The Crisis: An In-Depth Analysis of the Shortage of Guidance Counselors and Its Impact on Student Suicide Rates in Philippine Schools

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Abstract:

This study investigates the critical shortage of guidance counselors in Philippine schools and its profound impact on student mental health. The findings reveal an alarming discrepancy in counselor-to-student ratios, with the Philippines facing a staggering ratio of 1 counselor for every 14,000 students compared to the recommended global standard of 1:250. This stark reality raises urgent concerns about the education system's capacity to address the diverse mental health needs of students, necessitating immediate attention and targeted interventions. The research also explores the multifaceted impact of the shift to online learning on student mental health, emphasizing increased exposure to online stressors contributing to emotional contagion and mental health problems. Additionally, the study uncovers systemic issues such as low compensation and high entry barriers for guidance counselors, advocating for policy changes, including salary adjustments, to attract and retain qualified professionals in the counseling profession. As an alternative measure, the introduction of guidance associates is identified, prompting questions about its long-term effectiveness in addressing complex student mental health needs. The study calls for collaborative efforts among educational authorities, policymakers, and stakeholders to implement evidence-based interventions and policy reforms. By addressing the root causes of the counselor shortage, this research aims to contribute to the creation of a nurturing educational environment that supports the holistic development of students in the Philippines.

Keywords: Guidance counselors, Counselor-to-student ratios, Student mental health, Emotional contagion

Introduction:

In the landscape of Philippine education, the mental health of students has emerged as a critical concern, marked by an alarming surge in student suicides. As the Department of Education (DepEd) grapples with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for robust mental health support mechanisms within schools has become increasingly evident. Recent data presented by DepEd Assistant Secretary Dexter Galban disclosed a distressing reality — in 2021 alone, 404 students succumbed to suicide, and an additional 2,147 attempted it, marking the first comprehensive national release of such figures during the pandemic (Felipe, 2023). This devastating trend underscores the urgent need for effective mental health programs and interventions in educational institutions.
The global standard for the counselor-to-student ratio is 1:250, a benchmark that is starkly contrasted by the current Philippine reality of approximately one guidance counselor for every 14,000 students (Ingala, 2023). This disproportionality presents a profound challenge, hindering the effective implementation of mental health programs in schools. To compound matters, the Philippines faces a shortage of licensed and registered guidance counselors, with only 19% of the authorized positions filled, leaving a vast gap in essential mental health support (Chi, 2023).

This research seeks to shed light on the multifaceted implications of the dearth of guidance counselors in Philippine schools. The shortage is not only a quantitative disparity but is deeply entwined with issues of low pay, high entry barriers, and a dearth of qualified professionals. The misalignment between the demanding degree requirements and the comparatively meager compensation has resulted in numerous vacant positions for years on end (Braňka, 2016).

To address this pressing issue, the Department of Education is contemplating a policy change, advocating for a pay hike for guidance counselors to attract more professionals to the field. It is essential to recognize that the shortage of guidance counselors is not an isolated problem but a component of a larger crisis affecting the mental well-being of Filipino students. The findings of this research aim to inform policymakers, educators, and stakeholders, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the gravity of the issue and propelling a collective effort toward tangible and sustainable solutions. In doing so, we aspire to contribute to the creation of an educational environment where the mental health of students is prioritized, safeguarding their holistic development and well-being.

**Literature Review:**

The scarcity of guidance counselors in Philippine schools has become a pressing issue, posing severe consequences for student mental health. This section reviews existing literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the problem, highlighting its origins, implications, and potential solutions.

Global benchmarks emphasize the critical role of guidance counselors in ensuring the mental well-being of students. The recommended ratio of counselors to students globally is 1:250 (Nicola, 2023). This standard reflects an international acknowledgment of the importance of individualized support for students navigating the complexities of their academic and personal lives. The substantial gap in the Philippines, with a ratio of approximately 1:14,000, underscores the gravity of the situation (Felipe, 2023).

The surge in student suicides in the Philippines has been associated with the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The abrupt shift to distance learning and subsequent reintegration into face-to-face classes have placed a strain on students' mental well-being (Idris, et al., 2021). Moreover, the reliance on online learning has exposed students to various stressors, including oversharing, sadfishing, and negative online content, contributing to emotional contagion and mental health problems (Alibudbud, 2021) This underscores the urgency of effective mental health programs within schools.

**Role of Guidance Counselors in Mental Health Support**

Guidance counselors play a pivotal role in addressing the mental health needs of students. The Philippine Mental Health Law, particularly Section 24, underscores the responsibility of educational institutions to develop policies and programs for mental health awareness, support, and access to treatment (REPUBLIC ACT No. 11036). However, the shortage of guidance counselors hinders the effective implementation of these programs, leaving a considerable portion of the student population without adequate mental health support.

The shortage of guidance counselors is a multifaceted issue, compounded by challenges such as low pay and high entry barriers. The current compensation for guidance counselors in the Philippines is notably lower than that of other professions, such as nurses (Bustos, 2016). This disparity discourages qualified professionals from entering the field, resulting in numerous vacant positions. The high entry requirements, including a master's degree, further limit the pool of available counselors (Gallardo & Chavez, 2022).

**Legislative Framework and Professional Requirements**

Republic Act 9258, known as the Guidance and Counseling Act of 2004, outlines the qualifications and responsibilities of registered guidance counselors. The law emphasizes the need for licensed professionals to provide guidance and counseling services in educational settings (Republic Act No. 9258). However, the shortage of licensed counselors has led to the assignment of teachers without proper credentials to act as “guidance teachers,” potentially compromising the quality of mental health support (Bakar, 2020).

Recognizing the urgency of addressing the shortage, Vice President Sara Duterte, who concurrently serves as the education secretary, has pledged to lobby for a pay hike for guidance counselors (Cordero, 2023). The proposed increase aims to make the profession more attractive and competitive, encouraging qualified individuals to pursue
careers as guidance counselors. This initiative aligns with the advocacy of the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association (PGCA), which calls for a raise in salary grades from 11 to 16 (Cordero, 2023).

To mitigate the immediate impact of the shortage, the concept of guidance associates has been introduced. These individuals, with a bachelor’s degree and specific training in guidance and counseling, could offer support in the absence of licensed counselors (Mababa & Fabella, 2023). While this provides a temporary solution, the emphasis remains on the need for qualified professionals to adequately address the complex mental health needs of students.

While existing literature provides insights into the shortage of guidance counselors and its implications, there is a notable gap in research exploring the long-term effects on student mental health and academic outcomes. Additionally, there is limited examination of the sociocultural factors contributing to the shortage and the broader community approach needed to address mental health challenges in schools (Andrin, et al., 2023)

The literature review underscores the critical need for addressing the shortage of guidance counselors in Philippine schools to safeguard student mental health. The multidimensional challenges demand a comprehensive approach, encompassing policy changes, salary adjustments, and the exploration of alternative support structures. The proposed solutions align with global standards and legislative frameworks while recognizing the unique sociocultural context of the Philippines. As this research unfolds, it seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on this pressing issue and inform effective strategies for the betterment of student well-being in the Philippine education system.

Methodology:

The integrative literature review undertaken for this study aimed to amalgamate existing research on the shortage of guidance counselors in Philippine schools and its repercussions on student suicide rates and mental health. Inclusive of studies, reports, and pertinent literature from diverse sources, the review adopted a systematic approach to identify, analyze, and integrate findings from a variety of studies, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

A systematic search was conducted across academic databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and relevant education and psychology journals. Utilizing keywords like "guidance counselors," "student mental health," "Philippine schools," and "suicide rates," the search aimed to pinpoint studies of relevance. Prioritization was given to peer-reviewed articles, official reports from the Department of Education (DepEd), and documents from reputable educational organizations to guarantee reliability and relevance.

The selection criteria included studies conducted within the context of Philippine schools, specifically focusing on the shortage of guidance counselors and its implications for student mental health and suicide rates. Only literature published within the last decade was considered to incorporate recent developments, and preference was given to studies with a focus on quantitative data, policy implications, and proposed solutions.

Key information from selected literature, such as author names, publication dates, research methodologies, key findings, and policy recommendations, was systematically extracted and cataloged. Thematic categories like "Guidance Counselor Shortage," "Student Suicide Rates," and "Impact on Student Mental Health" were established to facilitate the organization of data.

A qualitative synthesis approach was employed for the analysis and integration of findings across diverse studies. This involved identifying patterns, themes, and recurring issues to provide a holistic overview of the shortage of guidance counselors and its implications for student mental health. Comparative analysis was conducted to assess variations in research methodologies, sample sizes, and geographical locations, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the issue.

A thorough quality assessment was undertaken to evaluate the methodological rigor and relevance of each selected study, ensuring the validity and reliability of the synthesized information. Priority was given to peer-reviewed studies, research conducted by reputable institutions, and those aligning with the overarching research questions. This meticulous methodology allowed for a rigorous synthesis of existing literature on the shortage of guidance counselors in Philippine schools, providing a foundation for comprehensive insights into the multifaceted issue at hand.

Findings and Discussion:

Alarming Discrepancy in Counselor-to-Student Ratios:

The investigation uncovered a profound and unsettling incongruity in the counselor-to-student ratios within Philippine schools, emphasizing a critical challenge to the mental health support infrastructure. The internationally recommended standard, standing at 1:250, starkly contrasts with the grim reality in the Philippines, where the
approximate ratio stands at an alarming 1 counselor for every 14,000 students (Felipe, 2023). This alarming finding underscores a significant inadequacy in the availability of guidance counselors, raising concerns about the system’s capacity to address the diverse and complex mental health needs prevalent among the student population.

The observed discrepancy places immense strain on the ability of guidance counselors to provide personalized support and underscores a potential barrier to fostering a conducive environment for the holistic development of students. The international standard reflects an understanding of the nuanced challenges students face in their academic and personal lives, with the expectation that a lower counselor-to-student ratio allows for more individualized attention and support. The substantial deviation in the Philippine context, as illuminated by this study, calls for urgent attention and strategic interventions to rectify the imbalanced counselor distribution (Aquino, et al., 2023).

The consequences of such a stark contrast in ratios are far-reaching, influencing the effectiveness of mental health programs and interventions within schools. A counselor-to-student ratio of 1:14,000 signifies a significant challenge in promptly identifying and addressing the varied mental health concerns of students. It raises questions about the feasibility of creating a nurturing and supportive environment that facilitates the emotional and psychological well-being of each student, considering the extensive workload that each counselor must shoulder (Cordova Jr, et al., 2023).

This finding resonates with the broader discourse on the role of guidance counselors in creating a safe and conducive learning atmosphere. Effective mental health support is contingent on the availability of resources, including an adequate number of qualified professionals, to address the diverse needs of students. The identified incongruity urges educational authorities, policymakers, and stakeholders to reevaluate the current system, with a focus on implementing measures that can enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of mental health support services within Philippine schools (Kilag, et al., 2023).

The study’s revelation of a significant discrepancy in counselor-to-student ratios in Philippine schools underscores a critical deficiency in the availability of guidance counselors. This finding serves as a clarion call for immediate attention and strategic interventions to rectify the imbalance, ensuring that the mental health needs of the student population are met effectively. The study contributes to the ongoing dialogue on the importance of mental health support in educational settings and prompts a reevaluation of existing policies to foster a more supportive and conducive learning environment for students in the Philippines.

**Impact of Online Learning on Student Mental Health:**

The exploration into the impact of the transition to online learning on student mental health reveals a complex web of challenges, necessitating urgent attention and targeted interventions. As students grappled with the demands of adapting to new educational formats, the study underscored the multifaceted consequences on their mental well-being. Beyond the inherent challenges of adjusting to remote learning, students experienced heightened exposure to online stressors, such as oversharing, sadfishing, and negative postings (Chi, 2023). This exposure contributed significantly to emotional contagion and a surge in mental health problems among the student population.

The findings illuminate the unique challenges posed by the digital learning environment, presenting a critical need for tailored strategies to safeguard student mental health. Online platforms, while essential for educational continuity during the pandemic, inadvertently become breeding grounds for stressors that transcend the academic realm (Macario, et al., 2023). The incessant online presence required by remote learning can exacerbate feelings of isolation, anxiety, and inadequacy, impacting students both academically and emotionally. The study emphasizes the imperative for educational institutions to implement targeted interventions that address these digital-specific challenges.

The study’s revelations align with a broader discourse on the intricate relationship between technology use and mental health in the educational context. Acknowledging the unprecedented reliance on digital platforms, it becomes imperative for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals to collaborate in developing comprehensive strategies. Such strategies should not only enhance students’ digital literacy skills but also incorporate mental health literacy, equipping them with the tools to navigate the online environment while preserving their psychological well-being (Monternel, et al., 2023).

The research exposes the intricate dynamics of the impact of online learning on student mental health. The identified stressors, ranging from oversharing to negative postings, highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the unique challenges posed by the digital learning environment. As educational institutions continue to embrace technology for academic continuity, a holistic approach that integrates both digital and mental health literacy is imperative to ensure the well-being of students in the evolving landscape of education.

**Low Compensation and High Entry Barriers for Counselors:**
The investigation sheds light on systemic challenges that significantly contribute to the shortage of guidance counselors in the Philippines, emphasizing the critical issues of low compensation and formidable entry barriers within the profession. A striking revelation from the study is that, despite the rigorous degree requirements and the crucial role played by guidance counselors, their salaries remain comparable to entry-level positions in other professions, such as nursing (Bouchrika, 2023). This stark misalignment underscores the urgent necessity for policy reforms, particularly in salary adjustments, to both attract and retain qualified individuals in the counseling profession.

The low compensation for guidance counselors is a systemic barrier that not only fails to reflect the level of expertise and responsibility demanded by the profession but also diminishes its attractiveness as a viable career option. The study’s findings resonate with the broader discourse on the undervaluation of mental health professions, emphasizing the need for recalibration to recognize the integral role played by counselors in fostering the well-being of individuals within the educational system (Orozco, et al., 2023).

Moreover, the high entry barriers, characterized by demanding degree requirements, exacerbate the shortage of qualified counselors. The extensive educational journey, involving a Bachelor’s Degree in psychology or related fields followed by a Master’s Degree in guidance and counseling, poses a substantial challenge. It not only requires a considerable investment of time and resources but also results in a potential loss of qualified individuals who may be dissuaded by the stringent entry requirements. This raises questions about the sustainability of the current system and the need for a more accessible pathway into the counseling profession.

The study highlights the interconnected issues of low compensation and high entry barriers as key contributors to the shortage of guidance counselors in the Philippines. The urgent need for policy changes, particularly in salary adjustments, is emphasized to attract and retain qualified individuals in this crucial profession. As the educational landscape evolves, addressing these systemic challenges is imperative to ensure a robust and well-supported mental health infrastructure within the Philippine educational system.

**Alternative Measures: Introduction of Guidance Associates:**

The study addresses the shortage of licensed counselors in the Philippines by proposing an alternative measure—the introduction of guidance associates. These individuals, equipped with a bachelor’s degree and specialized training in guidance and counseling, are envisioned as a temporary solution to provide support in the absence of licensed counselors (Felipe, 2023). While this alternative measure offers an immediate response to the shortage, it prompts critical questions about its long-term effectiveness and adequacy in addressing the intricate mental health needs of students.

The introduction of guidance associates reflects a pragmatic approach to mitigate the impact of counselor scarcity, allowing for a broader support network within educational institutions. However, the sustainability of this measure hinges on several factors, including the scope of their training, the capacity to handle complex mental health issues, and the potential strain on these associates due to the expansive student population (Kilag, et al., 2022). The study’s findings underscore the need for a nuanced evaluation of the roles and responsibilities assigned to guidance associates, ensuring that their involvement aligns with the evolving landscape of mental health within the educational framework.

Moreover, while the introduction of guidance associates serves as a provisional solution, it emphasizes the underlying necessity for comprehensive and long-term strategies to address the root causes of the counselor shortage. This could include policy reforms, increased investment in counselor education programs, and efforts to make the counseling profession more attractive and accessible to a broader pool of qualified individuals. As educational institutions navigate the complexities of student mental health, the study encourages a holistic and sustainable approach to ensure the continued well-being of students.

**Conclusion:**

This comprehensive study has delved into the critical challenges surrounding the shortage of guidance counselors in Philippine schools and its profound implications for student mental health. The findings underscore the urgent need for strategic interventions to address the identified issues and foster a supportive educational environment conducive to holistic student development.

The alarming discrepancy in counselor-to-student ratios, with the Philippines grappling with a ratio of 1 counselor for every 14,000 students compared to the international standard of 1:250, brings to light a substantial inadequacy in the availability of guidance counselors. This stark reality raises concerns about the system’s capacity to meet the diverse mental health needs of the student population. To rectify this imbalance, immediate attention and targeted interventions are imperative to ensure that students receive the necessary support and guidance.

The study also highlights the multifaceted impact of the shift to online learning on student mental health. Beyond the challenges of adapting to new educational formats, students face increased exposure to online stressors,
contributing to emotional contagion and mental health problems. This emphasizes the necessity for tailored strategies to navigate the digital learning environment effectively and safeguard the well-being of students in this evolving educational landscape.

Moreover, the systemic issues of low compensation and high entry barriers for guidance counselors further exacerbate the shortage. The study advocates for policy changes, including salary adjustments, to attract and retain qualified individuals in the counseling profession. The recognition of the integral role played by counselors in fostering student well-being should be reflected not only in compensation but also in streamlining entry pathways to make the profession more accessible.

As an alternative measure, the introduction of guidance associates, while providing interim support, raises questions about its long-term effectiveness in addressing the complex mental health needs of students. This underscores the need for a nuanced evaluation of the roles and responsibilities assigned to guidance associates, alongside comprehensive and sustainable strategies to tackle the root causes of the counselor shortage.

The study encourages collaborative efforts among educational authorities, policymakers, and stakeholders to implement evidence-based interventions, policy reforms, and long-term initiatives that prioritize the mental health and well-being of students. By addressing the shortage of guidance counselors through a multifaceted approach, we can aspire to create a nurturing educational environment that not only supports academic growth but also fosters the holistic development of students in the Philippines.

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