

Experiences of pre-service teachers in high-stakes assessments: implications for teacher education

Mary Cris J. Go, Jovelyn G. Delosa

Faculty of Institute for Teacher Education, Northern Bukidnon State College, Manolo Fortich, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Teacher readiness for high-stakes assessments is a critical but underexplored area, especially given the challenges of low passing rates and insufficient preparation strategies. Literature shows studies emphasizing student readiness and performance, but less attention is given to the specific preparation, support mechanisms, and professional development for teachers regarding high-stakes assessments. This study aimed to examine pre-service teachers' experiences in preparing for high-stakes assessments and identify key factors that influence their readiness. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, data were gathered from semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs) with seven graduating teacher education students. The analysis revealed five key themes: preparation strategies, essential competencies, concerns and fears, access to resources, and institutional support. These factors were identified as crucial to shaping students' preparedness. The study concluded that targeted institutional interventions such as enhanced mentoring, improved access to resources, and stronger support systems are essential for improving teacher readiness. Recommendations included integrating holistic preparation strategies into teacher education curricula and fostering institutional support networks. This research contributed to the global discourse surrounding the experiences of pre-service teachers, proposing the need for design-thinking-based innovations to establish the readiness of pre-service teachers in taking high-stakes assessments, which defines their initial entry into the teaching profession.

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Corresponding Author:

Mary Cris J. Go
Faculty of Institute for Teacher Education, Northern Bukidnon State College
Manolo Fortich, Bukidnon, Philippines
Email: mjgo@nbsc.edu.ph

1. INTRODUCTION

Preparing pre-service teachers for high-stakes assessments is a challenge in various countries, with implications for teacher quality and readiness for the test. These assessments, which serve as gateways to professional certification, require candidates to demonstrate not only content mastery and pedagogical skills but also test-taking strategies. Despite their importance, low passing rates in high-stakes assessments persist, especially in developing countries such as the Philippines. This reflects significant gaps in readiness among pre-service teachers [1]. Existing research has largely focused on academic and technical factors related to examination performance, neglecting the lived experiences of examinees that are crucial to understanding the multifaceted nature of readiness [2], [3].

Globally, education systems are increasingly emphasizing inclusive and holistic approaches to teacher preparation. Studies highlight the interplay of academic, psychological, and institutional factors in

shaping readiness for high-stakes assessments [4], [5]. However, disparities in access to preparatory resources and inconsistencies in institutional support remain significant barriers to equitable readiness [6], [7]. Addressing these barriers is critical for improving teacher education programs and ensuring that all candidates are adequately prepared for the demands of professional certification exams [8]. For example, Cheng *et al.* [9] noted the role of adaptive learning technologies in bridging resource gaps, while Rincon-Flores *et al.* [10] emphasized the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy in enhancing teacher preparation in diverse contexts.

A major challenge in teacher preparation programs is the absence of comprehensive strategies that address academic, psychological, and systemic factors influencing readiness. Institutional interventions, while available, are often inconsistent and lack the holistic focus needed to adequately support pre-service teachers [11]. Additionally, disparities in access to resources further exacerbate inequities in preparation, leaving many students underprepared for high-stakes assessments [12], [13]. These gaps underscore the urgent need for research that examines the lived experiences of pre-service teachers to identify factors that influence their readiness and inform effective interventions [14]. This study advances the discussion on teacher readiness by proposing a shift towards a design-thinking-based framework in teacher preparation. Instead of relying solely on traditional review sessions and standardized test-focused curricula, this research emphasizes the need for adaptive, innovative, and learner-centered approaches that equip pre-service teachers with the skills and resilience needed for high-stakes assessments [15]. By incorporating flexible and reflective learning strategies, institutions can enhance the preparedness of aspiring educators beyond rote memorization, fostering deeper competency development aligned with real-world teaching demands.

This study aims to address these gaps by investigating the experiences of pre-service teachers in preparing for high-stakes assessments. Through the lens of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), it explores the strategies employed by candidates, the challenges they face, and the role of institutional support systems in shaping their readiness. By centering on the lived experiences of pre-service teachers, this research contributes new insights into the broader discourse on teacher preparation. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: i) What preparation strategies do pre-service teachers employ to navigate high-stakes assessments? ii) What challenges and fears do they face throughout the process? and iii) How does institutional support influence their readiness?

The findings are expected to inform curriculum reforms, enhance institutional support networks, and guide policy recommendations to improve teacher education programs. Furthermore, the study contributes to the development of practical solutions that strengthen pre-service teacher readiness in multiple dimensions, including curriculum design, equitable access to preparatory resources, feedback mechanisms, mentoring programs, and strategies to mitigate test-related anxiety. By integrating a more innovative and adaptive preparation model, this research supports long-term improvements in teacher certification success rates and professional competence [16]. By addressing these objectives, this study contributes to the global conversation on fostering equitable and effective preparation strategies for high-stakes assessments, ultimately enhancing teacher readiness and professional success [3], [8], [16].

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using IPA to explore the lived experiences of pre-service teachers preparing for high-stakes assessments. Data were collected through semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs) involving seven graduating Teacher Education students from a state college in the Philippines. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they had direct experience with high-stakes assessment preparation. Each FGD lasted approximately 60 minutes, and sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Transcriptions were analyzed thematically following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke [17], with a focus on identifying and interpreting key themes related to preparation strategies, challenges, and institutional support. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, data triangulation was employed by comparing findings across individual and group responses [18], [19]. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation, were strictly observed. This methodological approach enabled an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing teacher readiness for high-stakes assessments, contributing valuable insights for improving teacher education programs [20], [21].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Theme 1: preparation strategies

Pre-service teachers utilized various preparation strategies to navigate high-stakes assessments. These included structured time management, collaborative learning, and practice-based preparation. One respondent shared, "*I created a weekly schedule, prioritizing my weakest subjects. This helped me feel in*

control." Collaborative learning, such as peer study groups, was another common approach, as one participant noted, "*We studied together, and it felt reassuring to help each other with challenging topics.*" Practice materials, including mock exams, were also widely used. A respondent shared, "*I practiced with mock exams, which boosted my confidence.*" These strategies align with existing research highlighting the effectiveness of structured planning and peer learning in enhancing exam readiness [22], [23]. However, balancing preparation with other responsibilities posed challenges, as one participant stated, "*I struggled to manage my time between regular assignments and exam preparation.*" This finding echoes the role of effective time management in mitigating stress and improving exam performance [24].

3.2. Theme 2: essential competencies

Participants highlighted the importance of cognitive and emotional competencies in succeeding in high-stakes assessments. These included in-depth content knowledge, emotional resilience, and effective time management. One respondent stated, "*It was not enough just to know the subject; I had to manage my nerves too.*" Emotional regulation strategies, such as mindfulness exercises, were employed to manage test anxiety. A participant shared, "*I practiced mindfulness exercises to calm my nerves, which helped me focus better.*" These insights align with research emphasizing the role of emotional resilience in overcoming test anxiety [25]. Additionally, respondents stressed the importance of developing test-taking strategies, as one mentioned, "*I learned to manage my time during the exam to ensure I could answer all the questions.*" This supports findings highlighting the value of problem-solving approaches in exam success [26], [27].

3.3. Theme 3: concerns and fears

Fear of failure and pressure to meet societal expectations were significant challenges for pre-service teachers. One respondent shared, "*The pressure to pass felt overwhelming; I feared it would ruin my career plans.*" Another noted, "*I felt like I was letting down my family and teachers if I did not pass.*" Such external pressures are consistent with findings that familial and societal expectations exacerbate test anxiety [28], [29]. Participants also expressed concerns about balancing exam preparation with other academic responsibilities, as one stated, "*It was difficult to juggle studying for the exam and completing regular assignments.*" This finding aligns with studies emphasizing that competing academic demands increase stress levels [30], [31]. The lack of institutional emotional support further intensified these fears, as one participant remarked, "*I wished there were more mental health programs to help us cope.*"

3.4. Theme 4: access to resources

Access to quality preparatory resources was identified as a critical factor influencing readiness for high-stakes assessments. While some participants had access to updated materials and online resources, others faced limitations. One participant noted, "*I relied on online materials since our university did not provide much in terms of study guides.*" This discrepancy was exacerbated by unequal access to digital resources, as one respondent explained, "*Some of my peers did not have reliable internet access, and that made it harder for them to study.*" These findings echo the impact of resource disparities on educational outcomes [32], [33]. Participants with access to comprehensive resources reported feeling more confident, as one shared, "*I had access to online tutorials, and they were really helpful.*" Institutions must address these disparities to ensure equitable preparation opportunities for all students [34].

3.5. Theme 5: institutional support

Institutional support emerged as a crucial yet inconsistent factor in pre-service teachers' preparation. Some participants praised their professors for personalized mentoring and assistance with mock exams. As one respondent stated, "*My professors gave me advice and helped me prepare, which made a big difference.*" However, others experienced a lack of support, with one noting, "*Some professors did not offer extra guidance, and that left me feeling unprepared.*" The absence of emotional support programs was also highlighted, as one participant remarked, "*I wish the school had workshops on managing stress during exam preparation.*" These findings align with research emphasizing the importance of both academic and emotional support in teacher preparation [35], [36]. Addressing these gaps requires institutions to adopt holistic approaches that integrate academic mentorship with mental health services to better support students.

4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical factors influencing pre-service teachers' readiness for high-stakes assessments, emphasizing the interplay of preparation strategies, essential competencies, concerns and fears, access to resources, and institutional support. Teacher readiness requires both academic and emotional preparation, where effective time management, emotional resilience, and collaborative learning play essential

roles. The study underscores the importance of equitable access to resources and targeted institutional interventions to address disparities in preparation. Strengthening mentoring programs, providing mental health support, and ensuring the availability of quality study materials are necessary steps toward improving readiness. By integrating holistic preparation strategies into teacher education curricula and fostering robust support systems, institutions can better equip future educators for the challenges of high-stakes assessments. These findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on enhancing teacher preparation practices, offering actionable insights for improving teacher education programs in diverse contexts. Actionable reforms in linking teacher preparation to high-stakes assessment and teacher certification are needed by teacher education institutions.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This research followed the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to accurately reflect each author's contributions.

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Mary Cris J. Go	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jovelyn G. Delosa						✓				✓				✓

C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper. No conflicts of interest exist concerning this research.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all individuals included in this study. Participants were briefed on the research objectives, procedures, and their rights to confidentiality and voluntary participation before providing written consent.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research complied with all relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration. The study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Davao De Oro State College, a Philippine Health Research Ethics Board (PHREB) accredited institution.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [MCJG], upon reasonable request. Due to privacy considerations, raw data containing sensitive participant information are not publicly accessible but can be provided in a de-identified format upon request.

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BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS



Mary Cris J. Go     is a mathematics instructor at Northern Bukidnon State College, Philippines, where she teaches mathematics and professional education courses. She holds a PhD in Mathematics Education from the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines and a Master's degree in Science Education majoring in Secondary Mathematics from Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology. Her research interests include mathematical proficiency, assessment literacy, and secondary mathematics education. She has presented her work at numerous national and international conferences and published research in Web of Science-indexed journals. She can be contacted at email: mjgo@nbsc.edu.ph.



Jovelyn G. Delosa     the vice-president for Academic Affairs at Northern Bukidnon State College, Philippines. She earned her degrees from Xavier University and the University of Adelaide. Prior to her current role, she served as dean of teacher education at Xavier University, where she dedicated six years to transformative teacher education. A passionate advocate for assessing what truly matters and whole-person education, she is a recognized leader, having been a fellow of the SUSI-study of US Schools for Administrators, the United Board, and the Australian Leadership Award, among others. Her work has been acknowledged through awards such as the women's leadership in Asia and the 2023 Metrobank Foundation Most Outstanding Filipinos. With research interests in assessment literacy, curriculum development, and leadership, she has spearheaded innovations in education and community-based leadership programs. She has shared her expertise on national and international platforms, emphasizing learner-centered education and holistic well-being. She can be contacted at email: jgdelosa@nbsc.edu.ph.