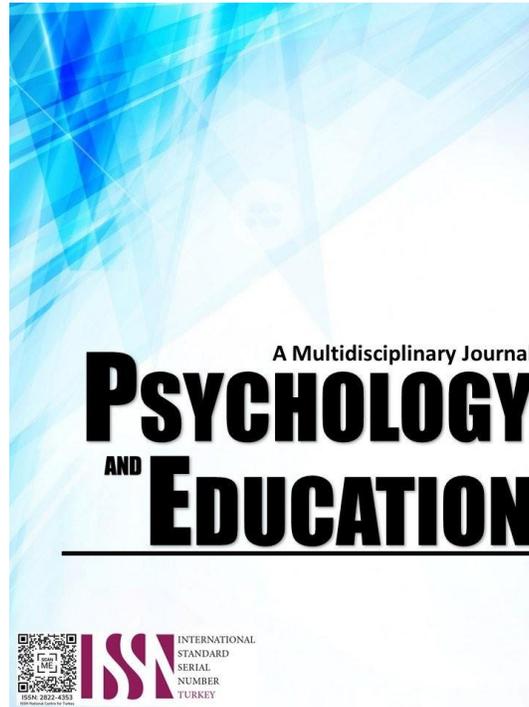


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## Challenges, Coping, and Meaning-Making of Registered Guidance Counselors Toward a Proposed Support Program

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### Abstract

This study examined the lived experiences of registered guidance counselors in Cavite, focusing on the challenges they encounter, the coping strategies they employ, and how they find meaning in their profession. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological design, criterion sampling was used to select participants, and data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis was employed in interpreting the data. Findings revealed that counselors face systemic barriers such as inadequate counseling spaces, low compensation, role misconceptions, excessive workloads, and resistance from parents and faculty, all of which are intensified by the shortage of licensed counselors. Despite these constraints, they demonstrated resilience through resourcefulness, time management, self-care practices, collegial support, and collaborative delegation. Counselors also derived meaning from their role as a vocation, from witnessing student transformation, and from their own personal growth. These results show the need for stronger institutional support, clearer role recognition, and wellness initiatives to sustain the counseling profession in Philippine schools.

**Keywords:** *guidance counselors, lived experiences, challenges, coping strategies, professional meaning, phenomenology, Cavite*

### Introduction

Guidance counselors play a crucial role in the Philippine educational system. They not only provide students with academic guidance but also support their social and emotional well-being, ensuring that learners receive positive educational experiences and develop the competencies needed for success (Aguilar-Ramat, 2022). As part of the Commission on Higher Education's mandate, guidance and counseling are integral to the holistic development of students throughout their academic journey. Despite this importance, systemic challenges persist. Currently, there are over 5,500 registered guidance counselors in the Philippines (Professional Regulation Commission, 2025). However, with millions of students to serve, the counselor-to-student ratio remains far from ideal. Globally, the recommended ratio is 1:250, yet the Philippines has extended this to 1:500, with some higher education institutions following an even wider 1:1,000 ratio (Philippine Star, 2023; Commission on Higher Education, 2017).

In Cavite, one of the country's fastest-growing provinces with a diverse and expanding educational sector (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2024), this shortage is strongly felt. Previous studies show that students from Cavite face significant stress and mental health concerns from academic pressures to adjustment challenges (Conde-Francia et al., 2024; Savilla et al., 2024). The present study confirms these concerns, revealing that guidance counselors in the province face inadequate counseling spaces, heavy caseloads, undervaluation of their role, and misconceptions that reduce them to disciplinarians rather than developmental partners. These barriers not only strain counselors' professional well-being but also compromise the quality and accessibility of services provided to students.

Understanding the lived experiences of guidance counselors is therefore vital. While past research on counseling in the Philippines has largely examined the topic from a quantitative perspective, focusing on ratios, program outcomes, or policy mandates, few studies have explored the personal and professional realities of guidance counselors themselves. This gap is especially evident in Cavite, where unique socio-economic and cultural factors further complicate their work. By exploring the challenges, coping strategies, and meaning-making processes of guidance counselors, this study aims to provide insights that can inform policy reforms, strengthen institutional support, and enhance the sustainability of counseling practice in the province and beyond.

### Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors in Cavite. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What challenges do registered guidance counselors encounter in managing the students?
2. How do registered guidance counselors cope with these challenges?
3. How do registered guidance counselors perceive and find meaning in their chosen profession?
4. Based on the findings of the study, what program can be proposed to help the guidance counselors?

### Methodology

#### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of guidance counselors in Cavite.

A phenomenological approach was chosen because it focuses on understanding how individuals experience, interpret, and make sense of their realities within a specific context. This design allowed for an in-depth examination of the personal and professional challenges faced by guidance counselors, providing insights into their meaning-making processes. (Sofaer, 2020). Through this approach, the study provided insights into the individual and shared meanings that guidance counselors attach to their professional and personal lives.

## Respondents

The respondents of this study were registered guidance counselors employed in various universities throughout Cavite, Philippines. Cavite was selected as the study location due to its diverse educational landscape and significant representation of educational institutions (Romanes, 2023). From the proposed range of four (4) to twelve (12), a total of seven (7) registered guidance counselors from different universities in Cavite participated in the study. This range aligns with phenomenological research guidelines, which recommend a minimum of four participants for sufficient depth and a maximum of twelve to maintain research quality (Bartholomew et al., 2021)

## Procedure

The study utilized purposive sampling, specifically criterion sampling, a technique that selects participants based on specific criteria related to the research focus. This sampling targets individuals who can provide rich, relevant information about the phenomenon under investigation (Campbell et al., 2020). In qualitative research, and particularly in the Phenomenological approach, a smaller sample size is preferred to allow for in-depth analysis of individual experiences and perceptions (Smith & Osborn, 2021). This method is efficient in exploring specific characteristics of the population that align with the study's objectives, making it ideal for answering the research questions focused on the lived experiences of guidance counselors in Cavite. The research instrument used in this study was a researcher-made interview guide, designed to gather qualitative data from the participants. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions, enabling participants to share their lived experiences, the challenges they encounter in handling students, their coping strategies, and how they find meaning in their roles. Additionally, their insights were explored to inform policy and institutional changes aimed at addressing the shortage of guidance counselors and enhancing support for their profession.

The data gathering process began with the submission of the manuscript for approval by the research adviser and the academic institution. The manuscript outlined the research objectives, design, methodology, and the proposed interview guide. Upon approval, the researcher finalized a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore the lived experiences, role perceptions, meaning-making processes, and professional challenges faced by guidance counselors. To ensure the instrument's credibility, it was validated by three (3) experts in the field of guidance and counseling: two (2) registered guidance counselors who are also licensed psychometricians and one (1) psychometrician currently pursuing graduate studies in clinical psychology. Their feedback was used to refine the questions for clarity and alignment with the study's objectives. A certification was provided as proof that the instrument has been validated.

Following validation, the study proceeded with ethical review and approval to ensure compliance with ethical standards in qualitative research. Criterion sampling was used to select seven registered guidance counselors from various universities in Cavite, ensuring that participants met the eligibility criteria and could provide rich, in-depth insights relevant to the study's focus. The researcher reached out to potential participants and scheduled one-on-one interviews at a convenient time and private location, either online or face-to-face. The semi-structured interviews allowed for open-ended discussions, enabling participants to narrate their experiences while allowing the researcher to probe deeper into emerging themes. All interviews were recorded with informed consent to ensure accurate transcription and analysis. Once interviews were completed, the recorded data were transcribed verbatim to maintain accuracy and integrity.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), beginning with familiarization with the data, where the researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the narratives. The next step involved generating initial codes, in which meaningful data segments were systematically coded across the dataset. These codes were organized into potential themes, reflecting patterns and significant aspects of the participants' experiences. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the study's objectives. Upon finalization, the themes were clearly defined and named, capturing the essence of the participants' insights. The last stage involved writing the report, where the themes were presented with descriptions and supported by direct participant quotes to enhance credibility.

Finally, the researcher synthesized the findings, drawing connections between the emerging themes and the broader research questions. The final research report was reviewed by the research adviser, with necessary revisions made before submission.

## Data Analysis

The study employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to analyze the qualitative data that was gathered from interviews with registered guidance counselors. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of their lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and meaning-making processes in their profession. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, the data analysis was conducted systematically to identify patterns and themes relevant to the research objectives. Reflexive Thematic Analysis is a flexible yet rigorous method widely used in qualitative research (Byrne, 2022). The first phase involved familiarization with the data, where interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in capturing participants' narratives. The

researcher engaged with the transcripts through repeated reading and initial note-taking to identify significant responses related to the challenges faced, coping strategies, and professional meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the second phase, initial codes were generated using an inductive approach. Open coding was conducted to identify recurring concepts across the dataset, and relevant data segments were systematically categorized. This process helped in capturing key aspects of the participants' experiences (Byrne, 2022). The third phase focused on searching for themes by grouping similar codes to reflect the core experiences of the participants. These emerging themes provided a structured framework for understanding how registered guidance counselors navigate their roles. In the fourth phase, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research questions. Data extracts were examined to confirm that they accurately represent the participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The fifth phase involved defining and naming themes to capture their essence clearly and concisely. Each theme was described in relation to the study's objectives to provide deeper insight into the findings (Byrne, 2022). Finally, in the sixth phase, the findings were synthesized into a comprehensive discussion that aligns with the study's purpose. Direct quotations from participants were incorporated to illustrate the findings and provide a better understanding of their experiences. By utilizing Reflexive Thematic Analysis, this study ensured a structured yet flexible approach to qualitative data interpretation, allowing for an authentic representation of participants' voices (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Byrne, 2022).

RTA emphasized the researcher's active role in identifying patterns of meaning within participants' experiences, allowing for a deeper understanding of the challenges, coping strategies, and sense of purpose among guidance counselors. Through this method, the study uncovered key themes that reflect their lived experiences and insights, which can inform policy and institutional support. To further explore the meaning-making process, this study is based on Victor Frankl's Logotherapy, which highlights the human capacity to find meaning even under challenging circumstances (Madeson, 2020). This perspective helped explain how guidance counselors derive fulfillment and resilience despite the challenges they face in their profession.

Additionally, Social Constructivism, as proposed by Berger and Luckmann, provides a broader lens by emphasizing how meaning is shaped by social interactions, institutional structures, and societal expectations (Nickerson, 2023). This framework is essential in understanding how guidance counselors construct their professional identities within the educational system and navigate their roles in response to external influences. By integrating these perspectives, the study was able to examine how guidance counselors make sense of their roles, cope with challenges, and contribute to institutional change. The insights gathered may help shape policies and improve support systems, ultimately addressing the shortage of guidance counselors in academic institutions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study explored the experiences and meaning-making processes of guidance counselors, which involved sensitive reflections on their professional roles and challenges. To ensure ethical integrity, strict measures were implemented to maintain confidentiality, promote voluntary participation, and ensure the well-being of participants throughout the research process. To protect anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used instead of real names in all records and reports. No personally identifiable information was disclosed, and any details that could compromise participants' privacy will be omitted. All collected data, including audio recordings and transcripts, were securely stored and accessible only to the researchers and the research adviser. The data will be permanently deleted three months after the study's completion to ensure privacy and compliance with ethical guidelines. Before participation, informed consent was obtained, ensuring that participants fully understood the study's objectives, procedures, and any potential risks. They were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw at any point, before, during, or after data collection, without any consequences. If a participant chooses to withdraw, their data will be immediately excluded from the study upon request. Since discussing professional experiences may evoke emotional responses, the study acknowledges the possibility of psychological discomfort. Participants were encouraged to share only what they are comfortable with, and mental health support resources were made available should they experience distress. If necessary, referrals to appropriate professional support will be offered.

The interview questions have already undergone expert validation to ensure their appropriateness, ethical soundness, and relevance to the study. The interviews were conducted with sensitivity and professionalism, ensuring that questions encourage meaningful reflection while minimizing potential distress. Audio recordings were taken with explicit consent, and participants may opt out of being recorded without affecting their involvement in the study. At the conclusion of data collection, participants were allowed to review their responses to prevent any misinterpretation of their experiences. Additionally, a token of appreciation was provided as a gesture of gratitude for their time and valuable insights.

### **Results and Discussion**

The lived experiences of registered guidance counselors in Cavite, particularly their challenges, coping strategies, meaning-making processes, and insights for program development, are thematically analyzed and interpreted.

Table 1 presents the significant findings on the lived experiences, specifically the challenges, of Registered Guidance Counselors in Cavite, organized into major themes and their corresponding subthemes. The first research question asked: What challenges do registered guidance counselors face in managing student cases? These include institutional and environmental limitations, such as inadequate counseling spaces and inaccessible offices, as well as professional undervaluation, which is manifested in low salaries and

role misconceptions.

Table 1. *Major Themes and Subthemes on the Challenges of Guidance Counselors*

<i>Major Themes</i>	<i>Subthemes</i>
1. Institutional and Environmental Barriers	1.1 Inadequate and Non-Conducive Counseling Spaces 1.2 Accessibility Issues Due to Office Location
2. Professional Undervaluation	2.1 Low Compensation and Inadequate Benefits 2.2 Role Misconceptions
3. Overwhelming workload	3.1 Multiple Mandates Limiting Counseling Time 3.2 Physical and emotional strain on counselors
4. Shortage of Guidance Counselors	4.1 Inadequate Number of Counselors 4.2 Recruitment and Staffing Challenges
5. Resistance and Misconceptions from Primary Educators	5.1 Parental Barriers to Intervention 5.2 Dismissive Mindset of Faculty

Counselors are also burdened by overwhelming workloads, leading to both physical and emotional strain, while the shortage of licensed professionals further intensifies these pressures. Additionally, they encounter resistance and misconceptions from parents and faculty, which complicate interventions and reduce support for counseling services.

### **Major Theme 1: Institutional and Environmental Barriers**

The first major theme that emerged in relation to the challenges encountered by registered guidance counselors is Institutional and Environmental Barriers. This theme reflects the influence of the physical and structural conditions of the workplace on the delivery of counseling services. Guidance counselors shared that, beyond their professional skills, the environment in which they work significantly affects the quality and effectiveness of their counseling sessions. International literature confirms that organizational and ecological factors often hinder the implementation of counseling services. For instance, Kratsa et al. (2023) emphasized that systemic conditions such as school location, type of institution, funding availability, and community setting strongly influenced whether schools could fully implement the ASCA National Model. These structural constraints serve as barriers that go beyond the individual competence of counselors, highlighting how environmental factors at the macro level can undermine program delivery.

In the Philippine context, similar barriers have been observed. Medalla and Musni (2025), in their qualitative study on Homeroom Guidance Programs in Iligan City, reported that institutional resource limitations and the lack of training or certification among Guidance Designates presented serious challenges in program preparation and delivery. This shows that insufficient institutional support not only affects licensed counselors but also impacts those who are tasked to step in when counselors are unavailable. Two prominent subthemes illustrate these barriers. First is the inadequate and non-conducive counseling space, and second is the accessibility issue due to the location of the counseling office.

#### ***Subtheme 1.1: Inadequate and Non-Conducive Counseling Spaces***

Guidance counselors reported that the lack of proper counseling spaces compromises confidentiality, comfort, and the overall counseling process. With the large number of students availing of guidance services, some counselors are forced to share a single room, separated only by partitions. However, voices can still be overheard, which discourages students from fully opening up. In some cases, when multiple students seek counseling simultaneously, others are asked to wait until one session is completed, creating delays and further compromising privacy. These conditions hinder the creation of a safe and confidential environment necessary for effective counseling.

Here are the verbatim statements of the counselors: "...sobrang dami pa rin kasi talaga ng mga bata most specially when we conduct intake interview... hindi pa rin kaya ng space...", "...may 3 counselors na nagshe-share ng isang room, tapos may division lang, so medyo naririnig so that compromises confidentiality...", "Nagstart ako maliit lang yung space. Iisa lang yung counseling room. Pag nagsabay. Naghihintay o dun nalang sa table kinakausap un client. So walang confidentiality nakikita."

Collectively, these findings are supported by researches that highlight the multifaceted challenges that shape the daily experiences of guidance counselors. It shows that the physical design of a counseling or therapy room plays a significant role in how clients engage in the process. In a qualitative study, Taiwo et al. (2023) found that both clients and therapists emphasized the importance of confidentiality, privacy, and the overall spatial environment in creating an ideal therapy space. Elements such as comfort, brightness, color, and outside views were identified as factors that influence openness and focus during sessions. These findings reinforce how inadequate or poorly designed counseling spaces, like those reported by guidance counselors, can directly hinder the quality of counseling services.

#### ***Subtheme 1.2: Accessibility Issues Due to Office Location***

Another environmental concern relates to the physical location of the counseling office. Counselors mentioned that when the office is housed in a building far from students' classrooms, students must make an intentional effort to visit, which often discourages those who have yet to build rapport with their counselor. There were also instances when the counseling office was shared with other

administrative spaces, such as the dean's office. This arrangement created hesitation among students to enter, as the office was not perceived solely as a safe space for counseling. In some cases, counselors observed minimal interaction with students precisely because of these accessibility and location issues. When counseling offices are located far from classrooms or shared with administrative spaces, students are less likely to visit, as they perceive the environment as neither accessible nor confidential.

As stated by the RGCs: "...nakahouse yung counseling office in \*name\* building... for them to go see me, sasadyain talaga nila ako... hindi masyado ganun kaano yung interaction compared to [now].", "...may mga pagkakataon na halos walang interaction kapag malayo ang office...", "...nandun yung ibang tao and also it's the dean's office so somehow, it would create... pagdadalawang isip na pumasok."

This mirrors challenges discussed in research where it was reported during the pandemic that school counselors experienced significant difficulties building meaningful relationships due to limited privacy and virtual barriers, and some students felt monitored with parents listening in during sessions (Alexander, Savitz-Romer, Nicola, Rowan-Kenyon, & Carroll, 2022).

## Major Theme 2: Professional Undervaluation

The second major theme that emerged in relation to the challenges encountered by registered guidance counselors is Professional Undervaluation. This theme refers to how guidance counselors perceive that their professional role and contributions are not fully recognized or valued within the institution. It captures both the concerns about compensation and benefits, as well as the misconceptions that diminish their professional identity. International and local literature consistently highlights this undervaluation.

In the Philippine context, DepEd continues to struggle with over 4,000 vacant guidance counselor positions, a critical shortage exacerbated by the fact that entry-level RGCs are compensated at salary grade 11, despite being required to hold a master's degree. Similarly, Atmojo (2025) explored how students themselves often hold misconceptions about the functions of school counselors. Many students perceived counselors as problem-solvers only for misbehavior, while others doubted their expertise in academic and career guidance. These findings highlight how a lack of awareness and communication about the counselor's role perpetuates misinterpretations that diminish professional legitimacy. It has two subthemes, namely Low Compensation and Inadequate Benefits and Role Misconceptions.

### Subtheme 2.1: Low Compensation and Inadequate Benefits

One aspect of professional undervaluation is the issue of low salaries and limited benefits. In the Philippines, becoming a guidance counselor requires the completion of a master's degree in counseling and passing the board examination, both of which demand significant financial investment (Lagon, 2024). Counselors emphasized that, given these requirements, there should be a clear return on investment.

Here are their statements: "...they asked me if the benefits, compensation fits my role... imagine nag-undergrad tayo, nagmaster's degree tayo then you need to pass the board exam... pero sana meron pa ring return of investment. Napakalaki ng demand e, napakarami ng clients... pero maraming di pumapasok kasi nagiging number 1 problem po nila is the ROI.", "...yung starting po namin sa \*university\* for guidance counseling ay hindi pa po ganoon kataas, it doesn't match really the mandated... we were given a promise na aayusin nila, so sana po "...we need young blood like you... ang pinakabata sa amin ma'am 48 years old. So kailangan naming ng bago... we have to give them, pag entry pa lang, mabigay na... pero as of now hindi pa siya nabibigay.", "...dahil 32 years na kami, okay naman po yung employment benefits but then ang problem naming ma'am doon sa mga bago, kasi medyo nabago yung salary structure so medyo bumaba... so far sa aming matatagal na, okay naman po.", "actually maam, matagal na rin pong usapan yan e kahit po sa \*organization\* mam, yung about sa salary, mababa talaga yung sahod ng guidance, mga guidance counselors, mga guidance staff compared doon sa workloads nila".

However, despite the heavy demands of the role and the large number of students they serve, the compensation remains low, as supported by Lagon (2024). While some tenured counselors reported that their benefits are stable, newer counselors noted that entry-level salaries are not competitive and do not align with mandated standards. This has been a long-standing concern, often raised even in professional organizations such as the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association, where it has been consistently recognized that guidance counselors, associated, advocates, and staff receive pay that does not match the scope and weight of their responsibilities.

According to Payscale (2025), the average annual salary of guidance counselors in the Philippines is only ₱228,856, which reflects the undervaluation of counseling services in the educational sector. Similarly, data from Indeed (2025) show that guidance counselors earn an average monthly salary of ₱27,504, or approximately ₱330,048 annually, which is insufficient when considering the cost of living in urban areas. JobStreet (2025) further reported that the monthly salary range of guidance counselors typically falls between ₱22,000 and ₱29,000 (₱264,000–₱348,000 per year), with some variation depending on geographic location—for instance, salaries in Taguig average ₱37,500, while in Quezon City, the average is ₱27,500.

This disparity highlights inequities within the profession, where counselors in more urbanized or resource-rich institutions receive slightly better pay than those in less developed areas. Although data from SalaryExpert (2025) indicate a higher estimated annual gross salary of ₱560,717 (with senior counselors earning up to ₱700,188), these figures may reflect more established or private institutions, and are not representative of most counselors working in public colleges and universities.

### ***Subtheme 2.2: Role Misconceptions***

Another dimension of undervaluation lies in the persistent misconceptions surrounding the role of guidance counselors. A common stereotype is that they primarily function as discipline officers, with many students even associating the guidance office with punishment or fear rather than support (Harrison, King, & Hocson, 2023).

As stated by the counselors, "...may mga challenges minsan si GC nagiging discipline officer or what. Pinapahandle pa ng mga iba't ibang tasks kasi pakiramdam nila usap-usap lang naman daw... wala namang ginagawa....may pakiramdam talaga na parang when it comes to work, parang bullied si guidance counselor, hindi naibibigay kung ano yung deserve ni GC... our profession is a vocation, pero sana rin maalign na makilala na talaga ng mga institution yung tunay na role ng GCs.", "...sometimes kailangan pa naming i-educate yung academic community sa role namin", "parang still a long way to go or ask to educate to orient the academic community, the members of the academic community... minsan kasi may assumption na parang ancillary lang ang GC."

This misconception is not only prevalent among students but is sometimes reinforced by school administrators and university officials, who often view counselors as reactive rather than proactive professionals (Harrison et al., 2023). As a result, counselors are often assigned tasks outside their professional scope because of the assumption that counseling is merely "talking to students." Therefore, they can take on additional responsibilities. Some counselors even described feeling marginalized or "bullied" in the workplace when their role was not clearly defined or respected. These experiences reveal that guidance counselors continue to struggle with a lack of clear role recognition within their institutions. The existence of misconceptions shows the marginalization of their profession, with counselors often treated as ancillary staff rather than core members of the academic community. This ongoing misunderstanding of their professional identity remains a significant barrier to the effective delivery of counseling services.

Similarly, Orot's (2020) study showed that even teachers often perceived guidance advocates as disciplinarians rather than developmental partners, a view that runs contrary to the actual mandates of Republic Act 9258 and the ethical standards for school counselors. This finding suggests that the guidance role is frequently misunderstood within the school setting, where counselors are still often associated with enforcing discipline than with supporting student development. Such perceptions may influence how students, teachers, and even administrators engage with the guidance office, reinforcing the idea that counseling is primarily for those who misbehave or underperform.

### **Major Theme 3: Overwhelming workload**

Another major challenge highlighted by the participants is the Overwhelming Workload. Guidance counselors reported that the scope of their responsibilities often extends beyond the core task of counseling, leaving them with limited time and energy to focus on students' needs. They are expected to balance counseling sessions with administrative duties, mandated institutional activities, and various school programs. As a result, the excessive workload not only limits the quality and depth of counseling services but also contributes to fatigue and stress among counselors. This burden is being felt by the increasing number of students requiring guidance services, which further stretches their capacity. This finding resonates with broader literature showing that workload is one of the most persistent barriers to effective counseling practice.

Abdulraof (2025) noted that guidance counselors are constrained by time, administrative tasks, and inadequate resources, which collectively compromise their ability to provide quality care to students with mental health needs. Similarly, Artiola (2025) found that Filipino school counselors experience moderate burnout and high levels of secondary traumatic stress, much of which can be traced to excessive work demands and simultaneous exposure to student crises. These stressors reduce their capacity to sustain meaningful engagement with students. Medina (2025) further emphasized that while heavy job demands are inevitable in the counseling profession, adequate job resources such as emotional support, proper facilities, and institutional recognition play a crucial role in buffering the adverse effects of workload and improving work engagement. This main theme was able to produce two subthemes, namely, Multiple Mandates Limiting Counseling Time and Physical and emotional strain on counselors.

#### ***Subtheme 3.1: Multiple Mandates Limiting Counseling Time***

Apart from their core function as guidance counselors, participants shared that they are often given additional responsibilities depending on the demands of the university. These tasks sometimes extend even beyond official working hours, leaving counselors unable to concentrate on counseling fully. In addition to their primary duties, they are also tasked with mandated activities such as CHED-required seminars, interviews, consultations, and other departmental programs.

"...hindi lang po kasi ako GC, guidance coordinator na rin po ako and from time to time even beyond working hours ang daming hinihingi... nagiging challenge siya sakín, hindi Talaga ako makapagfocus sa counseling...", "...alongside with the interview, meron kaming consultation, may follow-ups sa upperclassmen, tapos may mga activities kaming ginagawa, mandated seminars pa ng CHED... so in terms of workload, medyo overwhelming siya.", "...dahil nga mas marami ang 1st year namin... instead na makapagawa kami ng small group discussion with let's say our 3rd year students, hindi na naming din nagagawa...", "...sumabay yung exit interview... tapos syempre hindi mo naman pwedeng hindi i-accommodate yung counseling so nagsasabay lang siya...", "...aside from interviews and consultations, mandated seminars like mental health, drug abuse prevention, safe spaces, bullying—lahat yan kailangan naming gawin. Overwhelming siya and it takes time away from counseling."

While these activities remain part of the guidance function, they reduce the time that could otherwise be devoted to direct counseling services. For instance, CHED RO III conducted a Training of Trainers for the ‘Race Against Suicide Toolkit’ for guidance counselors and other school personnel (CHED Memorandum, 2024). Regional CHED offices have also advised counselors to participate in PGCA-organized forums such as the Midyear Conference on diversity and social justice (CHED Memorandum No. 082, s. 2018) and the PGCA Pampanga Chapter Annual Convention focused on workplace well-being (CHED Memorandum No. 126, s. 2019). These professional development activities, while beneficial, further pile onto the time allotted for direct counseling. This reflects how institutional requirements, though necessary, often overshadow the central goal of providing direct and consistent counseling support to students.

A similar situation was observed in a study of guidance designates in Cadiz City, where teachers were appointed to carry out guidance roles alongside their teaching loads. The findings revealed that while many designates experienced compassion satisfaction from helping students, they were also prone to compassion fatigue because of the competing demands of academic and guidance responsibilities. Interestingly, the study noted that even when working in less-than-ideal environments, guidance designates still reported moderate to high levels of satisfaction, which suggests resilience and dedication to their roles. However, the dual burden of teaching and counseling highlights how institutional structures often compromise the ability of personnel to focus on sustained and meaningful counseling work (Dayo, 2021).

### ***Subtheme 3.2: Physical and emotional strain on counselors***

As a result of these overlapping responsibilities and constant demands, counselors experience significant physical and emotional strain. With little to no breaks between sessions, they are continuously exposed to students’ emotional, academic, and social concerns, leading to compassion fatigue and eventual burnout. Some counselors even reported instances of skipping meals or forgoing basic needs such as restroom breaks due to the unrelenting flow of students. These accounts demonstrate that the heavy workload does not only affect the time allocated for counseling but also undermines the overall well-being of counselors, potentially compromising the quality of support they can provide.

“...constant exposure to students’ emotional, academic, or social problems, compassion fatigue talaga and burnout...”, “...so in terms of workload medyo overwhelming siya...”, “...dumadating talaga sa point na hindi ako nakakakain on time... or even bio break...”, “...may mga pagkakataon na halos walang pahinga dahil dire-diretso ang pasok ng estudyante...”.

These findings align with Abdulraof (2025), who noted that the weight of administrative and extracurricular duties often compounds the stress of guidance counselors, leaving them with less time and energy to focus on students’ mental health needs. Similar insights were highlighted by Kim and Lambie (2024), who found that non-counseling tasks, large caseloads, and limited opportunities to provide direct services significantly heighten the risk of burnout, particularly in contexts where counselors lack institutional and emotional support. Similarly, Hamelin et al. (2023) emphasized that when counselors’ professional identity is overshadowed by excessive administrative work, they experience what they termed “occupational identity suffering,” which significantly contributes to burnout. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that role overload not only physically and emotionally drains counselors but also compromises the quality of care they can provide, underscoring the importance of role clarity, adequate staffing, and workplace support systems to ensure both counselor well-being and effective student services.

## **Major Theme 4: Shortage of Guidance Counselors**

Another pressing concern revealed in the findings is the shortage of guidance counselors. Participants emphasized that the lack of sufficient personnel significantly hampers the delivery of quality counseling services. With only a few registered guidance counselors available, the increasing number of students becomes challenging to manage. This shortage is not only evident in their respective institutions but also reflects the broader reality in the Philippines, where the supply of qualified counselors falls short of the growing demand (Lacson et al., 2024). Two subthemes were made under this central theme, namely, Inadequate Number of Counselors and Recruitment and Staffing Challenges.

### ***Subtheme 4.1: Inadequate Number of Counselors***

Counselors pointed out that the student-to-counselor ratio in their schools is far from ideal. With thousands of students assigned to only a handful of counselors, providing individualized and timely support becomes nearly impossible. This overwhelming ratio leads to situations where counselors are unable to give adequate attention to each student, thereby limiting the effectiveness of counseling services.

This has been based on the statements of the counselors: “...kasi yung ratio natin (ng students), medyo mataas compared doon sa RGC natin. Actually maam, uhhh nasa 3,000+ kami sa college, tapos ang RGC namin, is sa college ay 2...”, “...ilan ang SHS, 7000. Then let’s say 1000 yung JHS and Elem... 8k. 16 diba... eh 2 lang kami.”, “Obviously maam, not, kasi 2 lang po kami ano, di naman po kasi counted especially sa accreditation yung mga non-GCs, kasi at the demand ay 1:500 or 1:1000 e almost 8000 na po kami”, “...our enrollment is around 9,000 and then per college meron kaming walong counselors, so more or less, medyo marami ma’am, more than 1,000 per counselor...”.

Hocson (2023) likewise cited the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association, noting that while the ideal ratio is 1:500, the actual

number of practicing counselors nationwide is vastly insufficient to meet even that benchmark. Recent data reinforce this concern: although there are currently just over 5,000 registered guidance counselors in the country (Contreras, 2024), the Philippines has millions of enrolled students, falling short of both the international standard of 1:250 and the local benchmark of 1:500 (Philippine Star, 2023). In fact, some higher education institutions have resorted to following CHED's acceptable ratio of 1:1,000 (Commission on Higher Education, 2017), further highlighting the critical shortage that severely hampers counseling effectiveness.

#### ***Subtheme 4.2: Recruitment and Staffing Challenges***

In connection with the shortage, counselors also identified recruitment and staffing difficulties as major obstacles. Hiring additional registered guidance counselors is constrained by the limited pool of licensed professionals nationwide.

Here are the what the counselors shared "...ang dilemma ma'am, ang hirap kumuha ng counselors sa college kasi we require talaga RGC... right now... since nagresign din yung dalawa... hopefully meron mag-apply... then ang problem naming ma'am doon sa mga bago, kasi medyo nabago yung salary structure so medyo bumaba...", "kasi matagal na naming nilalaban, add or get more counselors in the university ...", "...yung starting po namin sa \*university\* for guidance counseling ay hindi pa po ganoon kataas".

Although there are just over 5,500 registered guidance counselors in the country (PRC, 2025), this number is disproportionately small compared to the millions of students in need of services. According to the Commission on Higher Education (2024), only 43 higher education institutions in the Philippines currently offer guidance and counseling programs, further restricting the supply of new graduates and licensed practitioners. Even when vacancies are available, low salary offers discourage potential applicants, leaving many posts unfilled. Hocson (2023), citing the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association (PGCA), further emphasized that the profession remains undervalued, with compensation averaging around ₱25,000 per month. These conditions make recruitment particularly challenging, and unfilled positions ultimately add pressure to the few counselors currently in service.

#### **Major Theme 5: Resistance and Misconceptions from Primary Educators**

Another challenge encountered by guidance counselors is the resistance and misconceptions coming from primary educators such as parents and faculty members. These attitudes create barriers to the smooth implementation of interventions and often undermine the work of guidance counselors. In Eswatini, for example, Mabuza (2025) found that many teachers struggled to implement guidance and counseling programs due to weak parental involvement and a lack of administrative support. Without adequate buy-in from parents and school leaders, programs were either delayed or not taken seriously, leaving counselors without the necessary reinforcement to sustain interventions.

Similarly, misconceptions about counseling roles persist in other contexts as well. Mahaly et al. (2025) reported that many students and stakeholders in Indonesia perceived counseling as merely "giving advice" or even as a disciplinary function, which diminished the professional image of counselors and hindered collaboration with teachers and families. Parental Barriers to Intervention and the Dismissive Mindset of Faculty are the subthemes under this.

#### ***Subtheme 5.1: Parental Barriers to Intervention***

Counselors reported that some parents are in denial about their children's concerns, often dismissing or brushing off the need for counseling. In some instances, parents strongly resist recommendations, making it difficult for counselors to gain their cooperation. This denial requires lengthy explanations and negotiations, and at times, parents even respond confrontationally. Such resistance delays necessary interventions and places additional strain on the counseling process.

"...may denial, all the usual po... we really have to rehearse kung paano ko sasabihin sa kanila...", "...dismissive, they brush off the idea... mahirap i-accept ng mga magulang...", "...medyo mahabang paliwanagan kasi the parents, they think na 'ohh hindi naman yata kailangan yung mga ganyan'...", "...may parent kasi na parang... matapang, may sinasabi ka, may sinasabi din siya. Syempre di mo naman pwede ipilit, you have to meet halfway...", "kung sa faculty inconsiderate, ito namang parents parang uncooperative, na parang they thought na kapag may problem yung bata responsibility ng school, not theirs, so parang iniwan nila yung responsibility sa mga teachers, parang minsan may mga katwiran maam na parang, kaya ko nga inenroll sa inyo e. so yun po yung minsan problema sa parents, especially when uncooperative".

This reaction is not surprising when viewed in the context of broader Filipino attitudes toward mental health. As Tuliao, Velasquez, Orlina, and Yang (2020) observed in their systematic review, Filipinos across contexts, whether in the Philippines or abroad, tend to underutilize professional mental health services despite high levels of distress. Instead, they often rely on family and close friends for support, with barriers such as stigma, financial constraints, and the cultural importance of self-reliance and saving face discouraging them from seeking formal help. These cultural dynamics help explain why some parents resist or even reject counseling interventions, as they may perceive them as unnecessary, shameful, or a sign of family weakness. In turn, this creates an additional layer of challenge for school counselors, who must not only address the student's needs but also work patiently to overcome parental hesitation and stigma before effective interventions can take place.

Additionally, research into parent-child dynamics among Filipino college students reveals that invalidating parental responses and mental health stigma within the family significantly hinder help-seeking behaviors, reinforcing parental reluctance to acknowledge



external interventions (Lozano et al., 2024). These cultural and relational dynamics help explain why some parents resist counseling, compelling school counselors to first address parental hesitation and stigma before they can effectively support the student.

**Subtheme 5.2: Dismissive Mindset of Faculty**

Faculty members were also identified as sources of resistance. Counselors shared that some teachers perceive the activities of the Guidance Office as competing with academic time. Others are described as inconsiderate, believing that students’ concerns are exaggerated or dismissing them as mere complaints against teachers. Counselors also noted that certain faculty members trivialize student struggles by comparing them to their own past experiences, implying that students should be able to endure difficulties without support.

“...may resistance si faculty... feeling nila nagkakaroon ng competition sa oras ng bata...”, “...inconsiderate yung mga professors... feeling nila nagsumbong yung bata.”, “...mahirap ipaintindi... kasi lagi nila cino-compare, ‘nung panahon namin kaya yan’...”, “...mas careless... mas brusko makipag-usap sa mga bata (yung teacher)...they are much less sensitive... mas nag-eeffort kami na mas mapaintindi.”, “...medyo challenging ipaalam sa kanila (faculty) na the students are going through something...”, “...sometimes siguro yun inconsiderate yung mga professors sometimes mga teachers, so minsan parang ang hirap lumapit kapag may concern yung mga bata.”.

Rubin (2024) found that many teachers tend to view school counselors through a lens of interpersonal attributes, like character or approachability, rather than recognizing their professional competence, reflecting a partial or incomplete understanding of their educational mandate. These findings echo those of Orot (2020), who found that many teachers hold inaccurate perceptions of the guidance function, often reducing it to discipline enforcement or basic advisory tasks rather than holistic developmental work. Similarly, Harrison et. al (2023) highlighted that Filipino school counselors continue to compete with a lack of role clarity and systemic disempowerment, often influenced by school leaders and faculty who underestimate or misinterpret the scope of their work. Such misconceptions reinforce the marginalization of the counseling profession and contribute to the dismissive attitudes that undermine collaborative support for students.

The challenges faced by registered guidance counselors point to more than just heavy workloads or limited resources; they reflect how the environment and structures around them shape the way they carry out their roles. This just shows that when spaces are inadequate, offices are less accessible, or benefits and recognition fall short, the heart of the struggle lies in maintaining their professional identity amid these constraints. The essence of these experiences is the effort to remain committed to students despite conditions that sometimes make their work more difficult. What stands out is their resilience, choosing to stay present for students even as they navigate barriers within their institutions.

Table 2. Major Themes and Subthemes on the Coping of Guidance Counselors

Major Themes	Subthemes
6. Practical Approaches	6.1 Resourcefulness and Creativity Adaptation 6.2 Time Management and Coordination
7. Maintaining Personal Well-Being	7.1 Work–Life Boundaries and Self-Care Practices 7.2 Emotional Regulation and Professional Boundaries 7.3 Building Supportive Relationships in the Workplace
8. Collaborative Work Practices	8.1 Case Management and Workload Sharing 8.2 Strategic Delegation
9. Building Support from Parents and Faculty	9.1 Enhancing Faculty Support Systems 9.2 Addressing Stigma and Building Parent Awareness

Table 2 presents the significant findings on the lived experiences, specifically the coping, of Registered Guidance Counselors in Cavite, organized into major themes and their corresponding subthemes. The second research question asked: How do registered guidance counselors cope with these challenges? Results show that counselors adopt a variety of coping mechanisms to sustain their effectiveness despite the barriers they encounter. They apply practical approaches such as resourcefulness, creativity, and effective time management to maximize limited resources. To maintain their personal well-being, they emphasize work–life balance, emotional regulation, and building supportive relationships with colleagues. Collaboration is another key coping strategy, where counselors share workloads, delegate tasks strategically, and rely on associates or interns to manage cases. Furthermore, they actively build support from parents and faculty through psychoeducation, communication, and efforts to address stigma. These findings illustrate the resilience and adaptability of counselors in managing their professional demands.

**Major Theme 6: Practical Approaches**

One of the ways counselors cope with the challenges they encounter is through Practical Approaches, which reflect their capacity to adjust to institutional limitations and find creative solutions. Despite facing environmental barriers and heavy workloads, they adopt resourceful strategies to make their offices more conducive to counseling and to manage their time effectively. In one qualitative study focused on Filipino counselors, participants shared how they repurposed everyday resources, such as converting unused classrooms into temporary counseling areas or using flexible seating, to create more welcoming spaces for students. This ingenuity allowed them

to maintain confidentiality and foster a supportive atmosphere (Abdulraof, 2025).

Similarly, counselors in China employed informal peer support and streamlined scheduling to balance administrative demands with counseling duties. Feng et al. (2024) found that organizational support, combined with occupational empowerment, enabled counselors to prioritize client sessions by granting them autonomy over their schedules and work environments. Such institutional trust enabled counselors to manage competing duties more effectively. Under "Practical Approaches" are the subthemes of Resourcefulness and Creativity, Adaptation, Time Management, and Coordination.

### ***Subtheme 6.1: Resourcefulness and Creativity Adaptation***

Counselors shared that they often resort to resourceful and creative methods to address the lack of proper spaces for counseling. Some mentioned reorganizing or switching offices to make the environment more accommodating for students. Others adjusted their office layout, created makeshift enclosures, or used background music to help preserve confidentiality. They also personalized the space to make it more inviting and comfortable, so that students would feel welcome despite the limited facilities. These examples demonstrate how counselors utilize available resources to maintain a safe and supportive counseling environment, even in challenging conditions.

"...nagpalit kami ng office, nagswitch kami ng office ng \*other department\*, tapos inextend pa siya... habang nag-iintay sila, malamig naman, hindi sila magreklamo.", "...naglaan lang kami ng parang small portion lang ng office naming na medyo bukas... ginawa namin na pasquare para talagang naka-enclose... discreetly maaccommodate yung counselees.", "We try to be creative and being resourceful... patugtog kami ng music... para madistorted yung kwentuhan pag narinig sa kabilang room.", "I try to make it pleasing. Nilalagyan ko na lang siya ng something na talagang the students would feel welcome, comfortable doon sa space na we were given."

This finding resonates with Harrison et al (2023), who noted that Filipino school counselors often extend their roles beyond prescribed tasks, employing innovative and context-sensitive strategies to respond to student needs despite systemic constraints. Similarly, Lopez et al. (2025) found that guidance heads navigated professional demands by prioritizing efficient resource use, promoting teamwork, and applying innovative solutions, underscoring resilience and resourcefulness as key coping mechanisms.

### ***Subtheme 6.2: Time Management and Coordination***

Another strategy highlighted by the participants is careful time management and coordination. Counselors emphasized the importance of scheduling consultations to avoid overlap, borrowing space when necessary, and establishing good relationships with colleagues in order to share resources. These practices allow them to balance the demands of their workload and ensure that student concerns are still addressed in a timely manner. The significance of time management and collaboration is echoed in recent local research.

"Parang sakin, it should not hinder you from doing your job... if there's one thing... yun yung pagiging resourceful. Kung wala dito... hihiram ako sa ibang opisina... establish good relationship with other people.", "Time management talaga, coordination, when it comes to the period ng mga consultation sessions... para ma-manage yung time, hindi magkasabay-sabay."

Merino et al. (2023) observed in their study of teachers and counselors during the shift to remote learning that guidance personnel improved their organizational skills, creativity, and flexibility through deliberate scheduling and peer coordination. This illustrates how Filipino counselors actively manage limited time and institutional resources, enabling them to fulfill their duties and maintain responsiveness to student concerns despite systemic constraints.

## **Major Theme 7: Maintaining Personal Well-Being**

Another coping mechanism employed by guidance counselors is Maintaining Personal Well-Being. Given the heavy workload and emotional demands of their role, participants emphasized the importance of establishing boundaries, regulating their emotions, and fostering supportive relationships in the workplace. These practices help them sustain their effectiveness as counselors while also protecting their mental health. Research supports the critical role of self-care and resilience-building strategies among counselors. Duncan (2024) identified several burnout prevention techniques, such as scheduling time off, engaging in leisure activities, regular exercise, and fostering perspective, that effectively buffer professionals against emotional exhaustion and maintain their capacity to function effectively. This underscores how intentional self-care contributes to sustaining professional stamina.

Moreover, Feng et al. (2024) found that occupational well-being among school counselors is significantly enhanced by situational support, particularly organizational support, empowerment, and autonomy. These elements not only bolster well-being but also facilitate counselors' ability to maintain their emotional health under pressure. Three subthemes were established under this main theme, namely, Work-Life Boundaries and Self-Care, Emotional Regulation and Professional Boundaries, and Building Supportive Relationships in the Workplace.

### ***Subtheme 7.1: Work-Life Boundaries and Self-Care Practices***

Counselors shared that one way of coping is by setting clear distinctions between work and personal life. Some noted that once they are at home, they deliberately shift roles and focus on family or leisure activities as a form of self-care. Others emphasized reserving weekends strictly for personal time, unless situations are truly urgent. By leaving work-related stress in the office, counselors can maintain balance and protect themselves from prolonged fatigue.

“Kapag nasa bahay na ako ma’am... anak na ako doon... naglilibang na ako, naglalaro na ako sa phone ko para yun naman yung me time ko.”, “As much as possible kung hindi talaga urgent, I really do not work on weekends. Saturdays and Sundays talagang pang-personal lang... wala pang nag-question sakín kahit mag-leave ako, as long as nagagawa ko trabaho. Doon napapanatili yung work-life balance...kahit sabihin mo na nakaschedule yun, if I am not in a good state mentally and physically... if I have to postpone it, if I have to reschedule it, I can easily do so.”, “Pag-uwi ko, 5pm, iniwan ko na yung mental fatigue... challenging siya pero I manage myself, I manage my time.”

These highlight that establishing work-life boundaries is not only a personal choice but also a necessary strategy to sustain long-term effectiveness in the counseling profession. Gallardo and Chavez (2023) highlighted in their phenomenological study that a supportive work environment, wellness initiatives, and strong collegial relationships are crucial in promoting counselor well-being and retention. Their findings emphasize that, beyond personal coping strategies, systemic support — such as wellness programs, flexible workloads, and opportunities for growth — also plays a crucial role in sustaining long-term effectiveness in the profession.

### ***Subtheme 7.2: Emotional Regulation and Professional Boundaries***

Participants also emphasized the need to regulate their emotions and maintain professional boundaries when addressing students' problems. A counselor stated the process to being a “sponge,” absorbing the heaviness of student concerns, but emphasized the importance of not carrying these problems personally.

Counselors described engaging in simple debriefing practices, such as taking short breaks, physically stepping out of the office, or consciously reminding themselves that clients must ultimately take responsibility for their own growth. These strategies reflect counselors' awareness of the need to separate personal identity from professional responsibility, which protects them from compassion fatigue and emotional exhaustion.

“...kapag kumausap tayo ng bata tapos mabigat yung problem, para tayong sponge... so after naming makausap yung bata, gagawin naming parang konting pahinga... nakakatulong siya maam para matanggal yung bigat... tapos sasabihin mo, hindi mo personal na problema yun.”, “...you have to debrief lalo na kapag masyadong mabigat... as simple as standing up and going, getting out of your counseling room... literally change your perspective...ang baseline ko whenever I do my sessions is that ‘I am here with the goal of helping this client become self-regulated’... para hindi maging dependent sayo at hindi mabigat para sa counselor.”, “In as much as we wanna help client, they are the master of their own lives... I can only do so much... my goal is helping this client become self-regulated, na hindi maging dependent sayo.”, “As much as I wanted to get involve, I also put... nilalagyan mo din ng line between sa work mo at personal life mo. Hindi ko siya masyado dinadamdam... kailangan lagi may boundary between personal life and work.”, “...minsan di mo maiiwasan na pag higa mo... naiisip mo pa rin... pero I’m just taking it easy... I guard myself... kasi kahit stress sila, stress din kasama sa trabaho... so how do you manage your stress na hindi ka masyado nag-ooverthink.”

This is consistent with the findings of Artiola (2025), who reported that Filipino school counselors commonly experience moderate burnout and high levels of secondary traumatic stress due to both direct exposure to student trauma and indirect exposure to the suffering of others. The study further emphasized that without clear boundaries and coping practices, the emotional toll of counseling work can escalate into compassion fatigue, making self-regulation and intentional debriefing vital protective strategies.

### ***Subtheme 7.3: Building Supportive Relationships in the Workplace***

Maintaining supportive relationships with colleagues also proved to be a crucial coping mechanism. Counselors shared that they find comfort in teamwork, sharing ideas, and providing informal support such as casual conversations, coffee breaks, or meals together. Even in moments of disagreement, some counselors consciously focus on colleagues' strengths rather than weaknesses, which helps sustain a harmonious and cooperative atmosphere in the office.

Here are their statements: “very important po kasi sa akin yun samahan dito sa office... kayo namay nagutulungan, nagshe-share kayo ng ideas”, “...one of our things is that we also do consultation... part din po ng meeting naming minsan ‘o kape tayo’... Nandyang po ang isa’t-isa to listen.”, “From time to time you go out, eat with friends... nakaka-relax lang kasama yung guidance staff. So yun yung partly self-care, breather time.”, “Minsan may disagreement sa work... I try to look at the strength ng kasama ko, hindi doon sa mali niya. Kasi kung hindi ko aalisin yung paningin ko doon, hindi magiging smooth ang relationship. So I learned to dance with the music and be appreciative.”

These experiences demonstrate that strong collegial support systems act as an informal buffer against workplace stress, reinforcing counselors' resilience in the face of demanding responsibilities. Salazar et al. (2023) emphasized that Filipino guidance counselors do not view self-care as a purely individual activity but as something sustained by collegial and professional networks. Their study of Cavite counselors highlighted that social coping strategies such as seeking advice, sharing workload-related frustrations, and celebrating small successes with colleagues help counselors stay grounded and motivated in a resource-limited educational system.

By relying on these relationships, counselors were able to reframe challenges and build resilience, even when systemic issues such as heavy workloads, unclear role expectations, or a lack of resources persisted. In this sense, collegial support becomes a protective factor, reinforcing both personal well-being and professional effectiveness. A supportive workplace culture thus not only eases stress but also strengthens counselors' ability to deliver meaningful and sustained services to students.

## Major Theme 8: Collaborative Work Practices

Another coping mechanism employed by the counselors is through Collaborative Work Practices, which allow them to share responsibilities and maximize the collective strength of their team. Instead of handling challenges in isolation, they rely on coordination, case management, and strategic delegation to distribute tasks more efficiently. These practices help reduce individual workload while ensuring that students continue to receive the support they need. The American School Counselor Association emphasizes that school counselors should “lead, advocate, and collaborate” with administrators, teachers, and pupil services staff to design and manage comprehensive programs aligned with the school’s academic mission (ASCA, 2024). This approach enables counselors to integrate counseling functions into broader school initiatives, allowing for team-led interventions that optimize time and resources. Within the Philippine setting, emerging studies affirm the impact of school-based collaboration. Harrison, King, and Hocson (2023) highlight that effective partnerships, especially with school leadership, clarify counseling roles and create shared accountability. Collaborative relationships empower counselors to distribute tasks more strategically and prevent role overload, thereby forming two subthemes: Case Management, Workload Sharing, and Strategic Delegation.

### *Subtheme 8.1: Case Management and Workload Sharing*

Counselors reported that they share counseling responsibilities regardless of course or department assignments. For example, even if a student is not officially under their designated program, counselors willingly step in to conduct intake interviews and provide immediate support. They also described how colleagues cover for one another when someone is unavailable, and how guidance associates manage initial screenings before cases are escalated to licensed counselors.

“...kahit na hindi naming handle yung course, basta schedule sila for intake interview. Lahat kami nag-aaccommodate na kausapin yung mga bata.”, “...kung wala yung counselor, ako talaga yung sumasalo ng mga cases. In that case, nababawasan naman yung workload ng counselors per college... sharing of loads parang ganun... we try to co-manage yung counselors... kung natapos na sila sa workloads nila, they try to assist other college or other program.”, “Kung ilang cases pa lang naman, nirerefer talaga sakín kasi nakita nila yung lead... associates will do the initial screening... if they can manage it on their own, ok na. If not, saka nila i-refer sa guidance counselor.”

These practices highlight how collaboration serves as a buffer against overwhelming caseloads, ensuring that no student is left unattended despite limited manpower. This finding aligns with Gallardo and Chavez (2022), who emphasized that collegial support systems and collaborative teamwork among Filipino counselors play a crucial role in alleviating workplace stress and sustaining their professional well-being. In their phenomenological study, guidance counselors from different parts of the Philippines consistently described how peer support, harmonious relationships, and a cooperative office environment allowed them to manage the pressures of heavy workloads and limited resources. The authors noted that wellness and retention in the profession are not only products of individual coping strategies but are deeply reinforced by a supportive work environment, one characterized by strong collegial ties, psychological safety, and open communication. In other words, collaboration is not merely a practical response to limited manpower but also a relational and cultural resource that enhances resilience, work satisfaction, and professional effectiveness.

Similarly, Harrison et al. (2023) observed that Filipino counselors often transcend individual silos by engaging in case conferences, shared responsibilities, and collective problem-solving, strategies that enable them to meet the growing demand for counseling services despite systemic constraints.

### *Subtheme 8.2: Strategic Delegation*

Counselors also emphasized the importance of delegation to guidance associates, interns, and other support staff. Through planning and designated tasks, they can entrust responsibilities such as psychological first aid or preliminary interventions to associates, while licensed counselors step in only when further counseling is required. In some cases, on-the-job trainees also assist in programs, helping ease the workload and prevent burnout among staff.

“Meron kaming planning... may designated tasks sa guidance associates... ayaw ko lahat ng kilos nila ididictate... I have confidence in them or trust in them.”, “So far di pa kami case loaded... but if associates feel that we have to refer as guidance counselor, that’s when I step in. Wala pa group counseling pero yun ang gusto ko tutukan ngayon.”, “...ang mga guidance associate namin is sila yung sa mga PFA... now kung may nakikita po sila na kailangan ng further counseling saka po nila irerefer samin.”, “May mga OJTs din na tumutulong... so what we do is stick to realistic programs. At least nakakatulong yun para di kami masyado ma-burnout.”

These strategies illustrate that by entrusting specific functions to others, counselors can focus on more complex cases and core counseling duties, making their services more sustainable in the long run. This finding aligns with Lopez et al. (2025), who reported that guidance heads across Philippine schools view teamwork and strategic delegation as essential resilience mechanisms for navigating heavy professional demands. Their study stressed that role-sharing within the office helps sustain efficiency, ensures continuity of services, and prevents individual counselors from being overwhelmed by the volume of student concerns. Delegation also empowers support staff and interns, giving them opportunities for growth while strengthening the overall capacity of the counseling unit. In this sense, collective action and shared responsibility are not only practical solutions to limited manpower but also vital components of a sustainable counseling practice, one that protects the well-being of counselors and ensures that students consistently receive timely and practical support.

## Major Theme 9: Building Support from Parents and Faculty

Another coping mechanism identified by the participants is Building Support from Parents and Faculty. Since both groups play a crucial role in the educational environment, counselors actively seek ways to foster collaboration with teachers and parents. This involves enhancing faculty awareness of counseling services and addressing the stigma or resistance often shown by parents when interventions are recommended. Empirical studies reinforce the value of such collaboration.

Darmiany et al. (2022) developed a collaborative model in Indonesian elementary schools involving teachers, parents, and counselors. Their findings reveal that parental involvement significantly contributed to resolving students' non-academic problems, demonstrating how shared responsibility can positively impact intervention outcomes. Moreover, Gormley (2024) highlighted the central importance of consultation and collaboration in educational psychology. The study emphasizes that joint planning and problem-solving with faculty and parents enhances intervention relevance and acceptance, ultimately reinforcing the counselor's role and efficacy. Two subthemes under this are Enhancing Faculty Support Systems, Addressing Stigma, and Building Parent Awareness.

### *Subtheme 9.1: Enhancing Faculty Support Systems*

Counselors shared that they conduct regular psychoeducation activities, seminars, and orientations for faculty members to help them better understand students' mental health needs. These sessions refresh teachers on proper protocols, referral processes, and strategies for managing students with difficulties. Apart from formal training, counselors also highlighted the importance of open communication with faculty members through casual conversations and regular meetings.

"...ginagawa po talaga naming ang psychoeducation... nagbibigay po kami ng activities sa mga teachers, how to handle and manage students with mental health needs... na-refresh din sila sa protocols... Naaddress din po yung pinagdadaan nila, yun nararanasan nila. So napprocess namin. Tapos po nabibigyan din naming sila ng reminder", "Oo, we educate them through seminars and orientations... for the faculty members to be aware... lalong-lalo na doon sa referral.", "At the start of the school year... we educate the students and then of course, the faculty as well... about the services and the program.", "Every semester na mini-meet naming sila... this school year we plan to i-orient sila sa mental health policies, how to refer, how to assist students.", "May mga simpleng kamustahan, making sure na meron silang malalapitan na guidance office... pero we are thinking of ways paano magkakaroon pa ng stronger communication between the faculty and the guidance office."

These interactions build trust and ensure that the guidance office is seen as approachable and collaborative. These practices emphasize the proactive role counselors take in equipping teachers with knowledge and in cultivating stronger partnerships that contribute to a more supportive academic environment. Recent research reinforces this strategy. Abaño and Aranguren (2024) found that collaboration between guidance counselors and classroom advisers significantly improves the management of behavioral issues, reduces classroom disruptions, and establishes a stronger support system for students. Their study showed that when teachers are empowered and aligned with the guidance office, the burden on counselors is eased, student needs are addressed earlier, and interventions become more effective. In this sense, building strong partnerships with faculty is not simply an additional task—it is a central strategy that enhances school-wide support structures, alleviates counselor workload, and strengthens overall student outcomes.

### *Subtheme 9.2: Addressing Stigma and Building Parent Awareness*

Counselors also cope by navigating parental resistance through awareness-building efforts. They reported instances where parents initially dismissed or denied the importance of counseling, often due to stigma surrounding mental health. In response, counselors use different approaches such as listening first without invalidating parents' concerns, gradually explaining the importance of intervention, and framing support as a shared responsibility through co-parenting. Maintaining professionalism in confrontational situations and sustaining parent organizations were also strategies mentioned to encourage long-term collaboration.

"...as long as I was able to deliver the motive... pero may mga parents na hindi talaga open when it comes to mental health, may stigma pa rin o closed-minded... pero sino ba ang nagsu-suffer, yung anak nila.", "...I try to end stigma sa parents, sa unang pag-uusap pa lang po... binabasag ko na po yung stigma para maipalam na ang mental health ay kailangang makita, di kailangang ipagwalang bahala.", "Listen first, wag mo i-debunk... kasi maiinvalidate mo yung thoughts and feelings nila... I just listen first then iniisa-isa ko na.", "...we are dealing with them professionally... kahit hindi maganda pananalita nila, we still have to maintain a professional relationship with everyone.", "...may mga parents na nung una uncooperative pero eventually, pag naintindihan nila at naipaliwanag naming, nagiging cooperative na sila...we will try to explain sa parents na parang kailangan may co-parenting din... meron kaming parents organization... consistently tinatap nila kami to discuss matters regarding mental health."

These experiences reveal that while stigma and denial remain barriers, consistent communication and awareness-building help counselors gradually gain parents' trust and cooperation in supporting students' well-being. This challenge reflects broader Filipino cultural patterns. Martinez et al. (2020) confirmed in their systematic review that many Filipinos hold unfavorable attitudes toward formal psychological services, often preferring to seek help from family and close friends instead. They found that self and social stigma, hiya (shame), and the fear of "loss of face" are among the most substantial barriers to accessing professional support. Financial limitations and the perception that problems should be handled privately within the family further discourage help-seeking. Taken together, these findings explain why some parents initially resist counseling interventions. By addressing these cultural barriers through

respectful dialogue, psychoeducation, and consistent parent engagement, school counselors can normalize counseling as a collaborative support for students, gradually reducing resistance and stigma.

The coping practices of registered guidance counselors reveal that resilience in this profession is built from a balance of practicality, self-preservation, and collaboration. Their stories demonstrate that resourcefulness, effective time management, and minor creative adjustments enable them to make counseling possible even in environments with numerous limitations. At the same time, they recognize the importance of protecting their own well-being through boundaries, self-care, and emotional regulation, while drawing strength from supportive relationships in the workplace. Collaboration, whether with colleagues, teachers, or parents, further extends their capacity, reminding them that counseling is not a lone task but a shared responsibility within the academic community. At the core of these practices is a quiet determination to keep serving students meaningfully, even when the system itself offers only limited support.

**Table 3. Major Themes and Subthemes on the Meaning-making of Guidance Counselors**

<i>Major Themes</i>	<i>Subthemes</i>
10. Purpose Beyond the Self	10.1 Counseling as Spiritual Vocation 10.2 Affirmation through Student Success Stories
11. Student Transformation and Appreciation	11.1 Fulfillment through Student Growth 11.2 Validation through Student Gratitude
12. Service and Growth	12.1 Holistic Role of the Counselor 12.2 Personal Growth through Counseling

Table 3 presents the significant findings on the lived experiences, specifically the meaning-making, of Registered Guidance Counselors in Cavite, organized into major themes and their corresponding subthemes. The third research question asked: How do registered guidance counselors perceive and find meaning in their chosen profession? Findings indicate that counselors attach deep significance to their work by framing it as a purpose beyond themselves, often viewing counseling as a vocation and finding affirmation through the success stories of their students. They also draw meaning from student transformation and appreciation, experiencing fulfillment when they see growth and receiving validation through gratitude. Finally, they emphasized both service and personal growth, highlighting their holistic role in promoting student well-being and how counseling contributes to their own development as individuals. Taken together, these insights demonstrate that meaning is found not only in the positive changes counselors foster in others but also in their own continuous growth as professionals.

### **Major Theme 10: Purpose Beyond the Self**

Counselors shared that one of the deepest sources of meaning in their profession is the sense that their work extends beyond themselves. Rather than seeing counseling as simply a job or a way to earn a living, they view it as a calling rooted in service, spirituality, and the positive impact they create in the lives of students. This perspective emphasizes that the fulfillment they gain is not centered solely on personal achievement, but on the transformation and hope they help cultivate in others. Recent studies affirm this sense of vocation. Gallardo and Chavez (2022), in their phenomenological exploration of Filipino guidance counselors, emphasized that their participants derived meaning and resilience from a strong sense of purpose, often anchored in personal values and spiritual well-being. Similarly, international literature underscores that counselors find greater fulfillment when they perceive their work as aligned with broader life purpose and moral commitment (Niles & Gutierrez, 2024). Such findings highlight that counselors' professional identity is deeply intertwined with meaning-making processes that transcend institutional challenges. Two subthemes illustrate this: counseling as a spiritual vocation and affirmation through student success stories.

#### ***Subtheme 10.1: Counseling as Spiritual Vocation***

Counselors described their profession as something that transcends a regular job, framing it instead as a spiritual vocation. They expressed the belief that their path into counseling was guided by divine purpose, emphasizing that God "led" them into the role so they could serve and inspire students. For some, counseling is a way of helping "wounded souls" realize their potential, while for others, it is a constant reminder of their calling despite the challenges and uncertainties of the work. They see their profession not only as a career but also as a mission grounded in faith, service, and a higher sense of purpose.

Here are what the counselors said: "Unang-una kasi, nilead tayo ni Lord dito sa profession na to... in my simple act of action nakakatulong tayo sa mga bata, naiinspire at naencourage natin sila.... Ito yung dahilan kung bakit tayo nilead ni Lord sa will na to... para makatulong at makita silang nagpatuloy sa buhay", "I never thought I'd end up as a counselor... pero naniniwala ako na everything happens for a reason... God purposely sent me to work with students... and that assignment He gave me was really meaningful. It's a vocation... parang you can help wounded souls to realize their potential. That goes beyond being just a counselor", "Siguro ito yung calling... may mga panahon na ipapaalala sayo bakit ka nandito... may mga wins, may mga loss, but I keep moving forward."

These show that meaning for many counselors comes from viewing their work as a calling, one that allows them to impact lives in ways that go beyond professional duty. This reflects findings from Gallardo and Chavez (2022), who noted that Filipino guidance counselors often anchor their professional identity on spirituality, purpose, and advocacy for holistic student growth, which sustain them amid undervaluation and limited resources. Similarly, Lopez et al. (2025) emphasized that resilience among guidance

professionals is often framed within a strong sense of vocation and collective mission, reinforcing the role of spirituality in sustaining professional commitment. Beyond local evidence, Martinez et al. (2020) observed that Filipino cultural values of pakikipagkapwa (shared humanity) and faith play a central role in shaping both help-seeking and professional helping behaviors, underscoring why many counselors perceive their profession as a divinely guided mission. In addition, Artiola (2025) found that while Filipino counselors experience compassion fatigue, anchoring their practice in personal meaning and advocacy serves as a protective factor against burnout, further affirming that spirituality and vocation provide a deeper foundation for long-term commitment to the profession.

### ***Subtheme 10.2: Affirmation through Student Success Stories***

Counselors shared that their sense of meaning is strengthened when they witness positive transformations in their students' lives. They recounted experiences of students who once struggled with severe distress, such as suicidal thoughts or extreme withdrawal who eventually regained hope and confidence. Even simple gestures, like students initiating conversations, offering words of thanks, or acknowledging the counselor's role in their progress, were seen as powerful affirmations that they are on the right path. For many, these success stories serve as tangible reminders that despite the difficulties of the profession, their work has a lasting impact on students' academic, behavioral, and emotional growth.

"...ito yung kauna-unahang bata na Nakita ko na natulungan ko siya... dati suicidal na gusto na niyang matapos lahat pero ngayon nagtraining na siya para maging FA. Para sakin very fulfilling yun.", "I terminated 1 counseling session... from a student na hindi makausap mata sa mata... ngayon siya pa yung nangamusta. Hindi ako yung dahilan pero naging bridge ako para makita niya yung reason para magpatuloy.", "...a student told me, 'If I can write a book, I'll definitely put your name.' That reaffirmed that I'm doing the right thing...Nakikita mo yung clients mo... from despair to nag-iiba na yung confidence nila... they become self-sufficient and self-regulated. Yun yung gusto mong mangyari bilang counselor.", "Kapag nakikita mo nagiimprove mga bata, bumabalik sayo... It keeps me going... After mo silang makausap tapos nakikita mo may changes sa attitude nila... kahit mahirap at challenging, I find meaning kasi alam ko na natulungan ko sila academically, behaviorally, emotionally.", "Kapag nakita ko silang okay... kahit papano you had that experience... Kasi pag kausap ko na mga estudyante... somehow, it fuels you, it gas you up. Somehow, you are doing the right thing, you are on the right place."

These highlight how student success becomes a vital source of encouragement and affirmation, fueling counselors to continue their work with resilience and commitment. Harrison et al. (2023) observed that Filipino counselors often define professional success not in terms of institutional recognition or formal achievements, but through these relational and behavioral shifts that directly reflect student growth. This finding is echoed by Bulat-Ag-Cimafranca and Cimafranca III (2024), who reported that both guidance counselors and classroom advisers experience deep fulfillment when they see students becoming more compliant with rules, attending classes more consistently, and actively participating in learning. Such improvements are interpreted as concrete indicators of counseling effectiveness, reminding counselors that their work contributes to shaping not only academic outcomes but also the overall character and well-being of students. In this sense, positive behavioral change is more than just a student achievement; it is also a source of professional validation and personal meaning for counselors.

## **Major Theme 11: Student Transformation and Appreciation**

Another dimension of meaning that counselors emphasized is drawn from student transformation and appreciation. They shared that the progress and gratitude of students serve as potent reminders that their efforts are worthwhile. For many, meaning is found in seeing lives change, even in small ways, and knowing that their presence has made a difference. This perspective reflects that the fulfillment of counselors is deeply tied to the growth and recognition they receive from the students they serve. Gallardo and Chavez (2022), in their phenomenological study of Filipino guidance counselors, found that counselors draw resilience and motivation from witnessing student success. The sense of being valued and appreciated by students was identified as one of the strongest sources of meaning, allowing them to persevere despite systemic barriers. Similarly, Duncan (2024) highlighted that counselors who experience positive feedback and recognition from clients are more likely to sustain well-being and stave off burnout, suggesting that student transformation directly contributes to professional fulfillment. Under this are two subthemes, namely, Fulfillment through Student Growth and Validation through Student Gratitude.

### ***Subtheme 11.1: Fulfillment through Student Growth***

Counselors expressed that one of their most significant sources of motivation is witnessing students' growth. They find fulfillment in seeing students gain confidence, become self-sufficient, and develop resilience. Even the improvement of a single student was described as a marker of success, reinforcing the belief that every effort counts. Some counselors shared that preventing even one life from being lost to despair already affirms the significance of their profession.

"What keeps me motivated is definitely kapag... nag-iiba na yung confidence nila... they become self-sufficient and self-regulated.", "Kapag nakikita mo nagiimprove mga bata, bumabalik sayo... It keeps me going.", "The fact na nakakatulong tayo sa mga bata... naiinspire at naencourage natin sila na magpatuloy.", "Success is yun makita mo na sobrang natulungan mo yung bata. Success na yun para sakin.", "That's for me, it doesn't matter kung marami or kokonti pero kahit isa lang na nag-appreciate... I think that's success.", "One life is too many when it comes to suicide... One student educated already serves the value of our profession." These narratives highlight that the visible transformation of students provides counselors with a profound sense of accomplishment, shaping

their professional identity around the success of the learners they guide. Filipino guidance counselors during the pandemic similarly reported that even minor signs of student progress, such as opening up during sessions, attending counseling regularly, or demonstrating improved coping, were already meaningful markers of purpose (Harrison et al., 2023). Fulfillment did not necessarily come from dramatic change but was rooted in gradual growth, where counselors witnessed resilience developing one step at a time. Supporting this, Bulat-Ag-Cimafranca and Cimafranca III (2024) found that both counselors and classroom advisers experienced deep satisfaction when students showed improved attendance, better classroom participation, and increased compliance with rules. These modest but tangible behavioral improvements served as powerful affirmations of the impact of counseling, underscoring that student growth, whether big or small. Remains at the heart of counselors' sense of meaning and professional fulfillment.

### ***Subtheme 11.2: Validation through Student Gratitude***

Beyond witnessing growth, counselors also derive meaning from the gratitude expressed by students. Whether through messages, simple words of thanks, or heartfelt recollections of past counseling sessions, these gestures were described as powerful affirmations that sustain them emotionally. Counselors noted that even after exhausting days, appreciation from students, whether individually or through formal evaluations, makes the challenges feel lighter.

“Constantly bumabalik yung student para magpasalamat... kahit maliit o malaki yung nagawa ko, nagmamatter yun....Pag minessage ko, sasabihin ng student, ‘Sir ikaw po yung nagmomotivate sakin, natulungan niyo po talaga ako’... That ignites me to continue...Kapag may graduate student na magme-message, ‘Salamat sa pag-alalay at pagsuporta’... that simple note of appreciation keeps me going as a counselor”, “Kapag bumalik sila sayo at nagthank you... ikkwento nila yung sessions na naalala nila, yun ang pinakamasaya...Sabi ng estudyante, ‘Alam mo ma’am, tama po kayo, ngitian ko na lang yung nangyari... I learned a lot.’ Yun ma’am ang saya-saya.”, “Minsan may student na mag-message lang ng ‘Thank you Ma’am’ kahit simple lang pero ramdam mo yung genuine na appreciation.”, “Pagod na pagod na ako after the day... pero nung nakita ko yung evaluation results ng colleagues, supervisor, students parang balewala yung pagod.”.

These accounts illustrate that recognition from students not only validates counselors' efforts but also fuels their passion to continue, reinforcing the deep sense of purpose they attach to their role. This dynamic of appreciation aligns with findings by Manalo, Molina, and Vergara (2024), who showed that higher levels of gratitude among Filipino secondary students are significantly associated with enhanced psychological well-being, with gratitude accounting for a substantial portion of the variance in well-being. Although this gratitude stems from the student side, counselors interpret these expressions as reflections of the positive influence they have facilitated. In turn, such moments of appreciation become more than acknowledgments; they serve as emotional rewards that reinforce counselors' sense of purpose and strengthen their commitment to the profession.

## **Major Theme 12: Service and Growth**

The final dimension of meaning that emerged from the participants' accounts is Service and Growth. Counselors expressed that their role is not limited to addressing academic concerns but extends to fostering holistic development and, in turn, shaping their own personal growth. Meaning is therefore found both in the service they provide to students and in the parallel process of becoming better individuals through their practice of counseling. Gallardo and Chavez (2022) reported that Filipino guidance counselors derive fulfillment from the reciprocal nature of their work: as they accompany students in their challenges and milestones, they also strengthen their own resilience, values, and well-being. Similarly, Medina (2025) highlighted that the presence of job resources, such as opportunities for continuous training and emotional support, enables counselors to sustain work engagement and view their practice as both a service to others and a means of self-development. On a broader level, Duncan (2024) stressed that reflective practices and intentional self-care help counselors maintain balance, preventing burnout while fostering growth alongside their service to students. The two subthemes under this are Holistic Role of the Counselor and Personal Growth through Counseling.

### ***Subtheme 12.1: Holistic Role of the Counselor***

Counselors emphasized that they see themselves as more than academic facilitators. They described their role as one that bridges students, teachers, and parents, contributing not only to academic progress but also to students' emotional and social well-being. Even small interventions, such as talks or seminars that impact a fraction of the student body, were viewed as meaningful because they can spark resilience, empathy, and self-awareness. Counselors also highlighted that trust and rapport with students deepen over time, making their service not just functional but relational and holistic in nature.

“Malaki yung role natin... we serve more than academics... somehow nabibigyan natin ng balance academics and facets of mental well-being.”, “As a GC... kahit 10% na nabigyan mo ng talk may difference na nagyari sa buhay nila, Malaki bagay na rin.”, “We are here to assist them... to make the school environment inclusive... to help students develop resilience, empathy, and self-awareness.”, “I’m not looking at my job only as facilitator... it’s also parang as a bridge between students, teachers, parents... service not just in the mind but also heart and soul.”, “...he keeps on coming back to me, na whatever update nangyayari sa kanya bumabalik siya. That goes beyond rapport but real trust and confidence.”.

These perspectives showed that the meaning counselors derive from their work is grounded in the belief that they are contributing to the holistic growth of students, creating balance in both academic and personal dimensions of student life. Recent research supports

this perspective. Reissner (2024) noted that when counselors have a clear sense of professional identity, grounded in training, belonging, and role clarity, they demonstrate more substantial confidence and effectiveness in their practice. In the Philippine setting, this identity is closely tied to advocacy. Medalla et al. (2025) found that guidance staff often extend their responsibilities to social and emotional initiatives, creating learner-centered programs that respond to the broader developmental needs of students. Taken together, these insights affirm that the meaning counselors derive from their work rests on their ability to guide students toward holistic growth while also embodying a clear and empowered sense of their professional role.

### ***Subtheme 12.2: Personal Growth through Counseling***

In addition to serving others, counselors also recognize the personal growth they experience as a result of their profession. Some noted that sharing their own struggles with students allows them to connect more authentically, while others reflected that the lessons they impart to clients also guide their own lives. For many, counseling is both a service and a mirror that teaches them resilience, empathy, and self-awareness. They emphasized that being effective counselors requires being grounded individuals themselves, as personal well-being directly impacts their ability to support others.

“Bukod sa makatulong sa mga bata... shinashare ko rin yung struggles ko, para maramdaman nila na hindi sila nag-iisa.”, “I prosper din kasi I am moving towards... engaging with the community and collaborating with organizations.”, “If I am able to actually apply the things I share with my clients to my life... then that’s success for me.”, “Kung okay ka as a person, magiging okay ka rin sa lahat. Success for me is not being a failure as a person while helping others.”, “Being a counselor helped me grow din as a person... natuto ako mag-handle ng sarili kong struggles.”.

These reveal that counselors find meaning not only in transforming students’ lives but also in the transformation they undergo as professionals and individuals in the process of counseling. This view is consistent with Salazar et. al (2023), who found that Filipino counselors rely on both personal and professional self-care practices, such as boundary-setting, peer support, and reflective coping, to sustain their effectiveness. Their study emphasized that self-care is not merely an individual act of preservation but also a professional responsibility, since neglecting one’s own well-being can diminish the quality of support given to students. Counselors described practices like time management, maintaining work–life balance, and seeking strength from colleagues as essential strategies that allow them to continue serving others without becoming overwhelmed.

At the core of their narratives, registered guidance counselors find meaning not only in what they do but in who they become through their work. They see counseling as more than a profession; it is a vocation rooted in service, spirituality, and shared humanity. Their sense of fulfillment does not rest on titles or recognition but on the quiet victories they witness in students: renewed hope, small steps toward growth, and words of gratitude that affirm their presence matters. These moments transform challenges into purpose, allowing counselors to endure the weight of their responsibilities because they know their work creates ripples beyond themselves. The essence of their meaning-making lies in the intersection of service and self, where guiding others also shapes their own resilience, values, and identity.

### ***Proposed Program for the Guidance Counselors***

Based on the study's findings, the proposed program, entitled "Care for the Carers: A Wellness Framework for Registered Guidance Counselors," was designed as a direct response to the participants' lived experiences. The framework is anchored on both the results of this research and relevant literature, thereby ensuring that the interventions are contextually grounded and evidence-based. Specifically, the program seeks to address the pressing concerns of registered guidance counselors by focusing on five core objectives: (1) promoting counselor well-being and resilience, (2) strengthening professional identity and advocacy, (3) enhancing workload management and efficiency, (4) fostering meaning-making and continuous growth, and (5) building stronger partnerships with stakeholders. These objectives are operationalized through structured activities such as wellness workshops, retreats, peer-support groups, professional recognition initiatives, stakeholder dialogues, and workload support mechanisms. Collectively, these initiatives aim to reduce stress and burnout, clarify and elevate the professional role of guidance counselors, and sustain their motivation and commitment to the vocation.

## **Conclusions**

This study concludes that the practice of school counseling in the Philippines is both indispensable and deeply challenged. Registered guidance counselors in Cavite face systemic barriers, including inadequate facilities, low compensation, misconceptions about their role, and overwhelming workloads resulting from counselor shortages. These conditions highlight that the struggles of counselors are not merely individual burdens but reflections of broader institutional and policy gaps that need urgent attention. Despite these constraints, counselors demonstrate resilience through resourcefulness, collegial collaboration, and deliberate self-care. More importantly, they sustain their vocation by drawing meaning from student transformation, personal growth, and a sense of calling that reinforces their commitment to the profession. These findings affirm that the effectiveness of school counseling is not solely dependent on individual coping but also on systemic reforms and stronger institutional recognition. Thus, the study emphasizes two critical implications: first, the urgent need for educational institutions and policymakers to provide structural support, reduce workloads, and enhance the recognition of counselors’ expertise; and second, the importance of sustaining the inner resources and professional identity

of counselors through wellness programs, continuous training, and stakeholder collaboration. By addressing both systemic and personal dimensions, the profession of guidance and counseling can be strengthened to fully realize its vital role in promoting student well-being and holistic development.

The findings of this study reveal that the challenges faced by registered guidance counselors are not merely individual burdens but reflect larger systemic issues within the Philippine educational system. Addressing these concerns requires collective action from government agencies, professional organizations, school administrators, and the research community. The following recommendations are therefore advanced.

First, the national government and key education agencies such as the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) must take the lead in strengthening institutional support for guidance and counseling. Foremost is the enforcement of the recommended counselor–student ratio of 1:500, as the current shortage continues to compromise service quality. Recruitment efforts should be expanded by providing scholarships, licensure exam support, and incentives for those pursuing master’s degrees in counseling. At the same time, there must be a review of salary structures and benefits packages for guidance counselors. Given the professional and financial investment required to become licensed, compensation should be competitive and aligned with the demands of the role. Policymakers in Congress and DOLE can also explore upgrading counselor salary grades, ensuring parity with other specialized professions in education. Finally, DepEd and CHED should issue clearer guidelines that distinguish counseling from disciplinary or purely clerical tasks, reinforcing the unique developmental and therapeutic role of counselors in schools.

Second, the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association (PGCA), as the national professional body, should continue its advocacy for recognition and professionalization. This includes sustained awareness raising for policy reforms in compensation and role clarity, as well as designing structured programs for counselor wellness, peer supervision, and retention. Regional and national conferences organized by PGCA should also be made more accessible to counselors in rural or resource-limited areas. A proposed National Wellness and Retention Framework, jointly developed with DepEd and CHED, may serve as a blueprint for having systemic wellness initiatives, mentorship, and continuing education opportunities across schools nationwide.

Third, school administrators play a pivotal role in shaping the daily realities of counselors. Administrators are encouraged to provide dedicated and confidential counseling spaces, strategically located within the school, to increase accessibility and reduce stigma. They must also ensure adequate staffing support, assigning guidance associates, interns, or administrative aides to handle auxiliary tasks, thereby allowing licensed counselors to focus on their core counseling functions. Furthermore, a collaborative culture should be cultivated between the guidance office, faculty, and parents. This can be achieved through regular orientations, psychoeducation, and open dialogues that clarify the role of counselors and reinforce trust in counseling services. By institutionalizing these practices, administrators help create an environment where guidance is understood as supportive and preventive, not punitive.

Beyond systemic reforms from government and institutions, guidance counselors themselves can adopt strategies that strengthen their resilience and sustain their practice. First, it is recommended that counselors actively engage in continuing professional development through seminars, conferences, and peer learning opportunities, as these not only enhance skills but also reaffirm professional identity in a rapidly changing educational landscape. Counselors can also benefit from intentionally cultivating work–life boundaries, practicing self-care routines, and making use of wellness programs offered by schools or professional organizations. These practices help mitigate compassion fatigue and burnout, which were recurring concerns in the study. They are encouraged to adopt an advocacy mindset, not only for their students but also for their profession. By raising awareness about the scope of their work and clarifying role misconceptions, counselors contribute to reshaping perceptions and advancing the visibility of the profession. Engaging with organizations such as the PGCA and participating in policy dialogues can further amplify their voice, ensuring that their lived experiences inform reforms that affect their practice.

Finally, future research should build on the findings of this study by expanding the perspectives included. Future studies may explore the experiences of students, parents, and faculty members to provide a more holistic view of the counseling ecosystem. Comparative analyses between public and private institutions could also highlight systemic differences in counselor workloads, salaries, and professional support. Longitudinal studies are likewise recommended to assess the long-term impact of wellness and retention programs on counselor satisfaction, resilience, and student outcomes. These insights would further inform both policy and practice, ensuring that the profession continues to evolve in ways that safeguard counselor well-being and enhance student support.

Taken together, these recommendations emphasize that sustaining the counseling profession requires multi-level reforms and consistent advocacy. While individual resilience and coping strategies are important, they must be matched with institutional commitment, adequate resources, and supportive policies. Empowering guidance counselors through systemic support not only ensures their professional well-being but also strengthens their capacity to fulfill their mandate of promoting the holistic development and mental health of Filipino students.

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