

Lived Experiences of Guidance Advocates in the Implementation of Guidance Services

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Abstract:

This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of Guidance Advocates—specifically Guidance Counselors and Guidance Designates—in the delivery of guidance services within the educational environment. As students' academic, emotional, social, and career-related needs grow increasingly complex, the role of guidance advocates has become more critical and multifaceted. Employing a phenomenological research approach, the study sought to understand the essence of guidance advocates' experiences in implementing guidance services in schools through in-depth, face-to-face interviews. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to obtain rich and detailed narratives from practitioners working in mega or very large public secondary schools in Bacolod City. A total of six guidance advocates were included based on established inclusion criteria. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed three core themes that characterize the experiences of guidance advocates: (1) personal and professional growth, (2) balancing empathy with clear boundaries and professionalism, and (3) resilience amid systemic challenges. The findings highlight a wide range of emotional experiences and adaptive responses as guidance advocates navigate their roles. Participants described feelings of frustration, overwhelm, and emotional strain arising from limited resources, insufficient institutional support, and the absence of a systematized guidance structure. Despite these challenges, guidance advocates demonstrated flexibility, commitment, and resilience in sustaining their professional responsibilities and supporting students' well-being. The study underscores the need to recognize and strengthen the vital role of guidance advocates in fostering safe, responsive, and supportive school environments. The insights generated contribute to the growing body of literature on educational guidance and inform recommendations for policymakers, school administrators, and counselor training programs, particularly in the development of institutional support mechanisms and well-being initiatives that enhance both counselor effectiveness and sustainability.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, spiritual intelligence, self-efficacy, guidance advocates, development plan

Introduction:

Guidance advocates play a critical role in the educational system by providing students with a consistent and structured network of support to address academic, emotional, social, and mental health concerns. Through guidance and counseling services, students are assisted in managing academic pressure, navigating interpersonal relationships, and coping with psychological challenges. In addition to supporting learners, guidance advocates also collaborate with teachers and parents in addressing behavioral concerns and learning difficulties, thereby strengthening the school's overall support system. Despite their importance, the current shortage of guidance advocates in the Philippine Department of Education has a significant yet often overlooked impact on both students and the broader school environment. In the absence of sufficient trained and dedicated guidance personnel, many students are left to confront academic stress, emotional struggles, and social challenges independently.

Guidance and counseling are designed to facilitate individual growth in education, career development, and emotional well-being. Their primary goal is to help individuals realize their full potential, contributing to personal fulfillment and meaningful participation in society (Parveen & Akhtar, 2023). Internationally, school counselors are recognized for performing a wide range of roles. In the United States, for instance, school counselors function as liaisons, resource enhancers, community outreach agents, case managers, academic support providers, program planners, and members of school committees. However, the breadth of these responsibilities often limits their capacity to respond promptly and effectively to student crises. The scope of counselors' duties further varies depending on school intensity and student needs, with responsibilities encompassing both counseling-related and non-counseling-related tasks (Griffin & Bryan, 2021).

In the Philippine context, the importance of guidance counselors is formally recognized under Republic Act No. 9258, otherwise known as the *Guidance and Counseling Act of 2004*. This law underscores the role of guidance counselors in nation-building and promotes the development of a pool of competent professionals whose qualifications are validated through licensure examinations. Section 27 of Republic Act 9258 explicitly states that no individual shall practice counseling without proper certification, engage in misrepresentation, or allow license sharing. This provision highlights the necessity of engaging licensed professionals to safeguard students' values formation, academic behavior, and overall development. The act was enacted to professionalize guidance and counseling practice in the Philippines and ensure ethical and competent service delivery.

Recent studies further emphasize the expanding responsibilities of school counselors in responding to evolving educational and societal demands. Goodman-Scott et al. (2022) assert that school counselors play a vital role in addressing a broad spectrum of student needs, including academic achievement, career development, mental health, personal well-being, and life skills necessary for adapting to changing social and workforce contexts. Consequently, advocacy for school counseling programs has become increasingly important to enable counselors to function beyond crisis intervention and toward comprehensive, preventive, and developmental services.

However, several systemic challenges continue to undermine the effectiveness of guidance services in schools. Research by Balajadia and Fabella (2023) reveals that guidance counselors are now tasked with addressing increasingly diverse psychological and social concerns among learners. Their effectiveness is often hindered by underfunding, limited facilities, excessive workloads, and inadequate opportunities for training and professional development. These constraints are particularly pronounced in public schools, where high counselor-to-student ratios and insufficient institutional support restrict counselors' ability to provide sustained and individualized assistance.

The decline in the availability of guidance counselors, especially in public schools, has resulted in ratios that far exceed the recommended standard, often preventing counselors from delivering proactive and comprehensive support. Moreover, persistent stigma surrounding help-seeking behavior, inconsistent access to guidance services across schools, and institutional pressure to prioritize academic outcomes over emotional well-being further weaken the impact of counseling programs. As a result, guidance services tend to become reactive rather than preventive, leaving some students without adequate support for mental health concerns, academic progression, and personal development.

In response to the shortage of licensed guidance counselors, teachers are frequently assigned counseling-related responsibilities in Philippine schools (Decena & Singson, 2022). Mendijsar and Manamtan (2020) note that school administrators often appoint teachers as guidance counselors when licensed professionals are unavailable, despite the failure to meet the ideal counselor-to-student ratio of 1:500. This practice limits the effectiveness of guidance services, as teachers typically lack specialized training in counseling and are already burdened with extensive instructional and administrative duties (Fabella & Ignacio, 2019).

Given the increasing expectations placed on school counselors and guidance advocates, it is essential to recognize the challenges they face in fulfilling their roles and the importance of safeguarding their own mental health and well-being. These realities underscore the need to examine how guidance advocates navigate their responsibilities amid systemic constraints. Accordingly, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of guidance advocates in the implementation of guidance services, with particular attention to the challenges they encounter and the strategies they employ in carrying out their roles.

The researcher currently serves as a designated guidance counselor in a public school in Bacolod City. Motivated by firsthand experience and the evident shortage—and, in many schools, complete absence—of guidance advocates, the researcher was compelled to investigate the lived experiences of guidance advocates working in mega and very large public secondary schools in Bacolod City. By documenting and analyzing these experiences, the study aims to contribute empirical insights that may inform policy, practice, and institutional support for guidance services in public secondary education.

Review of Related Literature

Guidance and counseling services play a vital role in addressing students' academic, emotional, social, and career

development needs. In educational settings, guidance counselors are positioned as key support figures who facilitate student adjustment, personal growth, and holistic development. Parveen and Akhtar (2023) emphasized that guidance and counseling in schools extend beyond academic assistance, encompassing emotional well-being, decision-making, and career planning. This comprehensive role underscores the importance of well-structured guidance programs that are responsive to learners' evolving needs.

International research further highlights the impact of well-implemented guidance programs on students' school experiences. Lapan, Gysbers, and Sun (1997) found that schools with more fully implemented guidance programs demonstrated positive outcomes in students' academic engagement, career awareness, and overall school satisfaction. Similarly, the American School Counselor Association underscores the expanding role of school counselors in promoting student mental health, advocacy, and systemic change within schools (ASCA, n.d.).

In the Philippine context, guidance and counseling are formally recognized under Republic Act No. 9258, which professionalized the practice of guidance counseling and emphasized ethical standards, licensure, and accountability (Republic Act No. 9258, 2004). Despite this legal framework, several studies indicate persistent gaps between policy and practice, particularly in public schools where counselor shortages and role misinterpretation remain prevalent. The professional identity of guidance counselors has been widely examined, particularly in relation to role clarity, job satisfaction, and professional growth. Heled, Ukrop, and Davidovitch (2022) described school counseling as a profession often marked by ambiguity, where counselors struggle to balance individual professional identity with collective expectations imposed by institutions. Their study revealed that unclear role definitions contribute to professional tension and affect counselors' sense of belonging and effectiveness.

Bustos (2016) further emphasized the relationship between occupational satisfaction and life satisfaction among guidance counselors, suggesting that professional fulfillment is closely tied to counselors' perceived competence, recognition, and institutional support. Continuous professional development plays a critical role in strengthening this sense of competence. Insani and Astuti (2024) highlighted that counselors' personal qualities—such as empathy, integrity, and authenticity—must be continuously developed alongside technical skills to ensure effective counseling practice.

Experiential learning has also been identified as a foundation for professional growth in counseling. Kolb's (1985) experiential learning theory supports the idea that counselors refine their skills through reflective practice and real-life engagement, reinforcing the value of lived experience in shaping professional competence.

Phenomenological research has been widely used to explore the lived experiences of guidance counselors and advocates, providing rich insights into their emotional realities and professional challenges. Decena and Singson (2022) examined the lived experiences of guidance advocates through the lens of ethical bracketing, revealing the emotional labor involved in maintaining professionalism while managing personal reactions to students' disclosures. Their findings highlighted the tension between empathy and ethical restraint, a recurring theme in qualitative counseling research.

Similarly, Balajadia and Fabella (2023) explored the lived experiences of guidance advocates during the pandemic and found that counselors faced heightened emotional demands, role overload, and systemic constraints. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and a strong sense of mission. These findings align with other phenomenological studies that portray guidance counseling as deeply relational and emotionally intensive work.

Cho and Kim (2024) further documented job stress among school counselors, noting that heavy caseloads, administrative demands, and insufficient institutional support significantly contribute to emotional exhaustion. However, counselors' intrinsic motivation and commitment to student welfare often mitigate these stressors, enabling them to persist despite adverse conditions.

Numerous studies have documented systemic challenges that hinder the effective implementation of guidance services. Arfasa and Weldmeskel (2020) reported that secondary schools often lack adequate facilities, materials, and trained personnel to support counseling services. These deficiencies are compounded by limited collaboration among teachers and insufficient administrative backing.

In the Philippine setting, Mendijar and Manamtam (2020) found that teachers are frequently tasked with guidance functions due to the shortage of licensed counselors, despite lacking formal training in counseling. This practice not only compromises service quality but also exacerbates teachers' workload. Fabella and Ignacio (2019) similarly observed that guidance counselors who simultaneously function as classroom teachers experience role strain and professional conflict.

High counselor-to-student ratios further intensify these challenges. McCarthy et al. (2010) demonstrated that large caseloads are strongly associated with increased stress and reduced perceived effectiveness among school counselors. Without adequate staffing and resources, guidance services often become reactive rather than preventive, limiting their long-term impact on student development.

Despite systemic constraints, guidance counselors consistently demonstrate resilience and advocacy-oriented practice. Tayoto (2019) found that Filipino school counselors exhibit strong professional resilience and actively engage in self-care strategies to sustain their effectiveness. This resilience enables counselors to navigate emotionally demanding situations while maintaining commitment to their roles.

Advocacy has also emerged as a defining feature of effective counseling practice. It also highlighted that exemplary school counselors actively advocate for students, programs, and systemic reforms, positioning themselves as change agents within educational institutions. Goodman-Scott et al. (2022) similarly emphasized counseling advocacy as essential to expanding access to mental health and developmental support for students.

Pedroso et al. (2022) further noted that during periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, counselors' dedication to service and community support became a primary source of motivation. Their study reinforced the notion that guidance counseling is not merely an occupational role but a vocation grounded in service, empathy, and social responsibility.

These collectively demonstrate that guidance counseling is a multifaceted profession shaped by personal commitment, professional identity, and systemic realities. While guidance counselors face persistent challenges—such as role ambiguity, limited resources, and emotional strain—they continue to exhibit resilience, advocacy, and dedication to student well-being. Phenomenological studies consistently reveal the deeply human and relational nature of guidance work, affirming the importance of institutional support, professional development, and counselor well-being. These findings provide a strong empirical foundation for the present study's focus on the lived experiences of guidance advocates in implementing guidance services.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research method to capture and understand the lived experiences of guidance advocates in the implementation of guidance and counseling services in public secondary schools. Phenomenology, as a qualitative approach, is concerned with understanding how individuals experience a particular phenomenon and how they make meaning of those experiences within their natural environments. The purpose of this research design is to understand people by closely observing and listening to them in real-life contexts, often through in-depth interviews or careful examination of their behaviors and interactions. Approaches such as phenomenology provide structured yet flexible procedures that allow researchers to capture rich, experiential data. Since this study sought to determine the lived experiences of guidance advocates, the phenomenological design was considered the most appropriate methodological choice.

The study specifically aimed to determine the lived experiences of guidance advocates in implementing guidance and counseling services in their assigned schools, with emphasis on the difficulties, challenges, and opportunities they encounter in the course of their work. Data were gathered through individual interviews using a semi-structured interview guide composed of open-ended questions. All participants were asked the same set of guide questions to ensure consistency across interviews while still allowing them the freedom to narrate their experiences in depth and according to their own perspectives.

The research was conducted in mega or very large public secondary schools in Bacolod City. Based on Department of Education Memorandum No. 43, series of 2017, mega schools are defined as public secondary schools with one hundred one (101) or more teachers. Conducting the study in these settings was deemed appropriate, as such schools typically have large student populations and complex guidance needs. The interviews were held in the offices of the conversation partners within their respective schools to ensure a familiar, comfortable, and natural setting conducive to open and honest sharing.

The conversation partners consisted of six (6) qualified guidance advocates selected based on predefined inclusion criteria. These included two (2) Guidance Designates and four (4) Registered Guidance Counselors. All participants were between 25 and 60 years old and had a minimum of two (2) years of experience in the field of guidance and counseling. Each participant was currently assigned to a mega or very large public secondary school in Bacolod City, ensuring that all had direct and relevant experience with the phenomenon under investigation.

Purposive sampling was employed in selecting the conversation partners. According to the National Center for State Courts (NCSC, 2022), purposive sampling involves deliberately selecting individuals who possess specific characteristics, knowledge, or experiences that are directly relevant to the research questions. This method is particularly appropriate for qualitative studies that aim to generate in-depth insights rather than statistical generalizations. In this study, purposive sampling allowed the researcher to engage participants who were knowledgeable about guidance services and who had firsthand experience implementing such services in large public school settings.

To ensure methodological rigor and sample homogeneity, clear inclusion criteria were established. Inclusion criteria refer to the defining characteristics of the target population and are a necessary component of a high-quality research protocol (Patino & Ferreira, 2018). Participants were included if they were registered guidance counselors or designated guidance counselors, had at least two (2) years of experience in the field, were currently assigned to a mega or very large public secondary school in Bacolod City, and were between 25 and 60 years old.

Access to the participants was facilitated through gatekeepers, who played a crucial role in the conduct of this qualitative study. Gatekeepers are individuals who hold authority within the community or institution being studied and whose cooperation is essential for gaining access to participants and establishing rapport. In this study, gatekeepers included school principals, assistant principals, guidance coordinators when available, and teachers. The school principal, in particular, exercised authority over access to school personnel. Establishing positive relationships with these gatekeepers involved open communication, trust-building, and strict adherence to ethical standards, which are essential in qualitative research contexts.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit detailed narratives about the participants' lived experiences. The interview guide provided a framework for discussion while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions. Although the interview guide was written in English, participants were encouraged to respond in Hiligaynon to enable them to express their thoughts and experiences more freely and authentically. English translations of the responses were provided to facilitate analysis and reporting. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face to allow for richer interaction and observation of nonverbal cues.

Prior to data collection, the researcher secured approval through a transmittal letter and thoroughly explained the purpose, scope, and nature of the study to the participants. Participants were assured that their verbatim responses would remain confidential and would not be disclosed in any identifiable form. Each participant was asked to choose a location within the school where they felt most comfortable during the interview. Data were documented using audio recordings, field notes, and limited smartphone photographs to preserve contextual details and ensure accuracy of the gathered information.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, clearly explaining the voluntary nature of participation, the duration of the interviews, potential risks and benefits, and the intended use of the data. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the secure handling of all research materials. Interview transcripts were made available to participants for verification, while all

other data, including recordings and notes, were kept private and accessible only to the researcher. Honesty, confidentiality, and respect for participants' rights and welfare were upheld at all stages of the study.

To ensure the rigor of the study, trustworthiness was established following the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was addressed by ensuring that interpretations and findings were grounded in the participants' actual narratives and accurately reflected their shared experiences. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability was ensured through a systematic and transparent research process that would allow the study to be replicated in comparable contexts. Confirmability was maintained by ensuring that findings were derived from the data rather than researcher bias, preserving original participant responses, and maintaining a clear audit trail of the research process.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach guided by the Three C's of qualitative data analysis: coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing. During the coding phase, interview transcripts were read and re-read carefully to identify significant statements and initial codes, including attention to nonverbal expressions observed during the interviews. In the categorizing phase, related codes were grouped into broader categories and central ideas through an iterative process of review and refinement. Redundant or less significant categories were removed, while essential elements were retained. In the final conceptualizing phase, core concepts and themes were identified that captured the essence of the participants' lived experiences. Significant statements were clustered into themes and sub-themes that reflected the depth, meaning, and shared realities of guidance advocates in implementing guidance and counseling services.

Results

This section presents the findings derived from six one-on-one, in-person interviews with guidance advocates assigned in mega or very large public secondary schools in Bacolod City. The analysis focused on capturing the shared meanings and essential structures of participants' lived experiences in implementing guidance services. The thematic analysis yielded three major themes with corresponding sub-themes that reflect how guidance advocates experience their roles within the school system: (1) *Personal and Professionalism Growth (The Ever-Lasting Guide; Where Growth Begins)*, (2) *Balancing Empathy with Boundaries and Professionalism (The Grace Between)*, and (3) *Systemic Challenges and Resilience in the Role (Beneath the Load, Beyond the Label)*.

Participant Vignettes

The six conversation partners represented both licensed and designated guidance practitioners. Jorge is a male Registered Guidance Counselor and Registered Psychometrician with nine years of experience, aged 28, residing in Bacolod City, with previous work experience in a private institution. Charmela is a female Registered Guidance Counselor and Psychometrician who completed a Master's degree in Guidance and Counseling and has served in public schools for five years after initial private-sector experience; she is from a municipality in Negros Occidental. Sophia is a 52-year-old guidance designate with 29 years of experience; although she did not pursue graduate studies leading to guidance licensure, she described a sustained commitment to guidance work and extensive practical competence. May is 45 years old and has served as a Guidance Counselor for two years after 18 years as a teacher; she described becoming a counselor as a "dream come true" and reported placing 10th in the Board of Examinations for Guidance Counselors. Jewel is a female Registered Guidance Counselor with 13 years of experience and is among the first public school practitioners in Bacolod City to be registered; prior to her counseling role, she taught in the same school for five years. Mary is 49 years old and a Registered Guidance Counselor who served as a guidance designate for two years while functioning as a full-time teacher; she described sustained involvement in learner support, school organizations, and community programs while balancing competing responsibilities.

Theme 1: Personal and Professionalism Growth

Participants consistently described guidance work as a deeply meaningful profession that fosters both personal fulfillment and continuous professional development. Their narratives reflected a strong sense of purpose, commitment to student welfare, and recognition that effective guidance practice requires lifelong learning and adaptability.

The Ever-Lasting Guide

Guidance advocates expressed fulfillment in their role when they were able to help students and contribute positively to their development. The experience of being proactive, productive, and consistently available to learners was described as central to the sense of meaning derived from guidance work. Helping students navigate personal, academic, and emotional concerns reinforced the perception that the role of the guidance advocate extends beyond routine tasks and becomes a sustained commitment to service.

Participants emphasized that guidance work requires continuous learning, as counseling strategies must adapt to the unique needs of each student. Techniques that may be effective for one learner may not be applicable to another, necessitating constant professional growth. Alongside technical competence, participants highlighted the importance of actively promoting guidance services within the school. This involved regularly reaching out to teachers, maintaining a welcoming and understanding presence, and fostering openness so that guidance services could be fully utilized. Visibility and approachability were described as essential in ensuring that both students and teachers recognize the relevance and availability of guidance support.

Participants also described engaging in school-wide activities such as orientation, re-education, and outreach to normalize the presence of guidance services. These efforts allowed students to see that guidance offices exist as supportive spaces and enabled teachers to view guidance advocates as accessible collaborators rather than isolated specialists. The role was further described as values-oriented, with guidance advocates perceiving themselves as mentors who help shape students' character, decision-making, and emotional maturity.

Where Growth Begins

Professional growth was described as an ongoing process rooted in continuous learning, training, mentorship, and experience. Participants emphasized that counseling skills cannot be mastered quickly and require years of practice, exposure to diverse cases, and refinement of techniques. Seeking mentorship and further training was viewed as essential, as no guidance advocate considered themselves fully prepared without ongoing development.

Attendance in seminars and training programs was identified as necessary to stay updated with new policies, procedures, and expectations related to guidance services. Growth was also shaped by practical realities, particularly in contexts where guidance advocates worked independently without assistants. In such cases, professional development included learning to multitask, collaborate closely with school administrators, and manage multiple responsibilities simultaneously.

Participants also expressed the need to continually study emerging counseling strategies and theoretical frameworks. This commitment to learning was driven not only by professional expectations but also by a desire to better serve students. Overall, personal and professional growth emerged as a defining feature of guidance advocacy, shaped by both intentional learning and adaptation to institutional demands.

Theme 2: Balancing Empathy with Boundaries and Professionalism

The second theme highlights the delicate balance guidance advocates maintain between offering genuine emotional support and upholding professional boundaries. Participants described their work as emotionally demanding, requiring sensitivity, ethical awareness, and self-regulation to remain effective and resilient.

The Grace Between

Guidance advocates emphasized the importance of creating a welcoming, safe, and non-threatening environment where students feel comfortable sharing their concerns. A supportive atmosphere was viewed as essential in encouraging open communication and trust. Students were more likely to seek help when they felt that the guidance office was a safe space rather than a disciplinary setting.

Participants also described reaching students indirectly through collaboration with teachers. By engaging teachers first, guidance advocates were able to identify concerns early and establish appropriate channels of support. This approach allowed them to respect boundaries while still remaining responsive to students' needs.

Guidance work was frequently described as mission-driven rather than motivated by external rewards. Participants spoke of giving their time, energy, and emotional presence to their work, recognizing the significant influence

guidance advocates have on students' lives. The role was perceived as one that can shape, support, or profoundly affect a learner's trajectory, underscoring the ethical responsibility embedded in guidance practice.

Satisfaction in the role was often linked to seeing students gain insight, clarity, or personal growth—even within brief counseling sessions. These moments of learning and awareness were described as affirmations of the value of guidance work. Collectively, participants portrayed guidance advocacy as a profession that requires compassion tempered by professionalism, emotional presence balanced with ethical restraint, and care delivered within clearly defined boundaries.

Theme 3: Systemic Challenges and Resilience in the Role

The third theme captures the structural and institutional challenges that shape the daily experiences of guidance advocates, particularly within large public secondary schools. Participants described working within systems marked by limited resources, staffing shortages, and role ambiguity, yet they also demonstrated resilience and adaptability in responding to these constraints.

Beneath the Load, Beyond the Label

A recurring challenge identified by participants was the scarcity of guidance counselors. High caseloads and insufficient staffing placed significant strain on guidance advocates, making it difficult to provide sustained and individualized support. To manage these demands, participants described implementing strategies such as structured scheduling to protect their own well-being and prevent emotional exhaustion.

Limited institutional support for guidance programs was also highlighted, including inadequate facilities, lack of materials, and insufficient technological resources. The absence of basic tools such as internet access, computers, or private counseling spaces complicated administrative tasks and delayed the submission of required reports. These constraints added to the workload and stress experienced by guidance advocates.

Participants further described widespread misunderstanding of the guidance office's role. Guidance services were often perceived as disciplinary in nature rather than supportive, a misconception that extended beyond students to include teachers and, at times, school administrators. This misunderstanding contributed to stigma and discouraged students from seeking help voluntarily.

Despite these challenges, guidance advocates demonstrated resilience by continuing to engage students, advocate for their role, and adapt to systemic limitations. Participants described working to motivate students to approach the guidance office without fear and to reframe guidance services as sources of support rather than punishment. They also noted increasing emotional vulnerability among learners, which heightened the demand for guidance services even as resources remained limited.

Synthesis of Results

Overall, the findings reveal that guidance advocates experience their role as both deeply fulfilling and persistently demanding. Their work is anchored in personal meaning, continuous professional growth, and a strong sense of mission toward student well-being. At the same time, systemic challenges—such as limited personnel, inadequate resources, role ambiguity, and stigma—shape their daily realities and intensify emotional labor.

Despite these constraints, guidance advocates remain committed to their work, drawing strength from ongoing learning, adaptive strategies, and the belief that their presence makes a meaningful difference in students' lives. Their experiences reflect a balance of empathy and professionalism, growth and constraint, and resilience beneath the weight of expanding responsibilities—revealing guidance advocacy as a role that extends far beyond formal titles and institutional expectations.

Discussion and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of guidance advocates in implementing guidance services within mega or very large public secondary schools in Bacolod City. The findings reveal that guidance advocacy is experienced as a deeply meaningful yet structurally constrained profession—one that demands continuous personal and professional growth, emotional labor balanced with ethical boundaries, and resilience in the face of systemic limitations. Through phenomenological analysis, the essence of guidance advocacy emerged as a role defined by purpose-driven service, adaptive competence, and sustained commitment despite limited institutional support.

The first major theme, Personal and Professionalism Growth, reflects how guidance advocates construct their professional identity through continuous learning, self-reflection, and service-oriented engagement. Participants described guidance work not as a static position but as an evolving vocation that requires constant skill refinement and adaptability. This aligns with the findings of Davidovitch et al. (2022), who reported that work commitment and self-efficacy significantly shape counselors' professional identity. In the present study, guidance advocates demonstrated strong work commitment, often compensating for structural gaps through personal initiative, outreach, and self-directed learning. The emphasis on continuous training, mentorship, and exposure to new counseling techniques echoes the assertion that professional identity in school counseling remains dynamic and, at times, ambiguous—particularly when role clarity is undermined by institutional demands.

The sub-themes The Ever-Lasting Guide and Where Growth Begins highlight how guidance advocates locate meaning in sustained helping relationships and ongoing professional development. These findings resonate with Insani and Astuti's (2024) study, which emphasized that counselors' personal qualities—such as empathy, patience, integrity, and authenticity—are essential to effective counseling practice. In the current study, participants' accounts demonstrate that professionalism is not limited to technical competence but is closely tied to character, values, mentorship, and moral responsibility toward learners. Growth was not framed solely as compliance with professional standards but as a personal commitment to becoming more responsive, effective, and ethically grounded in service delivery.

Furthermore, the findings support Hendriyani et al.'s (2024) assertion that improving the quality of guidance and counseling services requires ongoing training and accountability. Participants consistently described the need for seminars, updated practices, and exposure to evolving counseling frameworks, particularly in response to changing student needs. The reliance on self-initiated learning and adaptation suggests that while formal systems may be insufficient, guidance advocates actively compensate by investing in their own professional growth—an indication of both resilience and systemic inadequacy.

The second major theme, Balancing Empathy with Boundaries and Professionalism, underscores the emotional and ethical complexity inherent in guidance advocacy. Participants described their role as emotionally demanding, requiring them to create safe and trusting spaces for students while maintaining professional distance and ethical integrity. This balance—captured in the sub-theme The Grace Between—reflects the quiet, often invisible labor of guidance advocates who must remain emotionally present without overstepping boundaries or compromising professional standards.

These findings are consistent with Alawiyah et al. (2020), who emphasized that ethical values and professional attitudes fundamentally shape counseling practice. The participants' narratives demonstrate high levels of ethical awareness, particularly in recognizing the limits of their role and the need for self-regulation. The emphasis on confidentiality, safe environments, and respectful communication reflects a strong internalization of professional ethics, even in contexts where formal structures and support mechanisms are weak.

The relational focus evident in the findings also aligns with Sari et al. (2024), who identified the counselor–client relationship as the core of effective counseling. Participants highlighted empathy, respect, and genuine care as central to building trust and facilitating positive outcomes. Notably, satisfaction in the role was often linked to small but meaningful moments of student insight or growth, even within brief counseling encounters. This suggests that guidance advocates measure success less by formal metrics and more by perceived impact on learners' emotional and personal development.

The third major theme, *Systemic Challenges and Resilience in the Role*, reveals the structural realities that shape guidance advocates' everyday experiences. Participants consistently reported shortages in personnel, inadequate facilities, limited resources, role ambiguity, and persistent stigma surrounding guidance services. These challenges mirror the findings of Balajadia and Fabella (2023), who identified underfunding, excessive workloads, and insufficient professional development as major barriers to effective school counseling. In the present study, such constraints were particularly pronounced in public secondary schools, where high counselor-to-student ratios and lack of institutional support significantly limited service delivery.

The sub-theme *Beneath the Load, Beyond the Label* captures the discrepancy between formal job titles and actual responsibilities. Guidance advocates described performing multiple roles simultaneously—counselor, administrator, mediator, educator—often without adequate staffing or recognition. This finding aligns with Pardi and Badrujaman's (2024) observation that unclear role definitions and weak collaboration within schools hinder counselors' effectiveness. Similarly, Arfasa and Weldmeskel (2020) reported that inadequate facilities, lack of materials, and limited administrative support severely constrain counseling services in secondary schools. The present study reinforces these concerns, highlighting how basic infrastructural deficiencies—such as lack of internet access, computers, and private counseling spaces—compound emotional and administrative burdens.

Role misunderstanding emerged as a particularly damaging issue, with guidance offices frequently perceived as disciplinary rather than supportive spaces. This misconception contributed to stigma and discouraged students from seeking help voluntarily, reinforcing reactive rather than preventive counseling practices. These findings state that stigma, inconsistent access, and academic prioritization undermine the effectiveness of guidance services. The persistence of such misunderstandings, even among school administrators, underscores the need for clearer institutional policies and advocacy to redefine the role of guidance services within the school system.

Despite these systemic challenges, participants demonstrated notable resilience. They employed adaptive strategies such as scheduling, prioritization, collaboration with teachers, and proactive outreach to sustain their work. This resilience reflects Cole et al.'s (2023) findings that counselors who feel prepared and supported—whether formally or through self-developed coping mechanisms—are better able to manage professional challenges. However, unlike Cole et al.'s findings, which emphasized adequate professional and social support, the present study suggests that resilience among guidance advocates in public schools is often self-generated rather than institutionally reinforced.

Taken together, the findings illustrate that guidance advocacy is characterized by a paradox: it is simultaneously a profession of profound meaning and persistent struggle. Guidance advocates navigate emotional labor, ethical responsibility, and systemic constraints while remaining committed to student welfare and personal growth. Their experiences reveal a profession sustained not by structural sufficiency but by personal mission, adaptability, and deeply held values. This underscores the urgent need for stronger institutional support, clearer role definition, adequate staffing, and sustained professional development to ensure that guidance advocates are not only resilient but also adequately empowered to fulfill their critical role in education.

Conclusion

This study employed a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of Guidance Advocates in Bacolod City in the implementation of guidance services. Through thematic analysis, three central themes emerged: *Personal and Professionalism Growth*, *Balancing Empathy with Boundaries and Professionalism*, and *Systemic Challenges and Resilience in the Role*. Together, these themes provided a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of guidance advocates' realities—revealing not only the challenges they encounter but also their motivations, sources of strength, and pathways of personal and professional development.

The findings highlight the profoundly human dimension of guidance advocacy. The work of guidance advocates is characterized by quiet dedication, emotional strength, and sustained commitment to the well-being of students and the wider school community. It is within this space of service that professional growth begins and continues, as guidance advocates constantly adapt to the evolving academic, emotional, and social needs of learners. Their experiences show that guidance advocacy is not merely a technical or administrative function but a relational and values-driven profession grounded in care, responsibility, and purpose.

The study further reveals that the emotional demands of guidance work significantly affect guidance advocates' roles, mental health, and overall well-being. Exposure to students' struggles and disclosures requires emotional depth and resilience, often testing personal limits. Despite these pressures, guidance advocates consistently demonstrate passion, commitment, and hope—qualities largely sustained by the meaningful impact they perceive in helping students and clients. These findings underscore the importance of institutional support systems that acknowledge the emotional labor inherent in guidance work.

Consistent with the findings of Tayoto (2019), the study affirms that resilient Filipino school counselors exhibit strong professional resilience and actively engage in self-care practices. Counselors who are grounded, motivated, and emotionally supported are better positioned to form meaningful connections with students and respond effectively to challenges. The well-being of guidance advocates, therefore, directly influences the quality of support they can provide. Caring for the caregiver is not optional but essential to sustaining effective guidance services.

Moreover, the results align with Pedroso et al. (2022), who found that counselors face a combination of personal and professional challenges, many intensified by rapid changes and uncertain conditions. Despite these challenges, what sustains counselors is a deep sense of calling and a genuine desire to support their schools and communities. This study reinforces the view that guidance and counseling is not merely a job but a vocation rooted in service, empathy, and commitment to human development.

In conclusion, this study underscores the humanity of guidance advocates and calls for increased recognition, support, and investment in their professional development. The Department of Education and school administrators are encouraged to strengthen guidance services by providing sustained training opportunities, adequate budgets, sufficient staffing, and comprehensive support systems. Creating a conducive and supportive environment for guidance advocates not only enhances their resilience and effectiveness but also ensures that students receive the holistic care they need to thrive. Ultimately, honoring and empowering guidance advocates is an investment in the well-being and future of both educators and learners.

Recommendations

The increasing complexity of students' academic, emotional, social, and career-related concerns underscores the urgent need to strengthen the support systems surrounding guidance advocates. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that a comprehensive, multi-level program be institutionalized to enhance the capacity of guidance advocates, reinforce organizational support, promote collaboration across school stakeholders, strengthen professional identity, and ultimately advance student well-being.

First, sustained professional development and training opportunities should be prioritized for guidance advocates. Regular workshops addressing emerging and pressing concerns—such as mental health first aid, trauma-informed counseling, and evolving trends in career guidance—should be implemented to ensure that guidance advocates remain responsive to students' diverse and changing needs. In addition, certification programs in guidance and counseling should be made accessible, particularly for guidance designates who may not have formal training in the field. These initiatives should involve not only guidance counselors and designates but also school administrators and, where appropriate, students, to foster shared understanding and coordinated support. Implementation may be phased, beginning with program orientation, role clarification, and needs assessment, followed by structured training rollouts, mental wellness initiatives, and policy integration, and eventually leading to full implementation with ongoing monitoring and refinement.

Second, stronger institutional support and policy alignment are essential to sustaining effective guidance services. Clear role definitions and standardized expectations for guidance advocates should be developed in collaboration with the Department of Education to reduce role ambiguity and misconceptions about guidance work. Schools are encouraged to establish a comprehensive guidance framework supported by leadership and to formally integrate guidance objectives into the School Improvement Plan. Aligning guidance services with institutional goals ensures that counseling programs are not treated as peripheral functions but as central components of holistic student development.

Third, mental health and well-being support for guidance advocates must be institutionalized. Given the emotional demands of the role, regular opportunities for debriefing and wellness activities—such as quarterly reflection sessions or retreats—should be provided. Access to mental health services for guidance advocates themselves, often described as “counseling for the counselors,” is strongly recommended to help mitigate emotional fatigue and burnout. Establishing support groups or communities of practice where guidance advocates can share experiences, exchange strategies, and provide mutual encouragement can further promote resilience and emotional sustainability.

Fourth, schools should intensify efforts to engage students and increase awareness of guidance services. Institutional initiatives such as a Guidance Week celebration can help showcase the scope and value of guidance programs through talks, forums, and interactive activities. Peer support programs may also be developed by training selected students as peer listeners or youth ambassadors, thereby extending the reach of guidance services and reducing stigma associated with help-seeking. In addition, career and life readiness initiatives—such as career fairs, mentoring sessions, and job-shadowing opportunities—should be strengthened to support students’ long-term development and transitions beyond school.

Finally, continuous evaluation and improvement of guidance services are recommended to ensure sustainability and effectiveness. Schools should adopt a guidance service audit tool to regularly assess the quality, reach, and impact of counseling programs. Annual reflection and planning workshops involving all guidance advocates can provide structured opportunities to review accomplishments, identify gaps, and refine strategies based on emerging needs and feedback.

Collectively, these recommendations aim to enhance the competence, morale, and resilience of guidance advocates; strengthen institutional commitment to guidance services; improve accessibility and responsiveness of counseling support; and cultivate a school culture that values mental health, well-being, and holistic student development. Implementing these measures can help ensure that guidance advocates are not only equipped to meet current challenges but are also supported as vital partners in fostering healthy, inclusive, and thriving school communities.

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