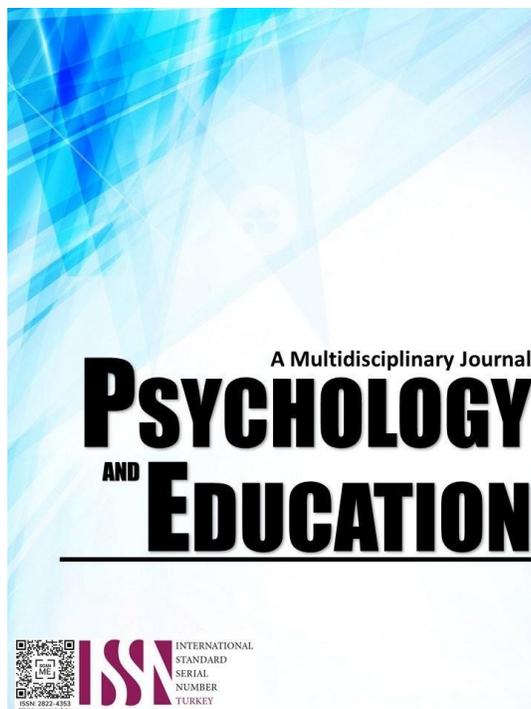


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Lived Experience of Guidance Designates in Selected Schools in the Philippines

Quintin L. Subong IV*

For affiliations and correspondence, see the last page.

Abstract

In response to the lack of registered guidance counselors in the Philippines, the Department of Education has appointed non-registered staff as “guidance designates” to tackle the academic and mental health issues of students, while also overseeing the various functions of school guidance offices. This study aimed to examine the lived experiences of nine guidance designates from public elementary and high schools, concentrating on their challenges, coping mechanisms, and contributions. Employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research uncovered essential themes, such as adaptability in their roles, job satisfaction, and perceived professional limitations. Participants expressed a sense of fulfillment in their positions as intermediaries among students, teachers, and parents, despite the challenges posed by their non-registered status. Many participants indicated a disinterest in seeking licensure, showing obstacles such as time limitations, financial issues, and a lack of institutional support, which raises significant concerns regarding professional identity and systemic challenges. These results illustrate the complexities involved in the role of a guidance designates and emphasize the necessity for improved policies, training opportunities, and systemic backing to address deficiencies in guidance services. Licensed professional teachers who are assigned as guidance designate have limited capacity in managing guidance office and in handling different concerns of the students. They lack the necessary educational qualifications, training, skills and eligibility to perform counseling services. However, the guidance designates are not interested to pursue relevant courses to be eligible as guidance counselors due to several factors. By elevating the perspectives of these individuals, this research enhances the understanding of their experiences and provides practical recommendations for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders dedicated to improving guidance services in Philippine schools. In particular, the Department of Education may strengthen the recruitment of registered guidance counselors to manage Guidance Centers and Offices; and facilitate counseling services in compliance with the law.

Keywords: *guidance designates, non-registered guidance counselors, public elementary and high schools*

Introduction

During the Economic Development Cluster meeting at the Department of Finance (DoF) on November 28, 2019, DepEd Secretary Leonor Magtolis Briones presented DepEd’s budget utilization for FY 2019-2020 and stressed that the lack of guidance counselors in all levels of education system has been “a persistent problem” in the Philippines. Such problem is rooted from the issue of difficulty of attracting graduates to go into the field or even to choose public sector due to the low salary (DepEd Press Release, December 2, 2019). As of June 2018, according to Undersecretary Annalyn Sevilla, only 3,553 guidance-related plantilla items were authorized, of which only 1,483 or 42% are filled and from that 1,483, only 393 are Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs). It is important to note that there are 3,220 RGCs as of July 2017 (PRC, 2017) and as of August 2019, there are only 3,822 Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in the Philippines (PRC, 2019).

In connection to this, Manila Bulletin (2019) reported that DepEd urge to hire more RGCs to dissuade the bullying in schools since last school year 2017-2018, 22, 000 cases of bullying in schools have been reported (Manila Bulletin, 2019). The number of RGCs all over the country cannot deny the fact that there is scarcity of professionals to support the services in guidance and counseling offices. Thus, schools are forced to keep unlicensed guidance counselors to act on behalf of RGCs and provide basic guidance and counseling services among schools (ABS-CBN, 2018). In instance, Mr. Rommel Perez, a licensed teacher from Krus na Ligas High School in Quezon City, act not only as students’ class adviser but performing the roles of guidance counselor of which he was not supposed to do (ABS-CBN, 2018). Nevertheless, it is considered as one of the responses of DepEd to sustain the needs of the students having disciplinary and attitudinal issues including students who have been victims of trauma and abuse.

In response to the work in public schools and address the scarcity of RGCs, the House Committee of Basic Education and Culture chaired by Congressman Ramon T. Romulo got the approval with amendments in the committee level of the “Substitute House Bill on the An Act Strengthening the Promotion and Delivery of Mental Health Services in Basic Education through the Hiring and Deployment of Mental Health Professionals.” This includes the increase of salary grades among guidance counselors at SG-16 having plantilla positions which will be changed to Guidance Services Specialist (GSS). This bill could attract registered guidance counselors to sustain the scarcity of RGCs in the Department of Education.

Previously, the division of Baguio City issued a Division Memorandum No. 432, s. 2018 that provides training for guidance designates on how they will support the need for more registered guidance counselors and counseling services by assigning full-time teachers in secondary public schools in the absence of RGCs. An example of this was a training conducted by Professor Agustin G. Huyong, head of Guidance and Counseling Services Unit, as reported by Paula Khryss Ushiyama last September 29, 2019 where he rendered

workshops for 26 Elementary Guidance Designates despite that the law (RA 9258) requires duly licensed professionals should engage in the practice of guidance and counseling, the Department of Education assigned teachers as “Guidance Designates” or “Guidance teachers” to continue providing academic as well as psychosocial support to students

Above literatures presented in congruence on how to address the problem on the scarcity of Guidance Counselors in the Philippines. Although attempts to compensate the needs of registered guidance counselors through assigning licensed professional teachers as guidance designates aside from their main functions, the educational qualifications and eligibility of guidance designates are different from guidance counselors who are registered.

As mandated in RA 9258, Registered Guidance Counselors are expected to perform an integrated approach to the development of a well-functioning individual by helping students to utilize their potentials and includes functions of counseling, psychological testing and other related tasks. Guidance designates, who are not qualified under RA 9258 are limited only to assist their students in maximizing their potentials, support them in planning their future in accordance with their abilities, interests and needs, and help the students overcome the obstacles in their personal and educational/professional growth (Sysia, 2018).

According to Sibandze and Mafumbate (2019), teachers are primarily trained on the classroom teaching of curriculum other than performing the guidance and counseling services. The results of their study found out that teachers experience challenges in implementation of guidance and counseling such as it is kind of extra work, heavy workload, insufficient time for guidance and counseling, lack or limited of required resources, and insufficiency with the funds and most importantly, teachers experience role ambiguity in performing the guidance and counseling services. This is also supported by Owino (2015) that teachers have difficulty in delivering guidance and counseling services as there were no guidelines on how it should be implemented as being guidance designates.

Thus, the increasing number of mental health concerns of the students with the scarcity of registered guidance counselors and the difficulties encountering by the teachers as guidance designates led the researcher to conduct this study. The researcher would like to have deeper understanding about the lived experiences of the guidance designates in primary and secondary public schools in the Philippines as they fulfill their duties and responsibilities in supporting mental health concerns of their students. Through this study, the researcher would like to address the concerns about the scarcity of RGCs in the Department of Education in adherence to RA 9258, and the phenomenon of guidance designates as they take the duties and responsibilities of being a guidance counselor.

Research Objectives

The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of the public elementary and high school guidance designates.

Methodology

Research Design

To understand and make sense of the lived experiences of the guidance designates, the study used the phenomenological research design using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the analytical approach. To explain the participants experiences, their feelings about certain phenomena and to produce in-dept descriptions of the lived experiences, the phenomenological research designed was utilized. According to Smith and Osborn (2007), this method aims to explore in detailed manner on how participants are making sense of their personal and social world. The IPA studies the meanings of particular experiences, events, and states hold for participants. Two-stage interpretation process or double hermeneutic is involved: first, the participants are trying to make sense of their world; second, researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world- insider’s perspective (Conrad, 1987).

Smith and Osborn (2007) further elaborated the steps in performing interpretative phenomenological analysis. They are as follows:

Stage 1: Transcription and Provision of Exploratory Comments

To be familiarized with the participant’s responses in the interview, the researcher spent a considerable amount of time listening to the recordings of the interviews with the guidance designates. Transcription followed. After proofreading the transcript, the researcher provided exploratory comments to put into account the content and the context in the interview.

Stage 2: Identifying Emergent Themes

In this stage, the researcher worked on the exploratory comments or notes to come up with concise themes which encapsulated the contents of the participants’ statements. Themes were identified within and across cases to determine their consistency and significance.

Stages 3: Clustering of Themes

Different clusters or superordinate themes were also identified based on the commonalities of the emergent themes or subthemes generated on the previous stage. Similar with the subthemes identified, the clusters or superordinate themes were also determined based on the consistency and significance of the subthemes obtained from stage 2.

Stage 4: Cross-cluster Analysis

A cross-cluster analysis is performed to discover converging themes among participants and to get a very detailed understanding of the

participants' responses per cluster. Cross-clustering was done to see if the clusters or superordinate themes identified were already standalone themes and not in any way redundant or factorial with the rest of the clusters. Qualitative studies require in-depth analysis that researcher focuses on context analysis, explore the deeply rooted causes of phenomena, and highlights the explanations of what happened (Wu and Wu, 2011)

Participants

The participants are currently holding a position as guidance designates while performing other duties assigned by their principals or school administrators from selected districts in the Philippines: Metro Davao, Metro Cebu, National Capital Region and CALABARZON. To make more meaningful findings, a minimum of nine guidance designates participated in the study and the researcher assigned pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of participants. Interviews were scheduled based on the availability of the participants and researcher.

Participants were selected using the purposive sampling technique. Through purposive sampling, the researcher found participants with homogenous characteristics and the research questions would be significant (p.56). In this study, participants were selected with the following criteria: 1) non-registered guidance counselors but with terms of reference as guidance designates; 2) guidance designates for at least two school years; 3) primarily, guidance designates hired as licensed professional teachers; 4) working from primary or secondary public schools; and 5) the guidance designates do not enroll in any advance programs or studies pursuing guidance and counseling or any course related.

Instrument

The researcher used a guide questionnaire that explored the lived experiences of the guidance designates. Semi-structured interviews were seen as exemplary method for IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2007), this kind of method is flexible in collecting data through listing initial questions where participants allow to start a conversation and the following questions can be modified in accordance with the participants' responses. The researcher engaged the participants in an interview in which the initial goal was to facilitate rapport or empathy that later allowed greater opportunity to go to novel areas that highlighted the research problems. Data were sufficient in analyzing the context of the study.

Procedure

The data collection executed through online platforms. The participants were scheduled based on their availabilities. The research objectives were discussed prior the interview proper and informed about the utilization of the data. After securing the informed consents and through the use of guide questions, research objectives were successfully attained during online interviews. The participants were advised for follow-up interviews for data validation.

Data Analysis

To understand and make meaning with the lived experiences of the guidance designates in primary and secondary public schools, the study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This method requires an active role for the researcher in the process of getting closer to the participants' personal world to examine their own experiences and perspectives (Smith & Osborn, 2007). It also allows both participants and researcher to come up at co-constructed understanding of lived experiences of the guidance designates in a flexible and an interpretative process, the researcher played a significant role to the emergent of themes and how these themes are making sense to the participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The study used the triangulation design by Osborn and Smith (2018) in which the double hermeneutic approach was employed to make sense on the lived experiences of the guidance participants and how the researcher making sense the guidance designates' lived experiences. The data gathered through recorded audios were transcribed verbatim. It allowed the researcher to do the open coding while reading. The researcher identified and labeled themes, either minor (subthemes) or major (superordinate themes) which were significant in understanding, interpreting, and making sense of the guidance designates' lived experiences. Cyclical approach in clustering themes was required to determine what themes are not well presented from the transcribed data.

After coding and generating themes on every individual transcription of the interview, the researcher began identifying connections among individual cases. After identifying some emerging themes and clusters from the transcripts, an additional table was created to conduct cross-case analysis and visualize the convergence and divergence of such cases. Specific quotes were used to check the correspondence of the analysis with the actual words of the participant, to highlight important themes or experiences of the participants. As the emerging themes and clusters began to converge and diverge in the analysis, this table helped in determining the common and unique experiences of the participants being guidance designates. Although some convergence and divergence of themes were seen in this cross-case analysis, other interpretations still occurred along the process, each eliciting deeper and more complex insights on the experiences of the guidance designates.

Ethical Considerations

To maintain that the conduct of research adheres to ethical standards, primarily, the guide questionnaires were validated by the experts in the field of psychology and counseling who are all licensed psychologist and guidance counselors practicing their professions in the

Philippines. The researcher is also a licensed guidance counselor that possesses skills in the conduct of interviews and evaluating probable distress to the participants.

Prior the interview proper, the informed consent was discussed and secured. The participations of the participants were all voluntary and had a chance to withdraw whenever needed. The research objectives and the utilization of the data were also discussed.

During the data collection, the anonymity of the participants, securing data privacy and rights to confidentiality were considered. The participants were represented by pseudonyms, including the name of places mentioned were altered but these changes did not influence the results of the study and its locality.

Results and Discussion

The results described the lived experiences of the guidance designates in primary and secondary public schools.

Preparation

In terms of preparation, the guidance designates had to sacrifice and make some adjustments with their timeline and start off their day early in order to sort out their tasks for the day to determine which ones should be prioritized. This shows the guidance designates' struggle of balancing personal- and work-related responsibilities. However, to ensure that no responsibilities are neglected, they also set boundaries between their work and familial roles to ensure that all tasks are still performed. Regarding the professional preparation, the guidance designates are frustrated for not being properly and sufficiently trained in providing basic guidance services, although they expressed that they have no choice but to continue providing the services that the guidance office should offer due to the lack of licensed guidance counselors in their institutions, thereby jeopardizing the quality of such services. These findings are supported by Yukhymenko et al. (2014), saying that the teacher is not the information provider or classroom controller, rather, the teacher facilitates, coaches, and models good problem-solving skills for their students. On the other hand, Tamim and Grant (2013) identified four roles of teachers in classes: reinforcer, extender, initiator, and navigator. These multiple roles of a teacher push them to facilitate certain adjustments that can help them perform all these functions successfully, and if possible, simultaneously.

Performance of Duty

In the performance of duty, the guidance designates basically serve as mediators or arbiters among the students and even teachers who have guidance concerns. Their idea that the primary duties of a guidance designate is to mediate individuals involved in a school conflict justifies their explicitly confessed lack of training in the professional practice of guidance and counseling. Nonetheless, they also utilize referral systems in cases that they are not competent enough to handle. The referrals, however, were not properly informed based on appropriate guidance assessments (e.g., oral interviews, behavioral observations, psychological testing, among others), thereby underscoring again their lack of training in the practice of guidance and counseling, as well as the lack of essential resources and facilities that a guidance office should have. Indeed, school counseling as a profession has increased in the 21st century, but most school counselors confuse about their roles and functions in the field (Astramovich, Hoskins, & Bartlett, 2010; Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005). Somehow, these findings also negate the suggestions of Zalaquett (2005) and Zalaquett and Chatters (2012), saying that counselors need to emphasize on providing counseling services, crisis intervention, coordination and consultation to the students. More so, they also expressed their exhaustion in assuming multiple lateral functions that cause them to neglect most of their guidance duties. Such lateral functions also cause negative effects on their mental health.

Personal Values

With regards to personal values, job satisfaction is still felt by the guidance designates despite their exhaustion at work. They also manifest a deep sense of concern to the students, and it also serves as the primary factor that makes them stay in their designation. It was evident in the narratives of the guidance designates that despite being non-licensed guidance practitioners, they are still capable of manifesting 'genuineness,' a core characteristic of a counselor. Guidance designates are also reactive rather than proactive, that is, they usually provide interventions only when there is a need, but they do not have any outstanding programs related to guidance and counseling. There is no wonder in this, since teachers have difficulty in delivering guidance and counseling as they have no guidelines to be followed and complained about their heavy teaching loads (Owino, 2015). Some of them are self-critical in practicing guidance and counseling and experience struggles in responding to clients because they do not know what should be done in counseling sessions (Pereira & Rekha, 2017).

Professional Scope

The guidance designates are aware that they have limitations in their power and authority as guidance designates, especially in the absence of a professional license. Somehow, they are aware of the Republic Act 9258, otherwise known as the "Guidance and Counseling Act of 2004" in the Philippines aimed the guidance profession at a higher ground and emphasized the significance of the role and functions of the counselor in the Philippine educational setting indifferent areas: a. counseling; b. psychological testing; c. research; d. placement; e. group process; f. teaching of guidance and counseling subjects; and g. other human development services (consultancy, private practice). Although they believe that they have mastered some guidance and counseling skills through their years of experience, they are still aware of the large disparity between them and registered guidance counselors in terms of knowledge,

preparation, and power. They are forced, however, to assume guidance and counseling duties due to the scarcity in the number of registered guidance counselors in the Philippines.

Practical Coping

Seminars, webinars, and other similar activities are viewed by the guidance designates as primary interventions for mental health concerns. On a personal level, guidance designates primarily battle burnout through social connectedness.

It is worthy to note that the guidance designates are disinterested in pursuing a professional license, primarily because of their awareness of the small amount of pay that RGCs receive, along with the disparity between the salary and level of responsibility that they assume. This is the reality in the Philippines according to Sysia (2018), since counseling is very important in the secondary school setting, and the reality that registered guidance counselors in the Philippines cannot suffice the needs of Department of Education, school counselors practice the profession without their license that leads into opposing principles of guidance and counseling directed by Republic Act 9258.

Conclusions

From the analysis of the results on this study, the researcher concluded that Guidance designates view their job as complex since they handle multiple job roles, so they are usually forced to facilitate various strategies and techniques to accommodate all their duties and responsibilities, sometimes even to the extent of developing burnout and exhaustion due to the lack of work-life balance. The challenges that a guidance designate experiences do not only affect their duty as a guidance designate but also their duty as a teacher, as a person in a family, and especially it also affects students.

The guidance designates believe that the major tasks of guidance personnel is to mediate and arbitrate conflicting students/individuals/parties in school. This shows the lack of training, knowledge, and competency per se of the guidance designates in providing appropriate guidance and counseling services, as provided by the law (RA 9258). The guidance designates can still feel a sense of job satisfaction despite the complexity of their tasks being guidance designates holding other lateral functions at work. They can also manifest key characteristics of an effective counselor (i.e., genuineness) that need to be nurtured. The guidance designates are aware of the limitations in their professional practice since they have no license as guidance counselor, but they are still forced to assume the role and perform some key guidance and counseling practices because of the scarce number of RGCs in the country. There are various ways that a guidance designate cope with the challenges of being one. These are subdivided into school's reinforcement, personal attributes/strategies, and family support. The guidance designates are no longer interested in pursuing a professional license as guidance counselors due to personal factors (e.g., age, amount of salary, disparity in authority levels, among others).

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Affiliations and Corresponding Information

Quintin L. Subong IV

De La Salle University – Dasmariñas, Philippines