

HELPING TILL IT HURTS: NARRATIVE OF SCHOOL-HELPING PROFESSIONALS

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ABSTRACT: This research study focused on the lived experiences of school-helping professionals, primarily on their struggles and motivation to persist in their chosen careers, which have been overlooked until today. Using a descriptive qualitative method, precisely a phenomenological approach, 17 professionals were invited to share their experiences through in-depth interviews or focus group discussions. This study employed purposive sampling to choose respondents who were fit to participate. The data in this study was collected using focus group discussions and individual interviews. With these methods employed, we can have two viewpoints of the participants. The data in this study was analyzed using thematic analysis following Colaizzi's method, which involves systematically identifying key themes and patterns, helping capture the participants' core ideas. The result showed that these professionals experienced self-doubt, getting disturbed by the cases they handled, and feeling drained and stressed after work while conducting their profession. However, they manage these challenges and difficulties by realizing self-growth and progress, being resourceful and resilient, and reducing stress through self-care. However, their profession has made them feel fulfilled and accomplished, recognizing continuous learning and growth and that their profession is a blessing and an opportunity.

KEYWORDS: *psychology, lived experiences of school-helping professionals, SDG 3, phenomenology, Philippines*

I. INTRODUCTION

The study examines the lived experiences of school-helping professionals, such as psychologists, counselors, and facilitators, working with students in both public and private schools. These professionals face significant occupational stressors, including burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary trauma, due to their work with distressed individuals and high responsibility for clients' mental well-being. The American Psychological Association highlights issues like emotional exhaustion and diminished job satisfaction in mental health fields, stemming from excessive workloads and difficulty in balancing work and personal life. Studies by Joshi and Sharma (2020) and Rainsford (2020) reveal that mental health professionals often suffer from secondary trauma and emotional fatigue from empathizing with clients' traumatic experiences. In the Philippines, the shortage of licensed mental health professionals, such as counselors and psychologists, is particularly evident. The counselor-to-student ratio remains below the ideal, intensifying workloads and stress for these professionals. Over time, school-helping professionals' roles have expanded, yet research and support for their professional and personal growth are limited. Despite their critical role, mental health professionals often experience issues like low self-efficacy, insufficient support, and high stress, which contribute to a research gap. This study addresses this gap by exploring school-helping professionals' struggles, motivations, and coping mechanisms through a phenomenological approach. Using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, it investigates how these professionals manage their roles and the challenges they face. Key research questions include understanding their experiences, coping methods, and the insights they can share with peers. The study is grounded in Seligman's Positive Psychology theory, focusing on strengths, optimism, resilience, and other positive traits that can enhance well-being and fulfillment. Csikszentmihalyi's Flow theory further supports this by exploring the importance of achieving flow states for happiness and productivity. These theories help to frame the study's focus on understanding the unique challenges these professionals face and how they find motivation and fulfillment. The findings will benefit various stakeholders, including educational administrators, the Department of Education, and the Commission on Higher Education, by increasing awareness of school-helping professionals' needs. Insights from this study aim to improve collaborative efforts among stakeholders, which may enhance mental health services for students. The study highlights the importance of self-care and resilience for these professionals

and could inform future policies and support systems to manage burnout and stress effectively. Additionally, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 3, this research contributes to global mental health advocacy by promoting support systems for mental health workers in stressful environments. The findings offer potential interventions to enhance well-being, leading to a healthier, more effective workforce. Ultimately, the study serves as a foundation for future research on school-helping professionals, potentially leading to broader understanding and improved support for mental health practitioners.

II. METHODS

This study examined school-helping professionals in Davao City, Philippines, to understand their challenges, motivations, and experiences. Conducted in both public and private schools, the research included in-depth interviews with seven participants and focus group discussions (FGDs) with ten participants. These professionals, who work as guidance facilitators, registered guidance counselors, or psychologists, were chosen using purposive sampling based on criteria ensuring their experience in the field. The sample followed Creswell's (2018) guidelines for phenomenological studies, recommending 5 to 25 participants for sufficient data saturation. The demographic profile of participants showed diversity in age and professional background, ranging from 28 to 55 years old and including various roles related to school counseling and psychology. Selection criteria required participants to hold professional licenses or have substantial experience in guidance roles within school settings in Davao City, with a minimum of five years at their current institution. Exclusion criteria ensured that only professionals meeting specific experience and tenure requirements were included. Participants were also informed of their rights to withdraw at any stage of the study, safeguarding their health, safety, and adherence to study protocols. Data collection involved an open-ended interview guide, designed to prompt detailed accounts of the participants' experiences and challenges. Experts validated the interview guide before data collection, and ethical approval was obtained from the University's Ethical Committee. Informed consent procedures clarified the study's goals, procedures, potential discomforts, and confidentiality terms, assuring participants of privacy. The study was conducted within an interpretive paradigm, emphasizing participants' active involvement and recognizing that reality is socially constructed. The interpretive paradigm allowed the researcher to gain insights into participants' lived experiences, acknowledging the impact of personal values on data interpretation (Flick, 2014). A qualitative research method was used, aiming to explore the meanings participants attributed to their roles, actions, and interactions. Employing a phenomenological design, the study focused on capturing the subjective experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of school-helping professionals, emphasizing the personal significance of their roles. This approach allowed the researcher to gather detailed data on participants' views, challenges, and coping strategies, as well as the insights they could offer to their peers. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, audio recordings, and transcripts. Participants were allowed to select the interview date and location, with sessions lasting between 30 minutes to an hour, conducted from November to December 2023. After interviews, audio recordings were meticulously transcribed, with careful attention to detail for accuracy and contextual relevance. Following transcription, thematic analysis using Colaizzi's method identified core themes, ensuring that findings were coherently organized and represented the participants' perspectives accurately. Trustworthiness was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework, incorporating credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility involved cross-checking transcripts with audio recordings, while transferability and dependability focused on relevance and reliability. Overall, the study highlighted the demands placed on school-helping professionals in a high-stress educational environment, contributing valuable insights into their experiences and underscoring the importance of professional support for these roles. This research is a foundational reference for future studies aiming to enhance mental health services within school settings.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1) *Experiences of School-Helping Professionals in The Conduct of Their Profession*

From the data collected, three main themes emerged experiencing self-doubt, getting disturbed with cases, and feeling drained and stressed after work. Self-doubt is a significant challenge for school-helping professionals as they support students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Participants expressed uncertainty about the effectiveness of their interventions and whether their current paths align with their true aspirations. This self-doubt often arises when they feel they do not fully understand the seriousness of their clients' issues, leading them to question their ability to make a meaningful impact. Research by Ziem and Hoyer (2020) indicates that therapists who humbly assess their effectiveness tend to facilitate more profound therapeutic changes, suggesting that self-doubt can be constructive. Additionally, Theriault et al. (2009) noted that self-doubt encourages counselors to focus on their growth, leading them to seek further knowledge and peer feedback. School-helping professionals experience significant challenges, including barrier bias, which leads them to focus on obstacles rather than potential solutions when evaluating cases. Participants noted the emotional toll of confronting disturbing realities, such as trauma and abuse, particularly in sensitive cases involving minors. This exposure to

clients' hardships can evoke strong emotional responses, resulting in secondary trauma or compassion fatigue. Chamlou (2022) emphasizes that consistently hearing clients recount their traumas can adversely affect therapists' mental well-being, highlighting the negative impact these cases may have on their emotional health. All participants reported feeling drained and stressed after work, a situation exacerbated by their multiple roles and household responsibilities. This exhaustion is particularly intense for school-helping professionals, who expend significant energy, empathy, and cognitive resources during counseling sessions. The emotional demands of deep, empathetic listening and addressing students' complex issues contribute to their mental fatigue. Vivolo et al. (2022) validate these findings, indicating that this recurrent exposure to clients' emotional distress puts these professionals at risk for burnout.

2) Management of Experiences Among School-Helping Professionals

From the data collected, three main themes emerged: realizing self-growth and progress, being resourceful and resilient, and reducing stress through self-care. Self-awareness, self-examination, and understanding one's impact on others are essential for personal growth, as emphasized by theorists like Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. Participants in the study expressed their commitment to continually enhancing their skills as school-helping professionals to better assist their clients, which also applies to address their personal struggles. They agreed that ongoing professional development is crucial for staying informed about the latest counseling techniques and mental health practices, allowing them to meet the evolving needs of students. This aligns with Simpson and Falkner's (2015) assertion that counselors should not only focus on ethical and competent practice but also prioritize their personal development. Participants in the study demonstrated resilience by willingly accepting their responsibilities as school-helping professionals, even while facing their own struggles. They acknowledged the demanding nature of their work and recognized that it comes with significant obligations toward their clients. According to Idris et al. (2023), counselors perceive their roles as intense yet view their profession as a catalyst for personal growth and improvement. This perspective is supported by Cole et al. (2023), suggesting that guidance counselors are well-prepared and have access to the necessary support to navigate the challenges they encounter. Reducing stress through self-care is crucial for maintaining the mental and emotional well-being of school-helping professionals, enabling them to effectively support students in need. Interviews revealed that participants commonly use sleep as a primary method to reduce stress, believing it rejuvenates and refreshes them for their demanding roles. In addition to sleeping, they prioritize relaxation by engaging in various activities that promote stress reduction. Participants recognize that self-care is essential for sustaining their ability to care for clients and managing the emotional toll of their work. Effective self-care practices, such as engaging in hobbies, spending time with loved ones, and setting professional boundaries, help prevent burnout and maintain their passion for their profession. This aligns with Pyslons and Gall's (2020) assertion that self-care activities enhance therapist well-being and reduce stress and burnout. Additionally, finding personalized self-care activities is vital, as Tan et al. (2024) emphasize that self-care is unique to each individual and plays a significant role in the professional life of counselors.

3) The Chosen Profession is a Blessing and an Opportunity

From the data collected, three main themes emerged: feeling fulfilled and accomplished, continuous learning and growth, and profession is a blessing and an opportunity. School-helping professionals find fulfillment and a sense of accomplishment in their roles, despite the challenges they face. Through their work, they develop their skills and resilience, continuously growing both personally and professionally while demonstrating their dedication to supporting students. Beyond addressing students' immediate issues, they foster hope, encourage resilience, and nurture a brighter future, which brings deep satisfaction and purpose. Witnessing students overcome personal struggles, achieve academic goals, and build future pathways affirms the counselors' roles as crucial support figures. Building strong relationships with students, families, and staff enhances their impact, and their advocacy in mental health and crisis management strengthens the school community. This sense of fulfillment aligns with Poyrazli et al. (2012), who note that guidance counselors experience high satisfaction due to the autonomy and meaningful, non-routine nature of their work. Continuous learning is vital for school-helping professionals, enabling them to adapt to evolving challenges and improve their skills. Participants emphasized that their learning extends beyond formal training to include insights from real-world experiences, their clients, and colleagues. These interactions provide practical knowledge and perspectives that are invaluable to their growth. Embracing continuous improvement enhances both their confidence and the overall effectiveness of the counseling programs, benefiting the school community as a whole. This aligns with Gültekin and Aricioğlu's (2012) findings that school counselors need ongoing professional development to meet the diverse needs of students and adapt to educational changes. Training sessions, seminars, and conferences offered by professional bodies and private institutions play a critical role in fostering this growth. School-helping professionals view their job as a blessing, experiencing fulfillment and growth as they make meaningful impacts on students' lives. By guiding students through personal and academic challenges, they form deep, supportive relationships that enhance

their sense of purpose. This aligns with Purwaningrum's (2019) findings, showing that counselors with high psychological well-being can balance professional and personal roles, thereby minimizing work-related stress. Similarly, Kay (2019) notes that existential fulfillment in their work helps school-helping professionals reduce burnout, as their purpose aligns with their actions. Despite the challenges they face, they remain motivated, seeing their profession as an opportunity to grow personally and to contribute positively to others. This perspective reinforces their commitment to a bigger purpose, fostering resilience and dedication. Overall, the responses show that school-helping professionals could overcome all the struggles they encountered and adapt successfully to significant challenges associated with their chosen profession. This confirms Seligman's (1998) Positive Psychology Theory that people thrive and live their best lives by focusing on various aspects such as character strengths, life satisfaction, passion and purpose, well-being, gratitude, compassion, self-confidence, hope, and optimism. Given the diverse challenges they have experienced, they continued to help and be a ray of hope to their respective students. Their fulfillment surpasses their challenges and serves as a testament to their resilience and determination. Despite encountering numerous obstacles, they have established a solid commitment to their goal, which is to help. This journey has enriched their personal growth and professional development, developing a deeper sense of accomplishment and purpose. This also aligns with Csikszentmihalyi's (1970) Concept of Flow Theory, which states that happiness comes from within oneself and that the key to happiness is how we invest our psychic energy.

IV. IMPLICATION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study reveals that school-helping professionals face numerous challenges, including self-doubt, emotional disturbances, and stress, which pose risks for burnout and compassion fatigue (Manganaro, 2023). Addressing these struggles is essential for mental health professionals, as stable mental and emotional health enables effective therapeutic relationships with students (Fabella & Mababa, 2023). Professional organizations, like the Philippines Guidance and Counseling Association (PGCA), could implement ongoing development programs and mentorship opportunities to support counselors' growth and resilience (Puslons & Gall, 2020). Likewise, institutions such as DepEd and CHED can help by promoting balanced workloads and wellness activities to reduce stress and burnout among school professionals (Tayoto, 2019). Establishing a supportive work environment where professionals feel valued is crucial for their well-being and effectiveness in supporting students. This study also highlights strategies that can benefit school-helping professionals, emphasizing self-growth, commitment acceptance, and self-care. Self-growth through regular self-assessment and professional development helps professionals recognize their positive impact and build resilience against self-doubt (Gutierrez & Mullen, 2016). Embracing their roles and challenges fosters a sense of purpose and dedication, keeping them motivated. Incorporating self-care activities like sleeping, socializing, and hobbies allows them to manage stress and recharge, ultimately enhancing both their effectiveness and well-being in supporting students. The insights from school-helping professionals emphasize the deep fulfillment and accomplishment gained from positively impacting students' lives, highlighting the importance of continuous learning and professional development. They encourage their peers to view their profession as both a blessing and an opportunity, fostering a supportive community that turns challenges into meaningful impacts. Additionally, they reaffirm their commitment to serving the community, recognizing their role as a source of hope for those in need. Future research could investigate the long-term effects of emotional challenges on school-helping professionals' mental health and job performance, as well as the effectiveness of self-care strategies and professional development programs in reducing burnout and enhancing resilience. Additionally, exploring the impact of school administration support systems on these professionals' well-being could provide valuable insights for better staff support. A comparative study across various educational settings in the Philippines may reveal how different contexts influence the experiences and coping mechanisms of school-helping professionals. Overall, the study highlights the significant emotional challenges faced by school-helping professionals, including self-doubt, case-related disturbances, and exhaustion, yet they find fulfillment and a sense of accomplishment in their work. They view their roles as a blessing, allowing them to help students while pursuing personal and professional growth through self-care and commitment to their responsibilities. These strategies are essential for maintaining their well-being amidst the demanding nature of their roles. The findings affirm Seligman's (1998) Positive Psychology Theory, illustrating how focusing on strengths and purpose enables them to thrive despite their challenges. Overall, their resilience and dedication not only enrich their own lives but also profoundly impact their students' well-being and development.

V. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the people who have been part of this research study and people who have contributed to its success. First and foremost, I would like to thank the knowledge, wisdom, and guidance extended to me by my adviser, Dr. Ronadora E. Deala. I also would like to acknowledge my research participants' supportive participation, allowing me to gather appropriate data and information relevant to this study. I am so proud of them for overcoming their challenges and never giving up on helping their students

overcome the difficulties life has thrown their way. My prayers are with you. May God continue to give you strength. To my main exclusive group, thank you for being and giving me the best support system I needed during tough and challenging times. Thank you for pushing me to finish this study to the best of my ability. To Silvino, thank you for sharing your time and wisdom for not hesitating to answer my call for help, and for helping me overcome my own self-doubts. With all the love in my heart, I would also like to thank my family—especially my husband Jeefy, who has been my number one cheerleader and my greatest supporter, both morally and financially. Lastly, none of this would have been possible without the divine providence and mercy of our Almighty God. I am deeply grateful for the will and strength He provided me to complete this journey. It is through His wonderful blessings, unconditional love, and divine purpose that I am who I am today, and I am where I am.

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