



## Ethical challenges faced by Philippine public secondary school guidance counselors under the new normal

SANCHEZ-MADDELA, Sarah Bless C.<sup>(1)</sup>; DELA CRUZ-CADA, Rosalie J.<sup>(2)</sup>

<sup>(1)</sup> 0009-0006-92728-9155; National University. Pasay City, NCR, Philippines. sarahblessanchez@gmail.com.

<sup>(2)</sup> 0009-0002-6748-4161; Far Eastern University. Manila, NCR, Philippines. [rjdelacruzcada@gmail.com](mailto:rjdelacruzcada@gmail.com), [rcada@feu.edu.ph](mailto:rcada@feu.edu.ph).

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the impact of the ethical challenges faced by guidance counselors in public schools in Nueva Vizcaya in performing their tasks of counseling and providing other related services to the students in an online learning environment brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they addressed the same. By a thorough understanding of the experiences of these public-school guidance counselors, it is hoped that new solutions or strategies to deal more effectively with such challenges can be offered. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this study examines the lived experiences of four (4) public secondary school guidance counselors who cater to the counseling needs of fifty-two public high schools in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. Results reveal that guidance counselors experience challenges, ethical and otherwise, in the delivery of their services to students. The most common ethical dilemmas pointed out by the participants are maintaining confidentiality of personal disclosures and student records, multiple relationships, awareness of a colleague's ethical transgression, and maintaining boundaries. Guidance counselors will always be part of the support group in the holistic formation of the learners, whether in the physical or virtual environment.

### RESUMO

Este estudo tem como objetivo explorar o impacto dos desafios éticos enfrentados pelos orientadores em escolas públicas de Nueva Vizcaya no desempenho de suas tarefas de aconselhamento e prestação de outros serviços relacionados aos alunos em um ambiente de aprendizagem online provocado pela pandemia de COVID-19, e como eles abordaram o mesmo. Através de uma compreensão profunda das experiências destes orientadores de escolas públicas, espera-se que possam ser oferecidas novas soluções ou estratégias para lidar de forma mais eficaz com tais desafios. Usando a análise fenomenológica interpretativa (IPA), este estudo examina as experiências vividas por quatro (4) orientadores de escolas secundárias públicas que atendem às necessidades de aconselhamento de cinquenta e duas escolas públicas de ensino médio em Nueva Vizcaya, Filipinas. Os resultados revelam que os orientadores enfrentam desafios, éticos e outros, na prestação dos seus serviços aos alunos. Os dilemas éticos mais comuns apontados pelos participantes são a manutenção da confidencialidade das divulgações pessoais e dos registros dos alunos, relacionamentos múltiplos, consciência da transgressão ética de um colega e manutenção de limites. Os orientadores sempre farão parte do grupo de apoio na formação holística dos educandos, seja no ambiente físico ou virtual.

### ARTICLE INFORMATION

**Article process:**

Submitted: 11/15/2023

Approved: 03/10/2024

Published: 03/14/2024



**Keywords:**

mental health, ethics, pandemic, tele-counseling, dilemma

**Keywords:**

saúde mental, ética, pandemia, teleaconselhamento, dilema

## **Introduction**

The American School Counseling Association (2016) states that school counselors are the promoters and pathfinders of organizational transition that aims to achieve educational progress and at the same time inculcate school counseling programs in fulfilling the goals of the institution. School counselors must actualize the ethical standards set by ASCA to ensure quality service and client welfare. In truth, abiding impeccably by ethical standards is not something that is achieved with ease. In the Philippines, the Guidance and Counseling profession also adheres to specific functions and expectations set by the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association (PGCA) Code of Ethics. Competence, excellence, integrity, trust, and service are among those identified in exhibiting a holistic approach to handling clients (Code of Ethics for Registered and Licensed Guidance Counselors, 2008). Kitchener, Meara, and colleagues' Moral Principles to Guide Decision Making (Autonomy, Nonmaleficence, Beneficence, Justice, Fidelity, and Veracity) was created to help counselors perform ethically as professionals.

Challenging situations are inevitable which is why counseling practitioners are expected to perform ethically even and especially when they are being discouraged to conform to ethical standards. These standards serve as their guide to determine the best possible resolution when conflicting obligations and complex circumstances arise (British Association for Counseling and Psychotherapy, 2010). However, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020, delivering counseling services to clients became challenging for counselors. Because of the limitations imposed by physical distancing and lockdowns, counselors have shifted to tele counseling to continuously provide relevant services during this time of difficulty. The use of telephone and virtual counseling emerged as a relevant tool in providing services (Joshi et al., 2020). With these tools, availing counseling services becomes easy without breaking health protocols. However, this innovation entails challenges such as the environment in a work-from-home setup, internet connectivity, confidentiality issues, technology literacy, and updating resources for referral (Sasangohar et. al., 2020).

The counseling profession is strictly bound to its ethical standards and counselors are deemed to uphold these standards and apply them in their daily professional work (American Counseling Association, 2005). With these ethical standards the guidance counselors need to uphold, and the emergence of issues brought about by the shift to online learning because of the pandemic, guidance counselors face several challenges.

Guidance counselors have a crucial role in bringing out the maximum potential of students. School counselors are expected to deliver services that will help an individual utilize his or her strengths to be able to reach maximum potential and become a fully functioning individual (Guidance and Counseling Act of 2004). This is also supported by the American School Counselors Association (2016) when it stated that school counselors should provide a

comprehensive guidance program that will support student development in terms of the academic, socio-emotional, and career needs of every student (ASCA, 2016). Hence, the main role of school counselors is to provide counseling to students. According to the Civil Service Commission, counseling comprises 25% of the overall task of a counselor and 25% conducting follow-up sessions for students. Other services are career guidance, information service, referral, research, and individual inventory.

One of the difficulties that counselors may face in an online environment is maintaining confidentiality. Ardi et al. (2017) used a documentary approach to study ethical considerations in using online platforms in counseling. They highlighted that data privacy is very important when using online counseling and this should be carefully maintained by using passwords to log in. Hertlein et al. (2015) found out that one of the potential ethical problems for counselors in online counseling is confidentiality, aside from training and education, licensing and liability concerns, crises and risky clinical situations, and the impact on the counselor-counselee relationship. Furthermore, school counselors may face challenges like being not able to observe non-verbal communication with the students because of the distance. This is crucial because some clinical disorders may not be observable enough and can be overlooked by the counselor. During emergencies, online counseling might be difficult to access (Ahmed & Firdous, 2020). Although, there are also advantages of online counseling and this includes accessibility, convenience, privacy, and mobility although absence of non-verbal cues, mistrust, and poor internet connectivity were the major obstacles to online counseling (Amos et al., 2020).

Given the issues that telecounseling entails, this study explores the ethical challenges faced by guidance counselors in public schools in Nueva Vizcaya in performing their tasks of counseling and providing other related services to the students in an online learning environment brought about by the pandemic, and how they addressed the same. Understanding the experiences of these public-school guidance counselors can offer new solutions or strategies to deal with such challenges more effectively.

The findings of this study may be relevant to the body of knowledge regarding the ethical challenges of public-school guidance counselors working in an online learning environment. This study is important because the guidance counselors' ethical challenges are investigated qualitatively to guide other guidance counselors similarly situated. The Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association may consider setting up structured programs for further and updated skills improvement in the field of virtual counseling and support, including lectures on improved self-care for guidance counselors.

This study is guided by the Connecticut School Association Theory (CSAT) which was proposed by the Connecticut School Association in 2001. According to the CSAT, to be able to deliver complete guidance and counseling programs in schools, the counselors need to know the theory, practice, and ethical standards for effective counseling, be able to conduct periodic evaluations and assessments, be skilled, knowledgeable, and experienced in conducting

consultations in schools, and must efficiently collaborate with and involve the stakeholders, especially the parents in the provision of guidance and counseling services to meet students' needs. Furthermore, counselors should be able to manage time, space, materials, and equipment, have sound decision-making abilities, be knowledgeable about assessment tools and techniques, and be able to understand and utilize technology in the delivery of their guidance and counseling services. Counselors should also exhibit professionalism in rendering counseling services in line with expected ethical standards. Lastly, the counselors should be able to direct and assist the students in creating their personal goals.

Currently, studies conducted on guidance counselors do not specifically deal with the issue of ethical challenges brought about by the online learning environment. The purpose of this study is to start a dialogue about the ethical challenges faced by public school guidance counselors in the provision of counseling services in an online educational setting, and the impact of the challenges, ethical or otherwise, on public school guidance counselors in the delivery of their services in the online learning environment, by examining this phenomenon based on the lived experiences of public secondary school guidance counselors who have been impacted by these challenges in the provision of services in the online learning environment.

## **Methods**

### **Research design**

To explore the public-school guidance counselors' experiences in the delivery of their services in an online learning environment and the ethical challenges they face while working in an online learning environment, this study utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The researchers collected accounts from the four (4) registered guidance counselors deployed in four secondary schools but who also catered to students who need counseling in fifty-two (52) public high schools in Nueva Vizcaya, and thus, they were able to gather data and accounts from a range of viewpoints and degrees of expertise.

### **Participants and study site, instrumentation**

Using purposive sampling, the participants were from the list of guidance counselors who were deployed in public high schools in Nueva Vizcaya. The study only accepted individuals who were at least 30 years old and had worked as guidance counselors for at least three (3) years. Exclusions from the study are those working as guidance counselors in private high schools, as well as public and private elementary schools in Nueva Vizcaya, and those who have not experienced working in both online and face-to-face learning environments.

The sample consisted of 4 participants who are all female and married. Their ages range from 30 to 49 years old (the average age is 38 years old), with experience as a guidance counselor ranging from 4 years to 22 years (the average year in service is 10 years). All except

one is a registered guidance counselor. All the participants finished a master's degree in guidance and counseling.

### **Data gathering procedure**

The study used a qualitative-intensive method, specifically the use of phenomenological research design, to evaluate the influence on guidance counselors of the ethical difficulties they encounter in an online setting. The goal is to first comprehend the experiences from the participants' points of view before creating a comprehensive account of their lived experiences.

A semi-structured interview questionnaire was used to conduct one-on-one interviews with participants. It began by gathering sociodemographic data of the participants such as age, gender, civil status, length of service as a counselor, highest educational attainment, and eligibility. The researchers gathered information from the participants regarding their perception of their profession; the changes they experience, the challenges they encounter in the delivery of their services as guidance counselors in an online learning environment, the effect of these challenges on them; and the ethical challenges they face and how they address these ethical challenges. The researchers conducted interviews via Zoom at schedules provided by the participants. The researchers promptly took contemporaneous notes after each interview and digitally recorded each session. The duration of the interviews, which ranged from 26 to 44 minutes, was 36 minutes on average.

### **Data analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) involved the following procedure: first, listening to the recorded interview, transcribing the interview, and a thorough understanding of the participants' accounts was obtained through reading and re-reading the interview transcripts several times. Second, emergent themes were first identified and afterward developed as superordinate and subordinate themes, and comparable topics were grouped. Each transcript was evaluated individually for patterns and linkages. Finally, after each transcript was incorporated into the final analysis, a master table of themes was constructed. The analyses were then presented by the researchers to the respective participants for their review and or comments via email.

### **Trustworthiness**

The study used credibility, transferability, and consistency criteria to guarantee the data's trustworthiness. The researchers carried out bracketing at the outset of the study, identifying vested interests, personal experiences, cultural factors, assumptions, and hunches that might affect how they interpret the research data. With these biases in mind, they maintained reflexivity and avoided letting their personal biases influence the findings of the study. Addressing the possibility of researcher bias was discussed and made possible through

reflexivity and proper division of labor. Considering that the first researcher is also a high school guidance counselor and personally knows the participants, the researchers tried to mitigate researcher bias by doing the interview together with the first researcher asking the questions from the semi-structured interview protocol. In contrast, the second researcher asked follow-up, prodding questions. The second researcher also did the transcription and initial coding to come up with the emergent themes. Then both researchers closely reviewed the interview transcripts and compared the codes with the raw data. After the primary codes were formed, member checking was done– the researchers repeatedly verified the conclusions with the opinions of the participants. Participants were given access to the transcribed interviews and asked to evaluate whether the extracted codes aligned with their beliefs and experiences. The codes and interpretations were inspected against the participants' remarks to ensure accuracy, and if the codes disagreed with the comments, the codes were corrected. Peer review was also used to ensure conformability, and in this process, one qualitative researcher with experience and competency in qualitative research was given code categories for external validation. The transcribed data were then contrasted with earlier studies that were discussed in the relevant literature.

## Results and discussion

Concerning the participant's delivery of services in an online learning environment, three (3) superordinate themes emerged: guidance counselor as a profession, challenges as part of the job, and ethical dilemmas (see Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
*Superordinate and subordinate themes that emerged*

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Guidance counselor as a profession	
Challenges as part of the job	Lack of support The influx of student concerns Presence not felt Non-direct services burden Addressing the challenges Impact of challenges
Ethical dilemmas	Frequently encountered Maintaining confidentiality Multiple relationships Awareness of a colleague's ethical transgression Maintaining boundaries Addressing ethical dilemmas

*Note: Guidance counselor as a profession describes the guidance counselor's perception of their profession, the tasks performed, and what it takes to be one.*

## **Guidance counselor as a profession**

For the participants, being a guidance counselor in a public high school is a noble profession. It is a highly fulfilling profession, not lucrative, but where you find happiness and fulfillment when you know you can help mold the students to become better individuals—better versions of themselves. A guidance counselor is crucial to a student's overall development.

Guidance counselors assist students in their academic and personal growth to become productive and well-adjusted individuals. They do this by conducting individual and small group counseling to students of the fifty-two public high schools who may need their help. They conduct psychological testing and career counseling. They use the data gathered to determine who among the students they would give the most challenging coursework. They refer clients, conduct research and evaluation, individual inventory, and provide relevant information to students, teachers, and other stakeholders through symposiums and other means of information drive. Guidance counselors often check in on students to learn about their circumstances and address their needs and issues.

Guidance counselors teach students how to manage emotional issues and other difficulties at home and school. They guide them on how to manage psychological issues that can interfere with their academic performance, thus enabling them to enhance their problem-solving skills in dealing with issues affecting them. They guide students on the right strategies in coping with the diverse situations they face—how they relate with their peers and how they handle changes. They shape the students' behavior while instilling the proper amount of discipline in them.

Guidance counselors help teachers in addressing the educational needs and aspirations of the learners. Concerns about mental health are one of the frequently encountered issues that guidance counselors deal with. Other than mental health problems, the concerns of the learners include a sense of isolation, heavy schoolwork, and fluctuating internet connectivity. In addressing these concerns, the guidance counselors conduct mental health activities, host homeroom and guidance sessions, communicate with parents, collaborate closely with teachers, academic leaders, and class advisers, and provide individual and group counseling. Their intervention techniques include online therapy, websites, YouTube video tutorials, videos, short films, online debates through WhatsApp groups, and other channels. (Ifdil et al., 2020). Specifically, they use Facebook Messenger, Google Meet, Zoom, phone calls, text messages, and limited face-to-face (home visitation) for counseling.

Most of the students exhibited anxiety throughout the lockdown. Aside from challenges brought about by the shift in online learning modality, The students were concerned about their access to food as well as financial resources (Baloran, 2020). Counseling is conducted virtually for students experiencing anxiety and depression; they communicate with them via mobile phones and the students' social media accounts.

The students suffered because of the lockdown, physical distancing, and other health precautions. Technology is optimized in the education setting. The students' level of preparedness for virtual classes was a major concern because they were worried about the challenges associated with online learning and, more specifically, about internet access. Majority of the students were not ready for a synchronous learning environment. A participant observed:

*GC4: "The readiness of the students is determined by their accessibility to stable internet connection, competence and confidence in their knowledge on how to use technology, preparation, and exposure to e-learning resources."*

Also, most students lack the necessary motivation to study and learn in a virtual environment. Probable causes of the lack of interest include a lack of both internal and extrinsic motivation, and the inability of the teachers to motivate the students. (Agustina, Matra & Karimah, 2020). As one participant said in jest:

*CG4: "Their loss of interest is also probably due to their lack of motivation, they have no drive to learn further, also maybe because of the teacher? Oops, sorry."*

A public secondary school guidance counselor should hold an MA Ed in Guidance and Counseling or an MA in Guidance and Counseling to be able to develop an extensive counseling program that will meet the needs of the students. Preferably, they should also be Registered Guidance Counselors.

### **Challenges as part of the job**

Challenges as part of the job (with six subordinate themes: lack of support; the influx of student concerns; presence not felt; non-direct services burden; addressing the challenges, and impact of challenges) describes the different challenges faced by guidance counselors in the performance of their tasks, how they can address the same, and how the challenges affected them.

#### ***Lack of support***

The participants identified the challenges caused by the lack of support for the guidance counselors. The limited counseling personnel in school and the hiring of ineligible school counselors (called guidance designates) who cannot do counseling, put a strain on the four participants who must provide counseling services to students from the fifty-two public high schools in Nueva Vizcaya. At times, the school administrators do not understand the role of the guidance counselor. For example, the crisis preparation and response team composed of the school administrators and student services personnel regularly meets to discuss joint efforts for student and family support where protocols for crises are addressed and evaluated with the entire staff, and while the guidance counselors are not considered as part of the team,

their opinions are sought on certain areas; or that the guidance counselors are members of the crisis preparation and response team but the team does not meet regularly. Hence, no opportunities for real updates and collaboration. In other words, school administrators do not prioritize the guidance and counseling programs because they focus more on the academic side of education (Knettle, et al., 2020). There is also a lack of support for the roles of guidance counselors, especially among families and the public—for example, they do not trust the guidance counselor, or do not think that the guidance counselor can help the students. For them, because there is no face-to-face interaction, online counseling programs are less effective (Villarreal-Davis et al., 2020).

To deal with students with mental health concerns or those who experience anxiety and depression, the guidance counselors should first ensure that they are mentally and emotionally prepared and in good health before providing counseling or engaging in other activities linked to guidance and counseling. By creating a supportive environment and praising their efforts, the guidance counselors will feel more valuable at work and their self-worth may increase (Kim & Lambie, 2018).

### ***The influx of student concerns***

To successfully provide the students with the needed services, school guidance counselors must make sure that they have the time and resources to conduct counseling. And when providing counseling to students online, they face various challenges.

One such challenge is the influx of emerging issues that students face, particularly students struggling with anxiety and depression, and other mental health issues due to the difficulty adapting to the virtual learning environment. There is also the difficulty in having access to or connecting with students in the online learning environment, more so, the challenge lies in offering and providing counseling to students remotely and motivating them to participate. Zeng, et al. (2023) revealed that undergraduate students suffer from online class related anxiety due to the new setup of learning environment brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, it affected their academic achievement negatively. Interestingly, they have found that intrinsic motivation mediates the negative relationship of online class related anxiety and academic achievement. Moreover, extrinsic motivation mitigated the negative relationship between the two variables. In this challenging situation, the guidance and counseling service is highly essential in providing socioemotional support for students experiencing anxiety and depression.

Students and guidance counselors were unable to communicate with one another due to internet connection issues. As a result, guidance counselors have started calling or using text messaging as a means of communication. The same problem was encountered by psychologists who reverted to tele-counseling during the pandemic. Internet connection was not stable making it difficult to communicate with clients (Geraldina, et al., 2023). There is

also the problem related to the students' availability— some students may want to be counseled but they are not readily available for counseling because of conflict in their schedules coupled with poor or unstable internet connection. With this concern that emerged, it is difficult to reach out to students who needed counseling.

### ***Presence not felt***

In a virtual learning environment, there is a challenge related to having a real presence in a virtual counseling session—either the presence, commitment, or sincerity of the guidance counselor is not felt by the students, or it is the students themselves who may be attending the virtual counseling session, but their minds are probably drifting elsewhere.

There is also the issue of the truthfulness of counseling—the students may not be open with the guidance counselor because of a lack of trust. This may have been due to problems with communication and or lack of rapport. During the counseling also, the guidance counselors may fail to fully observe the non-verbal cues of the counselees. In line with this, psychologists from Indonesia who utilized tele-counseling experienced the same difficulty with their clients. It takes more effort for them to understand the thoughts and feelings of the clients because they only rely on the tone of the voice and how they tell their stories. Although the mental health practitioners use video conferencing, it is still challenging for them to fully empathize with their clients as they cannot totally see the non-verbal cues of their clients and fail to get a full understanding of what these clients want to express because of the virtual environment (Geraldina, et al., 2023).

### ***Non-direct services burden***

The guidance counselors also encounter challenges in the delivery of non-direct services. Because of unstable internet connection and or refusal of the students to respond to efforts of the guidance counselors to reach out to them, the guidance counselors face difficulty in reaching out to students who have not participated in online classes and those who have not returned to school since the schools reopened. Conducting home visitation (if they cannot reach out to the students) is likewise a problem because of the distance between the school and the residences of the students, not to mention the risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus and its variants. When asked to cite the initial challenges faced by the participants, they answered:

*GC1: "Client has no internet connectivity, unresponsive clients, risking our health for home visitation."*

*GC2: "Limited access to students, no assurance if services reach the students, and concern if they are doing well despite their situation/ condition."*

*GC3: "Some students do not participate in the activities due to limited to no access to the internet, students are unable/ difficult to reach, limited given hours for guidance and counseling services -given only 1 hour every Wednesday."*

*GC4: "Difficulty in reaching out to students due to intermittent connection and unavailability, unresponsive students."*

At times, the guidance counselors are assigned to perform inappropriate duties that add up to their work and pressure from managing a high caseload owing to the number of students being counseled and monitored, especially for mental health concerns.

Other non-direct tasks that are equally exhausting include implementing essential psychosocial learning programs, providing training and resources for class advisers and subject teachers, and teaching staff, responding to the needs of students in crisis, and offering brief counseling to assist their mental health, while gaining access to sufficient school and community mental health resources and networking to refer students and parents who may be in indeed of mental health services, as well as collecting/analyzing student data for use of class advisers and subject teachers.

The participants also cited a lack of motivation, demanding workload, lack of resources and facilities, lack of time, insufficient professional development, and inadequate skills as a hindrance to their effective delivery of non-direct services to students.

### ***Addressing the challenges***

In addressing these challenges, the guidance counselors check on their emotional and mental readiness to manage the tasks. They find time to participate in professional development webinars appropriate for school counseling. They learn, get familiar with, and keep up with new technological platforms. They conduct team planning on protocols to be adopted and coordinate with the school principal and the teachers. They choose between providing online individual counseling or group counseling taking into consideration the needs of the students as well as privacy and confidentiality concerns. They meet with class advisers, communicate with the students' parents (again subject to confidentiality concerns), and conduct mental health awareness activities. On top of these, they care for their own mental health (self-care).

By communicating with the school principal, the teachers, and the staff, collaborative effort is stronger, and counseling becomes more successful for the guidance counselors. This benefits everyone--the school principal, the guidance counselor, the teachers, students, other school personnel, and more importantly, the school itself (McConnell et al., 2020). According to one participant:

*GC3: "After talking to the school principal, class advisers, and teachers, all of us now are more active in collaborating for our students' welfare. We*

*brainstorm on the specific concerns of students so we can produce appropriate interventions for them.”*

Guidance counselors had to be prepared and innovative in providing counseling to the students. To do so, the participants explain:

*CG3: “I have to go back and review the fundamentals of counseling.”*

*CG4: “I needed to recall the basics about counseling and think about how I can improve my style so I can provide more effective online counseling.”*

*CG1: “Having attended several relevant workshops and conferences gave me novel ideas and I became more confident in conceptualizing the activities we will do under the new normal.”*

The guidance counselors needed to be digitally literate and optimize technology in counseling. Said one participant:

*GC1: “This is because our students are digital users. We need to innovate—through critical thinking and creativity which we can only do if we are tech savvy.”*

To arm themselves with tactics and procedures that are efficient in online counseling, the guidance counselors participated in webinars and group discussions. These experiences gave them a deeper understanding and innovative approaches to dealing with the range of challenges that students face. Working together, they created protocols and conducted regular meetings with class advisers and teachers for them to gather data on the behavior of the students in their online activities. By watching videos about how to utilize Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom apps, the guidance counselors became familiar with the various online platforms that they use to deliver their services. They then shared their knowledge and expertise with one another and made sure that they had desktops or laptops with strong internet connections.

### ***Impact of challenges***

When asked if and how they are impacted by the challenges in rendering service in the online learning environment, the participants' responses were:

*GC1: “Doing counseling online is frustrating and tiring.”*

*GC2: “Since I am doing online counseling, I noticed that I became anxious of calls or text messages because my lines are always open. I need to have that open line of communication because there are students with mental health concerns.”*

*GC3: “I experience difficulty in rendering services to students.”*

*GC4: “It is so frustrating because there was an increased number of mental health concerns.”*

And when asked how they can cope with the challenges, the participants replied:

*GC1: “Organizing the task, taking a break, and teamwork.”*

GC2: *“Time management, self-care, and prayer.”*

GC3: *“Schedule the students so that we could be able to maximize our time.”*

GC4: *“Self-care and coffee.”*

Although it was difficult for the participants to get the students to study, regular virtual classroom visits, home visits, collaboration with teachers, and meetings with the principal turned out to be the most effective solutions for this issue. One participant claimed:

GC2: *“I realized that there should be open communication and strong collaboration with our school principal, the class adviser, the subject teachers, and parents to help the students.”*

The sudden shift to the online learning environment affected the participants. As pointed out by the participants:

GC1: *“As more students experience mental health concerns, from anxiety to depression, because of the online learning environment, we also experience online fatigue. Physical exhaustion began creeping in on us counselors.”*

GC3: *“Technology helps a lot and I learned how to adapt.”*

In trying to describe the hardship she encounters, a participant points to the difficulty of getting the students to undergo counseling because the students are reluctant to skip classes to attend counseling, so she had to adjust. She narrates:

GC3: *“It is difficult to have a schedule during weekdays unless we do overtime. The only time we can talk to them is during lunch break because it is not allowed to disturb classes, especially for them, they would tell us that they might miss their lessons. Luckily, the end of their class is at 3:00 pm, so we can have a session at 3:00-4:30 pm. Of course, it is not enough. It is difficult for us.”*

Like any other person, guidance counselors may become emotionally exhausted, feel online fatigue, and experience burnout when assisting students. One participant said:

GC2: *“There are times that I experience burn-out, loss of interest, and want to give up but when I think about the students, I pity them. That is why I keep holding on and believe that I can do this. The new normal is difficult for us.”*

## **Ethical dilemmas**

Ethical dilemmas (with two subordinate themes: frequently encountered and how to address) describe the moral dilemmas encountered by the guidance counselors and how they addressed the same.

### ***Frequently encountered***

The participants most frequently mentioned ethical dilemmas included maintaining the confidentiality of personal disclosures and student records, multiple relationships, awareness of a colleague's ethical transgression, and maintaining boundaries.

A participant shared her difficulty in maintaining confidential information disclosed to her as the counselor because she is also a part of the school's academic council:

*GC2: "It is challenging to maintain confidentiality because you need to discuss details, especially during academic council meetings when the members would question why the grades of the student dropped. If the teachers said there is no problem, then they would ask the counselor what could have been the problem."*

Most parents want to know what the students discussed with the guidance counselor, ignoring the confidentiality of the counseling session between the guidance counselor and the students. It is especially difficult if the students' concerns involve the parents or the whole family. As one participant relates:

*GC2: "It's really frustrating that you wanted to help the student who trusted you about her concerns, but you can't because you know that the parents are one of the contributing factors to her problem, the student's problem centers on them."*

Another participant struggled with maintaining confidentiality, particularly when she needed to act on information that she gathered from a student during the counseling session that placed said student or others in danger. She relates:

*GC1: "Since the pandemic, there were ethical issues compromised. For instance, confidentiality was hard to maintain because there are times that we have no choice but to inform immediately the parents or guardians of our students in case there are incidents involving life."*

The participants also face challenges regarding confidentiality and parental rights, particularly involving parents who have separated. The parent who has custody of the minor student demands that the guidance counselor does not give the other parent any access to information regarding their child. Sometimes the other parent approaches the class adviser or the teachers to ask for assistance, and the latter in turn asks for the requested information from the guidance counselors who find it hard to refuse the requests from the teachers who may happen to be friends with the guidance counselors. These scenarios result in challenges to parental rights, student confidentiality, and dual/ multiple relationships with the teachers. A participant says:

*GC1: I believe that the teacher must also be aware of the data I gathered in my counseling with the students or consultation with the students' parents. I also am aware that whatever the students' experience will influence their behavior and performance at school. This is confidential information so most of the time I am at a quandary on how much the teachers must know for them to be sensitive to the students and or the family, so I just give only brief but*

*helpful information after obtaining permission from the students or the parents about sharing the information.”*

Another participant also encountered an issue with multiple relationship; she explained:

*GC3: “There were times that teachers refer students with whom I am related. Since there are no other available counselors, I gave initial counseling only.”*

Another dilemma cited by one of the participants is awareness of a colleague's ethical breach. Participant GC2 found out that one of her colleagues committed an ethical breach in upholding the parent's rights, in total disregard for the rights of the student. Worse, the colleague did so because she is friends with the parent (father) who did not have custody of the student. The participant called the attention of her colleague about it, and reminded her about the possible implication of the breach but it was too late, the other parent (mother) already found out when the student told her that her father was able to talk to her because of the intercession of the colleague, in violation of the court protection order, which was not disclosed by the parent (father) to the guidance counselor's colleague. The colleague was relieved of her position and transferred to a public high school in another province.

At one time, one of the participants volunteered to accompany a student, who was taking antipsychotic drugs and having self-injurious tendencies, to the doctor since the client's parent will not or cannot do so:

*GC4: “But there was an instance where I consulted my supervisor if I was going out of my boundary as a counselor. My client was taking medications (antipsychotic drugs) and was having negative reactions to it. One day he showed me cuts on his arms and was saying that he wanted to end things. That he could not take what was happening to him anymore. I immediately informed the mother and requested that she take him back to his doctor. The mother was giving an excuse for not wanting to take him back to the doctor (she had work, she needed to work to be able to feed her family). I volunteered to be the one to do it.”*

A participant admitted giving the students the liberty to call her even during the night to take advantage of the ‘momentum.’ She explains:

*GC2: “I believe that once I told them that I will talk to them on the next day, and that day came, they would not tell me their concern. That is why I allow the students to call me so that, you know, to help them relieve or pacify their emotions at that moment.”*

### **How to address**

Guidance counselors often make ethical decisions that require them to be constantly vigilant and committed to the best interest of the student. Counseling work frequently presents dilemmas including confidentiality, parental rights, danger to oneself or others, and dual

relationships. The guidance counselors keep abreast on their knowledge of guidance and counseling and consult the ethical code when faced with making ethical decisions. The participants advise to be flexible and resourceful:

*GC1: "To avoid multiple relationships, I refer them to my colleague so that the objectivity in counseling will remain."*

*GC4: "Being a flexible and resourceful counselor can aid you to minimize the issues of ethics. We need to adapt to the changes happening around us and still be able to deliver our services."*

Providing counseling to students through video conferencing exposes both the guidance counselor and the students to risks such as the chance that an unauthorized person could intercept or overhear a counseling session. Additionally, it is challenging to preserve the confidentiality that is essential to the counseling connection as students' families, or the guidance counselor spends more time at home. To address this ethical challenge in maintaining confidentiality, participant GC2 encourages the students to ensure privacy first by finding a private spot where they can speak and keeping the family busy. In addition, she is in a secluded space and uses headphones when others are nearby. Also, when conducting counseling virtually, participant GC4 avoids the risk of making unintentional disclosures to the students so she uses a backdrop devoid of any personal belongings.

The guidance counselors know the current laws as well as the existing rules and regulations of the school on the confidentiality of records of students, so they can deal with these dilemmas both legally and ethically, for their protection, as well as that of the students.

Guidance counselors refer to the ethical code more often and consult a supervisor or a colleague for advice in resolving dilemmas. As two participants pointed out:

*GC2: "In case of doubt, refer to the ethics code or call a friend, he he, joke... consult a senior."*

*GC3: "That is when I consulted my supervisor. His reply was that we refer the client first to our school doctor. There was coordination between the doctor and the mother. The result was that I did not have to bring the client to his doctor, instead, the mother was able to do it."*

Guidance counselors should be adequately prepared and undergo continuous training on how to manage ethical dilemmas. They should be reminded of their primary duty of confidentiality to the students, but they must balance this duty with an awareness of the legal and inherent rights of parents or guardians to be the guiding force in the lives of their children. As such, the guidance counselor should respect the rights and duties of parents or guardians over their children and work to build a collaborative relationship with them wherever possible to promote the students' full development, while upholding their obligations and maintaining student confidentiality.

Mental health professionals, in addition to their legal and professional obligation, have an ethical obligation to protect their clients against unauthorized disclosures of information shared by the clients during the therapeutic relationship (Corey et al., 2011). Unless prohibited by law and upon the client's informed consent, psychologists may disclose confidential information. Counselors respect the right to privacy of their clients and refrain from making illegal, unauthorized, or unjustified disclosures of confidential information. Counselors protect client confidentiality and act in the client's best interest (American School Counseling Association, 2016).

On the overall, notwithstanding the challenges, both ethical and otherwise, faced by the guidance counselors, they will continue working and exercising their profession. Such is clear from their statements:

*GC1: "Definitely still worth it, though I look forward to the day when I will be concentrating on helping special education learners as well."*

*GC2: "No challenge is big enough to weigh me down, I will survive."*

*GC3: "Challenge is part of everyone's profession. Ethical dilemmas keep you on your toes and keep you straight– always on the right path."*

*GC4: I am too young to stop. I am also learning. The pandemic will pass, and everything will go back to normal. I cannot stop. I do not want to stop."*

## **Conclusion**

Guidance and counseling as a profession is a fulfilling job despite the limited opportunities on the career ladder. Even though the compensation is not fair enough with the high educational attainment and required skills and knowledge, the guidance counselors remain compassionate with students and give their best in delivering services despite the challenges of the pandemic.

Guidance counselors will always be part of the support group in the holistic formation of the learners, whether in the physical or virtual environment. COVID-19 pandemic caused the shift from physical classroom classes to the online learning environment. Because of this, a sizable number of students had mental health concerns that the school guidance counselors needed to be immediately addressed, thus, in the process these school guidance counselors faced challenges, ethical and otherwise, to help assist the students. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, guidance counselors must give more psychological help to the students to overcome the challenges the students face. The students' anxiety and psychological stress must be addressed so they are able to focus more on their studies despite the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online counseling sessions and regular monitoring are important to help them cope with their problems.

The main challenges that guidance counselors face are the lack of support, the influx of concerns, their presence not being felt in counseling in an online environment, and the burden

of a non-direct service. Furthermore, counselors experience ethical dilemmas involving issues in maintaining confidentiality, multiple relationships, awareness of a colleague's ethical transgression and crossing boundaries. These dilemmas are addressed by always referring to the code of ethics. To avoid multiple relationships, counselors practice referring clients to their colleagues. In dealing with crossing boundaries, counselors confer with their supervisors to have more wisdom in managing this ethical dilemma.

These challenges, ethical or otherwise, are addressed by implementing a better counseling program adaptive to students' needs in a virtual learning setup and require the following: a better communication system between the administrators, the teachers, and the guidance counselors; further training on communication and online counseling and a review of the fundamentals of counseling on the part of the guidance counselors; better coordination process with the principal, homeroom teachers, and other teachers; an enhanced virtual orientation on services and activities so the students will know what to do and who to approach, and intensified online communication with students.

Nevertheless, despite the difficulties and obstacles the guidance counselors face, effective interventions are done with the assistance of the school principal, the homeroom advisers, and subject teachers, and the varied activities assist in managing and addressing the difficulties and issues faced by the students in the virtual learning environment. The use of the Internet as a teaching and learning tool gives guidance counselors the opportunity to try and learn new things that inspire them to enhance their guidance and counseling programs. These new things included technology optimization, creativity, innovation, and acceptance of limitations in the online counseling environment.

## **Recommendations**

Given the findings in this study, the researchers recommend that guidance counselors should always be part of the executive committees in schools so that they will be able to help in contributing to the growth of learners. Also, the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association may think about developing organized opportunities for additional and modern skill development in online counseling and assistance, including talks on better self-care for guidance counselors. The Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association should provide training for counselors in delivering their tasks in the new normal and at the same time, provide proper guidelines for online counseling to address the ethical dilemmas of counselors. And for future studies, the researchers suggest either doing a study comparing the actual work experiences of guidance counselors in public and private high schools, or a comparative study between the lived experiences of male guidance counselors and female guidance counselors, or it is also possible to perform a comparison of the lived experiences of public secondary school guidance counselors with those of public elementary school guidance counselors.

## Limitations

Even though every effort was made to ensure the accuracy of this study, there were certain limitations. The difficulty in generalizing findings to large populations because of limited sample sizes and the contextualization of data based on narrative data is a major limitation of any qualitative research. It is possible that the study participants' experiences do not correspond to those of public-school counselors in other regions of the Philippines. Additionally, phenomenological investigations are more concerned with describing a particular phenomenon than they are with quantifying, operationalizing, or looking into its causes. Due to its subjective nature, it is possible that phenomenological analysis was affected or influenced by researcher bias. Finally, the participants may have been prone to censoring their responses due to the research's emphasis on ethical problems to avoid experiencing negative feelings associated with their recall of these challenges or unjust judgment because of self-perceived wrong decisions. Despite these drawbacks, the researchers believe that these findings add to our understanding of the ethical dilemmas that public school guidance counselors face given the degree of consistency with other studies.

## Ethical Considerations

The researchers ensured that the participants understand and sign their informed consent. Their names were not reflected in the research paper or even in the audit trail. The researchers used code names in the transcription of the recorded interview and in coding. The recorded interviews, the transcriptions, the coding sheet, the informed consent, and the semi-structured interview protocol, together with all the notes used in this research were collated in a virtual folder shared only between the two researchers. The researchers agreed that all data/ contents of the virtual folder (except the final paper itself) pertaining to this research will be kept only for a period of six months from the submission of the research paper and shall forthwith be deleted. Moreover, since phenomenological analysis's subjective nature makes it susceptible to being influenced by researcher bias considering that the first researcher is also a high school guidance counselor and personally knows the participants, the researchers tried to mitigate researcher bias by doing the interview together with the first researcher asking the questions from the semi-structured interview protocol. In contrast, the second researcher asked follow-up, prodding questions. The second researcher also did the transcription and initial coding to produce the emergent themes. Addressing the possibility of researcher bias was discussed and made possible through reflexivity and proper division of labor.

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