The Challenges of Guidance Counselors in Supporting Students' Mental Health

Dr. Analyn G. Abdulraof

Mindanao State University – Maigo College of Education Science and Technology, Philippines

Abstract

This study explores the various challenges encountered by guidance counselors in effectively supporting students' mental health, particularly in educational settings. Guidance counselors often meet difficulties in providing comprehensive mental health care due to competing responsibilities, such as administrative tasks, teaching loads, and the stigma associated with mental health issues. The primary objective of this research is to investigate how these factors affect the capacity of counselors to offer personalized mental health support to students. Operating within the legal frameworks of the Mental Health Act of 2018 (Republic Act No. 11036) and DepEd Order No. 74, s. 2019, this study highlights a significant gap between policy and practice. While these laws emphasize the provision of mental health services in schools, many guidance counselors are hindered by the burden of non-counseling duties, limiting their ability to fulfil their roles effectively. This gap in implementation results in inadequate mental health support, negatively impacting students' overall well-being. The significance of this research lies in its focus on addressing these challenges to improve mental health services within schools. Findings reveal that counselors are constrained by time, workload, and a lack of resources, leading to decreased quality of care for students dealing with common mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, family conflicts, and bullying. Based on these findings, the study recommends hiring additional full-time guidance counselors, reducing administrative burdens, and launching regular mental health awareness campaigns to mitigate stigma. These efforts would help ensure better mental health care for students, aligning with the goals of Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), promoting both mental health support and a conducive learning environment.

Keywords: *Challenges, guidance counselors, student mental health, stigma*

INTRODUCTION

Mental health issues among students have emerged as a significant concern in educational institutions worldwide. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) highlights that mental health interventions in schools lead to improved academic performance, social relationships, and overall well-being. On the study of Baskin et al., (2010) it indicates that mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and stress, have a profound impact on students' academic performance, social interactions, and overall well-being. Despite the increasing prevalence of mental health problems, many schools still struggle to provide adequate support for students. In the Philippines, the implementation of mental health programs in majority of the schools is still in its initial phase, and the resources dedicated to addressing students' mental health needs remain insufficient. This study seeks to examine the existing support structures, particularly in the context of school-based guidance counseling, and the factors that hinder counselors from effectively addressing students' mental health concerns. One of the critical gaps identified in the literature is the dual role that many guidance counselors in schools must play. Many are tasked with non-counseling responsibilities, such as administrative duties, teaching, and coordination of extracurricular activities, which take up a significant portion of their time (Reiner & Hernandez, 2013). This role conflict often limits their ability to offer personalized care to students who require mental health support. According to a study by Gysbers (2006), guidance counselors who are overburdened with administrative duties are less likely to provide effective mental health interventions, leading to unmet needs among students. This gap becomes more concerning when considering that many students hesitate to seek help due to stigma or lack of awareness of available resources (Rickwood et al., 2005). In schools where counselors are overstretched, the stigma surrounding mental health remains largely unaddressed. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policy changes that can

improve mental health services in schools. The Mental Health Act of 2018 (Republic Act No. 11036) mandates the integration of mental health services into the Philippine education system, highlighting the importance of accessible mental health care for students. However, the lack of concrete guidelines for the implementation of this law at the school level creates a critical gap that this study aims to address. Moreover, while the Department of Education (DepEd) has issued orders such as DepEd Order No. 74, s. 2019, which calls for the promotion of mental health in schools, many institutions still lack the manpower and training needed to comply with these directives effectively. By exploring how non-counseling responsibilities affect guidance counselors' ability to provide personalized care, this study aims to identify key areas for improvement. It also seeks to propose policies for reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues, ensuring that students feel comfortable seeking help. The findings of this study can contribute to the development of more structured mental health programs within schools, aligning with the goals of the Mental Health Act and supporting students' overall well-being.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research design, employing semi-structured interviews to gather data from guidance counselors. The purposive sampling method was used to select counselors from various institutions, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives. The interviews focused on exploring the challenges encountered by Guidance Counselors encountered in dealing with student mental health, their strategies for overcoming these challenges, and their perceptions of the current mental health support system within their institutions. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, identifying key themes and patterns that reflect the counselors' experiences and dilemmas in their roles.Moreover, this study adhered to and safeguarded the sanctity of research ethics. Thus, all measures to protect the respondent's identity and the ways to govern confidentiality, integrity, and objectivity were strictly followed and observed throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In addressing the mental health needs of students, guidance counselors play a critical role in providing emotional support, managing crises, and fostering students' overall well-being. However, the ability of counselors to offer effective mental health services is often hindered by numerous challenges. This study's thematic analysis reveals key obstacles that affect their capacity to provide adequate mental health support. The themes identified through this analysis provide a comprehensive understanding of how these challenges apparent in daily practice. Understanding these themes is crucial, as they highlight the gaps between mental health policies and the actual delivery of services in schools. Addressing these challenges is essential to improving mental health support systems, ensuring that students receive the care they need, and aligning school practices with legal frameworks and global standards such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The following analysis provides a foundation for developing actionable recommendations and proposed or reinforce existing policies related to it to alleviate the burdens confronted by counselors, to promote mental health awareness, and enhance overall student well-being.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES
Theme 1: Diverse Educational and Training Backgrounds
Mental health counseling professionals come from varied educational and training backgrounds, ranging from formal graduate degrees to short-term workshops and professional seminars. While some counselors have advanced education rooted in theoretical and practical foundations (Corey, 2016), others rely on shorter training programs to meet immediate professional needs (Blom et al., 2021). This diversity highlights differences in access to formal education and professional development opportunities. "*I pursued a master's degree to strengthen my knowledge in mental health, but I know some colleagues who rely mostly on short workshops due to financial constraints,*" one respondent explained.

A strong emphasis is placed on continuing professional development, with many professionals attending workshops and conferences to stay updated. Lifelong learning is crucial in counseling, as mental health issues evolve over time (King et al., 2019). Organizations like the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association (PGCA) and the Psychological Association of the Philippines (PAP) play a significant role in offering ongoing training. Research suggests that continuous professional development enhances competency and ensures that counselors remain effective in their practice (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2013). "*I make it a point to attend annual conferences because they help me stay informed about new mental health trends,*" another respondent shared. However, gaps in training opportunities persist, with some professionals facing financial constraints, geographical limitations, or lack of institutional support (Guiffrida, 2015). Limited training access may hinder counselors' ability to provide comprehensive mental health support, particularly in school settings where increasing numbers of students present with anxiety, depression, and trauma-related issues (King et al., 2019).While training provides a foundational understanding of mental health support, many professionals highlight the need for practical application, particularly in severe cases such as trauma, addiction, and suicide prevention (Cramer & Kapusta, 2017). Research emphasizes that crisis intervention and trauma-informed care require specialized skills beyond general counseling education (Meyers et al., 2015). School counselors, in particular, often lack the necessary resources and institutional backing to address severe mental health concerns effectively.Despite these challenges, professionals express optimism about applying their training, though many recognize the need for more hands-on experience. Supervised practice is essential for bridging the gap between theoretical learning and real-world counseling applications (Neukrug, 2017). Research highlights that practical experience enhances professional confidence and skill development, leading to more effective counseling interventions (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2013).

Theme 2: Gaps in Training Opportunities

Many professionals working in educational settings report limited opportunities for formal professional development specifically related to mental health. A significant number of respondents indicate that their only exposure to mental health topics has been through seminars or short workshops, which often lack the depth required to provide comprehensive training. "*Most of the training available is very brief, and we don't get enough hands-on experience to feel truly prepared*," one respondent shared. This finding aligns with research showing that educators and school counselors frequently feel unprepared to address mental health concerns due to inadequate training in this area (Reinke et al., 2011). Without structured and in-depth professional development, counselors may struggle to provide appropriate mental health interventions, especially as student needs become more complex. The absence of formalized mental health training limits their ability to recognize warning signs, implement evidence-based interventions, and offer effective crisis support. These gaps in training could have significant implications on student well-being, as poorly trained professionals may either overlook serious mental health concerns or apply ineffective strategies that do not address underlying issues.While some individuals engage in self-directed learning—such as reading new research or networking with peers—informal learning does not fully compensate for structured, evidence-based training programs (Cameron & Turtle-Song, 2002). Although self-directed learning demonstrates a proactive approach to professional growth, it lacks the standardization and depth of formal training programs. "*I try to keep up with new developments by reading and attending webinars, but it's not the same as structured training with expert guidance,*" another respondent noted. Relying on self-initiated learning may also result in inconsistencies in knowledge and practice, as different professionals may interpret mental health concerns differently. Moreover, informal learning does not always provide direct access to expert guidance, mentorship, or supervision, which are essential for developing advanced clinical skills. This reinforces the need for structured programs that offer comprehensive coverage of essential mental health topics, ensuring that school counselors and educators are adequately prepared to respond to student concerns with confidence and competence.Many respondents recognize the importance of staying updated with evolving trends in mental health to effectively support students. However, they report difficulties accessing advanced training in areas such as crisis intervention, trauma-focused therapy, and culturally responsive counseling. The need for specialized training is particularly

crucial in handling severe psychiatric conditions, as research has shown that counselors with advanced crisis management skills are better equipped to address suicide risk and trauma cases (Jobes, 2016). Without specialized training, counselors may struggle with assessing high-risk cases, understanding trauma-related behaviors, and implementing appropriate interventions for students dealing with severe distress. Furthermore, as mental health concerns become more prevalent in schools, professionals must be equipped with tools to navigate complex cases that go beyond general counseling techniques.Moreover, as educational institutions become more diverse, counselors must also develop cultural competency to effectively support students from various backgrounds. Sue and Sue (2016) emphasize that culturally responsive counseling is essential to ensure interventions are appropriate and sensitive to students' lived experiences. A lack of training in cultural competency may result in misunderstandings, misinterpretations, or unintentional biases that hinder effective counseling interventions. Without a strong understanding of cultural influences on mental health, professionals may fail to recognize how factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and family dynamics impact students' emotional and psychological well-being.Another key gap in training is the lack of practical exposure to real-life mental health scenarios. Some respondents note that while theoretical knowledge is essential, hands-on training through role-playing, case studies, and real-world crisis simulations is crucial in preparing them for actual counseling situations. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (2015) highlights that learning is most effective when individuals actively engage in real-world applications and reflect on their experiences. When professionals do not have sufficient opportunities to practice handling mental health crises, they may struggle with applying theoretical knowledge in real-life situations, leading to hesitation, uncertainty, or ineffective interventions. Studies suggest that training programs incorporating applied learning strategies, such as supervised internships and simulated counseling exercises, significantly improve counselors' confidence and decision-making abilities (James & Gilliland, 2017). Exposure to real-life scenarios allows counselors to experience the emotional intensity and ethical dilemmas they may face in the field, helping them build resilience and adaptability in managing challenging cases.

Theme 3: General Feeling of Inadequacy and Areas of Difficulty across Mental Health Counseling

A general feeling of inadequacy among school counselors further compounds these challenges, particularly in areas such as substance abuse counseling, crisis intervention for suicidal ideation, and handling complex mental health cases. Substance abuse counseling was highlighted as particularly difficult, with respondents indicating a lack of preparation and confidence in addressing such cases. "*Handling students struggling with substance use feels overwhelming because I lack the necessary training. Without clear policies, it's difficult to establish proper intervention strategies,*" one respondent noted. Research supports this concern, as Wolff and Koller (2021) found that structured institutional policies, ongoing professional development, and collaboration with addiction specialists are necessary for effective substance abuse intervention. Similarly, the absence of clear drug-related policies at the institutional level makes it harder for counselors to develop and implement effective intervention strategies.Managing suicidal ideation and depression among students was another area where counselors expressed difficulty, as these cases involve life-threatening risks requiring immediate intervention. "*Suicidal cases are the most distressing because the responsibility is so heavy. I always fear making a mistake that could cost a life,*" a respondent shared. Research by Cramer and Kapusta (2017) highlights that inadequate training in suicide risk assessment contributes to professional burnout and feelings of inadequacy among counselors. Continuous professional development, structured suicide prevention training, and peer supervision can help alleviate the stress associated with managing these cases. More broadly, counselors who lack formal training in psychology or mental health counseling often experience uncertainty in their ability to address students' mental health needs. "*There are moments when I feel unqualified to deal with the depth of mental health issues students face. More training and guidance would help build my confidence,*" one counselor admitted. This aligns with Neukrug (2017), who emphasizes the importance of strong foundational training in psychology for effective mental health practice. Comprehensive training programs and mentorship opportunities (King et al., 2019) can help address these concerns by equipping counselors with essential skills in mental health assessment and intervention.Through the integration of mental health into the curriculum,

sustained awareness programs, and active parental involvement, schools can take meaningful steps to combat stigma. By fostering an environment where mental health is treated with the same importance as academic success, students are more likely to feel comfortable seeking the support they need. Guidance counselors continue to advocate for these strategies, emphasizing that the path to reducing stigma begins with education, awareness, and a collaborative school-community approach.

Theme 4: Administrative and Extracurricular Responsibilities Overburden Counselors

School counselors are increasingly overburdened with administrative and extracurricular responsibilities, which significantly impact their ability to provide adequate mental health support to students. Many counselors in the locale also serve as teachers, balancing dual roles that create role conflicts and limit their effectiveness in offering psychological and emotional support (Reiner & Hernandez, 2013). Research by Thompson and Moffett (2019) highlights the strain faced by educators who must navigate multiple roles, leading to stress, burnout, and diminished well-being. Additionally, counselors are often tasked with administrative duties such as scheduling, reporting, and attending meetings, which detract from their primary counseling responsibilities. Scarborough and Culbreth (2008) found that excessive administrative tasks can consume up to 60% of a school counselor's workweek, reducing the time available for direct student interactions. Furthermore, career and academic counseling, though essential, add to the workload and prevent counselors from prioritizing more urgent mental health concerns (Bridgeland et al., 2011). "*The time I spend on paperwork and administrative duties takes away from the time I should be spending with students who need guidance and support,*" one counselor expressed. Another guidance counselor added, "*Balancing teaching and counseling roles makes it challenging to fully address the mental health needs of students. We need clearer role descriptions and additional support staff to ease this burden.*" This aligns with findings from ASCA (2019), which state that counselors often face role overload, forcing them to prioritize administrative duties over student support. This imbalance affects the quality of care provided, as counselors struggle with time constraints and exhaustion, leading to diminished engagement and compassion fatigue (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Figley, 2002). "*It's frustrating when administrative work takes preference over counseling sessions,*" another respondent shared. "*We entered this profession to help students, but time constraints often prevent us from providing the support they need.*" The overwhelming workload also reduces their ability to implement proactive mental health interventions, resulting in a reactive approach to student support (Reback, 2010). Through the integration of mental health into the curriculum, sustained awareness programs, and active parental involvement, schools can take meaningful steps to combat stigma. By fostering an environment where mental health is treated with the same importance as academic success, students are more likely to feel comfortable seeking the support they need. Guidance counselors continue to advocate for these strategies, emphasizing that the path to reducing stigma begins with education, awareness, and a collaborative school-community approach.

Theme 5: Stigma and Reluctance to Seek Mental Health Support

Despite increasing awareness, stigma surrounding mental health remains a significant obstacle to students seeking professional help. Many guidance counselors expressed that students are reluctant to seek support due to the fear of being judged or labeled as weak. One counselor stated, "*Students often tell me they worry about what their peers will think if they are seen going to the guidance office. They fear being perceived as unstable or problematic.*" This stigma is often reinforced by cultural and societal attitudes that discourage open discussions about mental health. Research by Corrigan and Watson (2002) highlights that stigma serves as a primary deterrent to accessing mental health services, as individuals may fear discrimination or negative perceptions. Additionally, Gulliver et al. (2010) emphasize the role of stigma in discouraging help-seeking behaviors, particularly among young individuals navigating social and academic pressures.Cultural background and personal beliefs significantly influence students' willingness to seek mental health support. Many guidance counselors noted that in collectivist cultures, mental health struggles are often perceived as private family matters rather than issues that warrant external intervention. One counselor shared, "*Some students have told me that their families discourage them from seeking help, saying that personal problems should be handled within the family.*" Cheon et al. (2020) highlight that seeking external help in such cultural contexts may be viewed as

bringing dishonor to the family, further discouraging individuals from utilizing available services. Moreover, financial constraints and accessibility issues serve as additional barriers, limiting students' ability to seek professional assistance.Family expectations also play a pivotal role in shaping students' attitudes toward mental health services. Some guidance counselors revealed that students hesitate to seek help because they fear disappointing their families. "*One student confided that they would rather struggle alone than risk their parents thinking they are weak,*" a counselor reported. Sue et al. (2019) note that cultural values emphasizing resilience and self-reliance contribute to this reluctance, making it essential for schools to adopt culturally sensitive approaches when designing mental health outreach programs. Given these challenges, counselors suggested that mental health services should be discreet and easily accessible, reducing the fear of exposure. This aligns with Rickwood et al. (2005), who suggest that reinforcing confidentiality can help reshape perceptions of counseling services and encourage students to seek help.A significant theme emerging from the responses is the misconception that the guidance office primarily serves a disciplinary role rather than a source of mental health support. Many guidance counselors expressed concerns that students avoid the office because they associate it with punishment. "*Students have told me they see the guidance office as a place you go only if you are in trouble,*" one counselor explained. This perception aligns with findings by Keys et al. (1998), which indicate that guidance offices are often associated with behavioral infractions rather than counseling. Vogel et al. (2007) further argue that individuals are less likely to seek help if they fear negative judgment from peers or authority figures. Counselors emphasized that confidentiality concerns also deter students from reaching out. "*Some students ask if their teachers or parents will find out if they see me, and that fear prevents them from seeking support,*" another counselor shared. To address these issues, counselors recommended that schools actively work to change the image of the guidance office by promoting success stories of students who have benefited from counseling, making counseling services more approachable and normalized.Despite these challenges, some guidance counselors noted that mental health literacy and awareness programs have positively impacted students' willingness to seek help. Jorm et al. (2006) found that increased mental health literacy enables individuals to recognize symptoms of mental disorders and seek early intervention. Schools that implement regular mental health education initiatives contribute to reducing stigma and fostering a supportive environment where students feel comfortable seeking assistance (Wyn et al., 2000). Counselors also recommended peer-led mental health initiatives, where trained students provide initial support and guidance to their peers, fostering a more accepting environment. "*When students hear from their peers that seeking help is okay, they feel less afraid to reach out,*" a counselor observed.By addressing stigma, cultural barriers, and the fear of judgment, schools can create an environment where students feel empowered to seek the support they need without hesitation. Strengthening confidentiality, rebranding the guidance office as a mental health resource, implementing peer support programs, and promoting culturally sensitive outreach are crucial steps in ensuring that students feel safe and supported when seeking help.

Theme 6: Strategies to Reduce Mental Health Stigma in Schools as suggested by the respondents

Reducing mental health stigma in schools requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates mental health awareness into daily school life, sustains ongoing educational initiatives, and actively involves parents and the broader community. Guidance counselors identified several key strategies to address these challenges, emphasizing the need for proactive efforts to normalize mental health discussions and encourage students to seek help without fear of judgment.One primary strategy recommended by respondents is the integration of mental health discussions into the school curriculum and extracurricular activities. Guidance counselors emphasized that including mental health topics in subjects such as health education, psychology, and even literature fosters a better understanding of mental well-being. Additionally, organizing events such as Mental Health Month activities, career week celebrations, and student-led awareness campaigns helps reinforce the importance of mental health in the school environment. *"By making mental health discussions a routine part of education, students learn that seeking help is normal and encouraged,"* one counselor noted. Research supports this approach, as Jorm et al. (2006) found that embedding mental health literacy into the curriculum significantly improves students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to mental health. Similarly, Reavley and Jorm

(2013) highlight that schools play a crucial role in shaping students' perceptions, and incorporating mental health education into everyday learning can significantly reduce stigma.Another critical strategy is the implementation of sustained awareness programs and literacy sessions. Respondents emphasized that one-time campaigns are insufficient; instead, schools must engage in continuous discussions through workshops, classroom dialogues, and peer support initiatives. *"Regular mental health literacy sessions help students internalize that mental well-being is just as important as physical health,"* a guidance counselor explained. Research by Corrigan and Shapiro (2010) indicates that the effectiveness of stigma-reduction campaigns depends on their frequency and consistency, reinforcing the need for sustained efforts. Additionally, Rickwood et al. (2005) stress that repeated exposure to accurate mental health information helps shift perceptions over time, making students more likely to seek support when needed. Schools that maintain an ongoing dialogue about mental health can build a culture of openness and understanding, reducing the hesitancy to seek counseling.Community engagement and parental involvement also emerged as essential components in reducing stigma. Guidance counselors emphasized the importance of hosting parent education programs, workshops, and school-community partnerships to extend mental health conversations beyond the classroom. *"Parents' perceptions of mental health often shape how comfortable students feel seeking support. Educating parents helps create a more accepting environment at home,"* one counselor shared. Research by Sue et al. (2019) supports this view, noting that cultural values and family beliefs play a significant role in shaping students' attitudes toward mental health services. Additionally, Hoare et al. (2017) found that engaging parents in school-based mental health initiatives enhances students' willingness to access support by fostering a more inclusive and supportive home environment. By ensuring that mental health awareness extends beyond the school, educators can help break generational cycles of stigma and encourage a more open discussion about mental well-being.Through the integration of mental health into the curriculum, sustained awareness programs, and active parental involvement, schools can take meaningful steps to combat stigma. By fostering an environment where mental health is treated with the same importance as academic success, students are more likely to feel comfortable seeking the support they need. Guidance counselors continue to advocate for these strategies, emphasizing that the path to reducing stigma begins with education, awareness, and a collaborative school-community approach.

General Conclusions

The findings from this study highlight several key themes that underscore the challenges and opportunities in addressing mental health stigma and training gaps among school counselors and educators. The thematic analysis revealed that while efforts are being made to integrate mental health awareness into school settings, significant barriers persist, including inconsistent training opportunities, diverse educational backgrounds, and a lack of hands-on experience.First, the study emphasizes the importance of structured and continuous mental health education in schools. By incorporating mental health topics into curricula and extracurricular activities, schools can normalize discussions about mental well-being and encourage help-seeking behaviors among students. Ongoing awareness programs and parental engagement further strengthen these efforts by fostering a supportive environment both at school and at home. Research consistently highlights that sustained, school-wide initiatives contribute to reducing mental health stigma and improving student outcomes.Second, findings demonstrate the diverse educational backgrounds of mental health professionals in school settings. While some counselors receive extensive formal training, others rely on short-term workshops and seminars to enhance their knowledge. Although continuous professional development is widely acknowledged as essential, gaps in access to specialized training remain a concern. Financial constraints, geographical limitations, and lack of institutional support hinder many professionals from obtaining advanced training in critical areas such as crisis intervention, trauma-informed care, and cultural competency.Furthermore, the study reveals that many school counselors feel inadequately prepared to address severe mental health concerns due to a lack of hands-on training. Practical exposure through supervised internships, case simulations, and real-world counseling exercises is crucial in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Respondents stressed the need for experiential learning

opportunities that allow them to develop confidence, refine their clinical skills, and navigate complex cases effectively.Finally, addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts among schools, policymakers, and professional organizations. Expanding access to affordable and high-quality training programs, integrating experiential learning strategies, and fostering school-community partnerships can enhance the capacity of counselors to support students' mental health effectively. As mental health issues continue to rise in educational settings, equipping professionals with the necessary skills and resources remains a critical priority in ensuring the well-being of students and reducing mental health stigma in schools.By implementing these strategies and addressing the identified gaps, schools can create a more supportive and inclusive environment where students feel empowered to seek help without fear of judgment. Ensuring that school counselors receive adequate training and institutional backing will further strengthen mental health support systems, ultimately benefiting students, educators, and the broader school community.

5.0 Recommendations and Proposed Policies Based on Findings

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that guidance counselors face significant challenges in effectively supporting students' mental health. Those challenges highlight the need for targeted interventions and policies. The recommendations and proposed school policies aim to address these issues by providing structural support, improving resource allocation, and fostering a more open and supportive environment for mental health services. By implementing these actions, schools can enhance the capacity of guidance counselors to focus on personalized care, reduce stigma through education and awareness campaigns, and promote a holistic approach to student well-being. Henceforth, changes are vital in creating a school environment that aligns with national education policies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring that students receive the mental health support they need in order to succeed.

1. **Expand Mental Health Resources and Counseling Personnel**
   The schools should prioritize hiring additional Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) to reduce the workload on existing staff, allowing them to dedicate more time to counseling students. Given the large student population, hiring at least two or three full-time guidance counselors is essential.

2. **Integrate Mental Health Education Across Curriculum and School Activities**
   Incorporate mental health literacy into all learning areas and student activities, such as career week, in-house consultations, and symposiums, to normalize conversations about mental health. Teachers should be trained to deliver psychoeducation within their lessons to raise awareness and reduce stigma.

3. **Establish Ongoing Mental Health Training and Development for Faculty and Staff**
   Schools must provide continuous professional development opportunities for counselors, teachers, and administrative staff to address evolving mental health needs. This includes training in trauma-informed care, crisis intervention, and culturally responsive counselling and the like.

4. **Delegate Administrative Duties to Free Up Time for Counseling**
   Administrative tasks should be streamlined or delegated to support staff, allowing guidance counselors to prioritize mental health care. Schools should hire additional administrative staff to reduce the burden on counselors and teachers who juggle multiple roles.

5. **Promote Parental Involvement and Awareness in Mental Health Initiatives**
   Engage parents through regular mental health workshops and open dialogues about the importance of mental well-being. These sessions should emphasize the impact of mental health on academic performance and student success.

6. **Address the Stigma of Mental Health Services**
   Schools should actively work to change the perception of the guidance office as a disciplinary or problem-solving center by promoting it as a safe and supportive space for all students. Stigma reduction efforts should involve awareness campaigns and open discussions among students, parents, and faculty.

7. **Foster a Culture of Support and Openness**
   Schools should cultivate an environment where students feel safe and comfortable approaching counselors. This can be achieved by providing private, confidential spaces for counseling sessions and ensuring students are aware of the services available to them.

Proposed Policies to be implemented

1. Implement a policy that mandates a minimum student-to-counselor ratio in line with international standards, such as the 1:250 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). The least is the DepEd Order 19, s. 2016 which mentioned that services of the guidance counsellors shall be shared among schools at a ratio of one (1) for every five hundred (500) students. This policy ensures that guidance counselors can focus on mental health support rather than being overwhelmed by administrative tasks.

2. Introduce a policy requiring the integration of mental health topics into existing subjects, particularly in values education and social sciences. This policy would also mandate yearly mental health awareness campaigns, school-wide events, and peer support programs to foster a supportive school environment.

3. Mandate that all faculty and staff undergo at least two professional development workshops per year focused on student mental health. Additionally, new hires should be required to complete mental health awareness and intervention training within their first year of employment.

4. Implement a workload management policy that requires a separation of roles between counseling and administrative duties. Guidance counselors should have dedicated time blocks for counseling sessions, with clear guidelines for when administrative tasks can be delegated to non-counseling personnel.

5. Develop a policy that requires schools to conduct at least one parent-focused mental health workshop per semester. Schools should also provide resources to parents on how to support their children's mental health at home and within the community.

6. Introduce a "Mental Health Safe Zone" policy that redefines the role of the guidance office. This policy would require the office to actively promote its role in emotional support and wellness, separate from its disciplinary functions. Additionally, schools should launch anti-stigma campaigns that include testimonials, interactive sessions, and peer support groups.

7. Implement a confidentiality and privacy policy that ensures all student-counselor interactions are kept strictly confidential, unless a student is at risk of harm. This policy should also guarantee that students are informed about the availability and purpose of counseling services through orientations and student handbooks. By implementing these recommendations and policies, schools can improve mental health support systems, reduce stigma, and create an environment where students, staff, and parents feel empowered to prioritize mental well-being.

Acknowledgement

REFERENCES

1. Baskin, T. W., Slaten, C. D., Sorenson, C., Glover-Russell, J., & Merson, D. (2010). Does youth psychotherapy improve academically related outcomes? A meta-analysis. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 57(3), 290-296.
2. Gysbers, N. C. (2006). Improving school guidance and counseling practices through effective and sustained professional development. Professional School Counseling, 9(2), 144-151.
3. Reiner, S. M., & Hernandez, T. J. (2013). Examining gender differences in school counselors' workload related to administrative duties. Journal of School Counseling, 11(15), 1-26.
4. Republic Act No. 11036. (2018). The Mental Health Act. Retrieved from https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2018/06/20/republic-act-no-11036/
5. Rickwood, D. J., Deane, F. P., Wilson, C. J., & Ciarrochi, J. (2005). Young people's help-seeking for mental health problems. Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health, 4(3), 218-251.
6. Blom, V., Ernstsson, O., Burström, B., & Svedberg, P. (2021). Knowledge and competence in mental health among social workers, managers, and employers. Social Work in Mental Health, 19(1), 1-17.
7. Corey, G. (2016). Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy. Cengage Learning.
8. Guiffrida, D. A. (2015). Constructive clinical supervision in counseling and psychotherapy. Routledge.

9. Hofmann, S. G., Asnaani, A., Vonk, I. J., Sawyer, A. T., & Fang, A. (2012). The efficacy of cognitive-behavioral therapy: A review of meta-analyses. Cognitive Therapy and Research, 36(5), 427-440.

10. King, R., Scheuermeyer, J., Harvey, K., & Kim, A. (2019). Building competence in counseling: The critical role of professional development. Journal of Counseling & Development, 97(4), 400-411.

11. Corey, G. (2016). Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy (10th ed.). Cengage Learning.

12. ramer, R. J., & Kapusta, N. D. (2017). A social-ecological framework of theory, assessment, and prevention of suicide. Frontiers in Psychology, 8, 1756. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01756

13. Meyers, R., Sweeney, A. C., & Brennan, S. (2015). Professional identity development of counselor education students: A phenomenological study. Journal of Counselor Leadership and Advocacy, 2(2), 143-158.

14. Neukrug, E. (2017). The world of the counselor: An introduction to the counseling profession (5th ed.). Cengage Learning.

15. Rønnestad, M. H., & Skovholt, T. M. (2013). The developing practitioner: Growth and stagnation of therapists and counselors. Routledge.

16. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). Trauma-informed care in behavioral health services. In Treatment Improvement Protocol Series 57.

17. James, R. K., & Gilliland, B. E. (2017). Crisis intervention strategies (8th ed.). Cengage Learning. Jobes, D. A. (2016). Managing suicidal risk: A collaborative approach (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

18. Miller, W. R., & Carroll, K. M. (Eds.). (2006). Rethinking substance abuse: What the science shows, and what we should do about it. Guilford Press.

19. Neukrug, E. (2017). The world of the counselor: An introduction to the counseling profession (5th ed.). Cengage Learning.

20. Roberts, A. R., & Ottens, A. J. (2005). The seven-stage crisis intervention model: A roadmap to goal attainment, problem-solving, and crisis resolution. Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention, 5(4), 329-339.

21. Wolff, N., & Koller, P. (2021). Substance abuse treatment and the role of policies in recovery. Substance Use & Misuse, 56(9), 1281-1290. https://doi.org/10.1080/10826084.2021.1904878

22. Cameron, S., & Turtle-Song, I. (2002). Learning to write case notes using the SOAP format. Journal of Counseling & Development, 80(3), 286-292.

23. Jobes, D. A. (2016). Managing suicidal risk: A collaborative approach (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

24. Reinke, W. M., Stormont, M., Herman, K. C., Puri, R., & Goel, N. (2011). Supporting children's mental health in schools: Teacher perceptions of needs, roles, and barriers. School Psychology Quarterly, 26(1), 1-13.

25. Roeser, R. W., Eccles, J. S., & Sameroff, A. J. (2013). School as a context of early adolescents' academic and social-emotional development: A summary of research findings. The Elementary School Journal, 100(5), 443-471.

26. Weist, M. D., Lever, N., Bradshaw, C. P., & Owens, J. S. (2018). Handbook of school mental health: Research, training, practice, and policy. Springer.

27. Guilford Press. Kolb, D. A. (2015). Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development (2nd ed.).

28. Pearson. Reinke, W. M., Stormont, M., Herman, K. C., Puri, R., & Goel, N. (2011). Supporting children's mental health in schools: Teacher perceptions of needs, roles, and barriers. School Psychology Quarterly, 26(1), 1-13.

29. Roeser, R. W., Eccles, J. S., & Sameroff, A. J. (2013). School as a context of early adolescents' academic and social-emotional development: A summary of research findings. The Elementary School Journal, 100(5), 443-471.

30. Sue, D. W., & Sue, D. (2016). Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice (7th ed.). Wiley.

31. Bridgeland, J., Bruce, M., & Hariharan, A. (2011). The College Board National Survey of School Counselors: Counseling at a Crossroads. Civic Enterprises.

32. Dye, H. A., & Borders, L. D. (2015). School counselor competency and time spent on non-counseling duties: An exploratory study. Professional School Counseling, 18(1), 1-10.

33. Scarborough, J. L., & Culbreth, J. R. (2008). Examining discrepancies between actual and preferred practice of school counselors. Journal of Counseling & Development, 86(4), 446-459.

34. Thompson, M. A., & Moffett, N. (2019). The role conflict and coping strategies of school counselors. The Practitioner Scholar: Journal of Counseling and Professional Psychology, 8(1), 65-80.

35. American School Counselor Association. (2019). The role of the school counselor. ASCA. https://www.schoolcounselor.org/Role

36. Kim, N. Y., & Lambie, G. W. (2018). Burnout and job satisfaction of school counselors: The relationships among stress, support, and perceived workload. Professional School Counseling, 21(1b), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X18777511

37. Lambie, G. W. (2007). The contribution of ego development level to burnout in school counselors: Implications for professional school counseling. Journal of Counseling & Development, 85(1), 82-88.

38. American School Counselor Association. (2019). The ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs (4th ed.).

39. ASCA. Lambie, G. W. (2007). The contribution of ego development level to burnout in school counselors: Implications for professional school counseling. Journal of Counseling & Development, 85(1), 82-88.

40. Thompson, M. A., & Moffett, N. (2019). The role conflict and coping strategies of school counselors. The Practitioner Scholar: Journal of Counseling and Professional Psychology, 8(1), 65-80.

41. Clemens, E. V., Milsom, A., & Cashwell, C. S. (2011). Using leader-member exchange theory to examine principal-school counselor relationships, school counselors' roles, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. Professional School Counseling, 13(2), 75-85.
42. Figley, C. R. (2002). Compassion fatigue: Psychotherapists' chronic lack of self-care. Brunner-Routledge.
43. Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2016). Burnout: A multidimensional perspective. CRC Press. Reback, R. (2010). Schools' mental health services and young children's emotions, behavior, and learning. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 29(4), 698-725.
44. Carey, J. C., & Martin, I. (2017). Counseling in Schools: Comprehensive Programs of Responsive Services for All Students.
45. Pearson. Clemens, E. V., Milsom, A., & Cashwell, C. S. (2011). Using leader-member exchange theory to examine principal-school counselor relationships, school counselors' roles, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. Professional School Counseling, 13(2), 75-85.
46. Slaten, C., Scalise, D., Gutkin, T. B., & Stevenson, R. (2015). Support staff in schools: Key roles and challenges in delivering comprehensive school counseling programs. Journal of Counseling & Development, 93(3), 323-332. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design. Harvard University Press.
47. La Greca, A. M., & Harrison, H. M. (2005). Adolescent peer relations, friendships, and romantic relationships: Do they predict social anxiety and depression? Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 34(1), 49-61.
48. Olweus, D. (2013). Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do. Wiley-Blackwell. Rigby, K. (2003). Consequences of bullying in schools. Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 48(9), 583-590.
49. Stallman, H. M. (2010). Psychological distress in university students: A comparison with general population data. Australian Psychologist, 45(4), 249-257.
50. World Health Organization (WHO). (2021). Adolescent mental health. WHO. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health
51. Cheon, H. S., Chung, R. C.-Y., & Chen, L. H. (2020). The roles of cultural values and ethnic identity in mental health of Asian Americans. Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 26(3), 363–370.
52. Gulliver, A., Griffiths, K. M., & Christensen, H. (2010). Perceived barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking in young people: A systematic review. BMC Psychiatry, 10(1), 113.
53. Jorm, A. F., Korten, A. E., Jacomb, P. A., Christensen, H., & Rodgers, B. (2006). Mental health literacy: A survey of the public's ability to recognize mental disorders and their beliefs about the effectiveness of treatment. Medical Journal of Australia, 166(4), 182-186.
54. Sue, D. W., Sue, D., Neville, H. A., & Smith, L. (2019). Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice (8th ed.).
55. Wiley. Wyn, J., Cahill, H., Holdsworth, R., Rowling, L., & Carson, S. (2000). MindMatters, a whole-school approach promoting mental health and well-being. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 34(4), 594-601.
56. Corrigan, P. W., & Watson, A. C. (2002). Understanding the impact of stigma on people with mental illness. World Psychiatry, 1(1), 16-20.
57. Gysbers, N. C., & Henderson, P. (2012). Comprehensive school guidance and counseling programs: A rich history and a bright future. American School Counselor Association.
58. Keys, S. G., Bemak, F., & Lockhart, E. J. (1998). Transforming school counseling to serve the mental health needs of at-risk youth. Professional School Counseling, 2(4), 381-387.
59. Wiley. Vogel, D. L., Wade, N. G., & Haake, S. (2007). Measuring the self-stigma associated with seeking psychological help. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 54(1), 40-50.
60. Corrigan, P. W., & Watson, A. C. (2002). Understanding the impact of stigma on people with mental illness. World Psychiatry, 1(1), 16-20.
61. Gysbers, N. C., & Henderson, P. (2012). Comprehensive school guidance and counseling programs: A rich history and a bright future. American School Counselor Association.
62. Keys, S. G., Bemak, F., & Lockhart, E. J. (1998). Transforming school counseling to serve the mental health needs of at-risk youth. Professional School Counseling, 2(4), 381-387.
63. Corrigan, P. W., & Shapiro, J. R. (2010). Measuring the impact of programs that challenge the public stigma of mental illness. Clinical Psychology Review, 30, 907-922.
64. Hoare, P., Wilson, J., Elton, R., & Crozier, W. (2017). What parents need to know about young people's mental health: A qualitative investigation of information needs, barriers, and facilitators. British Journal of Psychology, 108(4), 770-785.
65. Jorm, A. F., Korten, A. E., Jacomb, P. A., Christensen, H., & Rodgers, B. (2006). Public recognition of mental disorders and beliefs about treatment: Changes in Australia over 16 years. British Journal of Psychiatry, 190(3), 246-250.
66. Reavley, N. J., & Jorm, A. F. (2013). Public recognition of mental disorders and beliefs about treatment: Changes in Australia over 16 years. British Journal of Psychiatry, 200(5), 419-425.
67. American School Counselor Association (ASCA). (2019). The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs (4th ed.).
68. Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Child Development, 82(1), 405-432.