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A New Decade for Social Changes

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Abstract. The pandemic era has directed a new facade of education from traditional to a more conducive system of virtual and modular schemes. The Guidance Designates are equally tasked to play a crucial part in this abrupt transition as the teachers. They, too, are directed to maintain relationships on top of the delivery of guidance and counseling services at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic to meet the needs of students and families and let the education roll. This descriptive phenomenological study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of public junior high school guidance designates in the delivery of guidance and counseling services during the pandemic. The participants of this study were five guidance designates in public junior high schools identified using purposive sampling who took part in the unstructured in-depth interview. The study revealed that guidance designates faced issues, struggles, and sentiments in the delivery of guidance services during the time of pandemic. They utilized various alternatives for the delivery of appropriate services to clients despite unreachable ones. Despite their feelings of boredom and loneliness, they found meaning in their chosen profession by becoming grateful for the designation, and their commitment to serving the clients ignited the passion to go on despite the odds. Their enjoyment with colleagues acts as their strong social support during the crucial times of the pandemic. Thus, these experiences honed them to be shade shifters that remained resilient and flexible in the delivery of guidance and counseling services in the pandemic era.

Keywords. Guidance and Counseling Services, Guidance designates, Pandemic, Descriptive-Phenomenological, Philippines

1.0 Introduction

Due to social isolation and traumatic experiences, a large number of youth and adolescents experience trauma during the global pandemic [1]. This has a negative impact on students' motivation for academic success and leads to behavioral issues in schools [2]. Having school counselors on hand and offering assistance is the most practical and successful strategy to promote kids' mental and academic well-being throughout the pandemic. Similarly, counseling's objectives are to increase a client's efficacy and coping skills and assist students in getting ready for the many 21st century obstacles [3].
In addition to political pressures, social unrest, and racial disparities in the K–12 system, school counselors encountered challenges in handling the COVID-19 crisis [4]. Additionally, they had to establish and preserve virtual connections [5]. According to Capuzzi and Stauffer [6], effective counseling and psychotherapy are built on the helping relationship between the client and the counselor. In order to satisfy the needs of students and families during COVID-19, school counselors are required to plan and implement a comprehensive counseling program and maintain connections.

Meanwhile, there is a deficiency of guidance counselors in the Philippines. There were just 1,096 active counselors in the Department of Education (DepEd) as of May 2020. Meeting the recommended ratio of one guidance counselor for every 500 pupils, as stated in paragraph 5(d) of DepEd Order No. 77 is impossible, with 20 million kids enrolled in public schools [7]. The Department of Education has joined many groups to address the need for psychosocial assistance among students and instructors, acknowledging the necessity for guidance counselors during the pandemic. Aside from this, the department is also training teachers by designating them as guidance coordinators to provide counseling to students [8]. As a guidance counselor in a public secondary school, the researcher has observed that the scarcity of guidance counselors and the need for qualified ones were not seriously considered even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, the guidance counselors’ career advocates were designated, but this contradicted Section 27 of Republic Act 9258, which states that "No person shall engage in the practice of guidance and counseling without a valid certificate of registration and the valid professional identification card."

The lack of registered guidance counselors (RGC) is likewise significant in public high schools in Bacolod City and in the province of Negros Occidental [9]. Out of 50,957 and 146,676 public high school learners officially enrolled in the schools under the Division of Bacolod City and Division of Negros Occidental for 2021-2022 respectively, there are only five (5) RGCs in the former and only four (4) RGCs in the latter [9]. In response to this concern, both divisions assigned classroom teachers who were perceived as motherly, already tenured, or with a Psychology background as guidance advocates who will assume the responsibilities of a guidance counselor [9]. The Division of Bacolod City has 25 appointed guidance advocates, whereas the Division of Negros Occidental has 99. Decena and Singson [9] acknowledged that guidance advocates are facing challenges in providing guidance services, which is sometimes jeopardized as a result of a lack of training and basic knowledge, differing orientations, and demanding and overlapping work as both classroom teachers and guidance advocates.

Despite the significance of guidance and counseling services, few studies on Filipino counseling have been published in the country, especially in Bacolod City and in Negros Occidental. In the Division of Bago City, only one registered guidance counselor out of nine (9) national high schools is noted, and even fewer to no studies at all have been conducted regarding the practice of guidance and counseling during the pandemic time. This is the gap this study would like to address.

This study is necessary to address the gap in the literature regarding the experiences of guidance designates to provide an improved guidance and counseling situation in the country. Thus, this descriptive phenomenological study aimed to explore, describe, and interpret the lived experiences of guidance designates in public schools in providing the guidance and counseling services to high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2.0 Methods

This study utilized the descriptive phenomenological research design. The phenomenological approach explored the lived experiences of junior high school guidance designates during the COVID-19 pandemic. Phenomenology is defined as an approach aiming to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring those who have experienced it. Its primary goal is to describe the meaning of the experience with what and how it was experienced [10].

Meanwhile, this paper laid down the philosophical assumptions that shape the direction of this research. It was based on the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological perspectives. The ontological issues discourse the nature of reality and its characteristics. In the conduct of qualitative research, espousing the idea of immense realities is expected. Epistemological view concerns how people come to know something and how they know the truth. Axiological view tackles the role of values in research. This is important to honestly discuss the values and biases that are more perceived as ineluctable in shaping the findings of the qualitative research. Methodological view refers to the procedures described as inductive, emerging, and shaped by the experience of the research in collecting and analyzing data. Here, the researcher followed an inductive approach in the entire process, starting from specific methods to general.

The participants were the guidance designates in a public junior high school who were chosen using purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria require participants to be a Junior High School guidance designate, has an active service in the guidance office for at least 5 years, reporting to school during the pandemic, and willing to participate in the study and share experiences.

Meanwhile, an in-depth, unstructured individual interview was used in this study to extract the essence of the phenomenon. To gather the pertinent data, an interview guide was crafted using open-ended questions to allow the participant to narrate elaborately their in-depth experiences. The instrument included the “what” and “how” that probed the next questions to come up with the needed information to attain the purpose of the study.

In data analysis, Lichtman's [11] three Cs—coding, categorizing, and identifying concepts—as well as six steps were used. In the first step, an initial code was identified from a word, phrase, or the participants’ own words. Next, a careful reading of the text was made. Reading-and re-reading until codes were developed. There were 88 codes from the initial steps of the analysis. Some of these codes were redundant and there was a need to collapse and rename them. Some of these codes were modified. Lichtman [11] advised removing redundancies, renaming synonyms, or clarifying terms. As soon as the codes were modified, these were organized into categories. The researcher gathered 24 initials categories from the previous step. Once categories were identified, the researcher determined which categories were less important and could be combined to derive themes. Ten categories were gathered from this step. To further filter the categories into themes, these were revisited to ensure no redundancies and critical elements would be identified. The final step was to identify key concepts that reflect the meaning of the data collected.

In terms of the trustworthiness of the data, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were considered. In credibility, member checking was done where written transcriptions were returned to the participants for validation of the veracity of responses. In transferability, thick descriptions were used in presenting the narratives of the participants, which included the non-verbal gestures, exaggerations of the words, and eye contact. In dependability, the researcher ensured that the research process was clear, observable, and well-
documented by keeping all necessary data, such as recordings and transcribed notes, until the duration of the study while keeping all data safe from leakages. Lastly, in confirmability, this is concerned with the findings accurately derived from the data. This is where audit trail came in. A field expert in psychology validated the themes and findings of the entire data analysis.

Lastly, the researcher addressed the general principles of respect for persons, justice, and beneficence to fully guarantee the ethical soundness of the study in line with the guidelines established by the Philippine Health Research Ethics Board (PHREB). Specifically, it addressed issues regarding the privacy of the participants and the confidentiality of the data gathered.

3.0 Results and discussion

Theme 1. Facing Difficulties in Providing Guidance and Counseling Services During the Pandemic

The guidance designates experienced forced and necessary adjustments in the delivery of their services due to the pandemic. Three subthemes were developed: "Difficulty in Reaching Out to Clients," "Understaffing and Heavy Workloads," and "Health and Safety Concerns." These subthemes were related to the transition felt by the guidance designates in providing the services to their clients.

Difficulties in Reaching Out to Clients

Students are the main clients of the guidance services. However, the government declared the immediate closure of schools as one way to mitigate COVID–19 transmissions. Thus, the guidance services experienced adversities in reaching out to their students since everything went virtual. For a long time in a guidance office, Marz shared her comparison from the previous and present guidance services she offered the students. She tried so hard to reach out to the students and admitted the convenience of the guidance services before the pandemic. She verbalized it this way:

I wish I can reach out to these young people since most of them are having difficulty, especially in getting their modules from school. It is really important to reach out. For example, when we distributed the paper in which they needed to choose between first and second choice, it took a while for them to return it, others took it for granted while others didn’t answer at all. They didn’t take time to return it. Only a few papers were returned, and their teachers gave back incomplete forms (Marz, Personal Communication, January 26, 2022).

Likewise, Heart considered the pandemic year a difficult one for her entire service in the government. She wanted to take a break from her position as a teacher and a guidance designate. Based on her statements:

Based on my experience, this year is the most difficult of my three years in the Department of Education because there is no face-to-face encounter, and modes of communication are the only means to stay connected. So, if given a chance to take a rest, I will grab it (Heart, Personal Communication, February 04, 2022).

Max expressed her great concern for her clients. Students need the most guidance services since these elementary and secondary students still lack skills in problem-solving and might experience mental health issues because of the ongoing pandemic. Hence, reaching out to their clients is difficult during the pandemic because children cannot be found anywhere.
As a designated guidance counselor, I also cater to other needs of these pupils, especially at times when they are facing challenges. Currently, giving guidance is too difficult; as a result, most of them suffer from depression. So, I think they get easily bored in this situation (Marz, Personal Communication, February 12, 2022).

For Chi, reaching the clients is the most difficult experience in the delivery of guidance services during the time of the pandemic. According to her:

It is difficult to reach out to these children (Chi, Personal Communication, February 12, 2022).

**Understaffing and Heavy Workloads**

Aside from their usual workloads as teachers, the school administrator designated an additional task to work in the guidance services. Unfortunately, the pandemic created additional responsibility due to understaffing. Most participants in the study were at their retirement age, which increases their vulnerability to COVID-19 infections. Heart handles an advisory class. She expressed difficulties complying with the school forms that needed to be accomplished. Heavy workloads were assigned to them during the pandemic, and due to some restrictions and work-from-home arrangements, she experienced understaffing.

Paperwork is getting complicated, especially the forms. I have an advisory class and, at the same time designated guidance counselor. So, that is why it is really difficult. I have got a lot to do due to understaffing. Even the retireable has no choice but to accept an advisory class (Heart, Personal Communication, February 04, 2022).

Aside from the complicated school forms of the students, other guidance services such as the homeroom career guidance implementation and updating the records of the students add to the heavy workloads of the guidance designates. Max expressed her sentiments:

Currently, there is homeroom guidance and career guidance implementation as a main designated task for guidance counselors. That is only two aspects, but its scope and workload should have a layout to reach out to as many target students as possible (Max, Personal Communication, January 16, 2022).

Chi recognized that parents are the ones who experience many problems due to the pandemic. Parents cannot visit the school to get the modules for their children. Thus, they cannot follow up on the performance of their children in school. Based on her statements:

These parents are facing plenty of problems including the inability to go to school to get their modules as well as the difficulty of their children to understand their lessons (Chi, Personal Communication, February 12, 2022).

**Health and Safety Concerns**

The COVID-19 pandemic created a feeling of distress, fear, and anxiety for almost everyone, most especially the employees, since they had to go to their offices physically to render duty. Marz and Chi are prone to coronavirus transmission since they belong to the
immune-compromise category as senior citizens. They became so health conscious and anxious about the virus. For Marz:

There is this fear of being infected, especially since I am already a senior citizen with diabetes under medication, so I need to be conscious enough. Also, sometimes, I become paranoid whenever I feel some symptoms associated with the infection (Marz, Personal Communication, February 12, 2022).

Chi described her experience as somewhat "scary." She wished for a work-from-home arrangement, but due to the exigency of service, she was required to report to school. She considered her experience scary, insecure, and anxious about the future.

I am really scared to go to school because I am 60 years old, so I am vulnerable. Supposedly, we will just be working from home, but I cannot do anything because it is the principal's discretion. I am really scared (Chi, Personal Communication, February 12, 2022).

She further expressed:

I felt I was not secure whenever I went out because I did not know what would happen out there (Chi, Personal Communication, February 12, 2022).

Heart was too afraid of COVID-19 infections since she might be the courier of the virus and transmit it to her vulnerable family members at home.

Of course, I am afraid not only for my health but also for the members of my household (Heart, Personal Communication, February 04, 2022).

Max narrated her risky experience when they released the good moral certificates to the parents. Max was quarantined for two weeks for experiencing COVID-19-like symptoms. Hence, she considered a physical duty to her workplace to become an increased vulnerability to virus transmission. She described her workload as somewhat less pressure but too risky.

It was risky in the sense that there is a need for face to face-to-face encounters with the parents to release good moral certificates, wherein the risk of contamination was too high because parents tend to remove their face masks when talking... My fear of acquiring the infection and bringing it to my family due to daily work was very alarming (Max, Personal Communication, February 16, 2022).

Theme 2. Utilizing Strategies to Deliver Guidance Services

This theme discusses the various strategies of the guidance designates to execute their services to the clients. Two subthemes surfaced from the interview with the participants: "Virtualization" and "Connectivity Issues." These subthemes describe the participants' experience with adjustments to the use of technology and its issues with the delivery of guidance services.
Organizing Online and Guidance Counseling Activities

During the pandemic, the educational sector decided to implement full online/blended/modular classes to mitigate the spread of the virus. Since guidance is part of education, the delivery of guidance services simultaneously went virtual. This effort made by the guidance designates allowed them not to hamper their services, most especially students need enormously their presence to better cope with the pandemic.

Facebook page aided the guidance designates to spread information about the services offered to the students. Therefore, the students can communicate with them at any time of the day to cater to their needs. Even though internet connectivity is a tremendous hindrance to their services, the guidance designates tried their best to reach out to the students. Marz appreciated the Facebook page in some way:

Because of the difficulty, we created a Facebook page just in case they need help. But currently we can't attend to it regularly, and they always have this difficulty in internet connection so we cannot demand an immediate action (Marz, Personal Communication, January 26, 2022).

She further elaborated:

The Internet is needed because there was no face-to-face class. We tried our best to connect to students through the teacher's referral to try to connect with us through the Facebook page (Marz, Personal Communication, January 26, 2022).

Similarly, Chi valued the importance of a Facebook page in the delivery of their guidance services to the students. Based on her statements:

Through our Facebook page, students can reach out to us by asking questions and sharing their problems in this pandemic. In that way, I can give pieces of advice and personal opinion about the matter. Also, they can visit me at school to help them with their concerns. At least, we can keep the connection through that (Chi, Personal Communication, February 12, 2022).

Pin, who has been working as a guidance designate for 30 years, finds a way to reach out to her clients. Few students have acquired a cell phone, and she reaches out to these few clients using the internet, social media, or even text messages. According to her:

As guidance designate, I can think of ways to reach them out if internet connection is possible. I can help by keeping in touch with these students through social media or internet using their smart phones. Unfortunately, in our area there's always this difficulty to connect to the internet and few only have smart phones (Pin, February 13, 2022).

Despite the advantages of technology, virtual access for students and teachers is not a hundred percent possible. Problems with connectivity issues, signals, monetary expenses, and how to use online platforms still need to be considered. There are guidance services that can be done online, but since not everyone can access the virtual platforms, virtual programs are still impossible. Max shared her problems with internet connectivity:
It is impossible for us to create a program virtually. The estimated success rate would be 50%, and 30% would be the attendee rate online, but with no assurance. Although students' enthusiasm to participate in these programs is high, access makes it impossible to keep in touch with us through various platforms (Max, Personal Communication, January 16, 2022).

In addition to connectivity issues, one significant hindrance experienced by the guidance designates is adequate knowledge of online platforms. Some of the guidance designates encountered generational gaps in the use of technology. This digital divide made them feel dissatisfied and worthless since they could not efficiently deliver online services to the students.

I don't know how to use the internet. Some teachers use and access it easily. Therefore, my knowledge in terms of technology became obsolete. So, I feel that I'm no longer capable and thought of retiring at the age of 56 because I'm not satisfied as a person during this time (Pin, Personal Communication, January 26, 2022).

Max shared that her work experience was somehow relaxing since she could not deliver guidance services due to a poor internet connection.

Work became stress-free because there are no guidance services offered due to internet connection scarcity (Max, Personal Communication, January 16, 2022)

Marz narrated her difficulties and problems with the internet. Some students need guidance services but cannot avail of them due to a lack of internet services.

They cannot reach out to their students due to lack of internet as well. If students have problems, they come, but there are just a few of them. We instructed them to refer to us if there are some cases or problems among students (Marz, Personal Communication, January 26, 2022).

Chi requested an internet allowance so that she would not have to pay for it out of her own pocket. At times, the school provides internet assistance, but it is only available when students physically report to their workstations. The pandemic brought an economic crisis to almost everyone, and allocating for an internet expenditure is a burden on her part.

Here, although the school provided us internet connection, we still need to spend money to stay online (Chi, Personal Communication, February 12, 2022).

She added:

They should also provide an internet connection (Chi, Personal Communication, February 12, 2022).

**Tapping Teacher’s Involvement**

Guidance services should be made by the collaborative efforts of the school administrators, the teachers, students, parents, and significant staff in the institution. During the
The delivery of guidance services during the pandemic was challenging. Thus, the wisdom and participation of the advisers were very helpful in the conduct of the services. Max described her colleagues as somewhat helpful, supportive, and intelligent. She said:

*I find it difficult because I sometimes run out of strategies. That is why we involve the team of advisers in our guidance programs: They have fertile minds and are very supportive. Only a few complain* (Max, Personal Communication, January 16, 2022).

**Theme 3. Coping With the Challenges**

This theme allows the guidance designates to share their coping with various challenges to keep on going amidst the pandemic. Despite their experience with facing difficulties in the delivery of guidance services, this theme highlights how the guidance designates passionately love, fulfill, and are grateful for the designation.

**Fulfillment in the Service**

The guidance designates were fulfilled about designation when their clients express their gratitude and when they see their clients reach their potential. Further, the guidance designates felt that they are needed by someone. In return, the experience is very rewarding for them. Just like in the case of Max:

*I always keep my outlook positive. I always thought, "Think whatever you want; some may be true, some may be wrong in your mind, which I cannot control." The students always communicate with me; they even ask how I am doing. It gives me a rewarding feeling; even in small ways, they recognize our worth as guidance counselors because of their concern* (Max, Personal Communication, January 16, 2016).

Marz expressed her sentiments that her clients and other people would see her trying her best to help the students. She stated:

*That is one of the things that I'm hoping for, that they will see that you are trying your best to help* (Marz, Personal Communication, January 26, 2022).

Heart was truly passionate about her designation as a guidance counselor in her school. She serves her students with dedication and empathy. Likewise, she does her best to cater to their needs so that they have a smooth enrolment process.

*Of course, Ma'am, sometimes I feel tired because I am young and have feelings to take care of, but I also empathize with them that they need my guidance service. They cannot proceed to enrolment if they do not have a good moral certificate. I am always considering...*
their part. I do not want it will cause difficulty, especially to those requesting it, so I usually give what we can (Heart, Personal Communication, February 04, 2022).

Chi remained positive in her fulfillment:

Yes, it should be objective...and they should have a positive perspective and then ultimately improve...yes we remain beautiful always...I make sure I report flexibly to make a 3-day scheme (Chi, personal communication, February 12, 2022; March 12, 2022).

Settling Amidst Less Support from the Administration

Guidance designates experienced overwhelming gratitude for the chance to be assigned to guidance. They passionately embrace the profession and feel a certain kind of happiness that keeps them going in the service. At the end of the day, the designation made them feel happy and healthy. These feelings may arise from unending passion and commitment to serve the students. Max claimed that:

Yes, happy as can be. I have learned in the profession to see the best in the worst of times, and that is what keeps us going. I am always happy because, at the end of the day, it is the only thing that remains and sustains us through the hard times. They said it is like vitamin C because the more you laugh, the more you get healthy (Max, Personal Communication, January 16, 2022).

During the pandemic, Pin was so grateful because her designation gave her peace of mind since she was not delivering guidance services face-to-face, thus protecting her from the transmission of the virus. According to her:

As a designated guidance counselor, I can say that I am grateful because I do not handle more cases (Pin, Personal Communication, February 13, 2022).

Heart claimed that the pandemic brought about various problems in her task as a guidance designate since the guidance office was observing a skeletal workforce. She had to do the tasks alone when she was on duty. For her:

I cannot say I am happy at the end of the day. I can only say that I am thankful because I finished it today (Heart, Personal Communication, February 04, 2022).

Chi on the other hand gave her sentiments:

To us, it is 4 days and 1 day off...later, we have made a scheme among us...we were caught by the principal...actually, we have decided among us to have 3 days without the knowledge of the principal (Chi, Personal Communication, February 12, 2022).

Theme 4. Getting Moral Support From Colleagues

The guidance designates passionately persevered in their desire to stay in the service amidst the pandemic because of supportive and understanding colleagues. This is one of the many factors that kept the working environment alive. For Heart:
My principal is very understanding and motherly to me. I tell her my problems, especially at work and with colleagues. So, for those that need my guidance service, thank you will be enough (Heart, Personal Communication, February 04, 2022).

With the surge of cases of COVID-19 all over the country, government and private institutions have adopted various alternative work arrangements to prevent the spread of the virus. Marz confessed that, at times, she missed some of her colleagues in the office. However, some of them were fearful of the virus and decided to work from their respective homes.

They are also supportive if you want to take a leave of absence especially due to our current situation. And because of that, you will seldom see them. If you encounter them, you are very cautious for they might have COVID (Marz, Personal Communication, January 26, 2022).

Marz further expressed the need to be accepted, the need to feel worthy, and the need to belong in the circle of guidance designates. She claimed:

At this time, you should feel that you are also accepted in the group. You have to feel that they also need you, hoping they will see your worth (Marz, Personal Communication, January 26, 2022).

On the other hand, Pin stated that she experienced boredom talking with the same colleague from time to time. This boredom resulted from the ongoing alternative work arrangement to mitigate the virus. She described her experience as:

And sometimes, I also have some problems. Just like my colleague, a senior citizen whom I always stayed with inside the classroom, it became boring because we had the same discussions most of the time (Pin, Personal Communication, February 13, 2022).

Discussions

Facing Issues during the Pandemic

The participants in the study encountered various issues in the delivery of guidance services during the pandemic. Three participants experienced difficulties in reaching out to their students. Government agencies decided to close all schools and immediately shifted to virtual learning to mitigate COVID-19 transmission, most especially to children and students. According to the statistics reported by the United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] [12], half of the elementary students could not be reached by any alternative teaching mode by the time of school closures. Further, the data supported that students from rural areas and low-income families were also the most affected, which illustrates the proposition: "Three out of four students who cannot be reached usually live in rural areas, but in low-income countries, the percentage is even higher."

Likewise, the participants also experienced understaffing and heavy workloads in the delivery of guidance services to their clients, thus making them experience stress and burnout. Aguinis et al. [13] further claimed that school counselors who provided less direct services to the students experienced higher burnout rates than their counterparts. Even before the pandemic, these guidance designates heavily experienced workloads as they had to deliver their
services as teachers and as guidance designates. Furthermore, organizational conflicts such as role ambiguity [14] and overemphasis on administrative responsibilities [15] hinder students from seeking guidance services. The findings resonated with the study conducted by Blake [14] with high school counselors, which found that school leaders usually direct the counselors to spend more time with their administrative functions like schedules and test coordination. These roles fall outside the roles defined by the American School Counselor Association's [16] national model.

Aside from the heavy workloads assigned to the participants, they also faced career and professional problems. This experience stemmed from their experience with the absence of clients in which they cannot perform their skills such as counseling, interviews, testing, and other services. Supported by the previous literature, Savitz-Romer et al. [5] claimed that guidance counselors face professional and as well as personal problems in the helping profession, which hinders them from delivering guidance services during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Mullen and Gutierrez [17], when a person is experiencing too much stress over a period of time, there can be emotional and physical health problems, burnout, and the likelihood of leaving the profession. Mullen et al. [18] found a strong correlation between perceived stress and burnout in school counselors. This better explains why the participants also experienced career stagnation in the profession because of abrupt adjustments of the pandemic.

Lastly, the participants in the present study explicated their fear of being infected with the novel coronavirus. Presently, almost everyone is experiencing fear of the ongoing transmission of the virus. Psychological reactions to the pandemic and the present virus suggest that an increased level of fear of infection is a factor in the development of depression, hypochondriasis, and post-traumatic stress disorder [19]. In a similar study conducted in Korea, Kim and Kwak [20] found that 49.3% of art therapists were worried about getting infected with COVID-19 at work.

The findings of this study imply that guidance designates the needs, training, and intervention programs on how to deliver guidance and counseling services offline. The participants also experienced heavy workloads that hindered their physical and psychological well-being. Relative to this, the school administrators should conduct a stress-management seminar to alleviate the stress level of guidance designates. Moreover, the Department of Education should allocate a budget and offer plantilla positions to the guidance counselors to address appropriately the student's needs.

**Utilizing Strategies to Deliver Guidance and Counseling**

The participants utilized virtual platforms to continue the delivery of guidance services. They recognized the significant help of the Facebook page in providing services to their clients since it was the only way they could spread their virtual existence. Though Facebook has been helpful in its services, most of the participants experienced a gap in knowledge of technology. To conduct online services, it is appropriate that counselors should understand the principles and factors utilized in technology as their medium of counseling services [21].

The participants narrated their difficulties with technology. To cope with the trends in online counseling, counselors should optimize the utilization of technology that would allow synchronous and asynchronous interactions between counselors and counselees [22]. The use of virtual platforms, specifically Facebook, is consistent with the findings of Supriyanto et al. [23], in which they found that the use of virtual conferencing platforms such as Facebook,
Instagram, WhatsApp, and any other social media is very helpful in the implementation of guidance services. Further, counselors evidently experienced difficulties in establishing rapport with online counseling, feelings of isolation and fatigue, and technical issues with the conduct of actual conduct of online sessions [24].

Though the primary issue of using the virtual services is the unstable internet connection, the participants tried their best to reach out to their students. For some other rural areas with insufficient internet connectivity, the participants employed another mode of communication, such as texting and calling their clients. Comparable to online learning, a study by Reyes-Chua et al. [25] revealed that poor internet connection hinders learning. A similar study also revealed that the number one perceived challenge with the delivery of distance learning is internet connectivity [26].

In the same manner, the findings resonated with the findings of Cervantes et al. [27], which highlighted that guidance counselors described their guidance counseling experience as someone who has limited technology and skills and guidance counselors’ insufficiency. Another similar study that supported the experience of the participants was that of Amos et al. [28], in which they found out that non-verbal cues, trust, and poor internet connectivity were their major obstacles to online counseling.

The findings of the study suggest that guidance designates and as well as teachers must be equipped with technological advancement to continue providing services in whatever situations may arise. Likewise, the school administrators should provide the institution with a fast internet speed to be efficient and effective when providing services. Moreover, digital literacy training must be given regularly to the guidance designates as well as teachers.

**Coping with the Challenges of the Pandemic Era**

The participants sustained their psychological well-being and fought against loneliness, depression, career stagnation, and boredom by finding meaning in their profession. This feeling can be attributed to the COVID–19 pandemic; the physical isolation during work duty may have resulted in social isolation due to reduced work contacts and predominant virtual communication.

Similarly, the participants were committed to caring for their students. To give optimum service to their clients, self-care is a top priority in their profession. The feeling of fulfillment is very rewarding for the guidance designates when they see their clients succeed in their lives. In a similar study conducted by Mateo and Salanga [29], they found that life satisfaction predicted the flow state and emotional awareness. Additionally, their research found that counselors who expressed greater satisfaction with their lives may see counseling experience as rewarding. Further, another research also supported that school counselors reported an overall high level of career satisfaction [30].

The findings imply that despite the guidance designates’ negative experiences in providing guidance services, the administrators should reinforce internal and external motivations such as incentives, alternative or flexible work arrangements, and promotions. The guidance designates should help each other choose self-care practices and openly communicate with students and school administrations.

**Getting Moral Support from Colleagues**

The participant’s narratives describe how their colleagues helped each other to deliver guidance services to their clients. Based on their statements, the delivery of services was almost impossible without the help of the school administrators, principals, and, most significantly, the
presence of the teachers. They acted as a support system for each other during the pandemic. However, some participants also described their experience as somehow boring since they met and talked to the same colleague all the time. Research shows that counselors are recommended to promote self-awareness by seeking various forms of self-care: personal counseling, consultation, and seeking support from colleagues, supervisors, and peers to validate their experiences and process the challenges of providing services during the pandemic [31].

The presence of each other may be a support to the participants during the pandemic as part of their coping strategy to deal with stress and other forms of mental health issues. This is further claimed and resonated in the study of Akgul et al. [32], in which school counselors seek support from other professionals, share ideas of resources and materials, and practice mindfulness. Likewise, counselors are further encouraged to find their counselees and seek support and assistance from colleagues, supervisors, and peers to validate their experiences during the pandemic [31]. Thus, the presence of each other revitalizes the energy and the delivery of services to their clients.

The findings imply that in the helping profession, colleagues are very significant in staying in the service where they act as social support for the counselors. Facilitating camaraderie and fostering team building must be properly equipped with the guidance designates and the teachers. The school administrators should also promote a positive environment for the employees in the government service.

**Synthesis**

To summarize, the participants' experience illustrates an unexpected event that disrupted their delivery of guidance services: the COVID–19 pandemic. From their verbatim responses, the participants compared their experiences before and during the pandemic. The pre-pandemic experiences let them communicate and reach out to their clients, delivering guidance services efficiently and effectively. With the pandemic, the participants experienced forced adjustments to adapt to the new normal and to pursue the delivery of their guidance services to the clients.

However, adjustments seemed to be hard at first. The participants' resiliency, commitment, and gratefulness inspired them to face and surpass the disruptions of the pandemic. Amidst the difficulties in reaching out to their clients, they did their best to adapt to the virtualization of guidance services despite digital gaps, remained in the service for the gratitude and passion for helping their clients, and enjoyed the presence of their colleagues (See Figure 1).

Insights from their experiences signify that people are, by nature, resilient. Everyone can conquer and recover from every challenge and fearful situation that arises along the way with courage, faith, commitment, and passion for other people and their profession.

This paper revealed that the delivery of guidance services during the pandemic era became challenging due to unexpected global changes to mitigate the spread of the virus. Despite the adjustments, the participants' resiliency can be depicted by their struggles to keep trying their best to learn to use technology, reach out to clients through whatever means of communication, and find meaning in their profession.

**Essence of the Experience: "The Shade Shifter"**

When the educational blueprint drastically gloomed from a patterned bloom to a 360-degree unstructured turnaboot, the experience of the guidance designates is no exception to such novelty of the pandemic era. The delivery of these services at this time is close to impossible.
The enthusiasm to impart positivity and their will to make the most of what is left to "give" became a driving force to "change gear" and shift shade to adapt to the changes of the times. These shifts opened avenues for possibilities and versatile measures to reach out and offer alternative services that may help the students.

The themes created a picture that guidance designates have the ability to tap their greatest potentialities and shift from a "boxed" one to a resilient and adaptive one. Most of those interviewed were looking at a despicable picture of the situation, but through the urge for service and internal motivation, they shifted by turning shade after shade of optimism and seeing the best sides of every story. To sum up, Figure 1 depicts how the guidance designates experienced the delivery of their services amidst the pandemic.

Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of the Shade Shifter: The Lived Experiences of Guidance Designates during the two Phases of a Challenging Era

4.0 Conclusion
The experiences of the five participants brought insight that the resiliency and commitment of the guidance designates in the delivery of their services are evident. Their passion, love of their clients, and designation motivated them to keep on going despite the hindrances. Therefore, it is concluded that guidance designates were competent and dedicated to their services to the clients the same way as guidance counselors and other mental health professionals, despite their qualifications and primary role as teachers.

5.0 Limitation of the findings
This qualitative study is a purely phenomenological approach, conducted on five guidance designates in the province of Negros for a minimum of five years in the designation. Consequently, the findings of the study were limited to the scope of the study, and it was impossible to generalize the experiences of all guidance designates in the region or even in the whole country. Nevertheless, this study illumined the experiences of the participants, which could be added to the scarce literature and studies conducted among guidance designates.

6.0 Practical value of the paper
The findings of the study can be presented to the Division Office concerned for the possible creation of training programs for the guidance designates to enhance their skills further. For young designates, scholarship opportunities for further studies in guidance and counseling will eventually qualify them to take the licensure examination and become RGCs.
7.0 Directions for future research
For further research, quantitative or mixed methods may be conducted to support the qualitative findings for the creation of an intervention program, policy, or even amendments in the law. The findings may help government and non-government agencies, especially the Department of Education and the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association, to address specific problems encountered by the guidance designates.

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9.0 References


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