

It Means Everything...and It Means Nothing: New Social Worker Views on Taking the Master's Licensure Exam

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Abstract: *In order to call oneself a social worker in the United States, an individual must not only complete the required coursework and degree program, but also, in many states, pass a licensure exam. Recent discussion has centered around the efficacy of using an examination as a regulatory tool for licensure, particularly following the Association of Social Work Board's (ASWB) report identifying bias with the licensure exam itself, and indicating specific demographic characteristics including race, age, and English as a second language, as having an impact on the pass rate of test-takers (ASWB, 2022). This qualitative study specifically highlighted the experiences of 22 participants with an MSW degree who were preparing for or had taken the licensure exam. Five themes emerged through an analysis of the data: meaning everything and nothing, hoops and barriers, emotional responses, learning the tricks, and setting aside practice wisdom. This study reflects the ambivalence of new social workers toward the licensing exam and the disconnect between education and practice in what the test is actually measuring. Recommendations and implications for social work educators include advocating for a re-evaluation of social work licensure exams as proof of competence.*

Keywords: *Licensure exam, qualitative, new social workers*

In order to call oneself a social worker in the United States, certain criteria must be met, including the completion of a higher education degree program, demonstration of practice skills and competencies, and in some states, the ability to pass a licensure exam and pay the associated examination fees (Torres et al., 2024). Recent discussion has centered around the efficacy of using the Association of Social Work Board (ASWB) examination as a regulatory tool for social work licensure (Torres et al., 2024; Ricciardelli et al., 2024). In 2022, the ASWB released a report identifying bias with the licensure exam itself, and indicating specific demographic characteristics including race, age, and English as a second language, as having an impact on the pass rate of test-takers (Kim & Joo, 2024b). In a profession which values diversity, equity, and inclusion, and is founded on the

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principle of social justice, the concern can be raised that the examination required for social work licensure may have a negative impact on the overall diversity of the profession. This in turn impacts the services provided to social work clients, many of whom are identified as being society's most vulnerable members.

The primary function of social work licensure is to protect the public as well as provide a measure of safety in terms of the delivery of competent and ethical social work services (ASWB, 2025a). Additionally, the social work licensure examination tests an individual social worker's competence in terms of ethical and safe practice (ASWB 2025a). Torres et al. (2024) in a large master's level licensure study identified that participants felt the exam was developed for White-identifying test takers with a primary language of English. Torres et al. (2024) noted that "several BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] participants reported being told to 'think like a White person' when taking the exam" (p. 191). Furthermore, participants identified experiencing a disconnect between exam content/correct answers and actual social work practice, particularly practice taking place in communities with diverse population groups or immigrant communities (Torres et al., 2024).

Licensure exams are not unique to the profession of social work, and similar examinations serve as a "prerequisite to practice" in many other professions, including education, medicine, nursing, and law (Nienow et al., 2023, p. 76). The significance of licensure exams as an indicator of professional social work competency has been endorsed by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the ASWB, and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW; Apgar, 2022). However, if the profession's regulatory system, namely the social work licensure exam, is found to be biased, having disparities in pass rates (Kim & Joo, 2024b), this questions the validity of the exam. Concerns are raised, not only about the individual experience of taking the examination, but also the subsequent impact on the profession as a whole (Joseph, 2024).

At the time of this writing, there were 11 states not requiring Master of Social Work (MSW) graduates to take an exam to obtain a master's level license, with several others considering removing their exam requirement as well. State licensure fees also vary greatly according to the ASWB, ranging from \$0 – \$375. A total of three states had no fee but four states charged over \$300; over half the states had a fee over \$100 (ASWB, 2025b).

In a comprehensive literature search, only three studies were found that privileged the voices of those contemplating taking a social work licensure exam. Miller et al. (2015) surveyed undergraduate students about their perceptions about licensure. Using a survey with some open-ended questions, they found that these undergraduate students were planning on taking the exam and felt confident in their ability to pass, but at the same time were unsure about the exam requirements and process for application. Walker and Bruhn (2024) interviewed 20 African American social workers with an MSW who were interested in obtaining or had obtained licensure at the clinical level. They found that many of the participants felt disadvantaged due to their race when taking the test. Participants also encountered challenges in preparing for the test including a lack of financial resources and the extensive time demands required for studying. Broader concerns were voiced as to difficulty finding supervision for clinical licensure, the time gap between MSW completion

and licensure, and a lack of information about the scope and procedures for obtaining licensure. As referenced above, Torres and colleagues (2024) surveyed 1,481 social workers and students who had taken the master's level licensure exam at least once, with participants evidencing disproportionate pass rates. Researchers analyzed open-ended survey questions using grounded theory, finding that participants cited challenges that included financial and time limitations, emotional distress from knowing the test is biased, past negative standardized test-testing experiences, English as a second language, and experiencing the questions as confusing (Torres et al., 2024).

Gaps in the Literature and Purpose of This Article

Only two studies to date have explored the voices of those sitting for a social work licensure exam, with only one focusing on the initial master's level licensure exam. This study seeks to further explore the lived experiences of those taking the master's licensure exam. This qualitative study uses reflexive thematic analysis to explore and understand the feelings and perspectives of 22 MSW graduates preparing for and/or taking the exam.

Methods

Research Team and Positionality

All authors are social work faculty teaching at six different universities in Indiana. Six of the seven authors are female, one author is male, and one of the females is a person of color. Ages of the authors ranged from 39 to 69. Four of the authors have taken the initial master's level licensure exam, three have taken the LCSW, two took the ACSW and one was grandfathered into licensure. This research grew out of the author's collective concern of being unsure about how to best prepare social work our students for the licensure exam, especially in light of the release of the ASWB report showing widespread disproportionality in passing rates for multiple groups (Kim & Joo, 2024b). The authors also felt a qualitative approach would shed more light on the actual experience of taking the exam and could inform our mentoring and support of students. Prior to and during the coding process the research team spent time reflexively discussing their own experiences with the licensure process, the experiences of their students, as well as reflecting upon how those experiences have given the research team their own unique perspectives.

Method and Data Analysis

Qualitative research is the methodology of choice for issues in which not much is known. This study used Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2022) to analyze the data. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) focuses on the reflexivity of the researcher as they work to understand and question the data, holding their hypotheses lightly. RTA uses a six-step process to examine the data: 1) Familiarizing oneself with the dataset, 2) Coding, 3) Generating initial themes, 4) Developing and reviewing themes, 5) Refining, defining, and naming themes, and 6) Writing up. For this study, the research team each read the results from multiple interviews to familiarize themselves with the data. Each

researcher then coded the same participant interview, and then met to discuss the codes and what stood out to each researcher. The research team began to make lists of preliminary themes for this single interview. Each member of the team then read multiple interviews, coded three to five individually, and collaborated on themes across interviews. The research team read and re-read data, agreeing upon five overarching themes. To ensure trustworthiness and resonance of the findings, one researcher met with a small group of participants and discussed preliminary themes. Participants all agreed that study themes reflected their thoughts and feelings about the exam experience, in particular the article title.

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection Methods

Participants were recruited via social work alumni lists, prior academic connection with the interviewers, and a post-MSW support group. IRB approval was received from three midwestern universities and those researchers completed all the interviews, but the entire research team was involved in data analysis. Participants were recruited who were preparing for the exam, who had already taken the exam, and six were interviewed both before and after they took the exam. While researchers tried to interview participants pre/post, many participants were giving themselves an extended timeline for exam prep. Interviews were conducted virtually, and all interviews were recorded, transcribed by the researchers, and de-identified before sharing with the other members of the research team. Participants were offered a \$10 Amazon gift card per interview. Two semi-structured interview guides were used for participants, one before and one after they took the exam (Appendix).

Sample Demographics

There were a total of 22 participants in the study representing four universities. Nine participants had taken the licensure exam and 13 had not yet taken it but were actively preparing. Six participants were interviewed both before and after taking the exam. The average age for participants was 31, with the range from 22 to 57 years of age. There were 19 participants identifying as White (86%), two identified as African American (9%), and one that preferred not to say (5%). For gender, there were 18 females (82%), one male, one trans male, one nonbinary person, and one that did not specify. The majority of participants attended MSW level courses in a hybrid format, defined as at least some courses offered partially online, while three students completed a totally online program. Ten of the participants had a Bachelor of Social Work degree (43%). Participants were asked about the time and money involved in test preparation, not including the costs of the test itself. The average amount spent was \$130, with a few spending as high as \$500. The estimated hours spent preparing for the test ranged widely, with the average being 93 hours at the time of the survey. While preparing to take the test, 88% had a full-time job, and 43% were providing care for a child under the age of 18.

Findings

Five themes emerged through the analysis of the data: it means everything and nothing, hoops and barriers, emotional responses to the process, learning the tricks, and setting aside practice wisdom (See Figure 1). Participants were assigned unique initials to protect their confidentiality.

Figure 1. *Themes and Subthemes*



Theme 1: It Means Everything... and It Means Nothing

When asking participants what it means to them to be licensed, the research team received opposing views. There was a polarity between the test not holding meaning yet also providing a sense of legitimacy and validation. Some stated passing the licensure exam makes you “legit” and confirms your skills, giving “a level of validity” (IM), while others felt having new letters behind your name does not make a statement about your abilities as a social worker. A young, white female who had yet to take the exam said, “I want to be a better social worker, but in practicality I don’t know if passing a test makes me a better social worker” (PD).

It Means Everything

Participants that felt licensure is important often experienced a strong emotional response at passing the test with some being moved to tears at their passing score, “I was about to cry right there, because I didn’t believe it” (IM). These feelings of relief and legitimacy have also been supported by others, sharing that being licensed “gives me that security that I know the knowledge” (EC). Perception from others weighed heavily on the participants as well, expressing concern over how others might perceive them. TE even

went as far as stating that “my parents don’t know when I’m taking it” precisely for that reason. IM stated that “everything I learned was for nothing if I can’t pass because it gives us respect as a profession and it means you’ve hit a standard and have proven that.”

Being licensed has provided job security for some, “it’s important to me, because I have to get it, and I need it for jobs” (GA), while opening doors for others, “Growth within my career is what that means to me. The world is your oyster in social work when you have your LCSW and the pay is better too” (TE). Not passing comes with the steep consequence of not being able to perform at your full capacity and having to remain working at a bachelor’s level (BD).

Even major life decisions, such as where to live, are affected. There is variability that different states have with some requiring the exam while others do not.

I have to make a grown adult decision about where I want to live, based on where I’m licensed, asking myself questions like “Can I get licensed here and then move and then keep my supervision to work towards the LCSW? Does it not work?” Because I want to move somewhere else. That’s been an obstacle for me. (PD)

Overall, many participants agreed that even if the test has issues it is meaningful. They know, understand, and accept that becoming licensed is “like you’re just playing to the system to just get ahead and kind of hit that work and your dream job or whatever you desire to be” (WE). They do not always agree with the rules of the system, but also feel proud after passing. “I think that we should have a standard to adhere to, and I mean, the test has its own issues. But, I think that there needs to be some sort of standard. So I’m happy that it does exist” (TM).

It Means Nothing

Participants questioned if passing the exam and obtaining a license is a true measure of your social work skills or just a person’s test-taking savvy. “Some people say the test doesn’t really actually measure your competence in the field, you just have to learn how to take the test” (MW). “I thought it would feel like a bigger deal. But I’m no different than I was. I’m not going to do anything different in my practice than I did a minute ago when I didn’t have my license” (TE). “I think that sometimes people put so much emphasis on the test, where there’s a sense of if you don’t pass it, you don’t know how to be a social worker, and that’s definitely not the case” (EC). Passing the exam has also lost some meaning because it is no longer required in all states. “Honestly, I don’t really think it has much meaning [because] in other states, you just get it without even taking an exam... So really, what’s the point?” (MW).

All the requirements and sacrifices placed on test takers’ time and finances by their state, the ASWB, testing center hoops, and the licensure board were also questioned. BD summed it up:

I personally feel like it’s just kind of a money grab from the boards. You show up to the testing facility and you’re treated like a prisoner. It’s just a lot of frustration, a lot of money, [and] when I go to practice the test, it’s just like you have to forget

everything you know, everything you've been taught. I think a lot of people are just talking about how it's a waste of time, and how it never used to be this way. (BD)

Other participants agreed, stating “I've heard that it was pointless, so I didn't want to waste my money” (HS). TE also added, “there's no difference between the social worker I was before I took it and now.” “It means that you passed a test that doesn't really prove anything other than it allows you to do the job you've been working towards” (DN). Participants were generally disappointed about the amount of time, money, and anxiety they had to endure for something that does not have a bearing on their effectiveness as a social worker.

Theme 2: Challenges: So Many Hoops and Barriers

Participants expressed multiple perspectives on the challenges and barriers of taking the exam with the main concerns focused on registration, preparedness, financial concerns, accommodations, and confidence levels.

Registration

Participants felt there were multiple barriers to registering for the exam with additional accessibility barriers for those with different lived experiences and backgrounds.

We're supposed to advocate for vulnerable populations and accessibility. And yet we're putting an undue burden on [us]. And it almost feels intentional... if you're not the most typical like “Sally, Social Worker,” there is an extra burden put on you. (DN)

Participants who requested special accommodations experienced additional registration barriers. Multiple participants stated the exam processes and hoops were too stringent and they relayed a mistrust of the process and the system.

Preparedness

Participants expressed it was a major time commitment to prepare and take the exam and voiced uncertainty as they believed there is an extra layer of knowledge required after earning their MSW degree. BD stated, “... if I fail, then it's going to devalue the past three years, and not allow me to practice at my full capacity.” Test anxiety was common amongst participants with thoughts that the stakes are high even though you can take the exam multiple times. Multiple participants expressed they didn't share about taking the exam because it would be shameful if they didn't pass. TE stated, “I'm worried about how others will perceive me... I don't want people asking me about it and possibly having to say, ‘Oh, I failed.’ It's just embarrassing.” Some participants developed plans to take the exam multiple times, if needed. HL expressed deep anxiety about being prepared for the exam,

I spent most of the time prepping how I was gonna cope with not passing, I didn't want to tell anyone I was taking the test...and I already had mapped out how many times I was willing to pay for the test and take it.

Time management was also a challenge for many participants balancing work, studying, and their personal lives. And, participants experienced a disconnect between the educational knowledge, what you study, and what's actually on the exam.

Financial Concerns

Multiple participants noted financial barriers to taking the exam because of the registration requirements (i.e., test fees, fingerprinting and background checks). Participants expressed it was a “money grab,” as they had already paid for their education and there was the potential of additional expenses if you failed the exam and needed to take it multiple times.

Accommodations

Participants in need of ADA accommodations identified additional barriers. Options for testing centers and testing times were limited, and multiple participants with accommodation requirements noted the process for requesting accommodations was complex and time consuming, posing an additional barrier to taking the exam. Multiple participants felt their need for accommodations was not respected, as PT shared, “I have ADHD, but I was not going to challenge it on the test, I was not dealing with this. I have heard how it's handled.” One participant noted requesting the accommodation of a “low distraction environment” for the exam. The social work board replied this is how the testing center is designed so this request was denied. One participant persevered through the process of getting an accommodation and said that she wasn't going to be defeated by the process.

I've gotten pretty good at applying for accommodations, because you have to redo the whole process [she attended three universities], and when I looked into how to apply, I was a little bamboozled at how extra it was compared to every other testing arrangement I've ever had to do it for. I was like, is this right? And Reddit is full of people talking about how ridiculous the accommodations were.... but I matched their extraness with my extraness. (DN)

Confidence in the Exam Itself

Several recurring themes emerged for participants: feeling powerless over the system and exam process, mistrust of the power and control of the ASWB, and test anxiety. BD stated, “I think I'm extremely frustrated with how it feels like the whole ability to practice as a social worker rests on my ability to pass this test.” Questions and concerns were common regarding the validity of the licensure exam. Multiple participants also noted concerns regarding the exam questions as stated by BD, “... you just never know what you're going to get on test day, and that doesn't alleviate any of the anxiety.”

Theme 3: All the Feels....Stress, Shame, Anger, and Anxiety: Emotional Responses to the Testing Process

Participants identified experiencing several strong emotions in response to preparing for the social work licensure exam, actually taking the licensure exam, and just generally reflecting on the licensure exam itself. For example, some participants reported experiencing high levels of stress due to the perceived high stakes associated with passing the licensure exam. One participant (JM) stated that if they did not pass, “I guess I would have to do something that doesn’t require a license, there are other opportunities here, but I guess I wouldn’t be able to do therapy.” For some participants, it was critical that they pass the exam in order to maintain employment or to secure an increase in pay. Participants identified feelings of shame associated with the potential of failing the licensure exam. Participants identified additional negative feelings such as anxiety, doubt, uncertainty, and fear when reflecting on their ability to pass the licensure exam. As PD stated, “...as clinicians [we] can’t legally call ourselves therapists without the licensing. And honestly. I just want to be able to call myself a therapist.”

A particularly interesting emotional reaction identified by participants was resentment, especially directed at being required to take a licensure exam; in other words, the participant questioned “haven’t I proven myself already?” (TE). This was accompanied by frustration in terms of the amount of anxiety and stress a participant experienced when they “already knew they were good at what they do” (TE). Those participants who had completed the licensure exam and passed typically expressed relief along with a sense of validation, but also dread in terms of the next step on their journey, the LCSW.

Fear and anxiety permeated the experiences of many of the participants. These feelings revolved around the participants’ sense of preparedness for the exam, the expenses affiliated with the exam, the high stakes associated with passing the exam, the licensure requirements for employment, just to name a few. Feelings related to fear and anxiety are particularly evident in the following participant quote:

So it was scary and very intimidating for me, when I knew that after not taking tests and not having to necessarily show my knowledge as a social worker; my four and five years of education and social work. It was extremely intimidating and worrisome and anxiety provoking to know that there was a test at the end of it. Because it just filled me with a lot of fear and kind of took me back to the person I was before I started college. I just have to try so hard to get good grades and what if I don't pass? And so I just feel like as social workers, that's not how we have learned to express our knowledge. (TE)

Passing the exam is high stakes, so emotions run high. GA was very worried about the outcome of the test and said, “I guess the fear of not passing, and then having to tell my boss, or the fear of people thinking I’m not smart.” EC also talked about test anxiety. Managing the emotions around the test presents a burden that the participants had to manage on top of everything else in their lives.

Clearly, I have terrible test anxiety. Going through the MSW Program, we were more fixated on doing research and papers rather than doing testing. So this is

something that's been quite foreign to me for quite some time. I believe in grad school I may have only taken a total of maybe two or three exams maybe, and those are exam quizzes. Yeah, I've taken a few of those, but a quiz is just that... a quiz, you know, 10 points. And I'm trying to get out of my head that oh, my gosh! I can't do this!

Participants expressing fear and anxiety regarding the licensure examination process raised additional troubling questions about who is in “control” of the process.

I don't like it. I think it's just a way for the government to impose itself on how social workers interact and treat (clients). I think sometimes it limits our scope of practice, because now there's too much anxiety around us practicing instead of delivering good care. (LC)

LC worked in a clinic with transgender youth seeking care and said that being licensed meant that he could face sanctions if he did not follow state mandates. Each state enforces its own additional regulations, creating a scenario where “the state is more limiting than the actual test itself” (LC). As a result, he believes that not becoming licensed may become an act of social justice on behalf of client care.

Theme 4: Learning the Tricks of the Test

Many wondered if their exam score was a true statement of their readiness for practice. The general belief was that it is more important to know the test logic (i.e., how the questions work) than to know the actual content and practice wisdom related to the question. Learning the “tricks” of the exam was a common thread among participants. Popular study resources, such as Dawn Apgar’s study guide (Apgar, 2024) and RayTube YouTube videos (Ledet, 2025), encouraged participants to “forget what you know” and focus instead on the timing/sequencing of each question, such as what to do FIRST, what to do NEXT in a given social work practice scenario. One participant stated:

You have to read the questions a certain way with a completely blank slate every single time. You can't come in with any assumptions about anything, like you don't know this person. You don't know their situation unless it's in the script. (AM)

Another participant (HL) stated that it was important to know the steps and not just knowledge, “... so flashcards wouldn't work.” Participants appreciated free internet resources as they prepared for the exam. HL also said:

Raytube would break down a question ...that was really helpful for me, knowing why my answer wasn't the best answer, because sometimes it wasn't even that the answer was wrong. It's just not what you're supposed to do in the right order or what you're supposed to do firstin the hospital we should collaborate with the team first, because it could be really important to my client's care.

Another trick to passing the exam relates to having some degree of privilege. Participants suggested that being a good test-taker, having financial means, having educational opportunities and coaching, and having the privilege of time to study set them up for a much greater likelihood of passing the exam.

Theme 5: Setting Aside Practice Wisdom

The participants in this study expressed that they were grateful for taking a test prep course, as their initial approach to the questions might have otherwise led them in the wrong direction. Many participants received advice from others who had passed the test that they should take off their social work hat and try to approach the questions context-free. One participant stated that one of the test prep leaders also said to forget your education and just approach the test from a blank slate. However, participants indicated that approaching the questions in a context-free way felt inauthentic and antithetical to what social work teaches regarding the importance of context. Social work is all about the context, including practice setting, cultural background of both client/provider, client and provider values, the client's history, and the quality of the therapeutic relationship, among many other variables. One participant (BD) worried that her extensive practice experience could actually be a hindrance. She said, "And even when I took the practice thing that was offered through school, it's just like you have to forget everything you know and everything you've been taught. And so what's the point?" Another participant (LT) echoes this feeling saying, "So, I wanna make sure that I'm not thinking about all of the things that I've learned to do in my career in the real world versus what the test is asking me about." Participants felt that in order to pass the test, they needed to set aside their practice wisdom so they could focus solely on the test logic, and while that was frustrating, they were also uncomfortable with ignoring this advice when so much was hanging in the balance.

Another concern was that test scenarios differ from real life, where clients are often complex and present with multiple issues. Answering a test question about a scenario felt reductionist to the participants as there wasn't enough detail to make a thoughtful decision. Several participants also mentioned that they heard the test questions were created in such a way that people of color are disadvantaged, so they wondered if passing the exam was only a reflection of their privilege. This disconnect between their personal and professional values and the test created dissonance for participants.

Discussion

Five themes emerged from interviews completed as part of this study with new social workers who were preparing for or had taken the master's licensure exam: meaning everything and nothing, hoops and barriers, emotional responses, learning the tricks, and setting aside practice wisdom, with the most prominent finding being that social workers held two opposing views at the same time. On one hand they felt that licensure exams are biased and may not be evidence of competence, on the other they felt that being licensed means being legitimate or being perceived as a more competent and respected professional.

Beyond the disconcerting revelation by the ASWB of pass rate disparities, this research has uncovered additional unsettling dilemmas related to the licensure process for social workers with important implications for educators. In 2008 CSWE shifted its accreditation standards from a curriculum focus to a student outcomes focus (Apgar, 2021). In response to this, programs of higher education shifted away from traditional testing methods to assessments focused more on student demonstration of social work competencies.

Unfortunately, the exam process from ASWB did not shift, creating a misalignment between education, regulation, and practice, which are three very important pillars of social work (Apgar, 2022). Our participants felt this disconnect between their own practice wisdom, what they learned in school, and the test questions.

Students reported many concerns, barriers, challenges and frustrations with preparing for and taking the test, consistent with Torres et al. (2024). In order to provide ethical and professional services, social workers should engage with clients and constituents in alignment with their training. However, new social workers are required to pass an exam that may not align with that training. For students, the test may breed distrust in their education as they do not feel that school prepared them for the exam (Reay et al., 2023). Students have been trained to “do the work,” but their training doesn’t align with the test. As participants said, the test means everything, as passing the test gives social workers a sense of legitimacy. Passing the exam not only means legitimacy, it is also required by many jobs. In fact, social workers with a license earn on average \$5,500 more per year than those without a license (Kim et al., 2023).

For many participants, passing the exam seemed to be “playing the game” or “jumping through the hoops.” They felt the test was not evidence of their competence, which supports the notion that it means nothing. Participants expressed feeling bound by the extensive, confusing, and one-sided processes mandated by a bureaucratic system that was also misaligned with the values of our profession. Participants in our study and that of Torres et al. (2024) expressed fears about being granted ADA accommodations for the exam and shared hearing from others that they did not apply for accommodations for legitimate needs as the process seemed too onerous.

For all the participants, whether they felt the test was legitimate or not, taking the test was high stakes. Many accepted jobs with a temporary license requiring them to pass the exam within a year or face losing their job. Participants invested considerable time, money, and emotional energy preparing for the test while the vast majority were working full-time, and almost half had caregiving responsibilities. Most of them expressed intense anxiety and worry about not passing, how that would be perceived by their family, colleagues, and employers, and how that would make them feel about themselves.

Many participants reported the scenario-based questions on the licensure exam provide limited information and context with the expectation that the test-taker will be able to determine the “best” intervention or the “first” step to take. This is contrary to participants’ educational preparation and to the practice of social work in general. As a group, participants were conflicted about the validity of the exam. Many felt that social work needs licensure for gatekeeping, while others felt that gatekeeping is antithetical to social work values, as people are deemed illegitimate because they cannot pass a biased test.

In addition to the concerns raised in this study by the participants, we as social work educators became even more aware of the disconnects created by the test. Social work educators are tasked with preparing students to work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities, incorporating best practices, evidenced-based interventions, and strong theoretical frameworks. Students are taught to consider person-in-environment with their unique strengths, resources, and challenges, causing the issue

stated above regarding scenario-based questions with limited information. Other researchers have noted this conflict between teaching via experience to master CSWE's competencies and taking the ASWB licensure exam as well (Morrow, 2023; Victor et al., 2024). Apgar (2021) eloquently states this dilemma:

Licensure examinations are based on assessing knowledge for tasks that licensed social workers actually do in their jobs. Thus, there is a disconnect, with educators on one side asserting competency can only be assessed through behavioral observation of what social workers should be doing and regulators on the other focusing on knowledge that is driven by real world market conditions. (p. 519)

This raises questions about what MSW programs should do about this disconnect between what is being asked on the licensure exam versus teaching their students the practice of social work, creating a dilemma for social work educators who have moved away from traditional testing and test preparation strategies in their pedagogy, preferring experienced-based learning and competency development to comply with CSWE regulation. Grise-Owens et al. (2016) suggest "recasting social work's professional paradigm in the common framework of competency, with licensing part of the continuum of professionalization" (p. S126). incorporating licensure testing into the full scope of education and professional development versus being two separate things.

Does this mean social work educators should teach to the test so students can gain employment or continue to focus on experiential skill building so students learn how to be a good social worker? Are both true? This creates an ethical dilemma for the educator. If we teach our students how to pass a biased test, we violate the ethical values of social justice, dignity and worth of the person, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2023; Senreich & Dale, 2021). If we do not teach students how to pass the test, we may limit them from being able to provide future service to clients. As these concerns are considered, the researchers propose this status quo be challenged.

In the field of nursing, the percentage of nurses passing their licensure exam for RNs (NCLEX) is tied to the accreditation of the schools. Schools with low passing rates risk losing their accreditation (Mahmoud et al., 2024). Social work currently does not have any link between passing rates on exams and their accreditation, the merit of which has been debated in the literature (Apgar, 2022; Morrow, 2023). Faculty could support students by doing things such as requiring comprehensive exams before graduation, offering a licensure prep class, or providing discounted study materials. Requiring and assisting in studying and preparing for the licensure exam may eliminate some of the barriers related to finances, access, and knowledge that recent graduates may face as they attempt to register and pass their required licensure exam. While the above are good suggestions, they ignore the elements of test anxiety and practice ability, something social work has put a large emphasis on both in professional and educational settings. The anxiety experienced is understandable due to the exam length, testers being several years removed from standardized testing, and its high stakes nature (Ricciardelli et al., 2024). Nob et al. (2018) note the importance of passing a high-stakes licensure exam translating to potential career success. Failure will have a significant impact on testers' optimum performance. To address test anxiety, Coohey et al. (2023) developed a free, synchronous, online, non-credit

course to help students understand the test logic, and utilized a combination of mind-body strategies to reduce test anxiety. Results showed the combination of test and anxiety-reducing strategies had a significant effect on anxiety for participants and could potentially increase pass rates.

Implications For Social Work Education

Several key implications for social work education and the field of social work emerged when examining the findings of this study. Multiple participants raised the point that their MSW programs did not prepare them for the exam. It should be noted that participants did not state they felt unprepared to do social work but felt unprepared for the actual test and high-stakes nature of taking the licensure exam. This may be due to students not taking many actual exams in their MSW programs, instead being evaluated by papers, practicum, and simulations. It may also be due to the fact that when they were provided case studies in class, they were given an abundance of backstory and information on the client and situation as opposed to the minimalist approach of the licensure exam. Their education is preparing them for practice, but the exam is not testing this skill set. Either the test or the education needs adjustment.

Helpful Resources for Test Preparation

The researchers were impressed with the diverse array of helpful test prep resources shared by the participants and wanted to offer those here for other educators. Some of these included specific study resources such as: The Dawn Apgar study program (Apgar, 2024), Raytube on YouTube (Ledet, 2025), the ASWB practice test (ASWB, 2025c), Study.com (2025), Quizlet (2025), and Pocket Prep (2025). Other resources helped more with anxiety management and support. These included: social media groups for those taking the licensure exam (r/socialworklicensure [Reddit], 2017; Indiana Social Workers [Facebook], n.d.), practicum supervisor mentors, test-taking buddies, and colleagues and peers that had successfully completed the process.

Recommendations

In response to workforce issues and the disclosure of pass rates, many states are no longer requiring the initial master's degree licensure exam (ASWB, 2021). Instead, students are automatically granted licensure by virtue of completing their MSW degree or offered the opportunity to opt out of the test by engaging in additional supervision hours. One solution involves using an alternative pathway to licensure, taking only a jurisprudence test which covers applicable laws in a state (Hirsch et al., 2024). Joseph (2024) advocates for letting social workers retake only the modules they failed and not the entire test, using only a subset of the test to determine passing instead of the 170 questions that include research questions. As of this writing, only Illinois has implemented a pathway for social workers who fail the exam by having them receive extra years of clinical supervision (Connolly, 2024). However, obtaining clinical supervision is not always available or free (Walker & Bruhn, 2024). Many social work educators are calling for a

moratorium on the exam until better options for assessing competence can be determined (Torres et al., 2024; Victor et al., 2023; Victor et al., 2024).

In Indiana, the exam is still required. Prior to completing this study, this group of researchers had concerns about the disparity in exam pass rates. Hearing the participants' lived experiences only reinforced significant ethical concerns with the current master's exam. The licensing exam has been touted as a vital way to protect consumers of social work services, specifically guarding against those who will not uphold our ethical standards and/or those who lack competency, but in reality, it does not weed out those who are unfit for the profession. One participant said:

There are a lot of people who are awful at their jobs, who can pass a test. And there's a lot of people who would be amazing at their jobs, who aren't great at taking tests, especially when you take into consideration that the tests are written in a very black and white way, and like in every social worker or psychology class, ever the answer to things is usually it depends, and it's somewhere in like the gray. Nothing's ever black and white. (DN)

Those who have difficulty achieving licensure are actually our most vulnerable students, those who are living in poverty, are marginalized by race, age, or first language, and those who experience test-anxiety or struggle with standardized tests. We encourage immediate consideration of alternative pathways to licensure to remedy this ethical issue. In the interim, we also encourage offering one exam fee for unlimited opportunities to take the exam, as this would decrease financial burden and anxiety for applicants. When privilege is a part of being able to pass, of being able to serve vulnerable populations, how can the profession of social work stand in alignment with this process?

Bloxom and Anderson (2024) state that the ASWB is a monopoly, calling for NASW to advocate about the race disparities present in exam outcomes. Joseph (2024) takes this a step further suggesting that social work fully "remove its coupling with ASWB" (p. 6). Apgar and Luquet (2023) take a middle approach and recommend that ASWB and CSWE work to bridge the divide between competency-based evaluation and the exam. If these two parties were aligned, it could eliminate dilemmas for social work educators and may decrease many student concerns and fears.

Limitations

The researchers chose qualitative methods to seek a rich description from the participants. While this approach helped achieve that goal, it does mean the findings presented here should not be generalized to a larger population. While the sample size is on par with other studies of this nature, our sample does not have any participants who failed the exam on their first attempt. Their opinions and experience would have added greater depth to these findings. These researchers recommend a future study on this topic so it can be added to the literature. Another important drawback relating to the demographics of this sample is the minimal representation of minority voices. This is of interest, since Black/African American graduates, older social workers, and those for whom English is a second language have significantly lower pass rates than their White

counterparts (Kim & Joo, 2024a; Nienow et al., 2023). Again, a study similar to this one could and should be done with a stronger focus on those social workers from populations with lower pass rates to add their voices and experience to the literature.

Conclusion

Our study reflects the ambivalence new social workers have toward the MSW licensure exam. If it simultaneously means everything and nothing, those are confusing polarities to hold in tension for those preparing for the exam as well as those who have taken it. On one hand, social workers must pass the test in order to get or keep a job; on the other hand, they are well-aware of the inherent bias and the large role that learning the test logic plays in passing it. Participants expressed both viewpoints - that having a professional standard with a licensure exam is important, and, at the same time, that the exam appears to be a gatekeeping mechanism for those seemingly disadvantaged, which is antithetical to social work values. While passing the test was a huge relief and a validation of their efforts, participants felt the test was disconnected from practice, too expensive, manifests privilege and bias and is not an adequate measure of professional competence. The authors recommend seeking alternatives to licensure due to the multitude of dilemmas for social workers and for educators.

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Appendix

Semi-structured Interview Guide – PRE-TEST

- What do you know or what have you already heard about the licensure exam?
- What are you doing to prepare for the exam?
- What are you using to prepare – app, books, workshops? Study materials?
Buy/borrow?
- How many weeks or months have you studied?
- How much money, if any, have you spent to date preparing for the licensure exam?
- Tell me about your stress level when thinking about taking the exam? What specific things are stressful?
- What does being licensed mean to you at this level?
- How important is it to you?
- What barriers or obstacles are you encountering when *preparing* to take the test? Or what barriers or obstacles are you encountering in actually taking the test?
- What other supports are you using in preparing to take the test (peers, supervisors, mentors, online apps)?
- How confident do you feel going into taking this test? (1 – 100% and why)

Semi-structured Interview guide for AFTER participants have taken the licensure exam

- Were you surprised at the result?
- What do you make of your score?
- Knowing what you know now, do you wish you had done something different while preparing? If so, what?
- What does the result mean for you? (i.e., being licensed or having to take it again)?
- How does this result impact your career plans?
- What advice do you have for others preparing to take the licensure exam?
- What barriers do you anticipate if you have to take the exam again?