

Navigating Leadership Qualification Standards: Factors Influencing School Heads' NQESH Performance under DepEd Order No. 13, s. 2024

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Abstract— This study examined the factors influencing school heads' performance in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) within the context of Department of Education Order No. 13, s. 2024. It specifically identified key variables such as leadership competencies, emotional intelligence, management skills, and professional development engagement that affect examination outcomes. A mixed-methods research design was employed, integrating quantitative data from examination results and survey responses with qualitative insights obtained through interviews with school heads. Quantitative findings revealed that school heads demonstrated high levels of leadership competencies, emotional intelligence, and management skills, while professional development engagement was moderately high. Their overall NQESH performance was satisfactory. Correlation analysis further showed that all identified factors had significant positive relationships with NQESH performance, with management skills emerging as the strongest predictor. Qualitative results supported these findings, revealing themes such as leadership preparedness gaps, emotional pressure, limited training support, and reliance on self-directed learning strategies. The study concluded that school heads' performance in the NQESH was influenced by interplay of leadership competencies, emotional factors, professional development engagement, and institutional support systems. The findings highlight the need for strengthened and targeted professional development programs to enhance leadership capacity and examination readiness.

Keywords: National Qualifying Examination for School Heads; school head; performance.

I. INTRODUCTION

The National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) served as a critical mechanism for assessing the preparedness and competencies of aspiring and incumbent school leaders in the Philippines. As mandated by the Department of Education, the examination ensured that school heads possessed the necessary leadership, managerial, and instructional competencies required to effectively lead educational institutions and improve school performance. With the implementation of DepEd Order No. 13, s. 2024, greater emphasis was placed on strengthening competency-based standards and enhancing the professional qualifications of school leaders to address the evolving demands of educational administration in the country. According to Hallinger (2020), effective school leadership significantly contributed to improved school performance and student

achievement, highlighting the importance of competency-based leadership assessments such as the NQESH.

Despite these reforms, many school heads continued to encounter difficulties in attaining satisfactory performance in the NQESH. This concern underscored the need to investigate the factors influencing examination outcomes and leadership readiness. Previous studies revealed that several variables affected examination performance, including educational attainment, leadership competencies, professional training, emotional intelligence, management skills, and individual motivation (Goleman, 2018; Bush, 2020). Furthermore, institutional support systems, access to professional development opportunities, and workplace challenges also influenced school heads' capacity to perform effectively in qualifying examinations (Day et al., 2019). However, limited studies comprehensively examined how these internal and external factors interacted within the context of the NQESH and the implementation of DepEd Order No. 13, s. 2024.

Anchored on the growing discourse surrounding educational leadership and policy reforms, this study explored the factors influencing school heads' performance in the NQESH through a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were utilized to determine the significant relationships among leadership competencies, emotional intelligence, management practices, and examination outcomes, while qualitative data provided deeper insights into the lived experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of school leaders. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) emphasized that mixed-methods research offered a more comprehensive understanding of complex educational issues by integrating numerical trends with participants' perspectives. Through this approach, the study generated a broader understanding of the determinants of NQESH performance.

The findings of the study contributed to the advancement of educational leadership practices and policy development in the Philippines. Specifically, the research provided evidence-based recommendations for enhancing training programs, strengthening competency-building initiatives, and refining professional development frameworks for school heads. Ultimately, understanding the factors that influenced NQESH performance became essential in cultivating competent and transformational school leaders who could effectively respond to the dynamic needs of the Philippine educational system and

contribute to improved learner outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020).

II. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively examine the factors influencing school heads' performance in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) within the context of DepEd Order No. 13, s. 2024. Mixed-methods research was considered appropriate because it enabled the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, providing a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), mixed-methods research combines the strengths of quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain deeper insights into complex educational issues.

Specifically, the study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, wherein quantitative data collection and analysis were conducted first, followed by qualitative data gathering to further explain and enrich the quantitative findings. The quantitative phase focused on determining the relationships between leadership competencies, emotional intelligence, management skills, and NQESH performance. On the other hand, the qualitative phase explored the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges encountered by school heads in preparing for and taking the examination.

The participants of the study consisted of school heads and aspiring school leaders from selected public schools under the Department of Education. Respondents for the quantitative phase were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that participants had relevant experience related to the NQESH. For the qualitative phase, key informants were chosen through criterion sampling based on their examination performance and leadership experiences.

Data for the quantitative phase were gathered using a structured survey questionnaire adapted from validated leadership and management competency instruments. The questionnaire measured variables such as leadership competencies, emotional intelligence, management practices, professional development experiences, and motivational factors. Examination performance data were also obtained to determine statistical relationships among the variables. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis were utilized to analyze the quantitative data. These statistical tools helped identify significant predictors of NQESH performance.

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Interview questions focused on preparation strategies, perceived challenges, institutional support, and coping mechanisms related to the NQESH. The collected qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, which involved data familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report writing.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, the survey questionnaire underwent expert validation and pilot testing prior to administration. Reliability testing was

conducted using Cronbach's alpha to measure internal consistency. In the qualitative phase, credibility was ensured through member checking and peer debriefing. Ethical considerations were also strictly observed, including informed consent, confidentiality of responses, voluntary participation, and proper handling of data throughout the research process.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Problem 1: What factors influence school heads' performance in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) in terms of leadership competencies; emotional intelligence; management skills; and professional development engagement?

TABLE 1. LEVEL OF SCHOOL HEADS' COMPETENCIES AND NQESH PERFORMANCE

Variables	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Leadership Competencies	4.12	0.45	High
Emotional Intelligence	4.05	0.52	High
Management Skills	4.08	0.48	High
Professional Development Engagement	3.95	0.50	Moderate
NQESH Performance Score	82.30	6.85	Satisfactory

Table 1 presents the level of school heads' competencies and their performance in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH). The results showed that leadership competencies (M = 4.12, SD = 0.45), emotional intelligence (M = 4.05, SD = 0.52), and management skills (M = 4.08, SD = 0.48) were all rated as high. In contrast, professional development engagement (M = 3.95, SD = 0.50) was rated as moderately high. The overall NQESH performance score was 82.30 (SD = 6.85), interpreted as satisfactory. The data indicate that school heads demonstrated consistently strong competencies across leadership, emotional, and managerial domains. However, professional development engagement appeared comparatively lower than the other variables, suggesting variability in participation or access to structured learning opportunities. Meanwhile, the satisfactory NQESH performance suggests that although competencies were generally high, they did not fully translate into outstanding examination outcomes. These findings imply that school heads possessed adequate foundational competencies necessary for school leadership, but there may be gaps in continuous professional engagement that could limit peak performance in standardized assessments such as the NQESH. The discrepancy between high competency ratings and only satisfactory examination performance suggests that other factors—such as examination preparedness strategies, test-taking skills, or institutional support—may also influence outcomes. This interpretation is supported by leadership development literature, which emphasizes that while competencies such as leadership skills and emotional intelligence are critical, sustained professional development is essential for translating these competencies into measurable performance outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020; Hallinger, 2020). Furthermore, the Department of Education, through DepEd Order No. 13, s. 2024, underscores the importance of strengthening continuous professional development programs

to enhance school leadership effectiveness and ensure readiness for competency-based assessments like the NQESH.

Problem 2: Is there a significant relationship between the identified factors and school heads' performance in the NQESH?

TABLE 2. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FACTORS AND NQESH PERFORMANCE

Variables	r-value	p-value	Interpretation
Leadership Competencies	0.62	0.001	Significant, Strong Positive Relationship
Emotional Intelligence	0.58	0.002	Significant, Moderate Positive Relationship
Management Skills	0.65	0.001	Significant, Strong Positive Relationship
Professional Development Engagement	0.49	0.010	Significant, Moderate Positive Relationship

Table 2 presents the relationship between school heads' competencies and their performance in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH). The results revealed that all variables had significant positive relationships with NQESH performance: leadership competencies ($r = 0.62, p = 0.001$), emotional intelligence ($r = 0.58, p = 0.002$), management skills ($r = 0.65, p = 0.001$), and professional development engagement ($r = 0.49, p = 0.010$). Among these, management skills showed the strongest correlation with NQESH performance. The findings indicate that as school heads' competencies increase, their NQESH performance also improves. The strong positive correlation values suggest that leadership competencies, emotional intelligence, and management skills are closely associated with examination success. However, professional development engagement, while still significant, showed a comparatively weaker relationship, implying that participation in training activities alone may not be as strongly linked to immediate examination outcomes as actual leadership and management capabilities. These results imply that NQESH performance is largely influenced by the practical application of leadership and management competencies rather than engagement in professional development alone. The stronger relationship of management skills suggests that operational and decision-making abilities are critical in preparing for and succeeding in leadership qualification assessments. Emotional intelligence also plays an important role, indicating that self-awareness and interpersonal skills contribute to effective leadership performance in high-stakes examinations.

Problem 3: What experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms do school heads encounter in preparing for and taking the NQESH?

TABLE 3. EMERGENT THEMES FROM QUALITATIVE DATA

Theme	Description
Leadership Preparedness Gaps	Participants reported insufficient preparation in advanced leadership competencies needed for NQESH success.
Emotional Pressure and Anxiety	School heads experienced stress and pressure during exam preparation and actual testing.
Training and Support Limitations	Limited access to structured training programs and mentoring support was identified.
Self-Directed Learning Strategies	Participants relied heavily on self-study, peer collaboration, and online resources.

Leadership Preparedness Gaps. The first theme revealed that school heads experienced gaps in leadership preparedness, particularly in handling advanced competencies required for the NQESH. Participants expressed that while they had experience in school management, the depth and complexity of examination content required higher-level leadership knowledge and skills. This suggests that leadership preparation programs may not fully align with the competencies assessed in the NQESH. According to Bush (2018), effective leadership preparation must be explicitly aligned with real leadership standards to ensure readiness for certification and practice-based assessments.

Emotional Pressure and Anxiety. The second theme showed that school heads experienced emotional pressure and anxiety during NQESH preparation and examination. Many participants described stress related to time pressure, workload, and fear of failing the examination. This finding supports the idea that high-stakes assessments often create psychological strain among candidates. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explained that individuals under high pressure often experience stress when perceived demands exceed coping resources, which can negatively affect performance.

Training and Support Limitations. The third theme indicated that school heads experienced limited access to structured training, mentoring, and institutional support. Many relied on self-study or informal peer assistance due to insufficient formal preparation programs. This aligns with Timperley (2011), who emphasized that sustained professional learning and structured leadership support systems are essential for improving leadership effectiveness and performance outcomes.

Self-Directed Learning Strategies. The fourth theme revealed that school heads used self-directed learning strategies such as reviewing modules, online resources, and peer collaboration to prepare for the NQESH. This finding is supported by Knowles' (1975) theory of andragogy, which states that adult learners are self-directed and rely on internal motivation and independent learning strategies to acquire new competencies effectively.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study examined the factors influencing school heads' performance in the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) within the context of Department of Education Order No. 13, s. 2024, using a mixed-methods approach. Based on the findings, it was concluded that school heads generally demonstrated high levels of leadership competencies, emotional intelligence, and management skills, while their engagement in professional development was only moderately high. Their overall NQESH performance was satisfactory, indicating adequate but not yet optimal examination outcomes. The results further established that all identified factors were significantly and positively related to NQESH performance, with management skills emerging as the strongest predictor. This implies that practical and operational leadership competencies play a crucial role in determining success in the examination. However, the findings also revealed that strong competencies alone were not

sufficient to guarantee high performance, suggesting the influence of other factors such as preparation strategies, institutional support, and exam readiness. The qualitative findings complemented these results by showing that school heads faced leadership preparedness gaps, emotional stress, limited training support, and relied heavily on self-directed learning strategies. These experiences indicate that while school heads are capable practitioners, they require more structured and sustained professional development support to fully meet the demands of the NQESH.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that the Department of Education strengthen and institutionalize targeted professional development programs specifically aligned with the competency requirements of the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH). These programs should focus on enhancing leadership competencies, emotional intelligence, and management skills, with particular emphasis on practical application rather than purely theoretical knowledge. Structured training modules, simulation-based examinations, and competency-based coaching may help bridge the gap between existing skills and examination demands.

It is also recommended that school districts and division offices establish sustained mentoring and coaching systems for aspiring and incumbent school heads. Experienced mentors may provide guidance on examination strategies, leadership decision-making, and school management practices, thereby improving both confidence and performance outcomes. In addition, emotional support mechanisms such as stress management seminars and wellness programs should be integrated into leadership development initiatives to address the anxiety and pressure associated with high-stakes examinations.

Furthermore, school heads are encouraged to actively engage in continuous self-directed learning by utilizing available educational resources, professional networks, and online learning platforms. However, such individual efforts should be complemented by structured institutional support to ensure more consistent and guided preparation for the NQESH. Lastly, future leadership development policies should prioritize alignment between training programs and actual competency standards assessed in the NQESH. Strengthening

this alignment will ensure that professional development initiatives are not only compliance-based but also performance-driven, ultimately enhancing the quality of school leadership and contributing to improved educational outcomes in the Philippines.

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