Lived Experiences of Cebuano LET Topnotchers: A Phenomenological Study

Vincent C. Bayawa¹, Freeland Echavez², Maria Fe Corazon Degula³, Lloyd Matthew C. Derasin⁴
¹⁴ Cebu Normal University, Cebu, Philippines

Abstract - The study was conceptualized to explore the lived experiences of Cebuano LET topnotchers before, during, and after the board exam. The study adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological research design where the in-depth semi-structured interview was made use. Data collected were subjected to thematic analysis and generated the following themes: 1) motivation, (2) multi-factored, (3) highly-individualized preparation, (4) supernatural intervention, (5) discipline, (6) effective test-taking strategies, (7) mixed feelings, and (8) life-changing opportunity. The themes derived to reflect the overall process of becoming a topnotcher and on the transition after becoming one. Their rich experiences would serve as a model and an inspiration for aspiring teachers and topnotchers to come.

Keyword: lived experiences, hermeneutic, Topnotchers

Introduction

Board topnotchers have been sought out for their lived experiences. Aspiring professionals have always looked up board topnotchers for their excellent finish in the board exam. This is for this reason that their lived experience served as a model to many. Examining the lives of the board topnotchers would serve as a great avenue of learning for the aspirants.

Unarguably, achieving the highly-coveted top 10 of any licensure examination requires strict discipline and strong commitment that would set them apart from other takers. Quiambao (2015) pointed out that several factors intertwine and such would determine the actual performance in the board exam. These factors include efforts, academic performance and attendance (Godellas, Hauge, & Huang, 2000), quality of education, student factors and motivation (Quiambao, 2015) among others.

To date, there are forty-five (45) Professional Regulatory Boards which exercise authority over respective professions. They all fall under the bigger umbrella organization, the Professional Regulation Commission. Each respective profession continuously produces sets of topnotchers, with the Licensure Examination for Professional Teachers (LEPT) having the greatest number of takers.

Teacher education graduates are all required to take and pass the Licensure Examination for Professional Teachers (LEPT) before practicing the profession as per Republic Act 7836 or the Teachers Professionalization Act of 1994. With this, pre-service teachers have always eyed to obtain their license and certificate after finishing undergraduate studies. Consequently, some set for a higher target, to become a topnotcher. This leads to studies focused on exploring contributory factors consistent with the desire to top. Among remarkable findings include the results from Albite (2019) where hardcore preparation was coupled with strong personal attributes and the complementary internal and external environment as determinants of success (Pattaguan, 2018).

Cebu has been rich with many topnotchers across different professions, especially in the teaching profession. The province has been consistent in producing topnotchers every year, wherein most of them are graduates of the two state universities found in the region – Cebu Normal University (CNU) and Cebu
Technological University (CTU). In fact, since the September 2021 to March 2022 exam, CTU has produced 11 topnotchers and CNU with 5 topnotchers.

With the number of topnotchers native to the province of Cebu, the study was conceptualized to explore their lived experiences as they transition to a significant change in their lives as topnotchers. The study sought to generate themes on their experiences that would serve as a model to the aspiring teachers and topnotchers. Moreover, this would open another point of view on the topnotchers as a whole behind their huge achievement.

Methods and Materials

This study mainly employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach utilizing in-depth interviews to the point of data saturation. It sought to explore the lived experiences of the board topnotchers in the Licensure Examination for Professional Teachers (LEPT). The study's design was considered appropriate as it entails analyzing experiences and extrapolating meaning out from the informants’ experiences (Paley, 2016). The research informants were purposely selected based on their achievement in LEPT. First participant is a graduate of Cebu Normal University (CNU) who ranked 8th in the LEPT in the secondary level, with a general average of 91.60%. Second participant was a graduate of Cebu Technological University (CTU) who ranked 3rd in LEPT in the elementary level, with an overall average of 91.40%. Third participant was a graduate of CTU as well who ranked 4th in LEPT in the elementary level, with a board rating of 91.20%. Fourth participant was a graduate of CNU who ranked 6th in LEPT in the elementary level, with a board rating of 92.00%. Fifth participant was a graduate of CTU who ranked 10th in LEPT in the elementary level, with a board rating of 90.00%. Lastly, the sixth participant was a graduate of CNU who ranked 1st in LEPT in the secondary level, with a board rating of 93.40%. The researcher, being the primary research instrument in the study, utilized a semi-structured interview guide in the conduct of the in-depth interviews. Primarily, it focused on exploring and probing on the experiences of the board topnotchers before, during, and after the board exam. Moreover, the AtlasTI application was used to generate codes and themes in the analysis of data collected.

Ethical Consideration

To maintain integrity of the research, ethical standards were strictly observed. Prior to the actual data collection, informants were sent a letter of consent, and informed of the rationale of the study. The interview was conducted voluntarily, and participants were given the option to withdraw participation at any time or refuse to answer questions with which they were uncomfortable. Confidentiality of informants’ responses was strictly observed and the use of pseudonyms was employed to protect the participants’ identity. Moreover, participants were assured of the best benefit they can get from participating in the study and that they can access any information regarding the study's findings/results.

Data Gathering Procedure

Key informants were sent a letter of consent prior to data collection, signed and approved by them. Thereafter a virtual interview was scheduled based on their preferred date and time. Once the schedule was set, the informants were explained on the purpose of the study and were informed on the ethical standards observed. In order to properly examine each participant's experiences, probing questions were employed as part of the semi-structured interview session. With the informants' permission, the in-depth interview was recorded. The tape recording was then transcribed so that it could subsequently be subjected to analysis.

Data Analysis

Data gathered were analyzed using thematic analysis as adopted from Braun and Clarke (2008). It involved the following phases: familiarizing with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes;
defining and naming themes; producing the report. Initial coding and generation of themes were primarily done using the AtlasTI software.

Results

Thematic analysis was used to examine the collected data. Results showed 8 significant themes, which include, (1) motivation, (2) multi-factored, (3) highly-individualized preparation, (4) supernatural intervention, (5) discipline, (6) effective test-taking strategies, (7) mixed feelings, and (8) life-changing opportunity.

Theme 1: Motivation

The first theme generated was motivation. Participants all agreed that their desire to top the board exam resulted from a much deeper motivation. Motivation, as analyzed in the study, is composed of two subthemes, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are the internal and external factors (Areepattamannil, Freeman & Klinger, 2011) that contribute to an increase of the individual's performance.

Subtheme: Intrinsic Motivation

Internal motivation of the topnotchers was manifested on the following statements:

“They should be 100% motivated that they want to become a topnotcher jhud. Dili tungod sa ubang people, it should be coming from you.” – Participant No. 2

Participant No. 2 verbalized that the motivation to top the board exam should be at 100% and should not be conditional. He added that motivation must come from within. This was consistent with the statement of Participant No. 6 where he identified that the mindset of a motivated person is completely at a different level.

“Lain ra jud ang mindset sa katong taw nga dakong pangandoy.” – Participant No. 6

Meanwhile, Participant No. 4 identified that his inner motivation to persevere and top the board exam was derived from observing his mother who wakes up at dawn to prepare “puto” to sell early in the morning.

“Kada-adlaw mo mata ko alas 4:30 kay ako mama mo mata ug ala una kay mag puto man siya, as inspiration kana pa lang daan pagmata niya motivated nako. Kay kun mas gikapoy ang ginikanan, kana ganahan ko maproud maninguha by just looking at your parents. Maninguha nako.” – Participant No. 4

Subtheme: Extrinsic Motivation

External motivation of the topnotchers was verbalized on the following statements:

“I want my family nga maproud bitaw sa akoa since sukad pag high school, wala bitaw sila kasaway nga ipaso jhud nako sila sa stage. Kay pag highschool dili kaayo ko active sa skwlehan ba nya pag college pud, though I did my best, wala lage gihapon kay irregular student ko. Ganahan ko maproud sila sa akoa ba nga akoa na jhung ngalan ang naa.” – Participant No. 2

Participant No. 2 stated that he wanted to make his parents proud by topping in the board exam. He was not academically active during his basic education and due to being an irregular student, he did not qualify to graduate with Latin honors in college. Hence, topping the exam was his redemption after what had happened.
“Akong motivations jhud kay status in life. Naggikan man jhud ko sa poor family nya I am the youngest. Ganahan ko nga through sa pag top nako, makatabang sya nako to somehow ma lessen ang burden financially.” – Participant No. 3

Meanwhile, Participant No. 3 identified their status in life as his motivation to top. Being the youngest and coming from a poor family, he believed that through topping, he can help alleviate the financial burden in the family.

“Naa pod koy mga external motivations like kwarta and other reward. Ganahan pod ko mailado ako school. Ganahn ko mo give back sa school, na malipay akong mga teachers. And then, na motivate sab ko kay na pressure ko sa akong Latin honor magna cum laude, sige sila push nako na e top ako board exam.”
– Participant No. 5

Consequently, Participant No. 5 was also motivated by cash incentives and rewards. He also wanted to be known at school, to give back to the school and to make his teachers proud. Since he graduated as a Magna Cum Laude, he added that people’s expectation also pushed him to top.

Theme 2: Multi-factored

The second theme in the study is multi-factored. This showed that the participant’s successful finish in the Licensure Examination for Professional Teachers (LEPT) can be attributed to multiple factors. This brings to the subthemes, (1) self as a factor, (2) review center as a factor, (3) school as a factor, and (4) the Pygmalion effect. Each of the factors played together and paved a way in opening an opportunity to top the board exam.

Subtheme: Self as a factor

Having self as a factor was described on the following statements:

“Dapat self-motivated sila. If you are not motivated, wala ra gihapoy mahitabo.” – Participant No. 3

Participant No. 3 verbalized that self-motivation is very important. He added that all started with motivation and that without it, you’ll be bound to nothing.

“Biggest factor cher no is emotional and mental preparation. Kanan bitawng academic mastudyhan nimo. Ang content makuha nimo sa books. Pwede ra ka muadto sa review center para a. Pero being emotionally and mentally ready, mao nay pinakaimportante cher kay if you’re not ready emotionally and mentally, bisan pa og unsa ka kabright di jhud nimo makuha.” – Participant No. 1

Consequently, Participant No. 1 added that the most important preparation is to prepare oneself emotionally and mentally. He claimed that knowledge of the content can be studied and that you can readily obtain it from review centers and other sources. However, without being emotionally and mentally ready, regardless of intellect, one would not achieve his/her goal.

Subtheme: Review center as a factor

Having the review center as a factor was verbalized on the following statements:

“Ang review center of course, so dili siguro more of the content cher but more on the guidance. Musulti sila nimo og asa ka mu focus. Ikaw mao ni ifocus nimo so maguidan bitaw ka.” - Participant No. 1
Participant No. 1 verbalized the importance of the review center in achieving his goal by providing the guidance. He added that the review center guides takers on what to focus on in preparation for the exam.

"Better jud nga naa kay review center if kaya ra jud nimo. Kay ang sa review center man gud naa silay guide unsaon pag take and what to take. Nag sunod jud na ang ilahang programs saTOS compared kung mag self-study ra'ka." - Participant No. 6

Consequently, Participant No. 6 agreed with Participant No. 1 where he stated that the review center provides guidance on what and how to take the exam. He further pointed out that the review center’s program followed the Table of Specifications (TOS) of PRC.

Subtheme: School as a factor

Having the school as a factor in achieving their goal was verbalized on the following statements:

Participant No. 5 verbalized that his experience in the school from Elementary to college greatly contributed to his success. Since elementary, they were taught to answer and analyze multiple choice test items which enhances his test-taking skills. He further noted that his foundation on content was built strongly in school. With the strong foundation, it enabled him to become an independent learner.

"Like elementary ta, tudloan ka in answering exams kanang I think elementary ko makaingon ko nga whenever it is multiple choice kabalo ko muanwer kay elementary pa lang gi train na mi and then ang foundation sad sa knowledge like dili lang taphaw ang foundation. Like sa Sciences, so focused ang amoang school ato sa Sciences like dili lang sya shallow nga explanation pag elementary, so paghighschool namo like you become an independent learner kay naa kay foundation. Ig college nimo samot ka ka- independent learner kay dili biya tanan present ang professor.” - Participant No. 1

In addition, Participant No. 5 stressed on the great help contributed by his professors in college. He stated that his professor taught them well and he was able retain what was taught. He was also inspired by their advice. He added that since college, they were already practiced and conditioned for LET.

"Yes, sir, dako sila na natabang nako especially sa amo professors na maayu kayu modala tudlo. Wala gyud nako gipang kalimtan ilang mga gipang tudlo. Na inspire jud ko nila and na motivate ko sa ilang mga advices an gihtag sa akoa. Kay ilang mga gipang exam nila sa amoay kay pang LET man gud.” – Participant No. 5

Subtheme: Pygmalion effect

Pygmalion effect embraces the concept that social expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies (Rosenthal, 2010). This entails that high performance is consistent with high expectations. This was implied in the following statements from the respondents.

"Ni graduate man ko nga magna cum laude during my batch. Taas og expectation akong mga professors og classmates. Even first year palang, gi ingnan nako sa akong mga professor nga mag top ko sa board exam until nag 2nd year ko, 3rd year, and fourth year.” – Participant No. 6

Participant No. 6 mentioned that his professors and classmates had a high expectation from him since he was a freshman in college. He added that graduating as a Magna Cum Laude added to the pressure. This is consistent with Participant No. 2 when he verbalized that the expectations around him greatly affected his preparation so that he can meet their expectations.
“Para nako dako jhud og epekto ang expectations sa mga taw sa akoa maong naningkamot sad jhud ko para ma-meet ang ilahang expectation.” – Participant No. 2

Theme 3: Highly individualized preparation

Through the analysis of each board topnotcher’s preparation, it has been observed that each is unique and personalized. Hence, the third theme is a highly individualized preparation. The theme has two subthemes, (1) focus on own weakness and (2) own, unique study habits. Participants all agreed that the assessment and evaluation of self should be the starting point of any preparation. From then, everything should be personalized as it fits to one’s own learning style, intelligence, resources, pace, strengths, and weaknesses.

Subtheme: Focus on own weakness

The subtheme on focusing on one’s weakness was verbalized in the statement of Participant No. 1 when he identified that his preparation started with self-assessment. From there, he focused on the Professional Education subject as he was not as inclined to the component compared with the others. He further pointed out that one should always focus on one’s weakness to maximize the preparation.

“Akoang gi assess akoang kaugalingon ato. So more on proofed kay dili man jhud kaayo ko diligent nga student when it comes to Educ subjects. And then sa Gen Ed kay general knowledge ra man. So assessment lang jhud kung tan-aw nimo unsa imohang weakness, so adto ka magfocus.” – Participant No. 1

Subtheme: Own, unique study habit

Adopting an own and unique study habit was evident among the topnotchers. Their habits are indicated in the following statements.

In terms of actual study habits, Participant No. 1 explained that when he answers questions, he will always try to do it without directly comparing his answers to the answer key. After answering, that’s the only time he will check with the review center’s answer. He added that if he was not convinced with the answer from the answer key, he will look for another resource to confirm and double check the answer. According to him, he does not fully trust answer keys from the review center.

“Mag answer ko og questions nga walay answer key, like test questions nga walay answer and then I answer it myself. Then ig answer nako akoang i-compare sa answer sa review center. And if dili ko convinced sa ilahang answer, I tried to search again sa answer nga akoang ganahang makita kay I do not fully trust answer keys from review center.” – Participant No. 1

Consequently, Participant No. 2 stated that since he is an easily distracted person, he finds reviewing at dawn effective.

“Sa akoa sir kay, mag work sa akoa nag kadlawn kay mingaw sya ba. Easily distracted ko nga person maong basta naay saba kay di ko kafocus. But, two weeks before the exam kay wa na koy gipili nga time sir. Motivated na jhud kaayo ko ato nga time, buntag hantod kadlaw” – Participant No. 2

Participant No. 4 mentioned that he spent his free time every college vacation to review in the computer shop. He added that he finds joy in reading LET concepts and finds it stimulating when he learns and writes a lot.

“So akong preparation sir, nag prepare na jud ko third year college pako mao to, naa man tay closing every end of school year, ako gyud ibuhos akoang adlaw didto sa computeran. Magdala ko bondpaper didto,
“I know man jud ako style man jud is more on questioning so kada review nako atong book nako, by subject man siya. Ighuman nako og study sa foundation, magsuwat nako sa bond paper og series of questions about it nga didto sa book mismso. I drill na nako. Kay kahibaw ko bisan balibalihon pa siya kahibaw jud ko maka answer ko on point jud akong matuhag kay naa nakoy foundation.” – Participant No. 4

Moreover, he added that his learning style is more on questioning, so what he did was engage himself in drills after reading the foundation of concepts. He also utilized the space study technique to allocate time schedules on every topic and the Feynman technique to go through all of the content. Space Study Technique involves spreading out the same amount of study time across a considerably longer length of time (Weinstein, 2019). Feynman technique was an approach to learning used to make complex information simple (Reyes et al., 2021). This is done by employing strategies that break information into manageable chunks.

““I use Space Study Technique, imo sya gi-timeline by chunking the topic. Unya, ang Feynman technique is how you go through the content.”” – Participant No. 4

Participant No. 5 verbalized that he posted visual materials in the wall to retain difficult to memorize concepts. He added that sometimes he sits, stands, and even lies down while reviewing concepts on the wall. He also utilized drawing and story methods to understand concepts better.

““Usahay sir kay kapoyan ko maglingkod mag toon so. Mao to maghigda ko samtang ga basa-basa sa mga papilit sa wall. Usahay mag barog pod ko. Kanang mag summarize ko sa books. Mag drawing-drawing sad ko, like for example, sa digestive. Magbuhat ko og mga stick sa history para dali nako nga masabtan.”” Participant No. 5

Lastly, Participant No. 6 stated that he can easily understand and retain concepts by reading it aloud. He also pointed out that he is not fond of memorizing concepts, rather he paraphrases the idea and always tries to explain it in his own words.

““Sa kanang concepts, ang akoa sad is akong basahon. Basahon nako, dapat madunggan nako. Dapat i-sturya nako. Kana gining mag basa rako sa mata lang, dili siya effective sa akoa man. Dapat i-sturya jud nako para dali siya ma absorb sa kaong huna-huna. And then once mabasa nako, dili ko hilig mag memorize. Akong buhaton, basahon nako siya tapos i-rephrase nako. Dapat ma-explain nako in a simplest way nga akong words.”” – Participant No. 6

Theme 4: Supernatural intervention

The fourth theme yielded after the analysis of the data is supernatural intervention. Supernatural intervention by terms does not belong to the observable reality, breaking natural rules, and being related to god or a divinity (Eastwell, 2011). It comprised two subthemes, (1) divine faith and (2) superstitious beliefs. Analysis showed that participants strongly anchored themselves to deep faith and beliefs before, during, and after the board exam. Though beyond the realms of reality, it was believed that there was supernatural intervention and that it helped topnotchers achieve their goal.

Subtheme: Divine Faith

Belief in divine intervention was verbalized on the following statements.
In times when he feels pressured, Participant No. 4 always remembers the verse, “Be still and know that I am God”. He always gives glory to God on whatever he does, especially on his preparation. Consequently, Participant No. 6 believed in the magic of prayer. He even described that his preparation was more on prayers. He went to church and did a rosary for the board exam like the other takers.

“Ang ako jud permi gihumdu man katong, “Be still and know that I am God”. Bisan unsa pa’na ka pressure, be still because He is God.” – Participant No. 4

“Murag ang kanang preparation nalang nako ato kay more of prayers. Compared sa grabe nga tuon, Mo adto ko sa Sto. Nino church mag pray. Ang pinaka magical sad sa akong preparation na-complete jud nako ang 9 days nga rosary until this board exam.” – Participant No. 6

Moreover, Participant No. 4 believed that the achievement was caused by God. He explained that his deep faith allowed him to be victorious in the exam.

“Tatak dahil kay Lord jhud ang akoang achievement. Siya jhud ang hinungdan nianing tanan.” – Participant No. 4

Subtheme: Superstitious beliefs

The practice of superstitious beliefs was indicated in the following statements.

Participant No. 6 believed in superstitions. He explained that if he believes and that superstitions aren’t true, then he will lose nothing. However, if it is true, then he can gain something.

“Pero motoo ko og too-too. Ana sila kanang too-too, kung dili siya tinuod, walay ma wala nimo. Pero kung tinuod siya, naa kay makuha.” – Participant No. 6

Consequently, Participant No. 5 detailed the sets of superstitious beliefs he did before and during the board exam. He verbalized that he asked a topnotcher to sharpen his pencil. He also wore and brought something red on the day of the exam including underwear, socks, and handkerchief. He also mentioned that the visited churches should be in odd numbers. He also put coins on his socks as he believed that it would absorb the negative energies. He also took a bath at exactly 8 pm the night before the exam with water and salt. He also kicked the entrance gate, the door of the exam room, and the chairs. Upon leaving, he mentioned that one should directly exit the testing venue without looking back.

“Una kay nagpatahal jud ko sa akong lapis. Mag suot jud ko ug brief na red, mag medyas ug red, og mag panyo na red. Dapat daw imo i-visit na church kay odd numbers dili even, so 9 churches amo na visit. Another gibuhat nako is ingun sila dapat a night before sa exam maligo ka og tubig na naay asin kay ingun sila maka release siya ug bad energy. Nagbutang sab ko coins sa ako sapatos sa duha ka tiil aron ma absorb ang mga bad energy, pag abot sa exam. Ingun sila before ka musulod sa gate imo patiran ang gate ug imo isultii na “this is my last board exam. After sa exam, ako sab gipatiran ang bangko ug exit door ug di naka molingi. Inig gawas nimo sa gate imo sab daw patiran.” – Participant No. 5

In addition, According to Participant No. 3, a candle bought from the church should be lit at home from the start of the exam until the end. The light should be maintained all throughout, hence one must stay on guard and check on it from time to time.

“Ang kato nga candle, mao to ang need dagkoan nga kinahanglan dili sya mapawng hantod mahuman ang exam. Naa jhuy magbantay.” – Participant No 3
Theme 5: Discipline

The fifth theme generated was discipline. In the lives of the topnotchers, discipline can be best defined in terms of the following subthemes: (1) time management, (2) setting of goals, (3) commitment, and (4) investment of time, money, and effort. Analysis showed that the strict adherence to self-imposed discipline and a topnotched character are what sets apart the topnotchers from the other takers.

Subtheme: Time Management

Time management was verbalized on the following statements.

Participant No. 2 stated that he created a schedule to finish reading his resources. He skipped recurring content in order to cover more concepts in a day.

"Ang books sir kay naa koy sched nga dapat mahuman. Katong concepts nga kahibaw na ko daan, dili ra nako balikon, iskip ra nako na maong mahuman jhud nako ang book in a day." – Participant No. 2

Also, Participant No. 5 divided his entire day among the exam components. He allotted 7:00 AM to 12:00 noon for General Education concepts and 1:00 to 5:00 PM for Professional Education concepts.

"Sa ako specific time in preparations kay 7:00 am to 12:00 noon kay mag Gen Ed questions ko 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm mag Prof.Ed questions ko. Since wala man koy major, 12:00 midnight mag basa ko mga concepts sa Gen Ed ug Prof Ed na ako nalisdan. Balik-balik ra sya." – Participant No. 5

Subtheme: Setting of goals

Setting of goals was indicated by the following statements.

Participant No. 4 verbalized that he had manifested to become a topnotcher since he was a college student. He was inspired by the standees of topnotchers in the university. He believed that one attracts what was manifested and that manifestation works. One’s actions and thoughts would be aligned with one’s desire and it would raise a higher bar of one’s performance. He added that making something happen started with the desire.

"College palang ko sir ako na jud syang gi manifest, gi attract na jud nako na sya. Kana ganing makakita gani ko mga top notchers naa sa hagdanan sa CNU makaana ko nga someday naa ko dinhi. What you have manifested long time ago, nga gi-attract nimo. Musunod ang imong action, imong thoughts og imong high standard sa imong kaugalingun. Kung wala nimo gi-desire, di man jud na mahitabo because the first step of attraction is the desire on how much do you badly need it. I desire for it mao nahimo sya." – Participant No. 4

Moreover, Participant No. 2 and 4 believed that setting goals in the review is important. Participant No. 2 always aimed to only commit 5-10 mistakes on every practice test, while Participant No. 4 always made it a habit to obtain a 90% mark in answering questions.

"Every practice test, dapat 10 lang mistakes or 5. Naa sad jhud koy time para mag answer ba." – Participant No. 2

"...and then ako mindset ato basta mag-answer na gani ko ug mga questions I have to mind na 90% jud ang results. For example, 150 ang items, dapat naka 90% gyud ko so that pag abot sa board exam 90% ako grado." – Participant No. 4
Subtheme: Commitment

Commitment was described by the following statements.

Participant No. 6 verbalized that motivation should go hand in hand with commitment. He identified that efforts should be consistent. Moreover, he described that one’s effort strongly depends on the needs of the person. In his case, he knew his capabilities, hence he was able to estimate the amount of effort he needed to exert on his preparation.

“There should be motivation and then you commit to the motivation and dapat consistent ang imohang efforts. Ang effort man gud sa taw magdepende man gud na sa panginahanglan. Para man gud nako, dapat kaila ka sa imong kauagalingon bitaw, dapat kaila ka daan kung unsa imohang capabilities, sa imong kakayahan mismo ba para ma estimate nimo kung unsang effort ang imohang ibutang sa kana nga preparation” – Participant No. 6

Participant No. 2 and 3 exhibited commitments on their reviews by doing an extra mile. Participant No. 2 listens to drills on his way to work. Also, he recorded some of the content and used it as an audio track while travelling. He even pointed out that one should not waste time. This practice is very similar to Participant No. 3 when he listened to his recordings of concept bullets while jogging.

“Pag magbyahe ko going to work, around 30 minutes, kana maminaw og drills. Mag recordings pud ko sa akoang self sir questions nya answers especially sa Gen Ed. Do not waste time. Karon pa lang daan magtuon ka.” – Participant No. 2

“Mag jogging ko dira sa CNU dayon samtang nag jogging ko, nagrecord ko sa CBRC nga bullets nya mao akoa paminawn while mag jogging.” – Participant No. 3

Subtheme: Investment of time, money, and effort

Investment of time, money, and effort were verbalized on the following statements.

Participant No. 3 invested in his health during the review. He told himself that the exam would be his last so he used his savings to invest on vitamins, especially on B-complex. Also, he enjoyed complete meals while reviewing.

“Then naa man koy savings ato gigasto jhud nako kay nakaingon ko nga last board exam nato nako and sure ko nabawi ra tu nako. So nagpalit ko og mga vitamins for my brain, every day. Katong b-complex nga branded jhud, Everyday food nako kay complete meal jhud katong hapit na ang exam, like naay fruits.” – Participant No. 3

Consequently, Participant No. 3 invested in reliable materials as resources. He explained that he was never hesitant to use his savings for his expenses during the review. He also pointed out that he always finds time to study and exerts an honest effort to review. He added that one should invest in something that would enable you to reach your goal.

Theme 6: Effective test-taking strategies

The sixth theme generated was the effective test taking strategies. Among the other themes, this theme specifically revolved around the topnotcher’s lived experiences on the day of the board exam. This includes the following subthemes: (1) composure, (2) analytical skills, and (3) shading techniques. It was apparent among the participants that the actual exam required more than the simple recall of questions and answers. Hence, the application of test-taking strategies was deemed important to retain what was learned and apply what was practiced.

Subtheme: Composure

Composure was verbalized on the given statements.

Participants 1 and 3 felt composed on the day of the board exam. Participant No. 1 felt that he was taking a regular midterm examination from CNU. This was consistent with Participant No. 3 wherein he conditioned his mind that he was the smartest so that he would not feel anxious. Overall, they were confident while taking the exam.

“That time nga nag answer na ko sa exam kay wala ra, mura ra bitaw ko og nag answer og exam ra. Mura rag midterm ra sa CNU. Mao na akoang feeling or quiz ra ba run. Wala kaayo saya ba gisud nako sa hunahuna nga mao ni board exam ni basta akoang goal kay clear akoang head and di ko padala sa kakulba.” – Participant No. 1

“Akoang gicondition akoang self nga dili kulbaan, nga ako ang kina-brightan sa tanan. Mao tu during na sa pag answer dali ra kaayo ko naka answer. Confident kaayo ko ato nga time.” – Participant No. 3

Subtheme: Analytical skills

Analytical skills in answering the actual LET questions was described in the given statement. Participant No. 6 described his actual technique in answering the test. He stated that while answering, he discussed the questions and choices by himself. He analyzed each question and choices well. He mentioned that in the analysis of choices, if choices portray similar thoughts, then they are not the answer. However, if they are contrasting, then there is a higher chance that one of them is the answer. He utilized clue words in the analysis of items. He described his booklet as dirty with different marks from the identified clues. He believed that every word used in the stem could be a possible hint to arrive at the correct answer.

“Mag discuss-discuss ko sa akong self. Mag encircle ko and then mo adto dayun kos question. I-analyze nako kung same ba sila og thought ana. Murag na formulate na nako ba kung same na sila og thought, dili na sila ang answer. Kung opposite ilang thought, usa nila ang answer. Akong technique jud ana kay dapat naa koy clue words. During our time, akong test paper sa ProfEd, grabe jud kahugaw. Dapat encircle nako tanan. Kay akong concept, walay word nga i-butang kung dili siya makatabang sa pag answer sa question. Tanang wrods anha, possible jud nga naay gi tago nga clue.” – Participant No. 6

Subtheme: Shading techniques

Shading techniques were indicated on the given statements.

Participant No. 5 detailed his techniques in transferring his answers and in shading. He mentioned that in shading, one stroke should be observed. What he did was he started his shading from the center of the rectangle going outward to achieve the appropriate shade.
“Sa shading dapat one stroke ra jud nimo sya, di nimo siya ibalik ibalik. Sa akoa sir pag shading, diba rectangular man siya, ang akong gibuhat kay gi una nako shade ang tunga sa rectangle aron ang agi sa lapis ma focus siya sa tunga aron ma blacken maayu ang tunga kay if unahon nimo ang kilid mahanap naman gud siya sa tunga.” – Participant No. 5

Moreover, Participant No. 1 stated that he only proceeded to shading once he was sure of his answers. He answered in the booklet first instead of directly shading the answer in the answer sheet. He also skipped difficult items and went back after finishing all other items

“So, if wala ka kahibaw sa answer sa questions, leave it. I-leave sa sya nya ayaw sya ishade ditso. Balikon lang nimo siya ig kahuman na nimo. Also, sa akoang gibuhat, wala ko nagshade dirito kay para dili hugaw. What I did is I put the answer sa separate sheet so akoa syang gitransfer right after. Para hunahunaon sa nimo.” - Participant No. 1

Theme 7: Mixed feelings

Preparing for and taking the exam, and waiting for and receiving the results required a mixed concoction of feelings. Hence, lead to the seventh theme. Participant’s emotions shifted across different levels of their board exam journey. The theme comprised the following subthemes: (1) feeling of under pressure, (2) frustrations after the exam, and (3) feeling of Euphoria.

Subtheme: Frustrations after the exam

Frustrations after the exam were verbalized on the following statements.

All the interviewed topnotchers did not expect to top after the board exam. Though confident that they will pass, the dream to top became unsure. Participant No. 3 mentioned that he was unsure of 30 items in the General Education and 32 items in the Professional Education. Participant No. 2 had only 120 items of sure answers in the General Education and 99 items in the Professional Education. This contributed to the frustrations they felt after the exam.


Moreover, Participant No. 1 verbalized that he was anxious about the exam as his co-takers told him that it was easy. He was frustrated knowing that he had a hard time answering the questions, especially on his Majorship.

“Nisamot ako og kakulba kay naa tuy from other school, ana sya sayon ra man ang exam ma’am nya ako kay gilisoran ko. Kahilakan na kayko ato. Mura ko og nakulbaan kay gisayonan ra ang akong nga kauban sa majorship nya ako kay questionable.” – Participant No. 1

Subtheme: Feeling of Euphoria

The feeling of euphoria after receiving the results was described in the following statements.
Participant No. 2 stated that he was not aware that the result would be posted on that day. An acquaintance congratulated him on their group chat saying that he was one of the topnotchers. He described that he was extremely happy and that he was shocked in disbelief. He was very thankful for the achievement. He even mentioned that he and his family weren't able to sleep well that night.

“Wala ko kahibaw nga mao tu ang result sir, nag work ko ato. Naay nagpost sa amoang ge ba nga congratulations teacher, naa say nag pm nako nag topnotcher kko. Grabe makahilak kaayo. Maygani wa koy klase that time. Grabe ang happiness and thankful kaayo ba. Ako mama naa man sa province, wala sad sya nakatog kay happy kaayo saya bitaw. Ako sad wala katog kay di ko katuvo bitaw. Akoang ate og kuya and akoang soon to be, kay grabe sad sila ka proud kay kahibaw man sila sa akoang sacrifices.” – Participant No. 2

Like Participant No. 2, Participant No. 3 was not aware as well that the result was posted. A friend of his called and informed him that he was at top 4 while his friend was trailing at the 10th spot. He was very happy and at the same time shocked that he could not believe that he topped.

“Nanawag akoang kauban nga topnotcher sa, kay wa mn jhud ko kahibaw ato nga time mugaws ang result. Ana sya nga top 4 ko nya sya daw top 10. Ana ko ha? Balika daw. Wa ko katuvo nya wa ko kahibaw sa akoang buhaton.” – Participant No 3

In similar ways, Participant No. 3 was happy and at the same time cannot believe what had happened. He added that although it had been his desire to top, when the result came out, he cannot fully believe what was posted.

“Although you have been attracting nga ma-topnotcher ka pero ining abot sa topnotcher di ka motoo na topnotcher ka. Till now wala pa ni sink in akoa. Wala ba kaha na sayup ang PRC wala pa ba kaha sila na TYPO error. Dugay jud sya ni sink in.” – Participant No. 4

Consequently, a close friend informed Participant No. 6 that he topped the board exam. He recalled that he was in front of an Automated Teller Machine (ATM) when he received the good news. Suddenly, he burst into tears while holding the withdrawn money due to extreme happiness. He even added that he cannot fully explain how he felt that time and what’s sure is that he was very happy.


Subtheme: Feeling of under pressure

Pressure felt after being a topnotcher was indicated on the following statements.

Participant No. 1 explained that he felt pressure all his life and that topping the board exam even puts more pressure to himself. People sets higher expectations on him and that he is capable of everything, even that the things asked were outside his own sets of skills. This was consistent to the experience of Participant No. 3 where he pointed that people around him expect him to be perfect.

“Pressure kaayo ka all my life. Wala ko nagpakita og reasons para ang mga taw muset of expectations nako. Dili ko ganahan nga nay expectations ang mga taw nako. Murag dili nako kaya nga mag carry og burden nga kaning expectations. Like sa uban nakong kaila, ani nila nga easy ra nimo ang uban/ tanang butang. Like tagaan ka nila ani and they expect you to perform well bisag outside na siya sa imohang capability.” – Participant No. 1
Theme 8: Life changing opportunity

The last theme generated was life changing opportunity. The board exam results paved for wider horizons for the board topnotchers. It opened doors of opportunities for the following subthemes: (1) career opportunities and (2) scope of influence. Analysis showed that a significant change happened in the lives of the topnotchers, before and after the board exam.

Subtheme: Career opportunities

Career Opportunities was indicated on the following statements.

Topping the board exam opened for a lot of opportunities for the topnotchers. Participant No. 1 mentioned that he was offered promotion at his work. He also added that people now treat him nicely.

“Sa akoang work run, na offeran og promotion, and then people are nicer than before.” – Participant No. 1

Consequently, Participant No. 3 was offered a job by his Alma Mater among other offers. Also, Participant No. 5 detailed that his dream to lecture was fulfilled. Like Participant No. 3, he was also offered for a job to teach in his Alma Mater. Aside from that, he also received some monetary incentives.

“Daghan sad nga opportunities, like gikuha mi sa amoang eskwelahan nya mga offers nga mapressure nalang ka kay ura-urada. Abi nila og maayo na kayka.” – Participant No. 3

“Ako dream gyud nako ma lecturer ko mao to na hitabo na gyud, daghan pod kayu mga work ni duoll like for example gipatudlo mi sa amoang Alma Mater as part time college instructor sa sa CTE. Amo gyud gi grab wala ko mag expect sa college of education ko motudlo kay abi nako naa rako sa elementary. Naa say blessings like money” – Participant No. 5

Subtheme: Scope of influence

The bigger scope of influence was described on the following statements.

Participant No. 5 mentioned that after the result, he was invited as a speaker to motivate others. Participant No. 6 was also amazed knowing that people around him, despite not knowing them personally, became proud on his achievement. He mentioned that he did not fully realize how wide his influence this time after topping the board exam. He also added that there were a lot of aspirants who became inspired of his experiences.

“Daghan pod kag invitation to speak to motivate sa students naka inspire pod ko sa uban.” – Participant No. 5

“Maka amaze nga daghan og taw nga na proud sa kato nga achievement, murag wala ko naka realize up until karun wala ko naka hibaw nga asa kutob akong influence as a topnotcher og pila ka taw ba ang na inspire sa nga akong na agian ba.” – Participant No. 6
Discussion

The study generated 8 significant themes out from Cebu LET topnotchers experiences, which include, (1) motivation, (2) multi-factored, (3) highly-individualized preparation, (4) supernatural intervention, (5) discipline, (6) effective test-taking strategies, (7) mixed feelings, and (8) life changing opportunity.

The findings of the study suggested that one’s motivation is necessary to align goals with actions. Based from the analysis, board topnotchers associate their achievement to their high level of motivation, both internal and external. This agrees to the findings of Ayub (2010) where he identified both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as significant factors that increase individual’s performance. Such motivations allowed topnotchers to be consistent with their preparation. This showed that the desire to top the board exam resulted to the development of traits aligned with the desire. This finding is consistent with the results from Hazrati-Viari, Rad, & Torabi (2012) where they identified the relationship of personality and motivation.

Results showed that success in the board exam is a result of several factors interacting with each other, being multi-factor. Among the factors observed are the self, school, review center, and social expectations. This agrees to the statement of Quiambao (2015) when he purported that success comes from the interaction of several factors. Based from the analysis of participants’ responses, motivation originated from self, content and guidance were supported by the school and review center, while social expectations increase pressure and in turn increase performance.

Moreover, the findings also suggested that there is no single best preparation to prepare oneself in the board exam. This entailed that techniques, strategies, and habits should be aligned to one’s own learning style, intelligence, resources, pace, strengths, and weaknesses. This highly stresses on the concept of individual differences. The existence of personalized and unique study habits of topnotchers were consistent with Price (2004) stating that the concept on individual differences should be catered with practices matching the individual’s preferences.

Also, it was found out that the belief to supernatural intervention was common among the topnotchers. Topnotchers exhibit deep faith to God. Moreover, they also practiced superstitions on and/or before the board exam. They believed that these beliefs, rituals and practices had helped them developed assurance in taking the exam and in developing a positive mindset. This relates well to the findings of Faiza (2018) where she identified superstition and other supernatural beliefs as widespread and helps in shaping psychological state of a person. In the case of the topnotchers, this provides positive influence to their thinking.

Consequently, the study revealed that high performance in the board exam required strict discipline. It was manifested by topnotchers’ time management, goal-setting, commitment, and investment of time, money, and effort. With the strict discipline, topnotchers were able to meet their goal. This is consistent with Ehiane (2014) where he stated that discipline should be instilled to translate efforts to a higher performance. To support, Jung, Zhou, & Lee (2017) described the positive relationship of self-discipline in increasing percentage of success.

Additionally, it was purported that an effective test-taking strategy is necessary to translate good preparation to good outcome. It was revealed that topnotchers exhibit specific techniques in conditioning their self for the exam, in analyzing questions, as well as in answering and shading items. Radojevic (2006) described the importance of test-taking strategies in comprehending test questions and improving test score. In the case of the topnotchers, they were able to successfully employ such strategies which resulted to a high board rating.

Moreover, the result of the exam brought a mixed flavor of emotion to the topnotchers as revealed in the analysis. Primarily, the result brought extreme happiness and at the same weight from people’s expectations. Based from the analysis, higher interpersonal expectations after topping the board exam resulted to a perception that they are perfect individuals. This caused lots of pressure among the topnotchers. This is consistent to the study of Curran and Hill (2022) where they identified social expectation and perfectionism as cause of pressure and worn out.
Lastly, topping the board exam brought a significant turn of events to the lives of topnotchers as revealed in the study. It includes opportunities to further their careers as professionals and at the same time, the opportunity to touch and inspire someone’s life. Through the achievement, topnotchers were able to fulfill their dreams and at the same time experience things that are out of reach before.

Conclusion

Topnotchers are well-congratulated for their successful finish in the board exam. They are known to exhibit quality traits that cut them apart from other takers. However, to become who they are in the present is not just a result of their months to years of rigorous preparation, rather a result from cumulative experiences, shaping, and development all throughout their lives. The study opened for an opportunity to examine the lives of Cebuano topnotchers and to have better outlook on the process of becoming a topnotcher and on the transition after becoming one. Overall, aspiring teachers and topnotchers could look back on their rich experiences and serve it as an inspiration and a model on their lives.

References:


