



**CONNECTORS AND COMFORTERS IN CHIEF: LIVED EXPERIENCE OF
GUIDANCE DESIGNATES ON PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID IN
THE MIDST OF PANDEMIC**

YUMI ANGELA S. VALDERAMA

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT OFFICER II

Department of Education - Schools Division Office

09061689053

valderamaangela8@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study looked into the issues that six public secondary guidance designates in the Division of Calamba City faced while providing Psychological First Aid (PFA) in the middle of a pandemic. A learning and development program was proposed as a result of the study to capacitate guiding designates in the delivery of PFA in the new normal of limited face-to-face learning delivery.

The approach was phenomenology, and the research design was qualitative. The study generated ten superordinate themes using an interpretative phenomenological approach: Response to Varied Circumstances, Through Seminars and Training, listening to Students and Establishing Rapport, Challenging and Fulfilling, Favorable Uses of PFA, Negative to Positive Reactions Before and After PFA, Therapy, Limitations to Interaction, Reaching Out to Learners, and Willingness, Empathy and Passion.

The first theme explored the guidance designates' knowledge about PFA. For the second theme, the participants shared how they know about PFA, they discussed that it was through attending seminars and pieces of training for the third theme, the six participants cited the process they follow in providing PFA. For the fourth theme, they described their experience in providing psychological first aid. Under the fifth, it identified PFA over other means of intervention. The sixth theme was about the survivors' reactions before and after providing PFA. As for the seventh

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theme, it was about adaptations/additions made in the conduct of PFA. The eighth theme talked about challenges they encountered in the delivery of PFA. Then the ninth theme was about their ways of coping PFA challenges. Finally, the tenth theme was about the ways the guidance designates become committed to providing PFA to learners.

Keywords: connectors, comforters, chief, lived experience, guidance designate, phenomenological, psychological first aid (PFA), pandemic



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INTRODUCTION

"Extraordinary effort and performance cannot be expected without creating an environment in which individuals feel extremely valued." - Dough Conant-

The global Covid-19 pandemic has brought stress and, for some, trauma to young people's mental health, which has unavoidably taken its toll. They've had to deal with virus-related fear, anxiety and uncertainty about loved ones' futures, and bereavement for those who have died. They also had to deal with lockdown, which has resulted in social isolation, a lack of stimulation, decreased physical exercise, and increased screen usage, all of which have been shown to be harmful to their mental health.

Similarly, for other children, school closures have meant the loss of a safe refuge from a harsh family life, which may have been even more stressful as a result of lockdown, including exposure to parental conflict and domestic abuse. Then there's the matter of how long they've had to deal with it. After a year, young people have missed significant birthdays and rites of passage; there will be no prom, no graduation, and no chance to say farewell to their secondary school classmates. Indeed, the current situation has placed an unparalleled mental health burden on students, necessitating quick investigation and assistance.

As stated in the article (The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Mental Health, 2021) that school closures impacted around 28.45 million students across the country, with somewhat more male students (14.29 million) than female students (14.16 million). During lockdown, nearly half of these children (44%) felt isolated, and 54% expressed unfavorable feelings. Children attempted to cope by devoting more time to leisure (viewing television, playing online games, napping during the day) while devoting less time to reading books (0.75 hours), religious activities (0.37 hours), and distance education (0.10 hours).

Likewise, in a study published in the journal Psychiatry Research, the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the mental health of these young individuals, with a significant increase

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in depression symptoms and a decline in overall well-being during the lockdown. Clinical depression was found to have more than doubled in those surveyed, going from 14.9 percent in 2019 to 34.7 percent in May and June 2020.

In accordance with Evans (2021), there has been an increase in the number of young people experiencing mental health issues, and it is distressing to learn that this has significantly worsened as a result of COVID-19. Supporting young people's mental health and ensuring that they have access to the help they require is critical to their overall well-being.

As the pandemic's societal constraints continue, it's critical that we take precautions to preserve their mental health. Instead, constant emotional support from friends and relatives, as well as student-centered activities, will be critical in helping adolescents overcome fear and build resilience. In general, the World Health Organization promotes "Psychological First Aid" as a helpful strategy that can assist a large number of individuals in a crisis.

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an early disaster response strategy that promotes safety, stabilizes catastrophe survivors, and connects individuals to aid and resources, as cited in (Understanding Psychological First Aid, 2019). Mental health specialists and other first responders deliver it to those who are afflicted. PFA's goal is to evaluate an individual's immediate problems and needs in the aftermath of a disaster, not to give on-site counseling.

According to (Department of Education Reinforces Mental Health Awareness Campaign During COVID-19, 2020) that the Department of Education (DepEd) continues to conduct webinars for its personnel during the COVID-19 situation, with at least 600 personnel nationwide learning more about Mental Health and Psycho-social Support Services (MHPSS) and Psychological First Aid (PFA) following a three-day Webinar last April 2020. The Department's emphasis on looking after one's mental health during the present public health emergency was highlighted in a webinar hosted by its Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Service (DRRMS) and Bureau of Learner Support Services (BLSS).

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Educators, particularly guidance counselors, play a critical role in crisis recovery and addressing mental health issues that students face during a pandemic, as well as fostering support and security at schools and assisting students in regaining a feeling of normalcy. Teachers serve as guidance designates at public schools because there isn't a trained guidance counselor on staff. They are frequently the "first responders" who can utilize a PFA method to assist reduce student worries, reestablish a sense of safety, and restore the classroom learning environment. In this time of the pandemic, providing mental health support through the delivery of PFA is critical for students.

Furthermore, the fundamental role of guidance counselors is to ensure the learners' safety and well-being, as well as to aid them in dealing with emotional discomfort and establishing coping skills and productive actions to deal with fear and anxiety. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the lived experiences of guiding designates in the administration of psychological first aid to learners as they handle mental health concerns in the middle of a pandemic using the psychological first aid.

METHODS

Research Design

The study utilized qualitative research with interpretative phenomenology as an approach. This approach is used when a researcher uses "homogeneous samples to explore common views on a specific topic of interest and looks at the problems and opportunities of using numerous viewpoints to investigate the same phenomenon to capture more complex and systemic experiential occurrences" Larkin, Shaw, and Flowers (2018).

The phenomenological research approach was the most appropriate to the aim of the study, which explored and tried to understand the lived experiences of the guidance designate in the delivery of psychological first aid during the pandemic. The phenomenological approach allowed participants, through in-depth interviews, to elicit the meaning of their experience in providing PFA in the new normal.

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This study opted to use this method because the researcher through this proposed study also wanted to expand awareness about a certain phenomenon more than to explicate the structure or essence of the lived experiences in search for meaning that identifies the essence of the phenomena.

Research Instrument

In gathering pertinent information, an interview guide questions to direct the flow of discussions with the respondents were used in the study. The researcher prepared ten (10) questions for the participants. These questions asked the participants to reflect on the entire discussion and offer their positions or opinions on topics of central importance to the researchers. The researcher used open-ended questions that got the participants involved.

Participants of the Study

The participants were six female guidance designates who delivered psychological first aid in the Schools Division of Calamba City. Since this qualitative research used Purposeful Sampling, the participants were selected for having significant and meaningful experiences of the phenomenon investigated.

Data-Gathering Procedure

A letter of request was secured from the Schools Division Superintendent of Calamba City. Then, a letter of consent and an indorsement letter was forwarded to the six school heads of the guidance designates for the conduct of the study.

The interview guide questions were validated by the division disaster risk reduction management focal person, qualitative data analyst, and research director.

Gathering of data were preformed through one-on-one online interview (Zoom Application) with participants based on their convenient schedule. The researcher prepared notes,

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pen, the interview guide questions and created relaxing and trusting atmosphere before facilitation of interview.

After the one-on-one interview, their responses were transcribed, proceeded with the encoding of the verbatim transcription, tabulation of data and qualitative data analysis to arrive at emerging themes.

Treatment of Qualitative Data

The study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. For the treatment of qualitative data, the generally referred to as theme-centered or category-based analysis was applied. The procedure of data analysis using IPA is a recurrent process where the researcher proceeds through several systematic steps: Step 1: familiarization with collected data; Step 2: generating initial codes; Step 3: Searching for themes; Step 4: Reviewing themes; Step 5: Defining and naming themes by clusters. These six steps are based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework and are used to describe and illustrate the process of theme analysis in a methodical manner.

Step 1: Familiarization with collected data

This phase entails learning about the data. Before examining individual objects, get a full overview of all the data gathered. This comprises transcribing audio, reading over the text and taking preliminary notes, and generally familiarizing with the data.

Step 2: Generating initial codes

This phase entails creating brief labels (codes) that indicate key aspects of the data that could be useful in answering the research question. It entails coding the full dataset and then combining all of the codes as well as all pertinent data extracts for further analysis.

Step 3: Searching for themes

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This phase focuses on going over the codes that have been written, identifying trends, and developing themes. At this point, deciding whether or not some of the codes are too ambiguous or irrelevant, and they can be discarded. Other codes, on the other hand, may develop into themes in their own right, with the outcome varying depending on what is discovered. Then, for purposes, construct probable themes that reveal something useful about the data.

Step 4: Reviewing themes

This phase entails comparing the potential themes to the data set to see if they create a persuasive story about the data and answer the research question. Themes are usually improved in this phase, which may include splitting, combining, or discarding them. Themes are described as a pattern of shared meaning backed by a central notion or idea in the TA approach.

Step 5: Defining and naming themes by cluster

Developing a detailed examination of each subject, identifying the scope and focus of each theme, and determining the 'story' of each are all part of this step. It also entails coming up with a catchy name for each subject. Defining themes entails determining exactly what each theme means and how it aids in the comprehension of the material. Similarly, naming themes entails coming up with a short, easy-to-understand term for each subject.

Step 6: Presenting and discussing of analysis of data

The final process entails writing up the data analysis. All academic sources were included, as well as a methodology section describing how the data was acquired through a semi-structured interview questionnaire and how the theme analysis was undertaken and it includes the researcher's reflection.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants shared their responses regarding their knowledge about PFA. They knew the concept of psychological first aid. This idea was tied up on the theme, **Response to Varied Circumstances**.

Likewise, the guidance designates shared how they acquired their knowledge about PFA. Results of the study showed that it was through seminars and training, and came up with the theme, **Through Seminars and Training**. Most of them demonstrated a willingness to learn more about PFA specifically in Remote PFA.

They were **Listening to Students and Establishing Rapport** that described what the participants followed in providing PFA, the three action principles of Look, Listen and Link (3Ls), and establishing rapport. The 3Ls indicated that PFA was a method of approaching someone who needed assistance, determining what assistance he or she required, and assisting him or her in obtaining it. Participants stressed the need of developing a rapport with a victim or survivor in order to work effectively with them. The relationship between the victim/survivor and the PFA provider was referred to as rapport. It encompassed a relationship's connection, trust, sharing, safety, communication, and dynamism, as well as the PFA provider they were working with. It was doubtful that a victim will be able to work productively with the PFA provider unless they have a good rapport with them.

Challenging and Fulfilling depicted the experience of the guidance designates in providing PFA. It also showed that providing psychological first aid was a very challenging task. However, after attending various PFA pieces of trainings, the guidance designates were able to acquire the knowledge and abilities to assist people to overcome their difficulties and alleviating severe emotional distress.

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Likewise, guidance designates' were motivated to offer learners a reason to be optimistic about the future and help them reclaim their self-esteem and live a fulfilling, empowered life amidst the pandemic. Truly, nothing is more fulfilling than assisting someone else in overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Favorable Uses of PFA was the focus on the concept of the use of PFA over other means of intervention since they are trained on PFA. In the same way, PFA can be conducted by anyone with training, unlike other interventions that only licensed or certified professionals can do. Basic and practical, psychological first aid is intended to be used in a wide range of situations.

The survivor's reactions before and after PFA were centered on the theme of **Negative to Positive Reactions Before and After PFA**. Before the PFA session, the survivors' reactions were melancholy, aloof, hesitant, nervous, stressed, hopeless, and doubtful. The guidance designates shared the importance of instilling hope for students, offering stability during a time of uncertainty, and encouraging both students and families to give themselves grace and compassion as they navigated this tumultuous time. As a result, physical and behavioral reactions such as a change in facial expression, smiling, relief, faces lighting up and expressing gratitude among the survivors after the PFA session.

Therapy was manifested in the adaptations and additions made in the conduct of PFA. The participants adapted music therapy and calming/relaxing therapy and online PFA services helped the participants to provide quality psychological support specifically through the use of PFA face- to-face modality and during this time of the pandemic.

The major challenge that the guidance designates encountered in the delivery of PFA in the midst of the pandemic led to the unfolding of the theme, **Limitations to Interaction**. It was clear that this was not the same as the previous PFA session contact. Facial expressions, voice messages, and body language were not visible to guiding agents. These signals can

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frequently give the PFA provider a better understanding of the client's feelings, thoughts, moods, and actions.

While some delivery techniques, such as video chats and voice-over-internet technology, can provide a more accurate picture of the issue, they frequently lack the warmth and complexity of in-person encounters. It is very evident that it is different from the usual PFA session interaction before. Where guidance designates cannot see facial expressions, vocal signals, or body language. These signals can often be quite telling and give the PFA provider a clearer picture of the client's feelings, thoughts, moods, and behaviors. While some delivery methods such as voice-over-internet technology and video chats can provide a clearer picture of the situation, they often lack the intimacy and intricacy that real-world interactions offer.

The theme **Reaching Out to Learners** was the core of coping with PFA challenges by the guidance designates that they pressed on by reaching out to give quality support service to the learners despite the challenges they had encountered. It shows that the participants are capable of adapting to any situation that arises.

As a result, the participants' self-efficacy was highlighted. One's belief in one's ability to modify one's life direction is referred to as "self-efficacy." A high level of self-efficacy means that people who believe they can achieve things on their own merits are more likely to regard difficulties as hurdles to be overcome rather than avoided.

In addition, despite all of the difficulties that the participants had in giving PFA to students during the pandemic, they demonstrated that they were able to do so.

Willingness, Empathy, and Passion. The guidance designates stepped up in providing help and support in the midst of the pandemic. They showed their passion, empathy, and willingness to take the risk to help the students both academically and psychologically. Likewise,

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they demonstrated strong commitment at work where they found means and ways to show their love, concern, and emotional support that learners needed in these unprecedented times.

A great guidance designate is a person who is totally committed to the victims or learners they are serving. They have the ability to see beyond the spoken word and connect what is truly happening in a learner's life through even the unspoken words. They are empathetic in the sense that they are creative and truly care about others but care about empowering others, not creating dependencies.

Ultimately, a great guidance designate works themselves out of a job with a client by helping that client to learn to navigate life on their own.

CONCLUSION

This study, provided new awareness that, in current times, guidance designates uncovering themselves facing extraordinary obstacles in their pursuit to be a good and successful PFA provider in this tumultuous time. Diverse themes that had previously been unfamiliar to most guidance designates have now unraveled. Even in conducting this study, the researcher refused to consider her conviction about the participants' responses.

To identify the significant emerging themes, the data were kept confidential and scrutinized it meticulously. In this researcher's opinion, there is a need for the DepEd officials to take extraordinary measures to help guidance designates adjust to the new normal in the delivery of PFA.

The COVID-19 crisis forced guidance designates to examine their policies and practices through the lens of students. The researcher, for one, is convinced that guidance designates will be equipped to handle the challenges they face now and will be more prepared to deal with them

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in the future, even in the face of a possible pandemic. In addition, this will also help them be better equipped with the necessary skills they will need in the new normal.

Furthermore, the researcher recommends that the Education Program Supervisor (Division Focal Person of Guidance Designates), Project Development Officer II (Division DRRM Focal Person) and Health Section Staff may be able to assist guidance designates in adjusting to the new normal by providing continuous technical assistance regarding the delivery of PFA whether face to face or remotely.

It is also recommended that school heads, head teachers, and master teachers may provide an opportunity for guidance designates to utilize and demonstrate what they have learned from the various webinar trainings about PFA that they have participated in over the years. This may be realized through face to face and virtual conduct school-based seminars for learners and teachers.

Guidance designates may continue to pursue higher professional education and participate in a community of professional learning and development in order to gain the necessary skills applicable in the new normal.

A learning and development program action plan entitled Annual Conference and Training for Guidance Designates (ACT-GUIDE) is offered to capacitate guidance designates in the delivery of PFA in the new normal towards limited face-to face delivery of learning.

Future researchers may conduct another study exploring the lived experiences of learners who received PFA.

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