jud ko ug ayo atua. Basa kog daghan pang books. Grabe jud akong preparation compare sa first try nako. Nya pag gawas sa result wala man ko ka pasar. Didto na question nako akong ability. Disappointed ko sa akong kaugalingon."

[On my second attempt, I was confident that I would pass because I had prepared more thoroughly than I did on my first try. I studied extensively and put in significantly more effort. However, when the results were released, I did not pass. That experience led me to question my abilities, and I felt deeply disappointed in myself.] P1

"Every time mo file ko for exam, mag duha2x ko kay daghan kog what if's. Dayun basin ma same cycle lang gihapon dili ko maka pasar. So grabe jud akong pag doubt sa akong ability ato na time." [Every time I apply for the exam, I find myself hesitating because of many "what-ifs." I worry that I might not pass again in the same cycle. Because of this, I initially doubted my abilities.] P3

"pagkabalo nako sa result na wala ko ka pasar, nag muk-mok ko sa kwarto kay ga expect man ko na maka pasar ko. Sakit kaayu dayun dismay kaayu ko ug na pangutana jud nako akong ability, baba kaayu akong pag lantaw sa akong kaugalingon." [When I found out that I did not pass, I locked myself in my room because I had not expected to fail. It was deeply painful and disappointing, and I began to question my abilities. I became very critical of myself.] P4

According to the participant narratives, intense psychological stress, self-doubt, and emotional strain were frequently caused by repeated failures on the Social Work Licensure Examination. These stories showed that psychological stress and self-doubt are significant obstacles in the licensing process. Experiencing setbacks despite extensive preparation caused anxiety, diminished confidence, and moments of personal disappointment, all of which affected motivation and focus during subsequent attempts. According to Putwain et.al. (2021), examinees who failed were more likely to doubt their academic aptitude and expect worse results on future tries. Recurrent setbacks could cause mental and emotional strain, which can impair motivation, performance, and study focus. Recognizing and resolving these psychological problems was essential to maintaining resilience, recovering confidence, and regularly getting ready to pass the test.

Work-Related Challenges and Perceived Undervaluation. The significant obstacles participants face in their repeated attempts to pass the board examination are. Balancing professional responsibilities alongside exam preparation often created time constraints, fatigue, and divided focus. While experiences varied by work environment, many participants felt their efforts and professional contributions were not fully recognized, which sometimes affected their motivation and confidence. The participants articulated.

"Sa work place na feel nako na gina underestimate lang ko sa akong kauban sa trabaho ug sa among subordinate. Kay lage dili ko eligible. Ang mas nasakitan ko kay katung kame diri sa PSWDO paadtuan me sa Manila tanan kay naay seminar. That time grabe excited kaayu ko, nag order jud ko atu ug maleta kay sudlan sa akoang gamit. Pero last minutes kay gi ingnan ko na ibilin nalang daw ko nila kay dili daw ko pwede katu radaw'ng registered social work ang pwede. Na sakitan kaayu ko sa ilaha jud, kanang ning uli ko sa amoa na sege jud kog hilak kay gipa mukha jud kaayu nila ba na wala koy bili. Mao pud na isa ka reason na eager ko maka pasar jud, kay para malahi ilang treatment sa akoo." [At work, I feel that my colleagues and even my subordinates underestimate me because I am not yet eligible. One experience that affected me deeply was when our team at PSWDO was scheduled to attend a seminar in Manila. I was genuinely excited and even prepared in advance by buying a suitcase for the trip. However, at the last minute, I was told not to join because only registered social workers were allowed to attend. I felt deeply hurt and disappointed. When I returned home, I couldn't hold back my emotions and ended up crying because the situation made me feel undervalued. That experience became one of my strongest motivations to pass the board exam, as I want to prove my capabilities and be treated with the same respect as others.] P2

"sa work place kay gina degrade jud ko, ubos kaayu ko sa ilaha, suguon lang ka ug tig encode ug print. Kanang sunod sunoran raka sa ilahang gusto, sakit jud sya pero wala lang kaayu ko nagpa apekto jud, kay ug magpa apekto ko mawad-an kog trabaho." [At work, I feel degraded and treated as inferior. They

only assign me tasks like encoding and printing, and I am expected to simply follow their instructions. It's unhealthy, and it's affecting me emotionally. However, I feel like I can't let it affect me too much because I might lose my job.]

P5

The participants' experiences show that workplace relationships and professional obligations were significant obstacles to their attempts to pass the Social Work Licensure Examination. A study by Putwain and Daly (2020) discovered that, particularly for those taking high-stakes tests, unfavorable workplace comments and a sense of low professional standing increase stress and erode confidence. Underappreciated workers were more inclined to internalize failure and doubt their abilities, which had a detrimental effect on their perseverance in their studies. Time limits, fatigue, and divided focus from juggling rigorous work responsibilities with strenuous exam preparation hindered their study efforts. These reports demonstrated that problems at work extend beyond time management. Regular test preparation may be hampered by the emotional and psychological effects of perceived undervaluation on resilience and confidence. According to participant stories, maintaining attention, motivation, and perseverance throughout the licensing process required tackling both the practical demands of the job and the emotional pressure of professional underappreciation.

Motivations in the Pursuit of Professional Legitimacy

Pursuing professional legitimacy despite repeated licensure failures has been a significant driving force for social work graduates. Understanding their sources of motivation provides insight into the factors that sustained their perseverance and commitment to continuing to take the board examination. Five sub-themes emerged from the participants' responses regarding their motivations: family's support and encouragement, inspiration from peers and role models, personal resilience and self-determination, practical and financial incentives, and professional ambition and career advancement.

Family's Support and Encouragement. Family support and encouragement played a vital role in motivating the participants to continue their repeated attempts at passing the board examination. Emotional support, guidance, and reassurance from family members gave them the strength to persist despite previous failures. While the level and type of support varied among participants, having a supportive family consistently reinforced their confidence and determination. The participants asserted.

"ang akong wife gina encourage ko niya mo take kay mo pasar ra lage daw ko. Dayun every take nako na ma failed ko kay dili jud na niya ipa feel sa akoo na failure ko mao jud na ang rason na keep taking risk gihapon ko. Ang support sa akong wife, kay ako, give up nako ug take pero gina encourage ko sa akong wife na dili pweding forever nalang ko'ng sa balay mag atiman sa among anak, ingnan jud ko niya, paningkamot ipakita na interested ka. So mao tuy naka motivate sa akoo na mo take jud ug licensure." [My wife encouraged me to take the exam, assuring me that I would eventually pass. However, I failed each time I took it. She never wanted me to feel like I was failing or incapable, which is why I continued to take the risk. Her support helped me a lot, but she also encouraged me to keep moving forward because I could not stay at home indefinitely taking care of our child. She told me to show initiative and pursue my goals. That became my motivation to pursue and continue taking the licensure examination.]

P1

"katung nagka baby ko, dira na nga time na mas na motivate ko na mo pasar sa board exam. Kay para sa akoo mahatagan nako syag maayung gaugmaan kung ma registered social worker jud ko. Dayun akong family pud. Financial support ang naka tabang jud nako kay need man nako mag stop ug work para maka focus sa study. Ang pamilya jud nako ang ning support sa tanang pangangailan nako sa review center ug sa akong baby, so kana may nakahatag nako ug motivation na dapat wala juy masayang na kwarta ug effort." [When I had my baby, I became even more motivated to pass the board exam. I believed that becoming a registered social worker would allow me to provide her with a better life. I was also motivated by my family. Their financial and emotional support was a great help, especially since I needed to stop working to focus on my studies. They provided for my review center expenses and my baby's needs, which

encouraged me to keep going. I felt determined not to waste their sacrifices, money, and effort, and this pushed me to continue striving to pass the exam.] P3

"ang support sa akong pamilya jud ang nagpa encourage sa akao na at least ma proud sila na maka pasar ko, ug dili masayang ilang gasto pa skwela sa akao." [The support of my family has been a great source of encouragement for me. At the very least, I am glad that I was able to make them proud by passing, and that their financial support for my education was not in vain.] P5

The participants' stories demonstrate how important family support was in maintaining drive and perseverance amid several attempts at the Social Work Licensure Examination. According to a study by Baik et al. (2022), students were more likely to stick with it after failing, stay focused, and use productive study techniques when they receive support and assurance from family members. These stories showed how family support plays an essential part in enabling perseverance and determination. Graduates were able to continue despite preceding setbacks and the difficulties of integrating their studies with other obligations, in part due to the emotional, financial, and practical support of family members. Families supported participants in overcoming the challenges of repeated exam tries by offering financial aid, practical support, and emotional comfort, boosting confidence and maintaining the motivation to obtain licensure.

Inspiration from Peer and Role Model. Observing the successes and perseverance of others encouraged them to maintain focus and continue striving toward their goal of licensure. While individual sources of inspiration varied, guidance, advice, and shared experiences from mentors, colleagues, and successful peers consistently reinforced their commitment. The participants stated.

"katung nag sturyahanay me sa akong barkada sa iyang struggle pa unsa niya na pasar naingganyo sab ko kay grabe iyang sacrifice, dayun naa pud syay mga advice paunsa niya na pasar ang exam. So kato na ingganyo ko sa iyang sturya kay pare-parehas rami ug sitwasyon naa sab syay pamilya. Dayun maka ingon ko sa akao kaugalingon na makaya mani nako." [I spoke with a friend about his struggles and how he managed to pass the exam. I was truly intrigued because he had also sacrificed a lot and eventually succeeded. He shared advice on how he prepared for and passed the exam, which I found very helpful. Since we were in a similar situation and he also had a family to support, I felt encouraged by his story. It made me believe that I could do it as well.] P1

The participant's experience illustrated how peer achievement and perseverance served as a significant source of inspiration throughout the licensing process. This story demonstrated how important friends and role models are in maintaining motivation and dedication. Learning about the hardships, tactics, and sacrifices of others who had passed the board exam offered both emotional support and helpful advice. They assisted social work graduates in overcoming the challenging path for licensing and staying focused on their objective in the face of setbacks by offering encouragement, helpful advice, and instances of determination. It illustrated the way individuals acquire coping mechanisms and behaviors by watching the experiences of others, which is consistent with Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura, 1977).

Personal Resilience and Self-Determination. Success required more than knowledge; it demanded the ability to recover from setbacks, maintain focus, and stay committed to their goals. While each participant faced unique challenges, their determination to persist and learn from past experiences strengthened their preparation and performance. The participants uttered.

"ma amaze ko sa mga social worker samot na makita nako sila sa field ug paunsa sila mag deal ug tawo. So ako gi ambition jud na gustohun nako maka tarbaho jud sa field." [I am deeply inspired by social workers. The more I observe them in the field and see how they engage with and support people, the more I admire their work. This has strengthened my ambition to become a social worker and work in the field myself.] P1

"Year 2023 na challenge ko ana na year kay naay gi open na promotion, which is ma regular ko. Pero wala ko, close nila sa akao, although dugay nako dayun qualified ko base sa akong experience dire sa field, pero dili ko ma promote kay wala man koy eligibility. Mao tung naka pa encourage nako na ma RWS ko." [The year 2023 was an eye-opener for me and truly pushed me to my limits. There

was an open promotion that could have made me a regular employee; however, it was eventually closed to me. Although I was qualified in terms of field experience, I could not be promoted because I did not meet the eligibility requirements. That experience encouraged me to try again and pursue the professional title.] P2

"katung gina degrade ko sa work place ako tung gi take sya na dapat mo pasar ko para mapa mukha nako nila naa koy abilities." [When I was being demoted at work, I told myself that I needed to pass so I could prove to them that I have the necessary abilities to.] P3

"katung wala ko ka pasar wala ko na walaan ug pag-asa ato man, nasakitan man ko pero wala jud ko nag padala sa akong gibati. So, mas na motivate jud ko na mo take risk ug mo take ug licensure exam." [After I failed again, I did not give up. I was hurt, but I continued my studies. This experience motivated me even more to take risks and pursue the licensure exam with greater determination.] P4

"as nag tarbaho nako diri dayun na introduce sa akoo unsay trabaho sa social work kato sya ang naka pa eager nako mo take balik dayun mo pasar jud." [While working here, I was introduced to what social work is truly about, which deepened my understanding of the profession. That experience made me even more eager to retake and successfully pass the licensure exam.] P5

Based on the participants' stories, passing the Social Work Licensure Examination required more than just academic knowledge; it also required self-determination, perseverance, and resilience. Each participant encountered unique obstacles, from career setbacks to repeated exam failures, but their capacity to bounce back, stay focused, and remain dedicated was essential to their ultimate success. Moreover, Baik et al. (2022) highlighted that despite ongoing obstacles in their academic or professional lives, resilient learners are more likely to continue their efforts and stay engaged. Their stories highlight how crucial self-reliance and resiliency are to getting a license. By recovering from setbacks, staying motivated, and being committed, social work graduates were able to overcome challenges, enhance their preparation, and ultimately accomplish their career goals.

Practical and Financial Incentives. Achieving licensure was seen as a way to gain financial stability, secure better job opportunities, and improve their overall quality of life. While the type and scale of incentives varied among participants, these practical considerations consistently influenced their determination and commitment to succeed. The participants stated.

"nakita jud naka sa mga kauban nako na registered social worker na jud, mas dako jud sila ug sweldo dayun ang treatment sa work place e compare sa akoo kay lahi ra jud kaayu. Like mas taas sila kaysa ako na wala kapasar. So kato, ako syang gihimong inspiration para ma resistered social worker jud ko." [I have observed that my colleagues who are registered social workers receive higher salaries and are treated differently at work compared to me. They are regarded with greater professional standing, while I am not yet at that level. This realization became one of my inspirations to pursue becoming a registered social worker.] P5

According to Baik et al. (2022), examinees who were aware that earning a license would lead to tangible benefits like higher compensation, recognition, or job security were more inclined to dedicate time, effort, and focus to exam preparation. This demonstrated that useful incentives are effective extrinsic motivators. The participant's story demonstrated how financial and practical factors were a powerful incentive during the licensing process. The advantages of earning professional licenses were highlighted by observing the benefits registered social workers receive, such as increased pay and preferential treatment at work. This provided a strong incentive to continue studying and taking the test. This story demonstrated how applicable incentives such as increased pay, job security, and a higher position at work are essential for keeping social work graduates motivated and focused. These elements not only encourage perseverance in obtaining a license but also align individual objectives with broader career and financial ambitions.

Professional Ambition and Career Advancement. Achieving licensure was viewed as essential not only for personal growth but also for unlocking career opportunities and gaining recognition in social work.

While individual goals varied, the desire to advance professionally and secure meaningful work consistently guided their efforts and commitment. The participants articulated.

"2023 na challenge ko ana na year kay nay gi open na promotion na pwede ko ma regular. Pero wala ko ma qualify although dugay nako dayun qualified ko base sa akong experience dire sa field, pero dili ko ma promote kay wala man koy eligibility. Mao tung naka pa encourage nako na ma RWS ko. Pag RSW naka ma regular ka sa imong tarbaho, mas dali ang promotion. Dayun dili nalang ka basta mo tig print lang. Now nga naka pasar ko gi open nila akong item para sa akoo, dayun regular nasab, and given my experiences diri sa field on process na ang promotion na ma officer ko diri." [The year 2023 was an eye-opener for me. A promotion opportunity became available that would have allowed me to become a regular employee; however, I did not qualify. Although I had the necessary field experience, I lacked the required eligibility, which prevented my promotion. This experience encouraged me to pursue becoming a Registered Social Worker, as obtaining eligibility would make it easier to secure regular employment and advance in my career. Now that I have passed the licensure exam, an item has been opened for me, and I have been regularized. Given my experience in the field, my promotion to an officer position is currently in process.] P2

"Daghan kog nakita na advantages nga feel nako sa akong kaugalingon deserve nako tung mga advantages. So mo take jud ko. Daghan ug opportunity basta registered social work naka." [I have come to recognize the many advantages and opportunities that I rightfully deserve, which motivates me to take the exam. Being a registered social worker opens up numerous opportunities for professional growth and advancement.] P4

"Mas dali man gud ka ma promote or something ma hired ug naa jud kay eligibility sa trabaho, then even ma hired man ka without eligibility, lahi ra jud ang salary grade sa license ug without license." [It is easier to be promoted or hired for a position when you have the required eligibility. Even if you are hired without it, there is a clear difference in salary grade between those with a license and those without.] P5

According to the participant narratives, becoming licensed was directly related to career advancement, professional development, and recognition in the social work sector. These experiences demonstrated that professional ambition and the desire for career progress were powerful motivators. Licensing exams were used as regulatory instruments, professional entry points, and societal indications of competence. In the Philippines, the SWLE verifies that graduates possess the knowledge, skills, and values required to enter the workforce. (Agad et al., 2023). Becoming qualified to register as a registered social worker (RSW) offered prospects for advancement, better employment placements, and more significant responsibilities in addition to personal fulfillment. In addition to being a test of academic ability, passing the board exam was a public declaration of competence and ethical responsibility. This was in line with international standards, which use a license to verify professional trust. (Morrow, 2022). The participants' dedication, effort, and perseverance in securing their equipment for the licensing exam were consistently driven by their goal of obtaining eligibility, receiving recognition, and accessing more opportunities. This demonstrated how a license serves as a means of achieving significant career advancement and indicating capability.

The theory of this study, a strength-based perspective, proposed that individuals possess inherent strengths and capacities that enable them to overcome difficulties and grow through challenging experiences. In this study, social work graduates demonstrated resilience, determination, and adaptability as they handled repeated failures in the licensure examination. Rather than being defined by their setbacks, they strengthened their focus, improved their preparation strategies, and drew motivation from their personal goals and experiences.

Despite facing academic difficulties, psychological stress, family and social pressures, financial limitations, and work-related challenges, the participants continued to pursue licensure by utilizing available supports and resources. They relied on encouragement from family and peers, practical work experiences, and structured review strategies to sustain their motivation and commitment. The findings showed that

social work graduates faced challenges, yet persevered and hoped, continuously striving for professional legitimacy by building on their strengths and capacities to succeed.

This study provided empirical insight into the lived experiences of social work graduates as they navigate repeated attempts to pass the licensure examination. This perspective remained underexplored in the existing literature. The findings were significant as most studies focus on licensure outcomes and pass rates. At the same time, limited research captures the personal struggles, coping strategies, and resilience of graduates throughout the licensure journey.

Academic institutions and social work programs should value the results of this study in examining how graduates prepared for and coped with repeated attempts at the licensure examination. The lived experiences of social work graduates offered valuable insights for improving review support, academic guidance, and student assistance, enabling administrators and educators to develop more responsive strategies that helped graduates balance academic preparation, personal responsibilities, and professional demands as they pursue licensure.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in strict adherence to Republic Act No. 10173, also known as the Data Privacy Act of 2012, ensuring that all ethical standards in research were properly observed throughout the process. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were fully briefed on the study's objectives, procedures, and potential risks, with clear assurance that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. The study upheld voluntary participation by ensuring that respondents were not coerced and that their involvement posed no harm or risk. Strict confidentiality was maintained, with all collected data securely handled and accessed only by the researcher, thereby safeguarding participants' experiences and personal information. Respect for persons was prioritized, allowing participants to decline answering any questions without pressure or consequence. Furthermore, the research ensured equity and fairness by treating all participants equally regardless of background, beliefs, or characteristics. Anonymity was also strictly preserved, with all identifying information removed in published outputs to ensure that participants remained unidentifiable while their contributions were accurately and respectfully represented in the study's findings.

Conclusion

The study on the lived experiences of social work graduates in their journey toward passing the board examination highlights that achieving licensure requires more than academic knowledge alone. The findings showed that graduates did not view repeated failures as permanent barriers; instead, they strengthened their preparation strategies through enhanced focus and commitment, from memorization to deep comprehension, eliminated distractions and pressure, utilized review centers and peer-provided materials, and applied work experience to exam concepts. Despite facing multiple difficulties, they continued to pursue licensure with determination and a clear sense of purpose. Furthermore, the study revealed that social work graduates encountered various challenges throughout their licensure journey, including academic difficulties and subject struggles, family and social pressure, personal responsibilities, psychological stress and self-doubt, financial constraints, and work-related challenges and perceived undervaluation. However, they coped with these difficulties through drawing on family's support and encouragement, inspiration from peers and role model, personal resilience and self-determination, practical and financial incentives, and professional ambition and career advancement. The findings indicated that social work graduates learned to adapt and grow through their experiences by accepting setbacks, reflecting on previous attempts, and making necessary adjustments in their study habits and priorities. Through managing time more effectively, exerting added effort, and maintaining hope, they were able to persist despite repeated failures. In the aggregate, the study concludes that the path to licensure is a challenging yet transformative process in which resilience, strategic preparation, and strong support systems are crucial to achieving professional legitimacy.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the academic preparation and licensure performance of social work graduates. Social work students are encouraged to develop disciplined study habits early in their academic journey by maintaining consistent study schedules, strengthening their mastery of core social work concepts, and practicing effective time management strategies in preparation for the licensure examination. Graduates preparing for the Social Work Licensure Examination are advised to adopt deeper learning approaches, including critical thinking, conceptual understanding, and the application of social work theories to practical scenarios to improve comprehension of board examination content. Social work faculty members are recommended to integrate

instructional strategies that promote analytical thinking and conceptual mastery through case discussions, experiential learning, and real-life social work applications. Program chairpersons are encouraged to establish structured review programs, mentoring systems, and targeted academic support initiatives, particularly in challenging subject areas such as Human Behavior and Social Environment and Social Welfare Policies and Programs. Review center instructors should consider conducting more interactive, face-to-face review sessions that emphasize concept integration, mock examinations, and guided discussions to enhance test-taking skills and content mastery. Employers and workplace supervisors are also encouraged to provide supportive and flexible working arrangements for social work graduates who are simultaneously preparing for licensure examinations. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to conduct quantitative descriptive studies using structured Likert-scale instruments to further examine factors influencing licensure success, including study habits, time management, stress levels, support systems, and motivation, with data analyzed through appropriate statistical methods to identify key predictors of examination performance.

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