



Guidance and Counseling and Homeroom Guidance in Public Schools: How Do We Do in This Time of Pandemic?

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Abstract. The study established the present condition on the demand for qualified guidance counselors in the Department of Education (DepEd) to man the needs of the guidance and counseling program of the Department in general and the homeroom guidance in particular. The research design of the study was case analysis where documentary analysis was used as the main mode of analyzing data that come from reports, issued Department Orders, and declarations of the Department's Chief Officer. Results found that the main issue of lack of qualified guidance counselor have at least five sub-issues namely: lack of qualified applicant for the unfilled items of guidance counselor; low salary grade for entering Guidance Counsellor; small schools in far or isolated places has no available plantilla position item for Guidance counselor; unavailability of Teacher Education Program on Guidance Counselling; and pending Senate and House Bills for the upgrading of plantilla positions for guidance counselors. Findings showed that agencies such as DepEd, CHED, DBM, CSC, PAGC, PRC, and Congress must all work together to address the identified issues as these issues were categorized as concerns specific to the identified agencies. Finally, the NEUST College of Education may conduct a capacity-building program for the teachers of DepEd who are acting as guidance counselors, for the teachers in the conduct of guided homeroom guidance and the preparation of a Mental Health Tool Kit.

Keywords: academic guidance · academic counseling · classroom guidance · homeroom guidance · guidance and counseling

1 Introduction

Homeroom guidance is an integral part of any curriculum implementation in any type of situation there may be and more importantly in time of the pandemic. At all levels of education, homeroom guidance places a significant role and should be considered an integral component of the overall mental health building plan of all educational institutions. Homeroom Guidance serves as a tool that emphasizes proactive, preventative, and educational strategies to help students build life skills (Volante&Olua, 2022). However,

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J. Handhika et al. (Eds.): ICETECH 2022, ASSEHR 745, pp. 602–611, 2023.

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-056-5_58

during the pandemic, homeroom guidance has been restricted since children who are not studying from home cannot be properly watched which is in contrast to the situation when children are educated in traditional classroom settings (Carreon, 2022).

In his study, Llego (2021) discussed the salient points of DM-OUCI-2021-346 issued by the Department of Education. He expounded that homeroom guidance is a comprehensive, developmental, and proactive program designed to equip K to 12 learners with life skills in three domains, namely: academic achievement, personal and social development, and career development. Hence, the goal of homeroom guidance is to take part in the holistic development of a student, especially in this era when face-to-face classes and onsite interactions of teachers with students are suspended and prohibited. In all the actions of attaining the wholistic development of a student to become productive citizenry, the teacher plays a crucial role in facilitating and guiding the actions for a well implemented and wholistic homeroom guidance.

Towards the implementation of a holistic homeroom guidance program, guidance counselors of the school lead the most important task. While it is true at all times that a teacher is a jack of all trades, performing various roles as a learning facilitator, classroom and school leader, curriculum specialist, coach, or trainer (Blasé, J. & Blasé, J., 2006), guidance counselors serve as the guide of teachers in the implementation of wholistic homeroom guidance. Wholistic homeroom guidance meant the provision of wholesome learning experiences in the classroom that will foster positive attitudes where negativity may not prosper, where positive behaviors and values are practiced to overcome any form of mental stress to improve relationships with fellow students, teachers, and family members, where netiquette and online demeanor are observed at all times. Hence, a tandem of teacher and guidance counselors for better homeroom guidance is a must.

According to Undersecretary Jesus Mateo, as of May of 2020, there were 1,096 active counselors in the Department of Education. This number is part of the 5,398 “authorized” positions for the profession where more than 80% are unfilled. On the other hand, as of July 2017, per a report released on June 09, 2019 (Gatchalian, 2019), there were 3,220 registered guidance counselors since the first batch of licensure examinees in 2008. Considering the present need of the Department of Education, the total number of licensed guidance counselors is still not enough. To address the foregoing need to have at least one guidance counselor per school, teachers perform the task and act as guidance counselors.

Being a guidance counselor requires a bulk of educational qualifications and a license to practice the profession. However, in any way possible due to the above-cited situation, teachers serve and act in the role of a guidance counselor. As far as educational qualification is concerned, the few subjects on educational guidance taken during pre-service training were the only background a teacher has. This background is mostly practiced during homeroom meetings and in dealing with the academic needs of students. To meet the growing needs of students in the school with professional guidance counselors, amid a shortage of such professionals, the need for capacity building program for teachers to become equipped to work as substitute guidance counselors is highly needed. Thus, the conduct of this study.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The study explored the issues underlying the shortage of guidance counselors in Region III. Specifically, the study answered the following questions:

1. How may the specific issues underlying the shortage of guidance counselors in most DepEd schools in Region III be described?
2. How may the issues be categorized?
3. What initiatives may be given to address the issues categorized as:
 - 3.1 partner agency level;
 - 3.2 DepED level;
 - 3.3 CHED level; and
 - 3.4. other agency level?

1.2 Scope and Delimitation

The study described the status of shortage of guidance counselors in most schools in Region III and the need for a capacity-building program for homeroom guidance and counseling to address the needs of four Schools Division of the Department of Education which are partners of NEUST College of Education. Two of the subject SDO in region III are based in Nueva Ecija while the third SDO is based in Baler, Aurora, and the last one was based in Mindoro, one of the biggest SDOs in the Mimaropa Region.

The study was conducted during the Second Semester of the School Year 2021–2022.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Method Used

This study made use of case analysis as the research design, with documentary analysis as the main mode of analyzing the data. The existing reports, DepEd and CHED memorandum orders, and minutes of meetings during the webinar attended by the researcher who acted as the documenter were analyzed. The variables established in this study include the identified issues behind the shortage of guidance counselors in most schools in the Department of Education, the categories of the identified issues, and initiatives addressing the issues. In most parts of the study, descriptive statistics were applied.

2.2 Sources of Data

The primary source of data for the study was the Senate and the Congress reports involving the hiring of guidance counselors for the Department of Education, reports on the declaration by DepEd Secretary Leonor M. Briones regarding the problem of lack of guidance counselors, the report shared by Undersecretary Jesus Mateo in 2021 and the contents of DM-OUCI-2021-346 of the Department of Education.

2.3 Analysis of Data

All gathered data about the identified variables were presented textually and in tables. The data were descriptively discussed.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Specific Issues Underlying the Shortage of Guidance Counselors in Most DepEd Schools in Region III

In a DepEd post dated February 28, 2020 (DepdEdtambayan report, 2020), the Chief of the Department, Madam Leonor Briones admitted that there is a guidance counselor supply problem. Secretary Briones emphasized, and was quoted saying “At this time with Generation Z and the challenges which our learners are facing from society and global developments, Kailangan Talaga ng guidance counselors.”

Moreover, during the Economic Development Cluster meeting at the Department of Finance (DoF) on November 28, 2019, DepEd Secretary Leonor M. Briones aired the urgent need to hire guidance counselors. She said that the Department is challenged in filling in positions for guidance counselors citing reasons of disparity in the qualification standards and the salary grade for entry-level as provided by law. More specifically, Secretary Briones identified the following reasons which hindered the hiring of guidance counselors to man the 47,000 public schools in the country, these are:

1. There are high qualification standards, like passing the Master’s degree and the licensure exams for guidance counselors;
2. The salary grade 11 as entry-level, and
3. Pending request to increase the salary of guidance counselors

As stated above, as of May of 2020, there were 1,096 active counselors in the Department of Education and there were 47,000 public schools in the whole country catering to the 27,232,095 enrollees for School Year 2021–2022 (Montemayor, 2021). If the standard or required one counselor for every 500 students (1:500) ratio is to be implemented, then the Department of Education would need about 54,464 guidance counselors. However, if the initial target is to have at least one guidance counselor per school, the DepEd is still in need of 45,904 guidance counselors. If the required number of guidance counselors is still unattainable for the Department to meet, it is easy to deduce that schools in far plunged areas do not have guidance counselors.

The problem in the Philippines is not far behind the challenges experienced in other countries. For instance, in eastern Pennsylvania, according to Prothero & Riser-Kositsky (2022) there is a severe shortage of school counselors in many elementary, middle, and high schools, despite the growing number of children needing assistance with their emotional well-being. Confirming this problem of shortage of guidance counselor is the finding of the exploratory study by Akgul, et al. (2021) stating that school counselors are likely to experience a plethora of stressors including high student to school counselor ratios as well as minimal support.

In 2019, there were legislative actions done to meet the long-time needs of public schools for guidance counselors. These legislative actions were filed by Senator Lito

Lapid on September 23, 2019, as Senate Bill No. 1067 and Kabataan Party List Sarah Jane I. Elago on July 01, 2019. The titles of the Bills were:

- a. An Act Creating in the Department of Education the Plantilla Positions of Guidance Counsellors in every Elementary School and Additional Plantilla Positions of Guidance Counsellor for High Schools, Increasing the Salaries of Guidance Counsellors and Guidance-Related Positions, and Appropriating Funds Therefor
- b. An Act Institutionalizing Support Mechanisms for Public School Teachers and School Personnel in Matters of Student Discipline and Mechanisms for Classroom Management and Providing for Their Protection in cases Related Thereto

From the foregoing data, the main issue was the absence of guidance counselors in most schools of the Department of Education who play a vital role in the delivery of guidance programs of the school including homeroom guidance. More specifically the following issues stemmed from the main issue which includes:

1. Lack of qualified applicants for the unfilled items of guidance counselor;
2. Low salary grade for Guidance Counsellor 1 which is Salary Grade 11 with Php. 23,877.00 monthly salary
3. Small schools in far or isolated places have no available plantilla position item for Guidance Counsellor;
4. Unavailability of Teacher Education Program on Guidance Counselling; and
5. Pending Senate and House Bills for the upgrading of plantilla positions for guidance counselors

The issues above are substantiated by the findings of other studies. In the study of Paras (2006), the need to install a full-time counselor was suggested in congruence with the problem identified in this present study. Furthermore, there is also a need to improve the counselor-student ratio to develop close working relations with counselees. According to the article, *Do Schools Need More Counselors?* (2020), a higher student-to-counselor ratio improves student achievement, reduces suspensions and other disciplinary action, and may help keep schools safe and avert tragic tragedies, raising demand for school counselors.

According to Magsambol& Chi (2020), guidance counselors have little motivation to continue in their jobs because of the low salary and limited opportunities for advancement, despite the fact that they must earn a master's degree and pass a license exam to become registered. Additionally, the findings of Pereira and Rekha (2017) revealed that newly-employed counselors face several challenges related to their profession, including a lack of supervision and a poor salary scale which are also the main problems arising in the context of guidance counselors in the Philippines.

In the article, *School Counselors and COVID-19*, the counselors also voiced concerns that they lacked structure and guidance from leadership, which made it difficult for them to give individualized care to the children (Boudreau, 2020).

Meanwhile, Agrawal (2015) stated that guidance counselors experienced a number of difficulties linked to their jobs, including low incomes, a restricted number of career opportunities, and difficulties obtaining licenses.

3.2 Categories of the Issues

The above-identified issues may be categorized in terms of scope and responsible agencies, described as follows (Table 1).

The identified main issues can only be addressed if the identified agencies will work towards the solutions to the issues. In some of the identified issues, the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is highly sought.

1. Initiatives to address the main and stemmed issues

The lack of guidance counselors in most schools in the Department of Education can be addressed by taking into consideration the following suggested solutions. These initiatives may be attainable at various levels by the identified agencies who may implement the initiatives.

For the lack of qualified applicants for the unfilled items of a guidance counselor, the following initiatives may be undertaken:

- a. Conduct advocacy or promotion on the importance of the guidance and counseling program so that graduating senior high school students may consider taking guidance and counseling-related program in college. A DepEd or CHED memorandum order may be issued to affect the objective.

Table 1. Categories of Issues Involving the Need for Guidance Counsellors in the Department of Education

Issue	Level as main or stem issue	Responsible Agency
Lack of Guidance Counsellors	Main issue	DepEd, DBM, CSC Higher Education Institutions
Lack of qualified applicants for the unfilled items of guidance counselor	Stem issue	DepEd, CHED, PRC, DBM
Low salary grade for Guidance Counsellor 1	Stem issue	DBM, Legislative Body, DepEd, CSC
Small schools in far or isolated places have no available plantilla position item for Guidance counselors;	Stem issue	School Principals School Heads Higher Education Institutions
Unavailability of Teacher Education Program on Guidance Counselling; and	Stem issue	CHED, PRC Higher Education Institutions
Pending Senate and House Bills for the upgrading of plantilla positions for guidance counselors	Stem issue	DepEd School Principals

- b. Encourage teachers of values education and those teachers who are presently assigned in school guidance programs to enroll in post-graduate programs like MAED in Guidance and Counselling.
- c. The offering of scholarship grants by DepEd for those teachers who will pursue post-graduate programs in guidance and counseling and CHED for incoming college students who wished to enroll in guidance and counseling-related programs.
- d. As an alternative immediate solution to meet the need for guidance counselors in most schools in the Department of Education, the designation of values education teachers as guidance counselors may be promoted and the creation of a para-guidance counselor position may be suggested.

The issue of low salary grade for entering guidance counselor may be addressed through the following initiatives which may be initiated by the Department of Education that includes close coordination with the Department of Budget and Management and by requesting more budget allocation for the hiring of registered guidance counselors. A closer look at the principle of the career progression scheme may also be considered. The Department of Education may also undertake benchmarking in private institutions for comparison of the salary and benefits of guidance counselors.

The issue of the absence or unavailability of plantilla positions for guidance counselors in small schools located in far or isolated places can be addressed by forging of Memorandum of Agreement by the school with Higher Education Institutions forming a partnership while waiting for the created items to make plantilla positions available. Higher Education Institutions through the Teacher Education Program may craft or formulate capacity-building programs in the form of webinars, training, enablement activities, and other similar activities to which teachers who are acting as guidance counselors may avail to capacitate themselves on the current trends and pedagogical skills in holding homeroom guidance and academic counseling. Other projects like the development of the Homeroom Guidance Tool Kit fit for this time of pandemic may also be developed by the Teacher Education Institutions like NEUST College of Education.

The unavailability of the Teacher Education Program on Guidance Counselling can only be addressed by the collaborative actions of the Commission on Higher Education for the crafting of a curriculum in this field. To ensure that action is within the bounds of Republic Act No. 9258, otherwise known as the Act on Professionalizing the Practice of Guidance and Counseling in the Philippines, a collaboration with the Philippine Association of Guidance Counsellors must be initiated. The two House Bills for the upgrading of plantilla positions for guidance counselors filed in 2019 which are pending up to this date may be revived. To do this, the Department of Education in collaboration with the Commission on Higher Education may craft a position paper in support of the Bills and may lobby for Congress to fast-track the deliberation and consequent passage of the Bills. This found agreement in the study of Pereira and Rekha (2017) that there should be a governing organization on a national level to establish standards for the education and practice of counselling.

4 Conclusions

1. The main issue is the shortage of guidance counselors in most DepEd schools all over the country. This main issue stemmed into five supporting issues that include having lack of qualified applicants for the unfilled items of a guidance counselor, low salary grade for entering Guidance Counsellor, small schools in far or isolated places having no available plantilla position item for Guidance counselor, unavailability of Teacher Education Program on Guidance Counselling, and the pending Senate and House Bills for the upgrading of plantilla positions for guidance counselors.
2. The identified supporting issues that stemmed from the lacking of qualified guidance counselors in the Department of Education may be addressed through the collaborative and joint efforts of various agencies. The issue of low Salary Grades for Guidance Counsellors may be worked on by the DepEd officials with the Department of Budget and Management, the Civil Service Commission, and Congress. The School Principals and School Heads may work for partnership with Higher Education Institutions like NEUST College of Education for the provision of visiting guidance counselors in small schools and those schools in far and isolated areas. The unavailability of the Teacher Education Program on Guidance Counselling is an impending duty of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) which can collaborate with the Philippine Association of Guidance Counsellors while the status of the two pending Senate and House Bills filed in 2019 may be revived by the collaborative efforts of CHED and DepEd.
3. There were initiatives identified to address each of the identified issues. In these initiatives, the role of DepEd, CHED, other concerned agencies, and NEUST as a Teacher Education Program was identified. There were four suggested initiatives to address the issue of a lack of qualified applicants for the unfilled items of guidance counselors. The issue of low salary grades for entering guidance counselors may be addressed by considering at least 3 suggested initiatives. The absence or unavailability of a plantilla position for guidance counselors in small schools located in far or isolated places can be addressed by at least three suggested initiatives. Moreover, the unavailability of the Teacher Education Program on Guidance Counselling was an issue that only CHED and PAGC can initiate action. Finally, the two House Bills for the upgrading of plantilla positions for guidance counselors filed in 2019 which are pending up to this date may be revived through the combined efforts of agencies such as the DepEd, CHED, and Congress.

5 Recommendations

The issue of the lack of qualified guidance counselors to manage the guidance program of the Department of Education in general and to guide the conduct of homeroom guidance, in particular, is a particular problem of the Department. NEUST College of Education as a Teacher Education Institution can be a part of the solution through the following:

1. Crafting of Program of Action for the delivery of capacity building program to which the teachers of DepEd of the four partner Schools Division Offices of Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija, Baler in Aurora, and Occidental Mindoro are the beneficiaries;

2. Since NEUST College of Education is in partnership with all four mentioned Schools' Division Offices under the signed Memorandum of Agreement, the resident guidance counselors and psychometricians of the College may continue providing services as requested by the SDOs;
3. Enablement activities may also be conducted to guide the teachers of DepEd in the holding of guided homeroom activities, especially in this time of pandemic; and
4. NEUST College of Education may craft a Mental Health Tool Kit for utilization of the partner SDOs.

Authors' Contributions. A.C. and M.J.L. conceived of the presented idea. S.M.G. and B.E.C. developed the theory, performed the computations, and verified the analytical methods. A.C. encouraged M.J.L. to investigate (a specific aspect). A.C. supervised the findings of this work. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

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