

COUNSELING COMPETENCE AND AWARENESS OF COMMON MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AMONG GUIDANCE COUNSELORS AND DESIGNATES IN THE FIRST CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT OF CAPIZ

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to assess the level of counseling competence and the degree of awareness of common mental health issues of 128 randomly selected guidance counselors and designates in the first congressional district of Capiz for academic year 2023-2024. Foreign and local literature related to counseling competence and awareness of common mental issues were reviewed in relation to their relevance and implications to the study. A validated and reliability-tested researcher-made questionnaire was used to gather the needed data from randomly selected respondents. Statistical tools used to analyze and interpret data were frequency count, percentage, mean, t-test, f-test, Analysis of Variance, and Pearson-r. The findings of the study revealed that respondents report a “high” level of counseling competence, and degree of awareness of common mental health issues. There were significant differences in the level of counseling competence and degree of awareness of common mental health issues when respondents were grouped according to the nature of training, and number of trainings/seminars attended. Lastly, there was a significant relationship between counseling competence and awareness of common mental issues. These findings may aid in identifying counseling competence and mental health awareness gaps for targeted evidence-based professional development programs, for the career development initiatives of guidance counselors and designates.

Keywords: Counseling competence, Mental health awareness, Guidance counselor, Guidance designates

1. Introduction

The recognition of the significance of mental health in society is on the rise, particularly within educational settings. Recent studies underscore the crucial role that schools play in addressing the mental well-being concerns of children and adolescents, emphasizing the importance of this issue. Reports from London and the USA highlight a notable increase in rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation among students (Barker et

al., 2021; Son et al., 2020). Despite the prevalent struggles with mental health issues, a considerable number of individuals remain hesitant to speak up due to the existing stigma surrounding these matters (Schueth, 2022).

Furthermore, UNICEF in Latin America and the Caribbean (2021) stresses that every child and adolescent has the right to encounter reduced stigma and access quality mental health services, advocating for a broader focus on mental health beyond pandemic-related challenges.

In the Philippines, the pandemic and poor government mental health policies have aggravated Filipino children's mental health difficulties. Strategies must address Philippine societal challenges and common mental health issues in children. Without it, a mental health epidemic may replace the COVID-19 pandemic (Malolos et al., 2021). In order to promote mental health and avoid mental health disorders, guidance counselors may act as advocates for mental health. According to Jacoby et al. (2022), they have the potential to have a positive impact on the well-being of individuals as well as populations. In addition to frequently working in interdisciplinary teams with other health professionals, these counselors must be skilled in the theories and procedures of diagnosis, treatment, referral, and prevention (Meyer, 2019).

Research studies in the Philippines show the relevance of the competencies of guidance counselors, especially in acting as mental health support providers. One aspect of the counselor's overall competency standards is their personality competencies. Personal skills, core competencies, and supporting competencies are included in these standards (Lianasari & Purwati, 2022). Counselors must possess specialized competencies in academic guidance, career guidance, and personal-social guidance in order to provide inclusive guidance and counseling services for people with disabilities (Rahmat et al., 2020). Additionally, there is a need for a Guidance and Counseling Support System in higher education institutions in the Philippines to aid guidance counselors in managing students' needs and scheduling counseling sessions (Viray, 2022).

On the other hand, the school appoints a teacher to act as a guidance designate or guidance teacher to attend to the mental health requirements of the students due to a shortage of licensed guidance counselors, since even the ratio of one guidance counselor per 1,000 students is still not satisfied. In an effort to address the shortage of guidance counselors in the Philippines, a press release issued by Senator Gatchalian (2022) emphasized the need to include *plantilla* items for guidance associates who should be graduates of related academic programs. Additionally, increasing the current guidance counselor wage by five salary grades. Nonetheless, this idea is currently being carefully considered and pushed in the Senate by the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association.

In the Philippines, guidance designates deal with a variety of difficulties in their work. They face issues like scarce resources, a lack of counseling rooms, and an inadequate guidance program (Pasco & Fabella, 2023). These difficulties may hinder their capacity to offer students mental health services. Nevertheless, in spite of these challenges, guidance counselors have a high degree of compassion satisfaction and, an average level of exhaustion and satisfaction as care givers (Bongansico & Bongansico 2022). On the other hand, a study of Arcega et al., 2017 in Capiz Sate University-Main focused on student services revealed partially attained student services program objectives and highly satisfied student services programs in guidance and counseling. However, the likelihood of mental health issues increases due to the shortage of licensed guidance counselors. This compels the principals of the schools to appoint one of their teachers as a guidance teacher. On the other hand, as student mental health issues cannot be ignored, this is one of the methods to address the shortage for the time being while waiting for the ideal student-to-registered guidance designate ratio. Right now, what the schools need is support training to help the designates and guidance counselors develop their fundamental facilitation skills in dealing with students who might need their assistance. Noteworthy, there is a lack of studies that prioritize solely on the guidance counselors and designates in Capiz that suggests a gap in the literature which is the focus of this study.

This study explored the connection between the level of counseling competence and awareness of common mental health issues. Additionally, the study aims to determine if there are significant differences in these

variables when respondents are classified according to factors such as sex, nature of training, years of experience, and other designations of the guidance counselors and guidance designates in the first congressional district of Capiz. These variables have been the focus of a limited number of research studies, which the researcher deems highly relevant in the development of career support and training programs for guidance counselors and designates. The ultimate goal is to enhance mental health services in schools.

2. Method

Research Design

For the design of this study, the researcher employed the descriptive-correlational research design and made use of the quantitative data.

Research Participants and Sampling Procedure

The research participants in this study were the guidance counselors and designates in the first Congressional District of Capiz in academic year 2023-2024. A sample of 128 respondents were selected from a population of 185 selected through stratified random sampling, and categorized according to their division affiliation. These include forty-two (42) respondents from the Roxas City Division and eighty-six (86) from the Capiz Division. The survey's margin of error was set at 5 percent (5%).

Definition of Terms

The researcher operationally defined counseling competence as the ability to execute the facilitating skills in dealing with clients that is aligned to basic counseling skills. These only include the following basic skills: (a) before counseling: preparation for the session with the client through gathering relevant information about the client, setting goals, creating a safe and private environment during the initial consultation, (b) during counseling: understanding the client's concern, helping the clients achieve goals through demonstrating empathic nonverbal and verbal communication, active listening skills, problem-solving skills, and psychoeducation, and (c) after counseling: session documentation, confidentiality and security of the client's data, advocating for and communicating with others, continued support after termination, boundary setting, and counselor reflexivity and self-care. On the other hand, awareness of common mental health issues focused only on three common mental health concerns: (a) depression and anxiety, (b) suicide and non-suicidal self-injury, and (c) stress and trauma.

Research Instrument Used

In this study, a researcher-made questionnaire was developed as an instrument for data gathering. The researcher-made questionnaire contains questions about the selected profile of the respondents including age, sex, length of service, nature of training, number of trainings and seminars attended, and other job designations/assignments. The second and third parts included statements measuring the level of counseling competence and degree of awareness on common mental health issues through a 5-point-Likert scale. Informed consent was secured from the participants prior to data gathering, following the guidelines set in the National Ethical Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants (2022). The content of the questionnaire was validated by a panel of three (3) experts, and was pilot tested to ensure reliability among 30 guidance counselors and designates in the second Congressional District of Capiz. The reliability test garnered a Cronbach alpha value of 0.91, indicating a high internal consistency, and reliability.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher secured permission through letter sent to the office of two (2) Schools Division Superintendents. Upon approval, the researcher gathered data via Google Forms between December 01, 2023 to January 05, 2024. No identifying information was collected to mitigate risk for data privacy issues. A local copy was stored in the researcher's personal computer, and a back-up copy stored in a hard drive, both of which were password protected. All responses were consolidated and sent to the statistician for calculations using the Special Packages of Social Science (SPSS).

Data Analysis and Interpretation Procedure

To measure and analyze the quantitative data, different statistical tools were used that is reflected in each data table presented. All inferential data used alpha 0.05 level of significance, and was processed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

3. Results and Discussion

Level of Counseling Competence as a whole

The results presented in Table 1 shows that the level of counseling competence as a whole had a grand mean of 4.05, which was verbally interpreted as "High."

Table 1. Level of counseling competence as a whole

Components	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
After counseling session	4.16	High
Before counseling session	3.99	High
During counseling session	3.99	High
Grand Mean	4.05	High

Legend: 4.45-5.00=Very High, 3.45-4.44=High, 2.45-3.44=Moderately High, 1.45-2.44=Low, 1.00-1.44=Very Low. Components are displayed in the order of highest to lowest.

Results indicate that when considering the various components that contribute to the overall level of counseling competence, it was found that the component of counseling after a session received the highest mean score of 4.16, which can be interpreted as "High". Following this, both the components of counseling before a session and counseling during a session received the same mean score of 3.99, also interpreted as "High". These findings suggest that the overall level of counseling competence demonstrated by the counselors and guidance designates was quite impressive. Furthermore, these results also imply that the counselors and guidance designates were able to effectively showcase their counseling competence in dealing with their clients. In fact, it can be observed that the counselor/guidance designates consistently demonstrated a high level of knowledge, abilities, and attitude that are highly relevant to the effectiveness of counseling throughout the entire process of addressing their clients' concerns.

This is related to the findings of Gomez et al. (2023) that the education sector embraces the "competence approach", emphasizing personal growth and development of teachers. This aligns with the overall call for continuous training and learning across various fields, including security and municipal authorities. Moreover, a study by Olson et al. (2016) emphasized a scarcity of empirical investigation regarding the impact of professional incompetence among mental health practitioners (MHPs) on their well-being. In order to bridge this research gap, a comprehensive survey was conducted with a sample of 213 MHPs to ascertain their familiarity with their colleagues' issues pertaining to professional competency (PPC). The results indicate that a significant majority of MHPs possess knowledge about colleagues exhibiting PPC, and firmly believe that these individuals disrupt the work environment and have a detrimental impact on the care provided to clients.

These findings coincide with Ivey's Microskills Model which put emphasize on the importance of learning microskills in dealing with the client like rapport building, summarizing and planning, and ensuring clients leave with a clear understanding and direction. These microskills are effective in facilitation process for the progression of the client and eventually achieve the goal of the client (Ertelt et al., 2022).

Degree of Awareness of Common Mental Health Issues as a whole

Data in Table 2 revealed that the awareness of common mental health issues as a whole had a grand mean of 4.29 with a verbal interpretation of "High".

Table 2. Degree of awareness of common mental health issues

Components	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Depression and anxiety	3.74	High
Suicide and non-suicidal self-injury	3.64	High
Stress and trauma	3.40	High
Grand Mean	4.29	High

Legend: 4.45-5.00=Very High, 3.45-4.44=High, 2.45-3.44=Moderately High, 1.45-2.44=Low, 1.00-1.44=Very Low. Components are displayed in the order of highest to lowest.

Results indicate that within the domain of overall awareness pertaining to common mental health issues, awareness of depression and anxiety exhibited the highest mean score of 3.74. Subsequently, suicide and non-suicidal self-injury demonstrated a mean score of 3.64, while stress and trauma received the lowest average score of 3.40. All of these mean scores were categorized as "High" in verbal interpretation. The results suggest that there is a commendable level of awareness among the respondents when it comes to awareness of common mental health issues. This suggests that guidance counselors and designates demonstrate a clear and evident understanding, knowledge towards effectively addressing mental health issues.

The findings oppose a study conducted among mental health professionals measuring their suicide knowledge and attitudes. The participants, by a significant majority, expressed a lack of trust in their training and competence to provide aid to persons who were experiencing suicide thoughts. Moreover, 60% of the entire sample reported a perceived absence of the necessary support and supervision to effectively interact with and aid individuals with suicidal tendencies. Nevertheless, it was found that healthcare workers who had encountered a patient suicide had higher levels of skill compared to their counterparts who had not seen such an event (Erbuto et al., 2021). In another study by Dhyah Yulianti et al., 2023, guidance counselors discussed their struggles with understanding mental health, dealing with stigma, and receiving social support from teachers in mental health literacy. Additionally, a research in Cameroon revealed the a deficiency on knowledge, attitudes, and practices in terms of depression management among primary health care providers. They are uninformed about mental health and hold pessimistic views regarding depression. The depression screening and assessment is not frequent, though it is prevalent within the realm of primary health care. Developing a national mental health policy and increasing funding for mental health services are recommendations made in the study. It is suggested that mental health training programs and awareness education regarding mental illnesses be implemented (Mulango et al., 2018).

Difference in the Level of Counseling Competence when respondents are grouped according to the selected profiles

Table 3. Difference in the level of counseling competence

Selected Profiles of the Respondents	F/t Value	Significant Value	Probability
Age	0.572	0.566	ns
Length of experience	0.809	0.447	ns
Nature of training	4.718	0.004	s
Number of trainings and seminars attended	2.296	0.023	s
Other job designations/assignments	0.150	0.881	ns
Sex	0.746	0.457	ns

p-value > 0.05 = not significant; p-value < 0.05 = significant

The results show that there were no significant differences in the level of counseling competence when respondents were grouped according to sex, age, other job assignments/designations, and length of experience. However, the results also show that there were significant differences in the level of counseling competence

when respondents were grouped according to the nature of training, and number of trainings and seminars attended.

Therefore, the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the level of counseling competence in terms of nature of training, and number of trainings and seminars attended is rejected. Nevertheless, the assumption which asserts no significant differences in terms of sex, age, other job assignments/designations, and length of experience is accepted.

The results imply that regardless of sex, age, other job assignments/designations, and length of experience, respondents share the same level of counseling competence but when respondents' nature of training, and number of trainings and seminars attended is considered, differences in their level counseling competence are observed.

Difference in the degree of awareness of common mental health issues when respondents are grouped according to the selected profiles

Table 4. Differences in the degree of awareness of common mental health issues

Selected Profiles of the Respondents	F/t Value	Significant Value	Probability
Age	2.480	0.088	ns
Length of experience	0.125	0.883	ns
Nature of Training	15.014	0.000	s
No. of Trainings and Seminars Attended	3.904	0.000	s
Other job designations/assignments	0.520	0.604	ns
Sex	1.093	0.286	ns

p-value > 0.05 = not significant; p-value < 0.05 = significant

The results show that there were no significant differences in the degree of awareness of common mental health issues when respondents were grouped according to sex, age, other job assignments/designations, and length of experience with significant value that is greater than p-value of 0.05. The results also show that there were significant differences in the degree of awareness of common mental health issues when respondents were grouped according to the nature of training, and number of trainings and seminars attended.

Therefore, the null hypothesis that assumes there is no significant differences in the degree of awareness of common mental health issues when respondents were grouped according to nature of training, and number of trainings and seminars attended is rejected. Nevertheless, the assumption which assumes no significant differences when grouped according to sex, age, other job assignments/designations, and length of experience is accepted.

The results imply that regardless of sex, age, other job assignments/designations, and length of experience, respondents share the same degree of awareness of common mental health issues but when respondents' nature of training, and number of trainings and seminars attended are considered, differences in their degree of awareness exist.

The KAP model posits that knowledge influences attitudes, which in turn shape practices. Therefore, understanding an individual's knowledge and attitudes can help predict their behavior related to careers. The KAP theory is a model that proposes that knowledge, attitudes, and practices are interrelated and can influence each other (Andrade et al., 2020). In the context of guidance and counseling, KAP theory suggests that guidance designates and counselors' knowledge about mental health can influence their attitudes towards counseling and their willingness to practice counseling competence that includes skills, behavior and characteristics of a good counselor

Relationship between Level of Counseling Competence and Degree of Awareness of Common Mental Health Issues

Table 5. Relationship between Level of Counseling Competence and Degree of Awareness of Common Mental Health Issues

Variables	n	Pearson-r	Sig. Value	Probability
Counseling competence	128	0.604	0.000	s
Awareness of common mental health issues				

p-value > 0.05 = not significant; p-value < 0.05 = significant

The analyzed correlation between the level of counseling competence and the degree of awareness of common mental health issues as indicated in Table 7, demonstrates a significant association between these two variables. This correlation is reflected in the Pearson r value of 0.604, which has a significance value of 0.000 that is lower than the 0.05 p-value, indicating a significant relationship between the two variables.

The calculated values indicate that there is a significant relationship between the level of counseling competence and the degree of awareness of common mental health issues among Guidance Counselors and Designates in the first congressional district of Capiz, rejecting the null hypothesis.

This finding implies that an increase in counseling competence is linked to a higher level of understanding of common mental health issues, while a decrease in one variable may likewise indicate a decrease in the other variable. However, it is important to clarify that this does not confirm a cause-and-effect relationship between the two variables, but simply suggests a correlation. Therefore, both variables are interdependent. Improving the counseling skills of Guidance Counselors and Designates may lead to a better understanding of common mental health issues, and alternately.

This finding is related to the study of Gatan (2018), which has shown an important correlation between the level of readiness and the skills of school counselors in offering support to students with special needs. This proposes that the more competent the counselors are, the more likely they are to be prepared in servicing students with special need.

The KAP model posits that knowledge influences attitudes, which in turn shape practices. Therefore, understanding an individual's knowledge and attitudes can help predict their behavior related to careers. The KAP theory is a model that proposes that knowledge, attitudes, and practices are interrelated and can influence each other (Andrade et al., 2020).

4. Conclusion and Implications

Results of the study revealed the following findings:

1. The guidance counselors and designates in the first congressional district of Capiz have a “High” level of counseling competence.
2. The guidance counselor and designates in the first congressional district of Capiz have a “High” degree of awareness of common mental health issues.
3. The guidance counselor and designates in the first congressional district of Capiz have Significant differences existed in the level of counseling competence of guidance counselors and designates when respondents were grouped only according to nature of training, and number of trainings/seminars attended.

4. The guidance counselor and designates in the first congressional district of Capiz have significant differences in the level of counseling competence were grouped according to nature of training, and number of trainings/seminars attended.

5. There was a significant relationship between counseling competence and the awareness of common mental issues of the guidance counselors and designates in the first Congressional District of Capiz.

Conclusions

According to the research results provided in the study, these are the conclusions and generalizations that can be inferred from the data and analysis conducted:

1. The guidance counselors and designates in the first Congressional District of Capiz generally exhibit knowledge, abilities, and attitude relevant to effective performance of their designated role throughout the process of facilitating their clients' concerns.

2. The awareness of common mental health issues of guidance counselors and designates is well-manifested. They generally exhibit a solid understanding, knowledge, and a positive attitude towards addressing mental health concerns.

3. The selected profile of the respondents creates variation in level of counseling competence only in terms of nature of training and number of trainings/seminars attended.

4. The degree of awareness of common mental health issues differs only if the nature of training and number of trainings/seminars attended are considered in the selected profile of the respondents.

5. The level counseling competence and degree of awareness on common mental health issues of guidance counselors and designates in the first Congressional District of Capiz are interrelated.

Recommendations

Considering the insights gained from the conclusions, these are the following recommendations:

1. Guidance counselors and designates may reinforce continuous professional development through learning sessions to further enhance their knowledge of their role and skills in facilitation of their client's needs with topics focused on the significance of informed consent, boundaries of competence, concept of transference, and rapport building skills.
2. Guidance counselors and designates, along with program supervisors, may seek out and participate in conferences and workshops that offer insights into the most recent advancements in the field of mental health, targeted especially to those with minimal or no education or training regarding guidance, counseling and mental health. Such topics may include those about suicide and non-suicidal self-injury prevention, intervention, and postvention, evidence-based treatment for depression and anxiety, and a better understanding of the course, and development of stress and trauma.
3. Program supervisors may facilitate the creation of an organizational structure that allows for the formal supervision of guidance designates by a dedicated, experienced and licensed mental health professional who can oversee the various services provided by designates in their respective schools, and who may address any concerns that are beyond the knowledge and skill of guidance designates.
4. School principals, and heads, program supervisors, and division administrators may extend commendation to guidance counselors and designates or any individual assigned to this role for their unwavering dedication and contribution, which may be done so through awards, prizes, or even the allocation of service credits.
5. Division administrators may provide opportunities for further education through scholarships which will allow guidance designates with little to no education units in counseling to pursue a graduate

degree and eventually a license to practice counseling as a profession. Division administrators may likewise provide sponsored or free intensive training programs to encourage guidance designates with little to no formal education or training in the field to continue to enhance their competencies in their role as guidance personnel.

6. Professional organizations involving guidance counselors and designates may develop training programs that incorporate topics on counseling expertise and mental health awareness, and plan these programs to be interdisciplinary. Create a holistic approach to addressing mental health concerns by encouraging collaboration between various professionals working in the field of mental health.

Figure

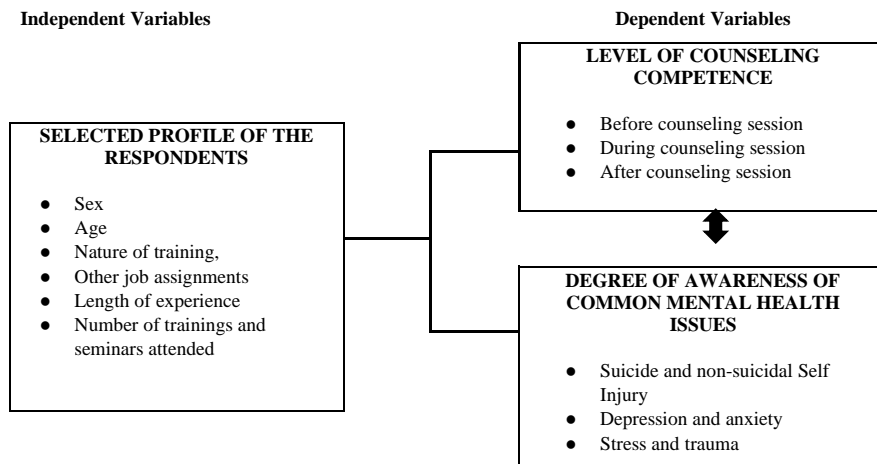


Figure 1. Research framework

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