

Counseling Challenges Experienced by the Guidance Counselors of the Division of Student Affairs, Mindanao State University Main Campus in the Recent Bombing Incident at the Dimaporo Gymnasium

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Abstract: Guidance and counseling is definitely an integral part of the promotion of the welfare of the students. With the plethora of problems of today's world, an increase need for counseling services has become imperative in educational institutions. However, regardless of the intervention modalities, counselors are at times faced with many challenges that in one way or another, affects them in carrying out their jobs. This paper aims to identify the challenges encountered by the guidance counselors in providing counseling during the recent crisis situation due to the bombing incident at the Dimaporo Gymnasium last December 3, 2023. It utilized a qualitative research design, phenomenological in particular through focused group discussion to the eight (8) guidance counselors. Furthermore, the study also aims to identify recommendations for future action geared towards improvement in the guidance services of the institution.

Keywords: guidance and counseling, challenges, crisis situation, recommendations.

1. Introduction

In today's world, many people are suffering from traumatic situations in which they find hard to deal with on their own and hence needs support from mental health professionals such as counsellors. In fact, crisis-inducing events like natural disasters, world pandemic, terror attacks and the like create unprecedented effects to one self. These situations can be a turning point in a person's life – either one of growth, strength and opportunity or health decline, dysfunction, and emotional illness (Roberts & Dziegielewski, 1995; Roberts, 2005; Hoff et al., 2009). When people experience a crisis, it is the support they receive during and immediately after the crisis that often plays a crucial part in determining the impact of the crisis on their lives (France, 2014).

It was on December 3, 2023 at around 7:30 in the morning, amidst a Sunday mass, an improvised explosive device was detonated inside the Dimaporo Gynasium. Instantly, the bombing incident had resulted to four casualties and several wounded students and faculty and personnel of the Mindanao

State University Main Campus. The crisis situation had led to unexpected interruption and suspension of classes and activities inside the campus which prompted the repatriation of students, faculty and personnel to their hometowns. Aside from the havoc caused by the loss of lives and injuries of the direct victims, the incident had also created various reactions and responses to the community. Not to mention, it had created a feeling of anxiety and intense trauma to both direct and indirect victims survivors who were students, faculty and personnel of the university.

In light of this, the university's umbrella organization for the student's welfare, the Division of Student Affairs' guidance counselors and its administrative team had immediately intervened and provided different services to the students (direct and non-direct victims) during the onset of the crisis. The office had collaborated with the university's Incident Command Center which served as a frontline office during the crisis. There was also a collaboration with the MSU Mental Health Psychosocial Support Team as spearheaded by the psychology department and its' partner organizations to provide psychosocial support to the MSU Main community.

This study aims to find out the challenges experienced by guidance counselors of the Division of Student Affairs in Mindanao State University in providing counseling and other related services to the students during the bombing incident. It also identifies the issues and concerns and how the counselors handle them. Based upon the experiences sought, recommendations and strategies were also identified in order to enhance the guidance and counseling program of the university.

2. Objectives of the Study

The following are the objectives of the study:

- 1) What were the actions taken by the counselors in dealing with the crisis?
- 2) What were the challenges lived through by the counselors in dealing with the situation crisis

situation?

- 3) What were the recommendations by the counselors that can be considered in enhancing the guidance and counseling program of the institution?

3. Methodology

A. Research Design

The research utilized the phenomenological design done through semi structured interview and focus group discussion with the guidance counselors. According to (Creswell, 2014) the phenomenological design is a qualitative approach in which the researcher describes the lived experience of the individuals about a phenomenon as described by the participants. The findings is derived from the experiences of the individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon.

B. Research Locale

The study was conducted in the Division of Student Affairs, the student welfare organization of the Mindanao State University-Main Campus, Marawi City. The organization is located at the first floor, Senator Domocao Hall, Administration Building. The Mindanao State University was created under Republic Act 1387 as amended. It was formally organized with the induction into office of the UP-Vice President Antonio Isidro as the first President of the first public university in Southern Philippines before President Carlos P. Garcia at Malacanang Palace on September 1, 1961. MSU formally opened its first classes on June 13, 1962 with 282 students from all the provinces and cities of Mindanao, Sulu, Palawan, Visayas and even as far as Luzon. (MSU Main Campus Student Handbook, 2019-2020 Edition) The campus is situated in an elevated 1,000-hectare military reservation and overlooking Lake Lanao, the country's second largest lake.

C. Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were the eight (8) guidance counselors of the Division of Student Affairs of the Mindanao State University-Main Campus, Marawi City.

D. Sampling

The researcher utilized purposive sampling or judgmental sampling in order to get the representativeness of the sample. Furthermore, aside from the researcher herself, excluded also from the sample are the two counselors who were on-leave.

E. Research Instrument

The researcher utilized focused group discussions and semi structured interview. Two experts who are in the profession of counseling counselling were asked to validate the key questions before the FGD. After validation, focus group discussion was conducted. The following questions were asked; 1. What specific interventions or activities were you able to provide during the crisis situation? 2. In your counseling sessions with students, faculty and staff, what do you consider as the top three issues or challenges you have encountered? 3. How were you able to handle such issues or challenges? 4. Based in your experience in counseling, what initiatives should be undertaken

that will improve the guidance and counseling program of your office? The researcher used a voice recorder device to record all the responses and discussions that transpired during the FGD.

F. Ethical Consideration

The researcher had sought the consent of the respondents of the study before the data collection. The respondents were given free will to participate and have the right to refuse the study. The researcher assured the respondents that all information collected from them will be treated with uttermost confidentiality.

G. Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the data through reading the transcript of the respondents and listening to their audio records. Relevant information were coded, labelled and categorized based from the common themes during the focused group discussion. A write-up of the results were made.

4. Results and Discussions

A. Actions Taken by the Counselors in Dealing with the Crisis

The study found that in light of the incident, immediate interventions and activities were provided by the guidance counselors. Specifically, the interventions were focused on psychosocial first aid, psychosocial education and psychosocial sessions and tele-counseling.

As the guidance counselors shared;

“*We did the Psychological First Aid...we visited the APMC, the dorms, the infirmary and did the Psychological First Aid...*”

“*For the first three days we did the PFA.*”

“*Yes, we also did the PsychoEd... (referring to psychoeducation)*”

It is important to ensure that mental health and psychosocial support is effective following exposure to a potentially traumatic event. According to the Department of Health of Minnesota, Psychological First Aid is an evidence-informed approach that is built on the concept of human resilience. It aims to reduce stress symptoms and assist in a healthy recovery following a traumatic event, natural disaster, public health emergency or even a personal crisis. In the same article, it was cited that a report from a study that one positive impact of PFA is that it had reduced symptoms of anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress, and distress, as well as improved ratings of mood, the experience of safety, connectedness, and a sense of control, among youth and adults.

On the other hand, Psychoeducation according to National Institute of Health, combines the elements of cognitive-behavior, therapy, group therapy, and education. The basic aim is to provide the patient and families knowledge about various facets of the illness and its treatment so that they can work together with mental health professionals for a better overall outcome. In a systematic review of 20 studies concluded that psychoeducation appears to reduce relapse and promote adherence in severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia (Zhao *et al.*).

B. Challenges Lived Through by the Counselors in Dealing with the Crisis Situation and How do they Handle Them

Among the top three prevailing issues raised by the counselor on the challenges they experiences include lack of manpower, insufficient fund, material resources and mobility.

As one most counselor shared;

“Kulang ng *manpower, material resources, mobility...*”

Translation: There is a lack of manpower, material resources and mobility.

“Dapat may mga *emergency funds...*”

Translation: There should be an emergency fund

“We can only do so much...kasi yun lang din ang meron tayo”.

Translation: We can only do so much because that is what we have.

“We give what we can and we do what we can”

Public service organizations often find themselves in the midst of a crisis or disaster event. In fact, emergency crisis and disaster management are but one of the numerous challenges for which organizations must be prepared. Unfortunately, public service organizations are sometimes overwhelmed, unfunded, and understaffed. They are forced to do more with less. This resource scarcity can derail the operation of any organization.

Accordingly, there is a positive relationship between labor shortage and organization performance. Organization depends on availability of labor to accomplish its tasks. (J. Kalimanzila, 2019). In an educational institution, adequate funding is crucial for providing effective instructional environments and educational opportunities for students to meet achievement goals.

C. Recommendations for an Enhanced Guidance and Counseling Program

The guidance counselors agreed that there is a need to strengthen the campaign of the guidance office through integrating its importance and concepts in university activities such as during college orientations.

In doing so, there is a need for strong support from the university administration in their campaign initiatives. According to one study of Idris *et al.* (2021) it is crucial to implement healthy policies and health promotion initiatives at the university that focus on creating healthy working, learning and living environments for students and staff, particularly those that are tailored to the specific physical and mental health issues. Furthermore, according to Webster *et al.* (2020), the success of school health promotion programs and initiatives depends in large part on the cooperation of school administrators.

Related to the need from the support, another recommendation from the guidance counselors that was discussed was the need to promote the guidance and counseling services of the university through enhancement of its media and online section.

As one guidance counselor had shared;
Siguro we need to be *louder*. And the language right now is the *media...*”

Translation: I think, we need to be louder... And the language right now is the media”

“This is *one way in order for us to be felt...*”

“Kailangan natin ng training regarding digital media”.

Translation: We need to have *trainings* regarding digital media.”

Nowadays, technology is very important in accomplishing a task especially using technical processes, methods, or knowledge. Accordingly, social media is an important part of today’s world. It helps people stay connected and share ideas, thoughts, and opinions with others in a safe and secure environment. It can also be used to promote businesses, organizations, and causes, as well as to stay informed about current events and trends (Johan, 2023).

In relation, professional growth in an organization can also attained through trainings and seminars. This will equipped the manpower of the organization with new knowledge and skills.

As cited by Oddli *et al.* (2021) from the study of Fraser and Greenhalgh (2001), they proposed that, in addition to ensuring competence, educators also need to enable capability which they defined as the “extent to which individuals can adapt to change, generate new knowledge, and continue to improve their performance” (Fraser & Greenhalgh, 2001).

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

In times of crisis, it is expected that schools must help students deal with the situation and any help offered should consider the social and emotional problems arising from the critical event. Hence, school-based activities such as psychosocial support is important in order to enable students to recognize the experience and work through it and thereby sustain their normal development and prevent academic and mental health problems. This is where the key roles of guidance counselors in school are very important. Hence, the need to strengthen guidance and counseling programs in an educational institution is an important undertaking especially in state universities where the volume of students is high.

Counselors are sometimes faced with many challenges in carrying out their multifaceted roles especially during crisis situations. Although there are many factors to consider, prevailing problems which were not address such as insufficient funds and lack of manpower could really add up to the challenge of providing their services. These insufficiencies are somehow beyond the control of the guidance and counseling section and needs the attention of the school administration. The study also revealed that there is still a need to strengthen the integration of the guidance and counseling section in school activities in order for its function to be recognized.

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