

Research Article

Subject-Specific Preparedness in Social Work Licensure Exams: Are Students Equally Prepared?

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Abstract

This study examined the preparedness of the first graduating class of a Bachelor of Science in Social Work (BSSW) program at a State University in Claveria, Misamis Oriental, Philippines, in taking the Social Worker Licensure Examination (SWLE). Researchers used a descriptive-comparative design to assess 106 third-year students' performance across three SWLE areas: Human Behavior & Social Environment (HBSE), Social Welfare Policies & Programs (SWPP), and Social Work Methods (SWM). The findings showed that most students are unprepared in the three (3) subject areas. Moreover, with $p < 0.0001$, significant differences in student performance were found, with SWPP (knowledge-based) scoring highest, followed by HBSE and then SWM. Several factors may explain these variations, including subject complexity, teaching methods that potentially benefited HBSE with interactive learning, student interest and prior knowledge, and curriculum sequencing, showing a strong HBSE foundation being crucial for SWM. The study recommends incorporating interactive learning strategies in HBSE online courses, catering to diverse learning styles, and leveraging student interest. Additionally, reviewing curriculum sequencing and implementing ongoing evaluation and faculty development programs could better prepare students for the SWLE and their social work careers.

Keywords: *Level of Preparedness; Human Behavior and Social Environment (HBSE); Social Welfare Policies, Programs, and Services (SWPP); Social Work Methods (SWM); Social Work Licensure Examination (SWLE)*

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Introduction

Social workers around the world are the backbone of support for individuals, families, and communities facing a multitude of challenges. To ensure these professionals are competent and deliver ethical interventions, standardized licensing exams have become a cornerstone of the social work profession (Nienow et al., 2021). These exams assess a candidate's knowledge and skills in core social work areas, ultimately aiming to safeguard the well-being of those the profession serves. There are, however, ongoing discussions about the alignment between these exams and the actual skills needed for social work practice (Apgar & Luquet, 2022).

In the Philippines, the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) administers the Social Worker Licensure Examination (SWLE), which serves as the gateway to professional practice (PRC Board, 2022). This standardized exam evaluates graduates' competence across four key areas: Human Behavior and Social Environment (HBSE), 20%; Social Welfare Policies, Programs, and Services (SWPP), 20%; Social Work Method (SWM), 30%, which includes Social Case Work, 10%, Social Group Work, 10%, and Community Organization, 10%; and Field Practice (FP), 30%. Passing the SWLE is mandatory for social workers to secure licensure and legally practice their profession within the country.

This study focuses on a new Bachelor of Science in Social Work (BSSW) program at a State University in Claveria, Misamis Oriental. The program's first graduating batch is expected in 2024, and these students will likely take the SWLE shortly thereafter. While the Social Work Department strives to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary for SWLE success, limited information exists on their preparedness across the specific subject areas tested. This lack of data is particularly concerning for a new program still refining its curriculum and teaching methods.

Understanding student preparedness across individual SWLE subject areas is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it allows social work programs to identify areas where students might require additional support. This can lead to targeted interventions and curriculum adjustments that strengthen their knowledge base and exam-taking skills (Alonzo et al., 2017). For instance, if a substantial portion of students struggle with the HBSE section, the program might introduce additional workshops or revise the curriculum to provide a more comprehensive understanding of human behavior and its interaction with social environments. Secondly, a subject-

specific analysis can reveal potential discrepancies in student preparedness across different areas tested in the SWLE. This information is valuable for ensuring equitable opportunities for exam success. Identifying areas where specific student populations might require more support leads to program development and tailored interventions that address these disparities.

This study investigates the preparedness of the first graduating class of the Bachelor of Science in Social Work (BSSW) program at State University in Claveria across three Social Worker Licensure Examination (SWLE) subject areas: Human Behavior & Social Environment (HBSE), Social Welfare Policies & Programs (SWPP), and Social Work Methods (SWM). The SWLE includes a fourth area, Field Practice (FP), which these students will encounter in their next year of study.; hence FP is not included in the study. Moreover, the researchers hypothesize a significant difference in student preparedness across these core subject areas. To test this, the study compares student scores on adapted multiple-choice questions (100 items per subject) derived from SWLE review materials. Utilizing a descriptive-comparative approach, the study employs total enumeration with all 106 students participating. Descriptive statistics will analyze results, while inferential statistics will assess comparisons.

This study will provide a comprehensive report on students' strengths and weaknesses, informing the Social Work Department, College of Arts and Sciences, and University administration in designing targeted programs and interventions to enhance student preparedness for the SWLE. Exploring student preparedness across the aforementioned SWLE subject areas can contribute to a more competent and well-equipped social work workforce in the Philippines. A social worker's effectiveness hinges on a strong foundation in each of the core areas tested by the SWLE. Equipping graduates with a comprehensive understanding of these areas will not only increase their likelihood of passing the licensure exam but also ensure they are prepared to provide ethical and effective social work services to the Filipino people (Castex et al., 2018).

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-comparative design to investigate the preparedness of a pioneering Bachelor of Science in Social Work (BSSW) program's students for the



Social Worker Licensure Examination (SWLE). This design allowed us to not only describe the distribution of student scores across the three core SWLE subject areas (Human Behavior & Social Environment- HBSE, Social Welfare Policies & Programs- SWPP, and Social Work Methods- SWM) but also compare their performance between these areas.

Research Setting

The research was conducted at a State University's Social Work Department in Claveria, Misamis Oriental. The participants were the 106 third-year BSSW students who formed the program's first graduating batch. This specific setting was chosen as it offered the unique opportunity to assess the preparedness of students entirely new to the program's curriculum, directly impacting their success on the upcoming licensure exam. To ensure proper protocol and transparency, permission was obtained from the University administration to utilize the Student Lounge for data collection, and an official letter outlining the study was distributed to the students.

Respondents and Sampling Procedure

In terms of respondents, the researchers opted for a complete enumeration sampling method. This meant including all 106 students enrolled in the program, during the 2022-2023 academic year, who were expected to graduate on A.Y. 2023-2024 and were expected to take the social worker licensure examination after graduation. This approach was feasible due to the manageable size of the target population. Additionally, with the Department Chair requiring student participation for enrollment purposes, achieving complete enumeration was possible. The student list was obtained with all due permission from the Department Chair.

Instrumentation

The data collection tool used was a test questionnaire adapted from "Compendium of Multiple-Choice Questions for Social Work Board Exams" by Malelang et al. (2018). This questionnaire consisted of 100 questions per subject area, designed to assess the students' understanding of key social work concepts and principles. The questions mirrored the major areas covered by the actual SWLE.

Data Analysis

The study utilized both Descriptive and Inferential Statistics. Descriptive Statistics was appropriate for this study since the researchers described the data gained from this research without influencing it and assessed and described the students'

preparedness to take the licensure examination in terms of the subject areas. Moreover, the researchers utilized Kruskal Wallis Test to compare the students' scores across the subjects. Prior to utilizing this test, the researchers conducted a Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test, to test the normality of the data sets. It was found that SWM data are not normal. Hence, the researchers had to use a non-parametric test. The Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted at a significance level of 0.05. If statistically significant differences were found across subject areas, a post-hoc Dunn's test would be employed for further analysis.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. We ensured transparency by clearly communicating the study's purpose and objectives to the students. The potential risks and benefits associated with participation were minimal. Furthermore, the research aimed for a legitimate purpose: to contribute valuable insights to improve student preparedness for the SWLE, ultimately enhancing the social work workforce. Maintaining anonymity and confidentiality was crucial. Student identities and collected data were protected and will not be disclosed on any publicly accessible platform, adhering to the principles of the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Finally, informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study, ensuring they were fully aware of its goals and purpose.

Results and Discussions

Students' Performance in HBSE

Table 1 shows that the mean score of the Human Behavior and Social Environment (HBSE) subject area is 44.57 with a standard deviation of 8.86. It indicates that this subject area is challenging for third-year social work students. This subject area shows that most of the students are not yet prepared to take the licensure exam since the courses under this subject area were taken during online classes in the midst of the pandemic. According to the research of Barrot et al. (2021), the greatest challenge of college students during online learning was linked to their learning environment at home and technological literacy and competency. Also, their research revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic had the greatest impact on the quality of the learning experience and students' mental health. For many students, online learning is only a formality and not a real substitute for regular teaching; some teachers only share material with students without teaching it, online testing is



sometimes based on the principle of students working for themselves. Students are not acquiring real, long-lasting knowledge, and some students don't even have the proper equipment to attend online classes because they don't have electronic devices such as computers, cell phones and other gadgets. Also, some teachers don't consider the fact that during online testing, the student may lose the internet connection. According to the research of Dizon and Errabo (2022), the consequences and complexity of limited internet connectivity, loss of human interaction, and low skill in digital platforms were highlighted as the primary problems and disadvantages of online learning. The adaptability of the children to the online platform and the teachers' originality, flexibility, and eagerness to learn and adapt to the digital environment transformed these issues into learning opportunities.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of the respondents in HBSE subject area

Point Score	Interpretation	Frequency	Percentage
≤ 49	Unprepared	78	73.58
50 – 69	Slightly prepared	27	25.47
70 – 89	Moderately prepared	1	0.94
90 – 100	Very prepared	0	0
Total		106	100

Mean Score: 44.57; Standard Deviation: 8.86

Moreover, among the questions under this subject area, five (5) of the most difficult, answered correctly by only eight (8) to 14 respondents, are the questions on theories of personality in situational analysis form. According to Gillette (2022), personality is immeasurable and different for everyone, making personality challenging to study. Each personality theory offers a structure to analyze human personality, and most have extensive research backing up some of their premises. This is one of the reasons why the study of personality is still a developing field with no conclusive findings. According to Cherry (2023), the study of personality is one of the significant topics of interest in psychology. Numerous personality theories exist, most of which fall into one of four major perspectives. Each of these perspectives on personality attempts to describe different patterns in personality, including how these patterns form and how people differ on an individual level.

According to Kelland (2022), humans have many different personality theories because different theorists have viewed the human condition differently and used different techniques to study personality.

On the other hand, five (5) of the easiest, answered correctly by 80 to 98 respondents, are those that involve knowledge-based questions on theories of personality, which was tackled in their recent subject. They find these questions easy to understand, especially since most of them have prior knowledge of the topic. According to David Ausubel (1968), cited by Barry (2020), the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly. Brod (2021) stated that prior knowledge is previously learned information organized in a learner's memory and has long been known to explain large portions of variance in learning outcomes.

Students' Performance in SWPP

Table 2 shows that the mean score of this subject area is 46.89, with a standard deviation of 9.24. In this subject area, third-year students are unprepared. Also, the courses under this subject area were taken face-to-face, and the students are anxious about adapting to the transition of learning methods. According to The Diarist, Bautista (2022) stated that the shift from online classes to face-to-face has affected many students; as students head back to the classroom, they adjust to a new normal of in-person classes. Edwards' (2021) research has shown that anxiety and depression grew among young people during the pandemic. While anxiety's social and emotional effects are often explored, many people may not realize that anxiety can significantly impact children's academic work. While anxiety can make things like focusing and paying attention more difficult, anxiety is not a cause of learning difficulties but one of many symptoms (*The Relationship Between Anxiety and Learning Difficulties*, 2021). Children with learning differences are significantly more likely to have challenges with anxiety than children without learning differences. Learning difficulties often go hand in hand with processing deficits, which can produce stress and anxiety.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of the respondents in SWPP subject area

Point Score	Interpretation	Frequency	Percentage
≤ 49	Unprepared	68	64.15
50 – 69	Slightly prepared	37	34.91
70 – 89	Moderately prepared	1	0.94
90 – 100	Very prepared	0	0
Total		106	100

Mean: 46.89; Standard deviation: 9.24

Moreover, among the questions under SWPP, five (5) of the most difficult, answered correctly by only 14 to 18 respondents, involve two (2) were from a historical evolution, theoretical



framework and objectives, and functions of social welfare course. Another two (2) were from social work administration and supervision courses. And only one (1) was from social work research. Most of these topics were already tackled in the classes, but the students forgot what they learned. Students fail for many reasons, including distractions, fatigue, and stress. Other causes can include age, genetics, and medications. According to Nasib (2017), educational experience shows that some things are remembered well, while others are ‘there’ but sometimes difficult to find; while still other things are entirely forgotten. Students who ignored the most content from the class reported high stress during the course (*Students May Forget Relevant Information in Order to Protect Their Own Psyches*, 2017). Forgetting typically involves a failure in memory retrieval. While the information is somewhere in one’s long-term memory, the individual cannot retrieve and remember it (Cherry, 2023).

Further, five (5) of the easiest questions, answered correctly by 83 to 93 respondents, involve laws-related items. These questions are under Social Welfare Policies, Programs, and Services subject. During the discussion of this topic, the instructor handling the course provided activities and group work, which could have been the reason for the retention of students’ knowledge on the topic. Research has demonstrated that engaging students in the learning process increases their attention and focus and motivates them to engage in higher-level critical thinking. Instructors who adopt a student-centered approach to instruction increase opportunities for student engagement, which then helps everyone more successfully achieve the course’s learning objectives (University of Washington, 2024).

According to Kiser (2021), student ownership of learning is one of the most effective teaching strategies teachers may utilize. When students are explicitly involved in learning, they retain information and remember the experience. According to the study by Johnson (2017), the teacher’s role in creating an environment conducive to learning, and encouraging support of students’ autonomy, relevance, and relatedness of the material increases motivation to learn. Additionally, the teacher’s ability to develop students’ competence, interest in the subject taught, and perception of self-efficacy are all essential factors influencing students’ motivation to learn.

Students’ Performance in SWM

Table 3 shows the mean score is 40.47, with a standard deviation of 8.96. Upon taking the exam, the students were not prepared since they didn’t get a chance to review everything they had tackled or there was no preparation. According to Pandey (2023), vital preparation is essential in any examination. According to Emerson (2022), one of many best strategies in test preparation is cultivating good study habits; understanding and remembering information for a test takes time, so developing good study habits long before test day is significant. Chukwuemeka stated (2022) that poor or no preparation, simply put, is what one does in readiness for an occurrence or event. This issue of lack of preparation usually happens to students just venturing into a new class or field.

Table 3. Frequency distribution of the respondents in Social Work Methods subject area

Point Score	Interpretation	Frequency	Percentage
≤ 49	Unprepared	87	82.08
50 – 69	Slightly prepared	18	16.98
70 – 89	Moderately prepared	1	0.94
90 – 100	Very prepared	0	0
Total		106	100

Mean: 40.47; Standard deviation: 8.96

Moreover, five (5) of the most difficult questions in Social Work Methods, answered correctly by two (2) to seven (7) respondents, involve one (1) situational analysis or case-based, and 4 are casework-related. Introducing case-based questions in the board exam is probably in the best interest of students. These questions will require them to link the given case with the topic in the respective chapter and then answer based on their understanding. According to Holtzman (2008), the multiple-choice format often proves to be more difficult; this may be true because multiple-choice exams in college are usually composed predominantly of application questions. They ask students to grapple with scenarios and recognize concepts in context, which proves to be difficult for many students. According to Oxford Learning (2018), students fail exams because they are not studying to understand. Instead, they study to memorize.

Further, easiest questions, answered correctly by 81 to 88 respondents, were mostly coming from group work undertaken by the participants last semester. In this case, the instructor’s effectiveness is one factor in students’ learning outcomes.



Comparison of Students' Performance in the 3 Subjects

The analysis aimed to identify potential differences in student performance across the three Social Work Licensure Examination (SWLE) subject areas: Human Behavior and Social Environment (HBSE), Social Welfare Policies, Programs, and Services (SWPP), and Social Work Method (SWM). Since the data for the SWM subject area did not follow a normal distribution as determined by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, a non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis H test was employed (Field, 2013). This test is suitable for analyzing data that deviates from a normal curve. The Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.0001$) in student scores between the three subject areas.

Table 4. Kruskal Wallis Result among the three Subject Areas

Subject-Areas	n	Mean	SD	H	p-value
HBSE	106	44.57	8.86	25.9525	<0.0001
SWPP	106	46.89	9.24		
SWM	106	40.47	8.96		

To delve deeper into these variations, a post-hoc Dunn's test with a Bonferroni correction was conducted. This test identified significant discrepancies in mean rank scores between specific subject area pairs. Students performed significantly better in SWPP (mean rank score = 188.63) compared to both HBSE (mean rank score = 164.86; $p = 0.0596$) and SWM (mean rank score = 125.01; $p < 0.0001$). Additionally, a significant difference was found between SWPP and SWM ($p < 0.0001$). The Post-hoc result is shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Post-Hoc Dunn's Test Results for Differences in Mean Rank Scores Between SWLE Subject Areas

Pair	Mean Rank Dif.	Z	SE	Critical Value	p-value
HBSE – SWPP	-23.77	1.88	12.62	30.21	0.0596
HBSE – SWM	39.85	3.16	12.62	30.21	0.0016
SWPP – SWM	63.62	5.04	12.62	30.21	<0.0001

The observed variations in student performance across SWLE areas could be attributed to several factors. The inherent nature of the subject matter itself might influence student achievement. Social Welfare Policies, Programs, and Services (SWPP) might be perceived as more knowledge-based, potentially leading to

higher scores compared to Human Behavior and Social Environment (HBSE) which involves comprehending complex human behavior concepts. Additionally, delivery methods, including teaching styles and assessment strategies, may also play a role. Student interest and prior knowledge could also contribute to these variations.

Finally, curriculum design and sequencing might influence performance. The order in which subjects are taught can impact student learning. For instance, foundational knowledge gained in HBSE might be essential for success in SWM courses (applying social work methods).

Conclusion

This study investigated the performance of third-year social work students across the three areas of the Social Work Licensure Examination (SWLE): Human Behavior and Social Environment (HBSE), Social Welfare Policies, Programs, and Services (SWPP), and Social Work Method (SWM). The findings revealed statistically significant differences in student performance between the three subject areas. Students scored highest in SWPP, followed by HBSE and SWM. Several factors might explain these variations. The inherent nature of the subject matter itself could play a role. SWPP, which focuses on knowledge-based content, might be easier to grasp for students compared to HBSE, which involves comprehending complex human behavior concepts. Additionally, delivery methods, including teaching styles and assessment strategies, might influence student performance. Recent research suggests that online learning environments lacking interactivity and active learning strategies could hinder student outcomes in subjects like HBSE where applying knowledge is crucial. Student interest and prior knowledge could also contribute to the observed differences. Students might be more drawn to specific areas within social work, leading them to invest more effort and achieve higher scores in those subjects. Furthermore, students with a stronger foundation in relevant concepts might perform better overall. Finally, curriculum design and sequencing could be a factor. The order in which subjects are taught can impact student learning. For instance, a strong foundation in HBSE might be essential for success in SWM courses that involve applying social work methods. Future research could explore the impact of curriculum sequencing and targeted teaching strategies on student performance across the SWLE subject areas.



Recommendation

The findings of this study on student performance across the Social Work Licensure Examination (SWLE) areas suggest several areas for improvement. To address the challenges faced in HBSE, online learning environments should incorporate interactive and active learning strategies like case studies and simulations. Catering to diverse learning styles and prior knowledge gaps can be achieved through varied learning materials, assessments, and bridging workshops. Additionally, leveraging student interest by incorporating elements of choice within the curriculum can further motivate them. Finally, reviewing curriculum sequencing to ensure a strong foundation in HBSE before applying methods in SWM courses, along with ongoing student performance evaluation and faculty development programs, can create a more effective learning experience for social work students. These recommendations, coupled with continued research, hold the potential to significantly improve student outcomes and prepare them for success in the SWLE and their social work careers.

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