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Elemental Knowledge: Lived Experiences and Aspirations of National Examination for School Heads (NQESH) Examinees of South Cotabato Division

Wilson B. Francisco, Jr.*¹, Nathaniel D. Naanep, PhD¹

^{1, 2} Sultan Kudarat State University, ACCESS, EJC Montilla, Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat
Corresponding Author email: wilson.francisco@deped.gov.ph

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Abstract

Aim: This study investigated the elemental knowledge, lived experiences, and aspirations of NQESH examinees in the South Cotabato Division.

Methodology: A mixed-methods research design was employed, utilizing survey questionnaires and interview guides to collect data from 254 respondents. Stratified random sampling with proportional allocation, the fishbowl method, and purposive sampling were used to select participants. Quantitative data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), and multiple regression analysis, while qualitative data were examined using Moustakas' and Colaizzi's approaches.

Results: Findings revealed that examinees demonstrated very high elemental knowledge across key domains, including developing self and others, focusing on teaching and learning, managing school operations and resources, building connections, and leading strategically. A significant difference in elemental knowledge was found among examinees across districts. Furthermore, regression analysis indicated that expectations of elemental knowledge significantly contribute to the likelihood of passing the NQESH.

Conclusion: The lived experiences of examinees highlighted challenges such as mental fatigue, stress, and time constraints, but also underscored feelings of fulfillment, motivation, and career aspirations. Examinees viewed the examination as an opportunity for professional growth, career advancement, and improved leadership skills. The study underscores the need for continuous professional development and enhanced preparation strategies for aspiring school heads. It recommends targeted training programs to strengthen leadership competencies and improve examination performance.

Keywords: NQESH, school leadership, elemental knowledge, lived experiences, career aspirations, professional development, DepEd

INTRODUCTION

Quality and effective school management by school heads is not born, but it requires many sacrifices and practices to become effective. Effective school management by school leaders is not innate; it requires significant dedication, sacrifices, and continuous practice to develop and succeed. School heads must pass the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH) to qualify for a principal position. The NQESH was administered nationwide to evaluate and measure the essential knowledge of aspiring teachers who want to become school administrators.

A school head is directly responsible for addressing problems and implementation concerns related to educational reforms, which sometimes causes principals to become passive in educational management (Adarlo & Jackson, 2017) Hence, Republic Act No. 9155 states that every public elementary and secondary school of the country shall be managed by a school head who are eligible and passer of the NQESH (Dablo et al., 2023).



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However, some school heads lack proper preparation and fail to pass the examination required for eligibility for the position. A school head must possess various leadership dimensions, including educational leadership, people leadership, and strategic leadership, to effectively fulfill their role based on the NQESH dimension (Panibon, 2023).

Blasabas and Sumaljag (2020) assert that school principals frequently face two major challenges: inadequate training and orientation in adapting to new educational trends, and low budget allocations due to their lack of preparation for the task at hand. It is evident that implementing educational changes in response to the world's constant change has produced a new set of leadership criteria that must be met and difficulties that school leaders must face (Morales & Sapin, 2020).

The Department of Education (DepEd) tasked the National Educators Academy of the Philippines (NEAP), in coordination with the National Education Testing and Research Center (NETRC) (DepEd, 2020), with spearheading and mandating the equitable access of teachers and school leaders to the NQESH. The administration of the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads focused on the leadership dimensions (Dellomas & Deri, 2022).

Every year, thousands of candidates vie for the school head position, although only a select handful succeed. The 2018 examination recorded the lowest national passing rate at 0.64%. Merely 148 (0.64%) of 23,000 examinees successfully passed the assessment. Every school leader has a basic knowledge of the standards framework because the NEAP provided training sessions on the areas of the PPSSH; however, most of them still did not pass the assessment (Galleposo, 2021).

The research gap that this study is expected to address is the absence of empirical proof based on the experiences and aspirations of NQESH examinees who faked the exam. No study has examined the elemental knowledge of NQESH passers in other divisions or regions, though some have looked at their attributions and perceptions. Moreover, limited studies were conducted on the knowledge, skills, and aspirations shared by NQESH examinees during their examination journey.

The demand for more school heads opens the opportunity for aspiring teachers to be principals within the division. Passing the NQESH is one of the requirements to qualify for a school head position. Many school heads continue to serve as teachers in charge or head teachers. The researcher was therefore inspired to carry out the investigation in order to ascertain the NQESH examinees' aspirations, lived experiences, and elemental knowledge.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study was anchored to Weiner's Attribution Theory (1985), Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1996), McClelland's (1985) theory of needs and Expectancy Theory of Vroom (1964). In the context of the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads (NQESH), the application of these theories suggests that school heads achieved results that reflect their performance. To pass the NQESH, school heads apply their knowledge and skills, as success in the exam depends on motivation and expectations. However, meeting the examination standards requires school heads to work diligently toward desired outcomes, ensuring performance-based and individual results.

The use of transformational leadership was explained that school leaders must be able to use their subordinates' potential and motivations to achieve organizational goals during educational reforms or changes. Moreover, we instruct school leaders to demonstrate resilience in every situation and resist succumbing to discouragement. They must devise unique answers to challenges and establish new, dynamic pathways for their teams to pursue.

In general, applying these theories in taking the NQESH, school heads need to achieve something as a basis for their performance output in the results of the NQESH. School heads exercise knowledge and skills to have the chance to pass the NQESH. Not all individuals develop an inherent sense of self-worth or merit. Every aspirant in the NQESH needs motivation and clear expectations to achieve their goals. But to achieve the standard of the examination, they must work expectantly with desired outcomes, performance-based results, and individual results.



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In Weiner's Attribution Theory, the framework of this research is concerned with the interpretation of the events that contributed to individuals' achievement and their relation to their way of thinking and their behavior (Weiner, 1985). The theory states that people try to determine why they do what they do and attribute these causes to certain factors (Vaz et al., 2018).

The most important factors that can influence achievement are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck, which in turn are classified into causal dimensions such as locus, stability, and controllability (Pattaguan, 2020). Locus of causality describes whether the causes of achievement are internal, which are commonly connected with capacity, efficacy, skill, aptitude, and determination of an individual in achieving their goals, or external, which are usually linked to factors that an individual attributes the success or failure of their desired goals to, such as luck and task difficulty (Manik & Sidharta, 2017). The second aspect is stability, which demonstrates the reliability of the reasons that affect the success or failure of a goal. Intelligence and aptitude are universally associated with stable causal variables, making them difficult to modify, if possible at all. Unstable causal factors, like, for instance, the extent of efforts applied toward a goal, can be altered effortlessly (Galleposo, 2021).

Controllability constitutes the third element of attribution. It differentiates between controllable factors, such as competence and efficacy, and uncontrollable factors, such as ability, mood, the actions of others, and luck. A cause might be internal yet uncontrollable or external but controllable (Haykal, 2017).

On the other hand, transformational leadership is a leadership theory where a leader works with followers to identify the changes needed, create a vision through inspiration, and execute the change with a group of highly committed followers (Adarlo & Jackson, 2017). This culminates in the understanding that distinct educational levels necessitate diverse talents to address challenges in the process of learning. In that regard, transformational leadership is pertinent to the requirements of principal leadership among schools with different relationships between teachers and students (Panibon, 2023).

Baker et al. (2023) emphasized the significance of transformational leadership in influencing the learning process and the attainment of the desired outcome among the subjects. The author mentioned that leaders should be visionary and inspirational to their stakeholders so they can effectively assert the required change.

Moreover, the idea of "need for achievement" posits that it develops over time through an individual's distinct requirements and life experiences. Individuals motivated by the need for achievement typically possess a robust aspiration to establish and attain tough goals. Their preference is to work in a results-oriented work environment, and they always appreciate any feedback on their work. Achievement-oriented individuals engage in measured risks to attain their objectives and may avoid both dangerous and low-risk scenarios. They frequently like solitary labor. This personality type believes in a hierarchical structure derived primarily from work-based attainments (Lariosa et al., 2022).

The expectancy theory suggested by Vroom (1964) states that people act according to their beliefs that their work leads to certain results and how much they value those results (Osafu et al., 2021). The expectation hypothesis posits that three things influence an individual's incentive to work. The effort-performance relationship expectation refers to an individual's conviction that a specific level of performance resulted from a corresponding degree of effort. The performance-reward relationship pertains to the extent to which an individual perceives that a particular level of performance has yielded the desired consequence. The third is reward-related personal objectives. Relationship valence refers to the significance or worth an individual assigns to different work outcomes. Every outcome possesses a corresponding valence or value (Sutton, 2024).

Objectives

This study generally aimed to investigate the elemental knowledge, lived experiences and aspirations of National Examination for School Heads (NQESH) examinees of South Cotabato Division.

1. What is the extent of expectations of elemental knowledge of the NQESH examinees in terms of:
 - 1.1 leading strategically;
 - 1.2 managing school operations and resources;



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- 1.3 focusing on teaching and learning;
- 1.4 developing self and others; and
- 1.5 building connections?
2. Is there a significant difference on the elemental knowledge of NQESH examinees according to districts?
3. Is the extent of the expectations of elemental knowledge significantly contributes to the likelihood of passing the NQESH?
4. How do the NQESH examinees describe their lived experiences in taking up the qualifying examination?
5. What are the school heads' aspirations in taking up the National Examination for School Heads (NQESH)?

METHOD

Research Design

The researchers utilized mixed methods design. This mixed methods study addressed the elemental knowledge, lived experiences and aspirations of NQESH examinees. In this study, mixed method is a type of research design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected in parallel, analyse separately, and then merged (Creswell et al., 2018). The reason for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data is to integrate the results from both sets of data.

Population and Sampling

The respondents of the study composed of school heads who are non-NQESH passers in the entire Division of South Cotabato with 254 samples out of 740 populations. The researcher employed stratified random sampling to determine the sample of NQESH examinees in each district which calculated using the Raosoft calculator and proportional allocation

Moreover, in the qualitative phase the researcher utilized the purposive sampling. In this manner, nine (9) participants were included based on the inclusion criteria. The researchers had come up for six (6) participants in the actual interview due to the data saturation. The extracted from the six participants are almost the same and no new responses that could enrich the data on the lived experiences and aspirations.

Instruments

Part 1 intended to gather the data for the elemental knowledge of NQESH examinees. The statements in the questionnaire described the power dynamics and administrative practices in schools based on the legal mandates and policies being implemented.

Part 2 is an interview protocol that gathers the data on the lived experiences and aspirations of NQESH examinees. The interview guide protocol was made using the questions specified stating the lived experiences and aspirations.

Data Collection

The researchers followed a systematic data gathering procedure, beginning with securing approvals from the Graduate School, Schools Division Superintendent, and District Supervisors. Data collection was conducted through both face-to-face methods and online forms, ensuring flexibility and adherence to health protocols. Quantitative data were promptly collected, encoded, and analyzed, while qualitative data were gathered through interviews with informed consent. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, with participants' voluntary participation and confidentiality prioritized throughout the study.

Treatment of Data

The data gathered were immediately encoded, processed, and analyzed. It was computed using the appropriate statistical tools. Mean and standard deviation were used to determine the level of elemental knowledge of NQESH examinees. To interpret the findings on the elemental knowledge of NQESH examinees, the scale, mean range with the corresponding description (numerical rating, verbal description, and interpretation).

In the qualitative aprt, the responses of the participants were coded and analyze using Mosutakas (1994) and Colaizzi method (Collaizzi et al., 2009).



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Ethical Considerations

Considering the health and safety protocols, some participants expressed hesitation in taking part in the study due to concerns about physical interaction and potential health risks. In qualitative research, ethical considerations take on a distinct complexity due to the in-depth and often personal nature of the inquiry. These concerns become even more critical when conducting face-to-face interviews with vulnerable groups, such as school leaders under pressure or those preparing for high-stakes examinations. Participants may experience emotional discomfort or stress while articulating their experiences and aspirations, especially when discussing sensitive topics. While existing ethical guidelines for qualitative research provide general principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, they often lack specific guidance on practical applications in fieldwork—particularly in navigating ethical dilemmas that arise during direct interaction.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Elemental Knowledge of the NQESH Examinees. Table1 complements the preceding discussion and focusing primarily on the summary of Elemental Knowledge of the NQESH Examinees. The NQESH examinees manifest very high expectations on the level of their elemental knowledge ($\bar{x}=4.84$, $SD=0.32$). A closer examination of the data indicates that school heads' elemental knowledge in taking the NQESH have common perception that passing the exam needs tremendous efforts on the elements or pillars needed to lead a school, like strategic leadership and managing resources. These skills are outlined in the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH). The result concluded that school heads have very strong conviction that they possess qualities or elemental knowledge in taking the NQESH which the strengths of their knowledge focused on developing self and others and focusing on teaching and learning.

Table 1. Summary of Elemental Knowledge of the NQESH Examinees

Statements	Mean	SD	Description
1.Leadng Strategically	4.82	.37	Very High
2.Managing School Operations and Resources	4.84	.32	Very High
3.Focusing on Teaching and Learning	4.85	.31	Very High
4.Developing Self and Others	4.87	.30	Very High
5.Building Connections	4.82	.32	Very High
Overall Mean	4.84	.32	Very High

Difference on the Elemental Knowledge of NQESH Examinees according to Districts. Table 2 shows the Analysis of Variance on the elemental knowledge of NQESH examinees according to Districts. The elemental knowledge of NQESH examinees along with the domains of leading strategically, managing school operations and resources, focusing on teaching and learning, developing self and others and building connections manifest notable disparity in perceptions among the respondents ($F=3.3203 > F\text{-critical}=2.27896$). The null hypothesis is rejected, confirming that variations in training programs, resource availability, or instructional strategies may influence examinees' knowledge levels. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to ensure equitable access to quality preparation programs across all districts.

Table 2. Analysis of Variance on the Elemental Knowledge of NQESH Examinees according to Districts

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F-crit	Interpretation
Between Groups	0.323	4	0.0808	3.3203	0.01024	2.37896	Significant
Within Groups	30.783	1265	0.0243				



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Total 31.106 1269

**significant @.05*

Relationship between the Elemental Knowledge and the Likelihood of Passing the NQESH

The multiple regression analysis results indicate that F-value: 3.055, which are extremely high, indicating that the model explains a significant portion of variance. Significance F (p-value) was 0.000 meaning the regression model is statistically significant at any conventional level (0.05). This indicates that at least one of the predictor variables significantly contributes to explaining the dependent variable. The elemental knowledge based on PPSSH domain is significant to each other in the likelihood of passing the NQESH. This means that each elemental knowledge has significant relationship to each other so that NQESH passer could have the chance to pass the examination.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis on the Likelihood of Passing the NQESH

	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Regression	5	2.7122	0.542			
Residual	248	4.4035	1.775	3.055	.000	Significant
Total	253	2.7122				

Lived Experiences of NQESH Examinees

The fourth research problem explores the lived experiences of the NQESH examinees in taking up the qualifying examination. The live experiences of the school heads are encapsulated 19 clustered themes. Lived experiences, in this context, illustrate the challenges, difficulties. The lived experiences encountered provides insights into the training process, challenges faced aspirations development of the elements of NQESH. Additionally, data analysis was conducted to identify common themes across the transcription, shedding light on the various experiences of the NQESH examinees.

The data reveals four (4) emergent themes such as experienced sense of joy, fulfilment and excitement, experienced mental fatigue and unstable emotions, challenges and pressure in time and examination and knowledge satisfaction. Moreover, the 19 clustered themes are inspiring, excited, excited and ready, fulfilled, full-pledge, mental blocked, intense and stress, nervousness, difficulties, very hard, mixed emotions, stress and anxiety, tool long selection, challenging and pressure, limited time, time allotment, in-depth knowledge, internalize due to long choices and positive thinking.

Emergent Theme 1. Experienced Sense of Joy, Fulfilment and Excitement

Theme 1 delves into the different experiences in the sense of joy, fulfilment and excitement of the NQESH examinees substantiated by five (5) clustered themes. Analysis of the data obtained through oral interviews conducted by the researcher revealed that many NQESH examinees experienced different situations like being inspired, excited, excited and ready, fulfilled, and becoming a full-pledge principal.

The significant findings revealed that taking an NQESH is inspiring for the promotion to Principal I which create a sense of joy and satisfaction. The NQESH examinees were excited for the examination because it determined the ability to pass or not to pass the examination. More so, school head experience excitement and readiness to take the exam.



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This can be concluded that NQESH examinees experienced different feelings and emotions as a sign of self-fulfilment. Taking the NQESH resort to promotion for Principal position as it is a requisite to for appointment to principal item.

Emergent Theme 2. Experienced Mental Fatigue and Unstable Emotions

Theme 2 from the result characterized experienced mental fatigue and unstable emotions which composed of 6 clustered themes. These themes are mental blocked, intense and stress, nervousness, difficulties, very hard, mixed emotions and stress and anxiety. The clustered themes derived from the significant findings extracted from the transcription of data.

NQESH examinees experienced significant stress, anxiety, and nervousness, making the examination process even more demanding. Alongside these emotional burdens, they struggled with time constraints, often finding it difficult to select the best answer when multiple options seemed correct. This combination of mental fatigue and emotional distress had a noticeable impact on their test performance.

Emergent Theme 3. Challenges and Pressure in Time and Examination

The emergent theme on challenges and pressure in time and examination has four (4) dimensions of clustered themes focused on lengthy selection, challenging and pressure, limited time and time allotment. Through oral interviews conducted by the researcher, the clustered themes were drawn from the significant findings of the participants.

The result indicates that NQESH examinees experienced that the examination is too long to read tried to stay focused during the entire examination but still they experienced challenges and pressure. The dimension of the responses implies that challenges and pressure in time and examination was experienced by most NQESH examinees due to time constraints and the questions in the examination is too long to read and understand.

Emergent Theme 4. Knowledge Satisfaction

This theme centres on the experiences of NQESH examinees in knowledge and satisfaction. This emergent theme is characterized by three (3) clustered themes: in-depth knowledge, internalize due to long choices and positive thinking.

The result could simply implies that taking the NQESH is rewarding because it is just walking through the domains of the PPSSH. It assessed the knowledge, skills and competencies of aspiring school heads. The knowledge and satisfaction experienced of NQESH examinees is a manifestation of in-depth preparation of familiarizing the different situations and right application of the knowledge and skills.

School Heads' Aspirations in taking up the National Examination for School Heads (NQESH)

The fifth research problem explores the school heads' joys and aspirations in taking up the National Examination for School Heads (NQESH). The aspirations of the NQESH examinees comprises of four (4) emergent themes taken from the coding and similar responses which grouped together into one ideas.

The emergent themes include the duties, work functions and responsibilities in performance management, economic opportunities and promotion, developing self and professional attitude and leading strategically and influencing others.

Theme 5. Duties, Work Functions and Responsibilities in Performance Management

Emergent theme 5 on the work functions and responsibilities in performance management consists of six (6) clustered themes on focusing to work, career advancement, effective leadership, work related and duties and responsibilities. Based on the data gathered through oral interviews utilized by the researcher, it was found that most participants have relevant ideas on their aspirations to their duties, work functions and responsibilities in performance management.

The significant findings indicates that the aspiration of the school heads to pass the NQESH is to relate the work on the supervision, instructional functions and decision making, work for the practice of leadership work, and



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relate to the functions, duties and responsibilities as a school head. The result also implies that taking the NQESH demonstrates the competence of commitment to leadership skills and school management by enhancing their professional standing and improving the performance of the school.

In so doing, school heads can take part in activities that helped them become better leaders. It offers useful information on the value of self-reflection and ongoing learning for building leadership capability in school contexts to educational policymakers, professional development providers, and school leaders (Smith et al., 2020).

Emergent Theme 6. Economic Opportunities and Promotion

Emergent theme 6 illustrates the participants' aspirations through their economic opportunities and promotion. This theme is supported by four (4) clustered themes, such as higher salary, opportunities, promotion and Principal item. Based on the data gathered through oral interviews utilized by the researcher, it was found out that NQESH examinees' aspirations in taking the test is about economic opportunities and promotion. Once a school head passed the examination he has the opportunity to raise his salary equivalent to Principal rate.

The above findings indicate that NQESH examinees' aspirations involve passing the NQESH to raise the salary through promotion to Principal position. Likewise, it gives the opportunities to be promoted to higher position. It also gives the power and authority to shows the leadership qualities. NQESH gives an opportunity to become a principal and improve the economic life of the school head.

Emergent Theme 7. Developing Self and Professional Attitude

Emergent theme 7 depicts the relevant significant findings about developing self and professional attitude that gives aspirations to the aspiring school heads, the NQESH examinees. This theme is backed up by three (3) clustered themes: knowledge and skills professional development and professional attitude.

Emergent Theme 8. Leading Strategically and Influencing Others

Emergent theme 8 presents the participants' aspirations on leading strategically and influencing others that backed up by four (4) clustered themes: influence others, leadership skills, impact and recognition and school management.

Conclusion

The following conclusions were drawn regarding the findings and the tested hypothesis.

The NQESH examinees exhibit strong confidence in their leadership competencies, rating themselves very highly across key domains such as instructional leadership, resource management, and strategic planning. These findings emphasize the importance of ongoing professional development and leadership training to further strengthen their preparedness for school leadership roles.

There is a significant difference in the elemental knowledge of NQESH examinees across districts at the 0.05 level. The level of knowledge varies by district, potentially due to differences in training programs, resources, or preparation strategies.

The regression model confirms a strong and significant relationship between the predictor variables and the dependent variable, demonstrating its reliability. Similarly, the NQESH of DepEd ensures that school heads meet the required competency levels across all domains to qualify as Category A passers.

Furthermore, NQESH examinees experienced different feelings and emotions, mental fatigue as well as challenges and pressure, however, knowledge and satisfaction is manifestation of in-depth preparation in the examination.

Finally, the aspirations in NQESH proves the need for competence, leadership skills and school management to enhance professional standing and improving the performance of the school to have a better opportunity to become a principal and improve the economic life of the school head.

Recommendations

1. The NQESH examinees manifest strong elemental knowledge in taking the examination, however, they have to look into other factors in improving their knowledge in building connections and leading strategically. They need



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to enhance their knowledge from theory to practice in strengthening support for learner development, as well as school and community improvement.

2. The higher DepEd officials may assess and evaluate the actual versus conceptual understanding of the different domains of PPSH corresponds the performance of NQESH examinees during the examination.
3. The different elemental knowledge is likely significant in taking the NQESH, it is recommended that school heads may gave time, reflection and focus from preparation to actual examination day in order to outsmart the content of the examination.
4. It is also recommended that to improve the quality of knowledge, deal with concerns, foster a culture of reading and timeless understanding of the situations school heads may invest time in research and innovation. By doing this, they might help themselves overcome the challenges, stress and mixed emotions being experienced when taking the NQESH.
5. It is also suggested that in order to grow, strengthen, and increase their skills in understanding the patterns of NQESH, school heads may not only gain a thorough theoretical understanding of the PPSH competences but also learn about their practical implementations anchored to the DepEd policies and frameworks. Furthermore, passing the NQESH requires more advanced critical and analytical abilities as well as dynamic professional development.
6. The study was limited to elemental knowledge, lived experiences and aspirations of National Examination for School Heads. Another study may conducted to determine the strategies and factors associated in passing the NQESH, level of understanding of the strands of PPSH applying to practical situations.

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