

Referral and Consultancy Services among Guidance Counselors and Guidance Designates: A Mixed-Method Study

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ABSTRACT

This convergent parallel mixed-method study explores the crucial role of referral and consultancy services in promoting mental health and well-being of students in Camarines Norte. It has a particular focus on the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) and teachers assigned as guidance designates with regard to these services. The study seeks to achieve four primary objectives: (1) to describe the overall perspective of RGCs and guidance designates on the referral and consultancy services, (2) to assess the level of the actual practice of these services, (3) to determine the significant difference in the implementation of these services between RGCs and guidance designates, and (4) to propose a framework for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the referral and consultancy services. To achieve these objectives, six RGCs and 24 guidance designates were interviewed and surveyed. Narrative analysis was utilized to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives, while t-test was employed to determine significant differences in the actual practice of referral and consultancy services at 0.05 confidence level. The findings revealed several challenges that hinder access to these services: the limited availability of RGCs, difficulties in establishing connections with other mental health professionals, and the reluctance of clients and their families to engage with the services. Based on the analysis, the study recommends the Guidance and Counseling Referral and Consultancy System. This innovative system aims to enhance these services processes, ultimately contributing to the improvement of mental health and well-being among clients.

Keywords: Referral service, Consultancy service, convergent parallel mixed-method study, situational study, Guidance Counselor, Camarines Norte

INTRODUCTION

Referral service is one of the key services rendered under the guidance program. As Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) play a crucial role in helping students manage their emotions, they access appropriate mental health support through referrals for long-term intervention. Given the nationwide shortage of RGCs, an efficient referral system becomes essential in ensuring that students' psychosocial needs are adequately addressed. Moreover, the referral system serves as an indicator of the overall effectiveness of the health and education support systems, reflecting the capacity of institutions and governing bodies to coordinate and manage the various subsystems and stakeholders involved in the process (Seyed-Nezhad et al., 2021).

The process of referral service naturally transitions into consultancy service as counselors collaborate with referred professionals to ensure coordinated support that addresses the client's multifaceted needs. In consultancy, counselors and consultants both provide support to clients who seek guidance and solutions to personal or professional problems. Recent studies highlight that consultation fosters skill development, supports ethical decision-making, and reduces professional isolation, making it an enriching necessity (Miu et al., 2022). Likewise, school-based research emphasizes that consultation enhances collaboration among educators, expands counselors' ability to address complex student needs, and strengthens systemic responses to mental health challenges (Lancaster, 2023).

Referral and consultancy services are vital components of the counseling profession, facilitating extended care through collaboration with other mental health professionals. This need is especially evident in Camarines Norte, where there is a pronounced shortage of RGCs. According to the Department of Education's standard ratio of 1:500 for basic education (DepEd, 2019) and the Commission on Higher Education's guideline of 1:1,000 for higher education institutions, the current number of RGCs remains insufficient to meet the growing demands of students. Consequently, RGCs in the province face overwhelming workloads, leaving many students' guidance and counseling needs unmet. To address this shortage, DepEd designated "guidance designates"—teachers assigned to perform guidance and counseling functions despite lacking formal education or training in the field. While this initiative temporarily alleviates service gaps, it raises concerns about the quality, ethical soundness, and professional integrity of counseling practices, as untrained personnel may unintentionally compromise adherence to established professional standards.

Research on referral and consultancy services is essential in addressing the shortage of RGCs and mitigating its ongoing impact on the delivery of services and the well-being of clients. However, there remains a paucity of empirical studies examining their implementation and efficiency within the Philippine context. Moreover, limited evidence exists regarding the integration of technology-based systems to enhance referral and consultancy processes in school settings.

A thorough examination of the referral and consultancy services and their potential to address the shortage of RGCs in Camarines Norte may mitigate the excessive caseloads experienced by counselors by enabling the appropriate referral of clients to other specialists. Developing and implementing innovative referral and consultancy mechanisms can help guidance designates stay within their professional boundaries. This approach also prevents them from engaging in counseling practices that may compromise ethical standards.

Research Objectives

This study aims to underscore the significance of guidance and counseling referral and consultancy services in addressing the shortage of counselors in Camarines Norte, thereby contributing to the overall strengthening of the mental health profession.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following objectives:

1. To describe the overall perspective of the Guidance Counselors and designates of the counseling referral and consultancy services.
2. To assess the level of actual practice of the referral and consultancy services of the RGCs and guidance designates in terms of in terms of coordination, assessment, and monitoring.
3. To determine the significant difference in the implementation of these services between RGCs and guidance designates in terms of quality.
4. To propose a framework to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the referral and consultancy services among RGCs, guidance designates, and other mental health professionals.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a convergent parallel mixed-method approach to improve the validity and reliability of its findings. Quantitative data measured the extent and significant differences in their practices, while qualitative insights explored their experiences. This approach highlighted both measurable trends and contextual factors, leading to clearer conclusions about the effectiveness and challenges of referral and consultancy services.

Respondents and Locale

Table 1 shows that five RGCs were from a school in Daet, while one RGC was from Labo, representing 20% of the respondents. Among the guidance designates, 16 were from Daet, four from Vinzons, and four from Labo,

accounting for 80% of the respondents. In total, there were 30 respondents. This study was conducted in Camarines Norte.

Table 1. The distribution of RGCs and designates per town where their respective schools are located

	<i>Schools from</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Registered Guidance Counselors	Daet	5	20%
	Labo	1	
Guidance designates	Daet	16	80%
	Vinzons	4	
	Labo	4	
		<i>n=30</i>	<i>100%</i>

The RGCs were purposively selected to capture their expert perspectives, while guidance designates were randomly selected from schools across Camarines Norte. RGCs included those who had passed the Guidance and Counseling board examination and were currently serving as counselors in DepEd schools or at CNSC in Camarines Norte. Guidance designates were teachers managing the guidance and counseling office in the absence of RGCs. The guidance designates were selected using Slovin's formula with a 0.10 margin of error, given the small size of the total population.

Data collection and analysis

An unstructured interview was conducted to describe the overall perspective on the referral and consultancy services of the RGCs and guidance designates. Narrative analysis was employed to examine the overall perspective of the Guidance Counselors and designates on the counseling referral and consultancy services.

An adopted survey questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale was employed to determine the level of actual practice of referral and consultancy services among RGCs and guidance designates, focusing on the dimensions of coordination, assessment, and monitoring. Weighted mean was used to interpret the data collected from the survey. t-test at a 0.05 confidence level was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences in the implementation of referral and consultancy services between RGCs and guidance designates in terms of adequacy and quality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the perspectives of the participants, levels of actual practice, significant differences between the two groups. It also explored implications for enhancing the effectiveness and quality of the referral and consultancy services in Camarines Norte.

Objective 1. The overall perspective of the Guidance Counselors and designates on the counselling referral and consultancy services. Based on the study's interviews with RGCs and guidance designates, referral and consultancy services were recognized as essential for supporting clients' mental health and well-being. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of these services is constrained by several factors, including the (a) limited number of RGCs in Camarines Norte, (b) challenges in establishing connections with other mental health professionals such as psychologists and psychiatrists, and (c) low engagement from clients and their families. Additional barriers identified include scheduling conflicts, the absence of a formal referral system, financial constraints, and clients' reluctance to disclose personal issues due to fear of overexposure or repercussions.

These findings align with previous studies highlighting the critical shortage of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs), funding, and accessibility to mental health care. The issue reflects broader national challenges, as mental health services in the Philippines receive only 3–5% of the health budget, most of which is allocated to hospital care, with just 0.52 psychiatrists and 0.07 psychologists per 100,000 people (Lally et al., 2019). Financial and accessibility barriers further discourage Filipinos from seeking formal mental health services, with many turning to family and friends instead (Martinez et al., 2020). Despite the 2018 Philippine Mental Health Act, funding and resources for mental health remain insufficient (Alibudbud, 2023).

These findings, supported by both the current and previous studies, emphasize the need for a cost-effective, innovative, and reliable referral and consultancy process that would allow RGCs and designates to access a network of mental health professionals as needed, while ensuring that such services remain financially accessible to clients.

Objective 2: The level of actual practice of the referral and consultancy services of the RGCs and guidance designates in terms of coordination, assessment, and monitoring. As presented in Table 2, the findings reveal a noticeable difference between RGCs and guidance designates in carrying out coordination, assessment, and monitoring tasks in referral and consultancy services. RGCs consistently demonstrated strong performance across all indicators. Guidance designates, however, showed lower performance in key areas, including collecting and reviewing client data, using available and additional research to develop referral plans, sharing intervention plans with relevant stakeholders, monitoring clients over a specified period, and analyzing data to evaluate referral effectiveness.

As stated by the designates during the interview, they are familiar with the concept of referral services but lack a comprehensive understanding of the processes involved. It was mentioned that referrals are typically made verbally rather than through a formalized procedure. According to them, they often seek guidance from the RGCs at the DepEd Division Office regarding appropriate actions for clients.

The study's findings corroborate previous research indicating that referral services managed by guidance designates are often less effective due to limited background knowledge and insufficient understanding of counseling processes (Dulay & Pitonang, 2023). Licensed teachers assigned as designates frequently lack the specialized training, skills, and eligibility required to manage guidance offices and address diverse student concerns (Subong, 2025). Additionally, the dual responsibilities of teaching and guidance duties constrain their capacity to perform key tasks, including coordination, assessment, and monitoring, and may compromise adherence to ethical standards (Decena & Singson, 2022). Collectively, these factors help explain the lower performance of guidance designates observed in the current study.

Table 2. The level of actual practice of the Referral service of the RGCs and designates in terms of coordination, assessment, and monitoring

As a guidance counselor or designate, I...	WM		Ave. WM	Adjectival Rating
	RGCs	Desig-nees		
1. make sure that the program has an effective referral for handling student crises	5.00	4.50	4.75	HI
2. provide confidentiality, to the limits provided by the law	5.00	4.60	4.80	HI
3. make sure that student's information were properly released during referrals	5.00	4.30	4.65	HI
4. assesses referred clients by collecting/reviewing data	5.00	4.00	4.50	HI
5. use available and research more data to develop referral plan	5.00	4.00	4.50	HI

6. share intervention plan with those involved in the referral process	5.00	4.00	4.50	HI
7. monitor referred client for specified time period	5.00	4.00	4.50	HI
8. analyze data to determine effectiveness of referrals	5.00	4.00	4.50	HI
9. continue monitoring student progress if intervention was successful in the referred professional	5.00	4.50	4.75	HI
10. develop a new plan if needed if intervention was not successful in the referred professional	5.00	4.40	4.70	HI
Total	5.00	4.20	4.60	HI

Legend: 4.50-5.00 Highly Implemented (HI); 3.50-4.49 Implemented (I); 2.50-3.49 Moderately Implemented (MI); 1.50-2.49 Slightly Implemented (SI); 1.00-1.49 Not Implemented (NI)

With regard to the level of actual practice of the consultancy service of both the RGCs and designates in terms of coordination, assessment, and monitoring, the findings of the study indicate a clear distinction between RGCs and guidance designates as shown in Table 3. RGCs consistently demonstrated full competence across all indicators, reflecting strong and consistent performance in providing consultancy support. In contrast, guidance designates appeared less prepared to assume supervisory roles and provide psychological support.

Table 3. The level of actual practice of the consultancy service of the RGCs and designates in terms of coordination, assessment, and monitoring

<i>As a guidance counselor or designate, I...</i>	WM		Ave. WM	Adjectival Rating
	RGCs	Desig-nees		
1. adapt a coaching model that is most appropriate for my role as a school counselor based on other experts' suggestion	5.00	4.40	4.70	HI
2. partner with counselors in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential	5.00	4.50	4.75	HI
3. think and act differently than before to respond to the changes in and around schools today as advised by other experts	5.00	4.40	4.70	HI
4. prepare for the paradigm shift in supervisory roles through structured consultancy protocols	5.00	4.10	4.55	HI
5. require specific and focused training to ensure the application of globally accepted best practices	5.00	4.20	4.60	HI
6. encourage client growth and promote formation of healthy relationships through the help of other experts	5.00	4.50	4.75	HI
7. apply psychological first aid and assistance coping with grief and loss at one end of the spectrum to planning career goals at the other end of the spectrum	5.00	4.10	4.55	HI
8. call for and support a client in emotional distress	5.00	4.40	4.70	HI

9. apply the school's resources, including allied professionals, to the pursuit of the goals, actions and outcomes they have identified	5.00	4.40	4.70	HI
10. facilitate client development of decision-making skills in collaboration with other experts	5.00	4.30	4.65	HI
Total	5.00	4.30	4.70	HI

Legend: 4.50-5.00 Highly Implemented (HI); 3.50-4.49 Implemented (I); 2.50-3.49 Moderately Implemented (MI); 1.50-2.49 Slightly Implemented (SI); 1.00-1.49 Not Implemented (NI)

The study found in the interview that guidance designates possessed minimal to no knowledge regarding the consultancy service. They were unfamiliar with the nature of the service, its processes, and the appropriate professionals to consult. Moreover, even when advised to seek assistance from mental health professionals, most designates were unaware of where to find them. Their understanding of consultancy was largely limited to seeking guidance from RGCs at the DepEd Division Office for specific cases.

Kavakli et al. (2021) highlighted in their study that conducting research on consultation services will not only contribute to the body of knowledge but also improve the quality of education provided to guidance counselors. Other studies have shown that consultation fosters professional growth, ethical decision-making, and systemic responses to student needs, particularly when counselors collaborate with peers and other experts (Alexander et al., 2022; Lancaster, 2023).

Objective 3. The significant difference between the implementation of the referral and consultancy services between the RGCs and designates in terms of quality. There is a highly significant difference between the quality of the implementation of referral and consultancy services between counselors and designates, as shown in Table 4. The disparity can be attributed to the limited education and training of designates, which restricts their ability to effectively carry out the referral and consultancy processes. These results highlight the critical role of formal training and professional preparation in ensuring the effective implementation of these services.

With their professional credentials, RGCs practice reflected a nuanced grasp of theoretical foundations and the adaptability essential for an integrative counseling approach (Arellano, 2025). In contrast, studies have shown that teachers' capacity to function as counselors is limited, as they lack training in counseling. Classroom teachers are often designated as guidance advocates; however, they face challenges in balancing dual roles as educators and guidance providers (Balajadia & Fabella, 2023).

Table 4. The significant difference between RGCs and designates' implementation of the Referral and Consultancy services in terms of quality

	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>Significance at p<.05</i>
Referral	9.58	.00001	Significant
Consultancy	14.17	.00001	Significant

If $p < .05$ = Significant; if $p > .05$ = Not Significant

Objective 4. Proposed framework to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the referral and consultancy services among RGCs, guidance designates, and other mental health professionals. Given the challenges faced by both RGCs and designates in Camarines Norte, a technology-based innovation for the referral and consultancy services was proposed, as shown in Figure 2.

Guidance & Counseling Referral and Consultancy System

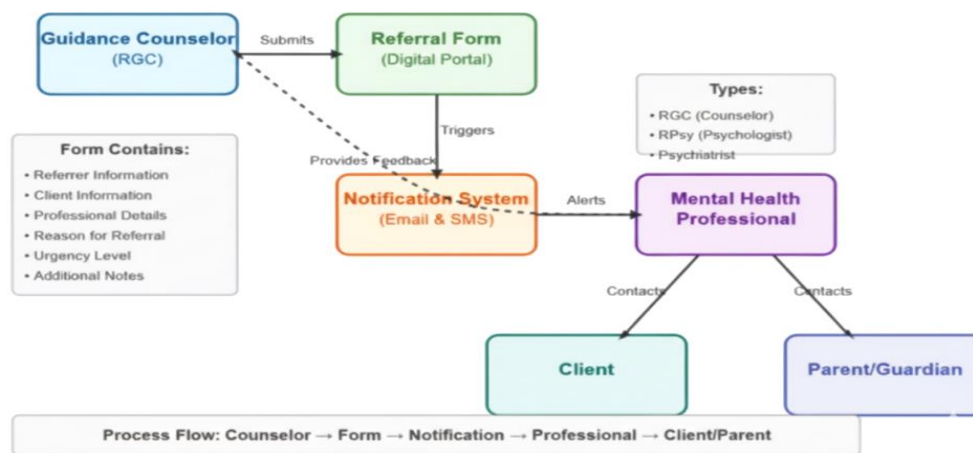


Figure 2. The Concept Model of the Guidance and Counseling Referral and Consultancy System

The Guidance and Counseling Referral and Consultancy System is designed to streamline the connection of clients with appropriate mental health professionals in Camarines Norte. In the continuum of care, the process begins at the universal level where guidance designates monitor students and flag early concerns. At the targeted level, identified cases are formally referred through the system, which promptly notifies mental health professionals and ensures proper documentation. At the intensive level, these professionals review the referral for urgency, contact the client and guardians, and coordinate with the referring Guidance Counselor to clarify details before starting appropriate interventions. Feedback is then sent back to the counselor, creating a continuous communication loop that strengthens accountability and ensures continuity of care.

Research on technology-based educational counseling services for students remains limited. However, counseling services need to be adapted to the problems faced by clients. Therefore, a referral system is needed to make it easier to provide follow-up services to cases handled so that psychologists in their fields can handle them (Jannah et al., 2023). In school settings, digital information and communication technologies improve efficiency, facilitate direct interaction, and strengthen cooperation, communication, and coordination (Abdallah Altarawneh & Awwad Alomoush, 2022; Muhammad, 2024).

This integrated referral and consultancy system offers several advantages over traditional methods. It eliminates delays associated with paper-based referrals and phone tag, creates a documented trail for accountability, ensures all necessary information is captured in a standardized format, allows for appropriate triage of cases based on urgency, and facilitates communication between professionals.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on interviews with RGCs and guidance designates, the study identified several challenges that restrict access to referral and consultancy services within the guidance and counseling offices. These include the limited number of registered counselors available for consultation within the province, difficulties in establishing connections with other mental health professionals such as psychologists and psychiatrists, and the reluctance of clients and their families to engage with these services. Survey findings further revealed that RGCs, equipped with appropriate education and training, demonstrated greater confidence and competence in implementing referral and consultancy services compared to guidance designates, who generally lacked equivalent expertise and formal preparation.

Since guidance designates were appointed primarily to address the shortage of RGCs in Camarines Norte, DepEd and CHED should provide scholarships that will enable interested designates to pursue formal studies in guidance and counseling. This initiative would help address the shortage of qualified RGCs and mitigate its impact on the quality and accessibility of guidance and counseling services in the province.

The study recommends that DepEd and CHED establish partnerships with LGUs expand the network of mental health professionals. Partnership with HEIs is also suggested to institutionalize a standardized referral and consultancy protocol through a province-wide policy. Such an initiative would help distribute caseloads more efficiently among RGCs and other mental health practitioners, thereby improving service delivery and ensuring that a greater number of clients receive appropriate support.

Given the findings of inefficiency and communication gaps in the traditional referral and consultancy services, the study introduces the digital Guidance and Counseling Referral and Consultancy System. Piloting this digital framework in selected schools is advocated by the study, as this innovation provides the platform to integrate policy, capacity-building, and performance monitoring into a single system. By ensuring compliance with RA 10173 (Data Privacy Act) and child protection policies, the proposed system can streamline service delivery, strengthen interprofessional collaboration, and ultimately make all these recommendations feasible while aligning with School-based Mental Health Program pursuant to the Basic Education Mental Health and Well-Being Promotion Act (RA 12080).

Ethical Consideration

The researchers ensured that all participants provided voluntary and informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. Each participant received detailed information regarding the study's objectives, procedures, possible risks, and benefits, and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without facing consequences. Additionally, strict measures were implemented to maintain the confidentiality of participant information. Data collected were either anonymized or de-identified to safeguard the privacy of participants. Confidentiality was maintained throughout all stages of the research, including data storage, analysis, and dissemination.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest related to the publication of this research. No financial, personal, or professional relationships have influenced the study's design, conduct, analysis, or reporting. All affiliations and funding sources have been properly disclosed.

Data Availability

The data supporting this study are available upon request. However, certain information will be anonymized to ensure the confidentiality and security of the respondents.

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