

THE WORK EXPERIENCES OF THAI SECONDARY PUBLIC SCHOOL GUIDANCE COUNSELORS IN KALASIN, THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological inquiry delved into the work experiences of Thai secondary public school guidance counselors in Amphoe Mueang Kalasin, Thailand. The study surveyed how counselors provided academic, psychological, social, and career-related services to students. Besides, what challenges they faced in the school system. Six licensed guidance counselors from three public secondary schools took part in semi-structured personal interviews in Thai that were later translated into English. Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The five major themes that emerged were the complex roles of guidance counselors, student barriers to counseling, institutional and systemic challenges, emotional labor and coping, and professional growth and fulfillment. The results showed that counselors not only carried out academic advising but also were involved in a number of other areas such as career development, crisis intervention, providing emotional support, and helping students develop their values. Unfortunately, the cultural stigma, the resistance of students, scarcity of mental health resources, lack of institutional support, and heavy workload were some of the factors that challenged their work. Counselors, however, stated that they felt a strong sense of mission and professional delight. The research suggests the development of an extensive Guidance Counselors Professional Empowerment and Wellness Program (GC-PEWP) to enhance counselor skills, well-being, and the institutional integration of guidance services.

Keywords: *guidance counselors, lived experiences, Thai education, counseling services, Kalasin, phenomenology*

INTRODUCTION

Guidance and counseling services are necessary components of students' educational, emotional, social, and career development. These services have been officially a part of the Thai educational system since the early 2000s when the country underwent national education reform (Kuncharin & Mey, 2010; Visessuvanapoom & Wongwanit, 2013). But, even after the official mandates have been issued, many schools especially in remote areas of provinces are still incapable of offering a full-fledged and well-resourced counseling program due to lack of funds, untrained staff and the prevalence of negative stereotypes associated with mental health issues.

The province of Kalasin is situated in the Isan area of the northeastern part of Thailand. The economically challenged Kalasin has suffered from a trend of parents moving away for work while children's mental health has been affected negatively by cultural factors such as the saving face concept and attributing mystical powers to non-visible phenomenon. These sociocultural factors influence both students' attitudes and their help-seeking behaviors. Hence, school guidance counselors have become the main characters in the frontline to respond to students' academic, psychosocial, and career-related issues and they even bridge the gap between their traditional counseling roles and the additional functions that they have to take.

The research emphasis in Thailand has been mostly on how effective the services are, the mental health needs of youth, and the urban interventions (Boonboot et al., 2024; Kaesornsamut et al., 2012; Jueajinda et al., 2021). Nevertheless, few research works have paid attention to the experiences of the school guidance counselors, and even less so, in the rural provinces such as Kalasin. The international literature review aligns with local research in that it points to a dearth of qualitative research in the field of school counseling in Thailand (Larran & Hein, 2024). Getting knowledge of the counselors' experiences help to unveil the realities, obstacles, and possibilities for the enhancement of the counseling services in the educational institutions of Thailand.

This research examined the personal experiences of guidance counselors in Kalasin public secondary schools through the lens of the academic, psychological, social, and career-preparedness services offered to students. The inquiry team used phenomenology as a theoretical framework to examine how the counselor described their duties, strategies, challenges, and potential solutions.

Research Questions

This study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Thai secondary school guidance counselors in Amphoe Mueang Kalasin with regard to:
 - 1.1 rendering services to students with academic problems;
 - 1.2 providing counseling services to students with psychological problems;
 - 1.3 assisting students with social problems; and
 - 1.4 helping students prepare for future careers?

2. How do Thai secondary school guidance counselors describe their work in terms of:
 - 2.1 the services they provide at their school;
 - 2.2 the counseling strategies they use; and
 - 2.3 the challenges they encounter in fulfilling their roles?
3. What program or intervention can be proposed to strengthen the recognition and integration of guidance counseling in the educational system of Kalasin Province?

METHODOLOGY

The daily experiences and professional realities of guidance counselors were examined by the researchers using a qualitative phenomenological design. Such a method allowed the researchers to obtain detailed, in-depth descriptions of the participants' points of view, difficulties, and their processes of understanding the experience. The study was conducted in Kalasin Province, Thailand's provincial capital, Amphoe Mueang Kalasin. Three public secondary schools took part, namely Kalasinpittayasan School, Anukoolnaree School, and Meuang Kalasin School. Six (6) qualified guidance counselors in Thailand were involved in the purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria set for the participants were that they: (a) are currently working as guidance counselors in secondary public schools; (b) have degrees in guidance and counseling or related areas; (c) have at least one year of counseling experience.

Before conducting semi-structured, individual interviews, the researchers obtained approvals from the school administrators. The interviews were held in Thai, and with the permission of the participants, they were audio-recorded. Then they were transcribed word-for-word and translated into English. To maintain privacy, all recordings were removed after transcription.

The interview guide prepared by the researchers included three topics: (1) personal strategies for handling academic, psychological, social, and career concerns; (2) work descriptions, services, and counseling approaches; (3) proposed improvements for counseling programs. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, search for themes, review of themes, defining and naming themes, and production of the final report.

This research is limited to counselors working in public secondary schools from a single district only. The findings cannot be generalized to all Thai counselors, private schools, or other provinces. The data presented are the subjective accounts of the participants based on their self-report. The researchers have taken necessary steps to ensure that the participants were fully informed about the nature of the study, that their involvement was voluntary, and that their anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. Also, data were stored securely, and recordings were deleted. To protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms were employed.

RESULTS

After the analysis, five major themes were identified:

1. Multidimensional Role of Counsellors

The participants emphasized that their roles are not limited to academic advising only but also include providing the students with emotional support, helping their moral development, reacting to crises, and preparing the students for their future careers. As a result, counsellors were frequently involved in addressing concerns related to the personal, family, behavioural, and peer areas of the students.

2. Student Barriers hinders Counselling

According to the counsellors, students are very reluctant to seek help, and they explain their behavior by that fear of stigma, unwillingness to disclose personal issues, adopting the "saving face" cultural view, and parental misunderstanding of counselling.

3. Institutional and Systemic Challenges

It was said by the participants that systemic problems that limit them are such as the counsellor to student ratio being too high, not having enough mental health professionals, lack of facilities and training, teachers who are not willing to cooperate, and absence of standardized referral procedures.

4. Emotional Labor and Coping

Counsellors sometimes had to take over the emotional burdens of their students, which led them to experience compassion fatigue. They used prayer and meditation, peer sharing, journaling, informal debriefing, as well as other personal coping mechanisms to help them cope with the situation.

5. Professional Growth and Fulfilment

Through the trials and tribulations, the counsellors still found great joy in the progress of the students. They believed that counselling is their vocation and saw it as being personally and socially significant.

DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: The lived experiences of secondary school guidance counselors in Amphoe Mueang Kalasin with regard to: (1) academic problems, (2) psychological problems, (3) social problems, and (4) career preparation.

1.1 Rendering Services to Students with Academic Problems The counselors' experiences in handling academic problems mirror a fact that when students suffer from academic difficulties, these problems are rarely single and most of the time are dependent on the students' psychosocial background. This part of the statement of the problem was best answered by the first theme: "the multidimensional role of

counseling.” This theme maintains that academic problems occur alongside other challenges.

1.2 Providing Counseling Services to Students with Psychological Problems This part of the statement of the problem was best answered by: the first theme “The Multidimensional Role of the Counselors” when the guidance counselors talked about working as the first responders to emotional crises; the second theme “Student Barriers to Counseling” when dealing with the stigma-generated barriers to students which hinder them from revealing their thoughts and feelings; the third theme “Institutional and Systemic Challenges” such as the absence of a referral system and lack of mental health professionals, 47 which can cause school-based counselors to be under a great deal of pressure. In addition, the experiences of school guidance counselors is also reflected in the fourth theme “Emotional Labor and Coping” when counselors often have to deal with heavy emotional labor as they take in the students' emotional pain. Finally, the fifth theme “Professional Growth and Fulfillment” is evident in seeing that they get to feel professional fulfillment when they witness the recovery and resilience of the students that they have supported.

1.3 Assisting Students with Social Problems 49 This part of the statement of the problem was answered by the first three themes. The first theme of “Counselors Multidimensional Role” is even more obvious here as they assume the positions of mediators, negotiators, and advocates for positive peer interactions. Fear of escalation or judgment lies behind the second theme of “Student Barriers to counseling,” which cause delaying the disclosure of social concerns. The third theme of “Challenges at the Institution level,” like lack of anti-bullying programs or peer-mediation systems, exert more pressure on the counselors.

1.4 Helping Students Prepare for Future Careers This part of the statement of the problem was best answered by the first three themes “The Multidimensional Role of Counselors;” the “Student Barriers to Counseling;” and the “Institutional and Systemic Challenges.” The first theme is related to counselors working to help students navigate opportunities and family expectations. The second theme deals with how students struggle to realize their interests and potentials. The third theme deals with systemic 51 obstacles related to career planning: a great number of counselors have insufficient resources, and due to the large number of students, they do not have enough time and access to career assessment tools. These constraints pinpoint the theme of Institutional Challenges that determine not only the extent but also the quality of the career services.

Research Question 2: How Thai secondary school guidance counselors describe their work in terms of (1) the services they provided at their school; (2) the counseling strategies they use; and (3) the challenges they encounter in fulfilling their roles.

2.1. Services They Provide at Their School. This part of the statement of the problem is best answered by the first theme “Multidimensional Role of Counselors.” The services provided by school guidance counselors are holistic in that they not only help students with aforementioned academic, emotional, social, and career planning issues, but also use moral guidance and values education.

2.2. Their Counseling Strategies They Use. 54 This part of the statement of the problem is again best answered by the first theme “Multidimensional Role of Counselors.” The counselors recounted that their methods were based on empathy, solution-focused interventions, and group-based approaches.

2.3. The Challenges They Encounter in Fulfilling Their Roles. This part of the statement of the problem is best answered by the fourth theme “Emotional Labor and Coping.” Guidance counselors reported that they encountered various problems in doing their jobs. Besides: overwhelming workloads and role overloads, lack of institutional support, cultural and parental barriers, and emotional burnout and limited coping resources.

3: A program or intervention can be proposed to strengthen guidance counseling in Kalasin Province. This part of the statement of the problem is best answered by the fifth theme “Professional Growth and Fulfillment.” This theme suggests that although guidance counselors face emotional labor and burnout, the growth in their roles as well as seeing the productivity of their work can alleviate this emotional burden. In response to the issues outlined in SOP 2.3, a thorough program the Guidance Counselors Professional Strengthening and Wellness Program (GC-PSWP) was introduced. The said program is based on the respondents' real-life experiences and the four major challenges 57 that they faced: excessive workload, lack of institutional support, cultural barriers, and emotional burnout.

Conclusions

The lived job experiences of guidance counselors employed by Thai secondary public schools in Amphoe Mueang Kalasin are presented in this study. Additionally, it illustrates the intricate reality of their careers. The results show that guidance counselors provide much more than just academic advice. They are multifaceted individuals whose responsibilities include career preparation, social mediation, psychological intervention, and emotional support. Their experiences illuminate the fact that academic performance of students is strongly related to personal, familial, and cultural factors. In addition to that, the counselors have to deal with these factors at the same time in order to provide holistic assistance.

Besides, despite the dedication of the counselors, they are not always able to fully address student concerns since these are usually constrained by systemic and cultural challenges. The reluctance of students to ask for help, which is caused by the stigma, the fear of being judged, and the influence of “saving face,” was identified as one of the main obstacles that make counseling services less effective. Similarly, if parents do not understand counseling, it will further decrease the number of students willing to engage in it. The above cultural patterns are the reflection of mental health issues attitudes in the whole society of Thailand. This means that the importance of raising the awareness and providing psychoeducation for families and communities is demonstrated here.

Besides, counselors are also limited by the school system in their work. Heavy workloads, lack of resources, absence of mental health professionals, and weak referral systems are some of the constraints that take away the time and capacity of counselors. These difficulties are often the cause of emotional distress and compassion fatigue since the counselors become the emotional receptacles of their students' painful experiences and do not receive enough support from the institution. However, even in the face of these challenges, the counselors regularly made reference to their strong sense of purpose,

joy, and professional commitment. They are kept going by their internal drive, individual coping mechanisms, and the rewarding nature of their work with students in a profession that is otherwise very demanding.

This research project broadly acknowledges and emphasizes the value and the significance of the work of guidance counselors in Kalasin along with the various limitations that they encounter. The experiences of the individuals indicate the necessity of the supportive systems, clear policies, and mental health resources together with the continuous professional development. When these issues are improved, not only will the counselor's welfare and efficacy be elevated, but the students in Kalasin will also be more assured to acquire the comprehensive care and guidance that are essential for their academic, psychological, social, and even future career development to thrive.

Recommendations

The present findings of this research have led to the formulation of a series of recommendations that aim to improve the implementation, visibility, and sustainability of the guidance and counseling services in Kalasin Province. It has been thoroughly evidenced through the study results that guidance counselors are the ones who play the pivotal role in several dimensions at the same time, and they are confronting a notable number of institutional and cultural barriers. Hence, a well-coordinated policy, school, and practitioner-level response is inevitable.

Firstly, at the national and local leadership levels, the Ministry of Education along with educational policy makers are expected to revise and extend the policy provisions regarding guidance and counseling services. Part of this action will be a more precise definition of the standard for the number of counselor-to-student ratios, as the case that the counselor's workload makes it very difficult for them to offer a one-on-one support to students is well-known. Besides, an appropriate budget should be provided for the creation of the positions of extra mental health professionals like school psychologists or social workers and for the organization of specialized training of the staff in crisis management, trauma-informed care, and current counseling methods. Further strengthening of policy support will pave the way for the implementation of guidance services to become more feasible, and these will be more centralized and coordinated according to the needs of Thai students.

At the school level, the work of administrators greatly helps to raise the importance of counseling within the academic community. It is suggested that school administrators take the counseling work of the guidance counselors up as the primary issue that needs solving with the non-counseling duties to be reduced so that the counselors may focus on their core responsibilities. Besides, the administrators should work on creating good relations between teachers and counselors through setting up an efficient referral system as well as crisis protocols, this way teachers will realize the importance of guidance work and consider themselves as partners in student development. Apart from that, schools will benefit if they engage in awareness-raising and mental health education programs for students and their parents. The programs

will help participants get rid of the stigma, promoting the practice of seeking help, and building a school culture that supports each other.

Guidance counselors, on their part, are urged to keep up with professional development activities as this will not only improve their counseling skills but also increase their confidence when dealing with more complex problems of students. Since one of the major findings from this study was that counselors' emotional labor, counselors should also invest in their own well-being by doing mindfulness exercises, peer consultations, reflective journaling, and engaging in emotional support groups for professionals. The burnout that comes with the job will be less of an issue once they follow these practices and the counselors will be able to maintain emotional resilience and in turn, be effective in their roles.

Eventually, researchers of the future are very much welcome to extend this study by including the views of students, parents, and teachers in their investigation. This input will assist the study to form more complete pictures of the counseling services and uncover other factors that affect the ways through which help-seekers and program implementers communicate. It will also be great to carry out comparative studies with other parts of Thailand or some similar cultural contexts in the Southeast Asia region in order to find out whether the problems faced in Kalasin are common or unique to its socio-cultural environment.

In summary, the present research findings raise the need for an all-inclusive and deliberately planned approach to enhancing guidance and counseling services in the Kalasin Province. By implementing the required changes in policy, school structures, counselor empowerment, and research growth, the educational system will be better able to meet the social, emotional, and academic demands of Thai children.

Here is the suggested "Guidance Counselors Professional Strengthening and Wellness Program (GC-PSWP):"

Component	Objectives	Key Activities / Strategies	Responsible Persons	Time Frame	Expected Output
1. Wellness & Mental Health Support	• Reduce burnout and stress • Strengthen emotional resilience • Access to counseling support	• Monthly wellness workshops • Mindfulness & stress-reduction sessions • Wellness attendance records	• School Counselor, Psychologist, Administration	Monthly	• Counselors will have improved mental well-being
2. Professional Capacity Building	• Enhance guidance competencies	• Trainings on counseling techniques	Administration, External Trainers.	Quarterly	• Training certificates

Component	Objectives	Key Activities / Strategies	Responsible Persons	Time Frame	Expected Output
	Update counselors on new trends	- Case-management sessions - Seminars on legal/ethical standards			Skills improvement reports
3. Peer Collaboration & Support System	- Strengthened peer support - Best-practices sharing - Provide peer-based problem-solving - Documented case discussions	- Monthly peer case conferences - Monthly peer case conferences - Mentor-mentee pairing	Senior Counselors, Peer Group	Monthly	Build professional networks
4. Resource & Materials Development	- Provide tools needed for effective services - Development of referral guides	- Creation of counseling materials - Updating service forms	Guidance Office Team	Every Semester	- Counseling manual - Referral directory
5. Administrative & Policy Support	- Institutionalize support systems - Clarify roles and processes	- Workload management planning - Policy review and alignment	Administration, Guidance Head	Annual	- Approved policies - Clear referral system implementation - Updated guidelines
6. Monitoring & Evaluation	- Track progress of the program - Ensure continuous improvement	- Program evaluation reports - Feedback surveys - Improvement plan	Administration, Office of Secondary Education Observer.	Semi-annual	Evaluation results

Component	Objectives	Key Activities / Strategies	Responsible Persons	Time Frame	Expected Output
		Annual performance review			

Compliance With Ethical Standards

The researcher asserts that the study observed and followed the ethical principles in academic research. Consent was agreed by the participants and they were given detailed information regarding the interviews, the purpose of the study, the fact that they were free to participate and their right to leave the study if they wished without facing any kind of repercussion. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to the participants through the use of fictitious names and the assurance that no identifying information would be included in transcripts and the final report. Additionally, data privacy was respected by treating data appropriately, restricting access, and erasing audio recordings after transcription.

The researcher took care to avoid any harm be it emotional, psychological, or otherwise to the participants and that the data collection was done with the utmost sensitivity and respect. There was no conflict of interest that affected any part of the research, and the researcher was neutral while analyzing and interpreting the data. Moreover, the research complied with the standards of academic integrity by not plagiarizing and by giving accurate representation of the participants' voices and experiences. All the procedures were done for the sole purpose of research and educational development.

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