Practicing Empathy and Resourcefulness: The Core of Filipino Counseling Educational Settings

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In the Philippines, the rising prevalence of youth mental health concerns has highlighted a critical gap: current training for Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) often fails to address the complex socio-cultural realities of high-caseload, under-resourced schools. While existing local literature documents mandated roles and systemic challenges, there is a dearth of research explicitly exploring how the unique Filipino context shapes actual counseling practice. Utilizing Giorgi's descriptive-phenomenological approach, this study investigates the professional lived experiences of Filipino RGCs. The analysis yielded three core themes: the dynamic evolution of the RGC role, the profound influence of Filipino values (specifically *malasakit*) on practice, and a persistent professional gap. These findings culminate in the proposed Filipino Counselor Empowerment (FCE) Framework, a contextualized model for understanding and supporting the unique professional reality of RGCs in the Philippines.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is currently grappling with an escalating mental health crisis, evidenced by a 20.9% rise in youth depression and 74.6% of college students reporting severe anxiety (Bangalan & Agnes, 2024; Puyat et al., 2025). While educational institutions are positioned as critical intervention points, the delivery of effective support is crippled by a profound workforce shortage. The current counselor-to-student ratio stands at a staggering 1:14,000 (Ingalla, 2023), vastly exceeding the American School Counselor Association's 1:250 recommendation. This scarcity is compounded by systemic inefficiencies; Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) are often diverted from clinical work, spending over 36.37% of their time on administrative or non-counseling tasks (Burnham et al., 2024). These structural stressors, alongside inadequate compensation and a lack of organizational support, serve as primary predictors of professional burnout within the field (Lacson et al., 2024).

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Training and Professional Development. Current literature highlights a significant gap in the preparedness of Filipino school counselors regarding contemporary challenges. This is particularly evident in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which introduced complex issues such as emotional contagion and the digital divide in service delivery (Arrieta et al., 2021; Lacson et al., 2024; Pedroso et al., 2022). While professional effectiveness is theoretically contingent upon a flexible, developmentally-informed curriculum, ranging from core competencies to crisis intervention, a persistent disconnect remains between academic theory and real-world application. Furthermore, sustained professional growth necessitates high-quality supervision and specialized training that accounts for the distinct socio-structural demands of both public and private educational environments (Chatters & Liu, 2020; Haddock et al., 2020; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021; Holstun et al., 2019; Tanhan, 2018).

Motivation and Filipino Cultural Values. A counselor's professional sustainability is a product of both individual dedication (Poon et al., 2020; Singh & Silakari, 2017; Vela et al., 2016) and systemic factors, such as institutional resources and collaborative alliances with parents and educators (Dack & Merlin-Knoblich, 2023; Öztürk, & Sumbas, 2023; Tyler, et al., 2022). Within the Philippine context, however, professional effectiveness is

inextricably linked to indigenous psychological constructs. These include *malasakit* (a proactive, compassionate ownership of a student's well-being; Andres, 1994), *pakikipagkapwa* (the recognition of a shared identity that fosters deep relational empathy; Canete & del Castillo, 2022), and *pakikiramdam* (an intuitive sensitivity to non-verbal cues and social nuances; Pe-Pua, 2006). While these values are presumed to shape the professional identity and practice of helping professionals (Matthews et al., 2018; Rilveria, 2023) like the Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs), the empirical mechanisms through which these cultural drivers influence the practical, high-stakes application of counseling remain largely unexplored.

This study explores how indigenous cultural values and professional training intersect to shape the practical experiences and motivations of Filipino Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs). It aims to bridge the critical divide between theoretical education and the systemic demands of the Philippine school setting. Specifically, this inquiry seeks to address the following phenomenological questions:

1. How do Filipino school counselors navigate the lived experience of their dual counseling and non-counseling responsibilities within the current educational landscape?

2. How do these practitioners perceive the meaning and relevance of their graduate studies and professional development in relation to the complexities of their daily practice?

3. What essential meanings do counselors ascribe to the promotion of students' holistic development (academic, personal-social, and emotional)?

   3.1. How do professional work experiences and academic preparation converge to shape the structure of these meanings?

   3.2. What specific lived motivations serve as the catalysts for professional effectiveness and sustained service?

2.0. METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study utilized a descriptive phenomenological design combined with Sikolohiyang Pilipino concepts (Enriquez, 1992; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000) to explore the lived experiences of Filipino Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) regarding their academic preparation and professional practice. Adhering to the Psychological Phenomenological Method developed by Giorgi (2009), this qualitative approach was chosen to move beyond surface-level descriptions and uncover the "fundamental essence" of how participants experience their roles, training, and professional interactions (Englander & Morley, 2023; Leigh-Osroosh, 2021). By forming themes inductively from data gathered through online interviews and demographic questionnaires, the study captures the complexity of the counselor's reality as it is lived (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The analytical process followed Giorgi's rigorous three-step framework: phenomenological description, reduction, and the search for essence. Central to this was the practice of epoché (bracketing), where the researcher intentionally set aside preconceived notions and theoretical biases to focus exclusively on what was genuinely revealed within the participants' accounts (Giorgi, 2009; Englander & Morley, 2023). Through this disciplined lens, the data were transformed into psychological meaning units, ultimately synthesized to describe the essential structure of the Filipino RGC experience.

Participants and Sampling. This study utilized purposive and convenience sampling (specifically criterion-based) to ensure the selection of participants who could provide "information-rich" accounts of the RGC experience. The inclusion criteria required that participants be: (a) Filipino citizens; (b) Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs); (c) employed in a counseling capacity for a minimum of two years; and (d) assigned to various grade levels. The two-year tenure requirement was established to ensure that participants had moved past initial professional induction and could provide stable reflections on their career considerations and effectiveness (Poon et al., 2020).

While 19 licensed guidance counselors from private and public schools in Metro Manila were initially invited, the final analysis was conducted on a sample of 11 participants (9 private; 2 public). The final sample size was determined by data saturation, the point at which informational redundancy was reached, and no new thematic structures emerged from the data bank (Guest et al., 2006; Guest et al., 2020; Hossain et al., 2024). Although the sample predominantly represented the private sector, the inclusion of public school RGCs offered a vital perspective on the systemic challenges, such as extreme counselor-to-student ratios, inherent in the Philippine public education system.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

	Sector	Place	Years of Service	Educational attainment	Position
1	Private	Metro Manila	23 years and 5 months	MAEd Guidance and Counseling	Head, Guidance Counseling and Testing Office
2	Private	Metro Manila	6 years	MA in Guidance and Counseling	Guidance Counselor/OSA

3	Public	Metro Manila	15 years	MA in Guidance and Counseling	Guidance Counselor
4	Public	Laguna	20 years	MA in Guidance and Counseling	Guidance Counselor
				Doctor of Education major in Educational Management	
5	Private	Metro Manila	18 years	MAEd in Guidance and Counseling	Guidance Counselor
6	Private	Metro Manila	11 years	MA in Guidance and Counseling	Guidance Counselor
7	Private (former Public)	Metro Manila	16years	MA in Guidance and Counseling	Guidance Counselor
8	Private	Metro Manila	18 years	MA in Guidance and Counseling	Guidance Counselor
9	Private (former Public)	Metro Manila	2 years	MAEd in Guidance and Counseling	Guidance Counselor
10	Private	Metro Manila	30 years	MA in Guidance and Counseling	Guidance Counselor
11	Private	Metro Manila	2.5 years	BSMA in Psychology and Counseling Straight Program	Guidance Counselor

Measures. Data collection relied on two primary instruments: a demographic profile and an original semi-structured interview guide. The demographic questionnaire was administered prior to the interviews to verify adherence to the inclusion criteria and to collect pertinent variables, including age, gender, educational attainment, and professional history.

The semi-structured interview guide was designed to elicit "thick descriptions" of the participants' lived experiences in both academic and professional settings. To ensure the depth and authenticity of the responses, participants were encouraged to utilize translanguaging (English and Filipino), allowing for more natural expression of complex emotional and cultural concepts. The instrument underwent a rigorous content validation process involving a panel of five experts: three certified counseling psychologists and two veteran licensed guidance counselors. This expert review resulted in three iterations of the guide, ensuring that the prompts were developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive, and aligned with the study's phenomenological objectives.

Procedures. The recruitment process was initiated through purposeful referrals. To ensure institutional adherence, permission was obtained from the respective Guidance Directors before dispatching formal invitations and informed consent forms via email. Data collection consisted of one-hour semi-structured virtual interviews conducted via Google Meet or Zoom. Participants received the interview guide in advance to facilitate reflection, though the researcher prioritized establishing rapport to encourage spontaneous, "lived-experience" descriptions. All sessions were documented through digital recordings and supplementary notes. To ensure thematic depth, follow-up inquiries were sent via email to six participants who provided additional clarifying data.

Data Analysis. Data were analyzed following Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method, which seeks to uncover the psychological essence of a phenomenon. The analysis proceeded through four distinct stages:

1. Gaining a Sense of the Whole: The researcher repeatedly listened to recordings and reviewed transcripts to immerse in the data, reflecting on the global meaning of the participants' experiences.
2. Discriminating Meaning Units: The text was broken down into "meaning units" by identifying shifts in the psychological intent or focus within the participants' descriptions.
3. Transformation of Meaning Units: These units were translated from the participants' everyday language into psychological language, focusing on the "what" and "how" of their professional and academic experiences.
4. Synthesis of General Structural Essence: Finally, the transformed meaning units were synthesized into a consistent statement of the structure of the experience, effectively capturing the "essence" of being a Filipino RGC.

Methodological Integrity and Ethical Considerations. The study was grounded in trustworthiness (credibility, dependability, and confirmability) rather than traditional internal validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). To ensure clarity and cultural relevance, the interview protocol was piloted prior to full-scale data collection. Methodological

rigor was further maintained through: 1) Member Checking: Participants performed transcript verification to ensure the accuracy of their recorded accounts; 2) Peer Debriefing: A graduate counseling student served as a peer examiner, reviewing transcripts and emergent themes to mitigate researcher bias; 3) Reflexivity: The researcher maintained an observation log to practice *epoché*, intentionally bracketing preconceived notions throughout the study.

Ethical integrity was prioritized by securing informed consent and emphasizing voluntary participation. To mitigate potential distress, support resources were provided to all participants. Anonymity and Confidentiality were strictly maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of institutional identifiers. All digital data were stored on encrypted, restricted-access platforms and will be permanently deleted after five years. Finally, the research integrated cultural competence through specialized training

in Filipino communication styles (*pakikiramdam* or relational sensitivity and *paggalang or respect*) and regular supervision to ensure the process remained sensitive to the indigenous context of the participants.

3.0.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of 11 Filipino Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) yielded three interdependent major themes: *Role Diffusion, Relational Practice*, and the *Professional Development Gap*. These themes merge into a unified structural essence termed "Compassionate Triage." This structure describes an adaptive professional reality where counselors must deploy innate cultural resources to navigate an overwhelming systemic landscape for which formal academic training has provided insufficient preparation.

Table 2. The Main Themes and Subthemes

Main Theme	Subthemes (Constituents)	Corresponding Research Question
The Dynamic and Diffuse Role of the Filipino Guidance Counselor	Significant Interaction with Students and Program Implementation; Execution of other Counseling-Related Tasks; Performance of Non-Counseling Tasks	SOP 1: Experience of Responsibilities and Role Conflict
The Filipino Counselor's Relational Practice: Vocation and *Kapwa* (fellow being)	A Strong Desire to Help is a Prerequisite; Sense of Compassion (*Malasakit* or compassion); Being There for the Youth/Parental Approach	SOP 3: Meaning Ascribed to Holistic Student Growth & Motivation
The Professional Development Gap: From Theory to Contextual Skill	Awareness of Personal Strengths and Limitations; Relevant Training Contributes to Professional Effectiveness; Counseling Supervision; Counselor Resilience Training; Counseling Skills Training for In-Person and Online Services	SOP 2: Meaning and Utility of Training

Structural Challenges and the Phenomenon of Role Diffusion

The participants' accounts reveal a persistent tension between their professional mandate and the reality of role diffusion and overload. While direct engagement with students validates their sense of purpose and vocational identity, this is frequently undermined by an influx of administrative and non-counseling duties. The data suggests that for the Filipino RGC, the "lived role" is often defined by external systemic pressures rather than the parameters of formal training.

A sharp dichotomy exists between educational sectors: while private school counselors typically maintain boundaries closer to the ASCA (2019) standards, public school RGCs experience an acute state of role diffusion. Driven by the 1:14,000 counselor-to-student ratio, public sector RGCs are structurally compelled to function as crisis managers, discipline officers, or administrative clerks. This creates an environment characterized by "daily ethical compromise," where the counselor's time is diverted from

clinical support to systemic maintenance. This finding aligns with international discourse on role conflict (Blake, 2020) and underscores the systemic underinvestment in Philippine mental health infrastructure (Dela Peña et al., 2024; Alibudbud, 2024).

Relational Practice: Vocation and *Malasakit*

Despite these structural challenges, counselors persevere through a culturally grounded motivation rooted in *Malasakit* (compassion), Vocation, and a Parental Approach. This intrinsic desire to help is described as a "non-negotiable spiritual calling" that serves as a primary protective factor against attrition.

Culturally, this practice is operationalized through *Malasakit*, which drives RGCs to transcend contractual obligations in favor of moral imperatives for their *Kapwa* (shared humanity). Success is thus evaluated through "affective transformation"—witnessing a student's emotional shift—rather than standard procedural metrics. This relational presence, or "being there," mirrors Southeast Asian

relational psychologies (Lee, 2018; Garcia & de Guzman, 2020). However, the findings suggest a critical caution: relying on *Malasakit* as a systemic coping mechanism risks the exploitation of the counselor's personal sacrifice, potentially leading to ethical fatigue.

The Professional Development Gap

A significant disconnect exists between theoretical graduate education and the pragmatic, "high-stakes" skills required in the field. While graduate studies provide a necessary ethical foundation (Bravin et al., 2020; Levitt et al., 2019), RGCs reported feeling underprepared for modern clinical complexities, such as acute crisis management, suicide risk assessment, and the ethics of digital service delivery.

The lack of mandatory, consistent clinical supervision was identified as a critical structural deficit that prevents the successful translation of theory into practice. Consequently, RGCs are forced to rely on personal resilience (*katatagan*) and improvised flexibility to compensate for these institutional training deficiencies. This gap reinforces the study's recommendation for the Filipino Counselor Empowerment (FCE) framework to bridge the divide between academic preparation and the contemporary "battlefield" of school counseling.

Emerging Filipino Counselor Empowerment (FCE) Framework

To address these findings, the FCE Framework conceptualizes counselor empowerment through three pillars: (1) Role Clarification and Advocacy to protect counseling time; (2) Cultural Integration and Ethical Practice to ground relational values like *malasakit* in ethical boundaries; and (3) Specialized, Supervised Training to bridge the gap between theory and real-world high-acuity demands.

Figure 1 presents a synthesized representation of the three major structural themes that surfaced from the phenomenological analysis. It conceptualizes how the professional effectiveness of Filipino Registered Guidance Counselors is sustained through the simultaneous activation of three interdependent pillars: Role Clarification and Advocacy, Cultural Integration and Ethical Practice, and Specialized, Supervised Training. In this framework, no single intervention is sufficient; instead, counselor empowerment requires an aligned and intentional system that protects the role, honors cultural foundations, and provides the specialized competencies needed for contemporary school-based mental health work.

Figure 1. Emergent Framework: Filipino Counselor Empowerment (FCE) Framework

The first pillar—T*he Intra Professional World (Role Clarification and Advocacy)*—highlights the urgent need to establish clear, enforceable boundaries around the RGC's professional function. This involves protecting counseling time, eliminating inappropriate non-counseling tasks, and equipping counselors with assertiveness and boundary-setting skills through continuing professional development (CPD) training to resist role diffusion. The second pillar—*Area of Transition (Cultural Integration and Ethical*

Practices)—recognizes that Filipino relational values such as *malasakit*, *pakikipagkapwa*, and the parental approach can serve as profound sources of motivation and therapeutic connection but require ethical grounding to ensure that cultural responsiveness does not lead to overextension or blurred boundaries. The third pillar—*The Evolving Professional (Specialized, Supervised Training)*—addresses the critical gap between foundational graduate training and the high-acuity demands of real-world practice, emphasizing

the need for structured mentorship, clinical supervision, crisis-management competencies, and formal coursework in Filipino Psychology.

Together, these pillars articulate a coherent empowerment model that reconciles the deeply relational, culturally anchored identity of Filipino Guidance Counselors with the structural and clinical demands of 21st-century school mental health work. The FCE Framework underscores that empowerment is both personal and systemic: counselors must cultivate resilience and ethical cultural practice, while institutions must provide the structure, clarity, and supervision necessary for sustainable professional functioning.

In accordance with Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological approach, the essence of the Filipino RGC's lived experience is defined as the continuous act of deploying innate cultural resources, specifically *Malasakit* and *Pakikipagkapwa,* to navigate a structurally overwhelmed educational system. This experience is characterized by "Compassionate Triage," a professional reality where personal character and indigenous values must compensate for systemic gaps in staffing, role clarity, and specialized training. In this structure, the counselor's professional identity is both fortified by their vocational heart and strained by the environmental demands of an "emergency-room" school setting.

4.0. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that while indigenous values provide profound resilience and therapeutic connection, they are not a substitute for formal structural support. The current reliance on individual sacrifice is unsustainable and risks leading to widespread professional burnout and ethical fatigue. Therefore, true empowerment for the Filipino RGC necessitates a transition from a model of individual endurance to a systemic framework, such as the Filipino Counselor Empowerment (FCE) Framework. This transition requires a multi-pronged approach involving policy reform to protect counseling time, specialized curriculum development to address modern high-acuity demands, and the institutionalization of clinical supervision. Ultimately, the future of school-based mental health in the Philippines depends on protecting the counselor's role as much as the counselor protects the student's heart.

5.0. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While this study provides a rich, "thick description" of the Filipino RGC experience, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, in accordance with Giorgi's (2009) methodology, the research prioritized depth over breadth, intentionally utilizing a smaller, purposeful sample to achieve thematic saturation rather than statistical generalizability. Consequently, the findings primarily reflect the urban educational landscape of Metro Manila and may not capture the unique socio-cultural nuances and resource constraints found in rural or provincial Philippine contexts.

Second, the researcher's positionality as a practicing RGC introduces an inherent "insider perspective." While this allowed for an immediate establishment of rapport and a nuanced understanding of professional jargon, it also required a disciplined application of epoché (bracketing) to mitigate interpretive influence and maintain the descriptive integrity of the participants' accounts (Finlay, 2014).

Finally, the virtual format of the interviews, necessitated by logistical and post-pandemic considerations, may have restricted the observation of subtle nonverbal cues and environmental "micro-behaviors" that are typically accessible in face-to-face phenomenological encounters (Archibald et al., 2019). Despite these constraints, the study provides a critical foundational structure for understanding counselor empowerment in the Philippines.

6.0. PRACTICAL VALUE OF THE PAPER

Filipino school counselors play a crucial role in delivering mental health support, yet they face significant challenges due to the increasing demand for services and a mismatch between broad professional responsibilities and inadequate, specialized training. This phenomenological qualitative study investigated how the work and training experiences of 19 Filipino school counselors in Metro Manila influence their professional effectiveness. Interviews revealed that the core of the counselor's lived experience is a vocation of holistic nurturance (*Malasakit* and *Serbisyo* or Compassion and Service), characterized by profound personal dedication to students' well-being within a structurally challenged, high-stakes school environment. The primary finding is the disparity between this deeply personal, relational, and expansive professional vocation and the current counselor training framework, which fails to provide the specialized, resilient, and boundary-aware expertise essential for addressing contemporary mental health issues. The study underscores the urgent need to formally bridge this gap and recommends the implementation of the Filipino Counselor Empowerment (FCE) framework to align comprehensive professional practices with appropriate, specialized training opportunities.

7.0. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Systemic reform requires collaboration between DepEd, CHED, and the PRC to mandate role clarity and move toward the 1:250 counselor-to-student ratio. Concurrently, Higher Education Institutions should modernize curricula by integrating high-acuity crisis skills and grounding indigenous values like *malasakit* in ethical boundaries to prevent burnout. To sustain the workforce, schools must institutionalize low-cost, high-impact initiatives such as peer supervision and wellness programs. Future studies should explore longitudinal workload trends across sectors and develop standardized protocols for school-clinical

transitions, ensuring a robust, culturally anchored system of care for Filipino students.

8.0. DECLARATION OF NO CONFLICTING INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

9.0 ETHICAL APPROVAL

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants followed the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee, with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

AI Declaration Statement. To ensure this research meets international standards of academic clarity and is accessible to a global audience, AI-based linguistic tools were employed during the final stages of manuscript preparation. Specifically, Grammarly was used to refine the prose, improve grammatical accuracy, and ensure the tone is suitable for an international readership. The use of these tools was strictly limited to language editing and structural polishing. All conceptual frameworks, data analysis, and conclusions are the original work of the authors, who maintain full accountability for the integrity of the final text.

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