Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools (2023), **33**, 161–174
doi:10.1017/jgc.2023.4

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Roles of School Counsellors in the Philippines: Challenges and Opportunities

Mark G. Harrison[1]*, Ronnel B. King[2] and Sheila Marie G. Hocson[3]

[1]Department of Counselling and Psychology, Hong Kong Shue Yan University, Hong Kong, [2]Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong and [3]Institute of Arts and Sciences, Department of Psychology and Guidance and Counseling, Far Eastern University, Manila, Philippines
*Corresponding author. Email: mgharrison@hksyu.edu

(Received 21 June 2022; revised 22 January 2023; accepted 30 January 2023; first published online 02 March 2023)

Abstract

School counselling has the potential to deliver significant support for the wellbeing of children. However, much of the research on school counsellors has been conducted in developed Western countries, with very limited research into factors influencing the effectiveness of counsellors in lower middle-income countries or in Asia. The aim of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of Filipino counsellors about their roles, and factors that supported or impeded their effectiveness. Seventeen school counsellors in the Philippines were interviewed, and the data were analysed thematically. Our findings suggest that Filipino school counsellors often carry out dual roles, experience a lack of role clarity, and are systemically disempowered in their schools. Relationships with school principals have a significant influence on counsellors' roles and positioning in schools, and therefore on their effectiveness. The ability of principals to foster a school ethos supportive of counselling is essential in enabling counsellors to leverage the multifunctional nature of their work, become embedded and centrally positioned in the school community, and enhance their effectiveness. Doing so can enable counselling to be more culturally accessible to young people.

Keywords: School counselling; school counsellors; Philippines; role clarity; dual roles; principals

School counselling is a diverse and continually evolving profession (Cinotti, 2014; Lambie & Williamson, 2004). The work of school counsellors is wide ranging (Harris, 2014), and combines elements of educator, educational leader, and mental health professional (DeKruyf et al., 2013). School counsellors' roles are also often ambiguous (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). A lack of role clarity has been associated with low job satisfaction (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011), and can negatively impact the effectiveness of counselling programs (Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017). A strong professional identity, characterised by clear roles aligned with the profession's philosophy, results in greater self-confidence, work commitment, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction on the part of counsellors, and a more effective school counselling program (Alves & Gazzola, 2011; Heled & Davidovich, 2019; Maor & Hemi, 2021; Walker, 2015).

Despite the impact of school counsellors' roles on their effectiveness, few studies have explored the roles of school counsellors in lower middle-income countries such as the Philippines. This is a significant research gap since the Philippines legally mandates that all schools employ school counsellors (Tuason et al., 2012). This article investigates Filipino school counsellors' perceptions of their roles and the factors that influence their effectiveness.

School Counselling in Southeast Asia

School counselling has now become a core part of education in Southeast Asia. Many governments, including those of Singapore, Malaysia, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China, the Philippines, and South Korea mandate that schools provide counselling. However, school counselling across the region is extremely diverse in terms of both its development and the roles taken on by counsellors.

School counselling is well established in Singapore. Counsellors carry out a wide range of developmental and preventative roles, work with principals and teachers to plan and deliver whole-school programs, give workshops for parents and teachers, and provide career guidance and social-emotional support to students (Yeo & Lee, 2014). Counselling is also well developed in Malaysian schools (Low et al., 2013; See & Ng, 2010), with school counsellors carrying out similar roles (Hasan & Bhakti, 2016; Rahman et al., 2013), although, in practice, the roles they carry out are very wide ranging, and many of their duties are unrelated to their core counselling role, primarily due to a lack of manpower and a weak understanding of counselling on the part of school principals (Amat et al., 2017). In Indonesia, school counsellors also provide responsive services and support systems for students (Hasan & Bhakti, 2016, p. 269). In Macau, a special administrative region (SAR) of China, counsellors conduct counselling with individual students, and consultations with parents and teachers (van Schalkwyck & Sit, 2013). In other countries in the region, school counselling is less well developed. In Thailand, for example, public school counsellors focus mainly on vocational guidance (International Labour Organisation, 2011; Tangdhanakanond & Lee, 2013), although the focus is increasingly shifting towards providing social-emotional support (Pham & Aktos, 2020). Similarly, counselling is provided in some Vietnamese schools, although usually not by trained counsellors (Le et al., 2011; Malhotra & Padhy, 2015), and children's mental health receives little attention (Dang et al., 2017; Le et al., 2011).

In some countries, school counsellors require a minimum qualification. For example, in Macau and Thailand, a bachelor's degree in counselling is mandated (Tangdhanakanond & Lee, 2013; van Schalkwyk & Sit, 2013), and a master's degree is required in the Philippines (Tuason & Arellano-Carandang, 2015). Elsewhere, such as in Malaysia and the Hong Kong SAR, governments have not implemented a minimum entry requirement or a licensing system for school counsellors, despite counselling being a mandatory requirement (Fung, 2019; Rahman et al., 2013; Yuen et al., 2017).

School Counselling in the Philippines

Education in the Philippines is compulsory for 13 years. Children attend elementary school (Grades 1–6), junior high school (Grades 7–10) and senior high school (Grades 11–12), in either public or private schools. Public schools are government funded and are generally poorly resourced and understaffed. Private schools, many of which originated as missionary schools, follow the same curriculum as public schools, but are better resourced due to their being funded by tuition fees. The provision of guidance services in schools in the Philippines began in the 1930s (Vinluan, 2011), but school counselling has been a recognised profession only since 2004, when the *Philippine Guidance and Counselling Act* (Republic Act 9258) became law (Tuason et al., 2012). The Board of Guidance and Counselling was created in 2007 and introduced minimum entry requirements and licensure for Registered Guidance Counsellors (RGCs). The qualifying examination covers a comprehensive range of school counsellors' roles (Tuason & Arellano-Carandang, 2015), reflecting the diverse range of duties carried out in practice, although its focus is mainly vocational in practice (Vinluan, 2011).

A severe shortage of counsellors hampers the effective provision of school counselling. Of 4474 registered members of the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association (PGCA), only 1096 were active in primary and secondary schools as of May 2020 (Magsambol, 2020), and some schools employ guidance facilitators, guidance advocates or guidance designates to perform some of the roles of RGCs. This shortage of counsellors is partly due to the relatively high entry requirement of a master's degree in Guidance and Counselling, a lack of career development opportunities, and low salaries compared to

https://doi.org/10.1017/jgc.2023.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

teachers and other educational professionals (Cardinoza, 2017). Despite decades of development, the roles of counsellors in schools are not clearly defined or well understood, and this, along with limited resources, means that school counsellors are routinely assigned roles that are not directly related to counselling, such as substitute teaching, proctoring examinations, administering academic tests, carrying out disciplinary duties, and clerical work.

The effective provision of school counselling in the Philippines is also hampered by the stigmatisation of mental health problems (Tanaka et al., 2018; Tuliao, 2021). In this context, the family and religious institutions are usually the first source of help for individuals who are often reluctant to approach a professional counsellor (Tuason & Arellano-Carandang, 2015).

School Counsellors' Roles

Counsellors in Southeast Asia work in the broad domains of career guidance, delivering guidance curricula, providing psychoeducation, and direct work with students, parents, and teachers (Harris, 2014). However, it is difficult to define the scope of school counsellors' roles. A lack of role clarity is a persistent characteristic of the profession globally (Suh et al., 2014) and is a key challenge in the work of counsellors (Harrison, 2022; Low, 2009). Clear roles, however, are associated with improvements in the important and developing areas of accountability practices, advocacy for counselling policy and legislation, in-service training, and the indigenisation of school counselling (Suh et al., 2014).

In Southeast Asia, role ambiguity is associated with a weak public understanding of counselling (Suh et al., 2014). The roles of school counsellors are also poorly differentiated from those of other educators (DeKruyf et al., 2013), reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of their work (Alves & Gazzola, 2011) and the culture of the region, where counselling is often seen as part of the remit of teachers (e.g., Lung, 2013), and where guidance has traditionally been associated with a disciplinary role (e.g., Hue, 2010). For example, in South Korea, counselling is carried out by counselling teachers (Lee et al., 2012), and in Hong Kong, student guidance teachers, who usually do not have a counselling credential, perform counselling duties (Fung, 2019). In the Philippines, schools often appoint *guidance advocates* or *guidance designates* to carry out some counselling duties.

School counsellors' roles are strongly shaped by the organisational ecologies in which they work. Many school climate factors exert an influence on the practice and development of school counselling (Martin et al., 2015), but of particular importance is the relationship between counsellors and principals. While principals often have a weak understanding of school counselling (Leuwerke et al., 2009), a strong principal-counsellor relationship positively influences the appropriateness and clarity of counsellors' role descriptions (Clemens et al., 2009; Lieberman, 2004). A collaborative relationship between counsellors and principals can help to shape counsellor roles that are more effective and comprehensive (Dahir et al., 2019; Dollarhide et al., 2007). Indeed, purposeful collaboration has been identified as the most important factor influencing effective school counselling (Janson et al., 2008).

Counsellors can focus more on their core roles of working directly with students and implementing counselling programs when principals have a good understanding of their role (Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017). It is therefore important that counsellors are in a position to provide principals with information that will enable them to best support counsellors' effectiveness (Leuwerke et al., 2009). Indeed, counsellors are most effective when they have influential roles characterised by autonomy, partnership, and recognition (Wingfield et al., 2010). The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Model describes school counsellors as agents of systemic change (ASCA, 2019). In practice, this can only be realised in the context of a good principal-counsellor relationship.

The present study sought to investigate the roles of school counsellors in the Philippines and how these roles are influenced by the context of counsellors' work. The research questions were:

1. How do Filipino school counsellors perceive their roles?
2. Which factors associated with their roles support or impede the effectiveness of Filipino school counsellors?

https://doi.org/10.1017/jgc.2023.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Type of school	Age	Years of experience	Years at current school
P1	F	Private	46	4	4
P2	F	Public	42	7	5
P3	F	Private	31	10	3
P4	F	Private	50	10	26
P5	F	Public	44	3	8
P6	F	Private	58	32	26
P7	F	Private	58	30	30
P8	F	Private	40	20	20
P9	F	Public	37	5	8
P10	F	Private	32	6	3
P11	F	Private	34	3	12
P12	F	Public	43	14	12
P13	F	Private	28	9	2
P14	M	Private	42	17	9
P15	F	Private	45	22	1
P16	M	Private	37	14	4
P17	F	Private	32	9	5

Method

Participants and Procedure

Given the paucity of research on Filipino school counsellors' roles, we adopted an exploratory qualitative approach. Approval for the project was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Education University of Hong Kong, and participants were recruited through the researchers' professional networks. The participants were asked to sign an electronic consent form and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time if they wanted to do so. The researchers ensured that the participants' anonymity would be protected, and no identifying information will be presented.

Seventeen school counsellors working at 14 different high schools in the Philippines, attended by Filipino students aged between 11 and 18, consented to participate. Four of the counsellors worked at public schools, the remaining being employed by private schools. We sought to interview participants for whom counselling was their primary designated role, and this is more often the case in private schools. The participants had between 3 and 32 years of experience as a school counsellor ($M = 12.6$ years, $SD = 8.9$ years) and had worked at their current school for between 1 and 30 years ($M = 10.5$ years, $SD = 9.3$ years). Their ages ranged from 31 to 58 ($M = 41.1$, $SD = 8.8$). All but two of the school counsellors were women, reflecting the extreme gender imbalance in the profession as a whole, 84% of all registered guidance counsellors being female according to the Philippine Guidance and Counselling Association (PGCA, personal communication, November 11, 2022). Detailed information about the participants is given in Table 1. Individual, semistructured interviews were conducted in English over Zoom. We asked guiding questions such as: 'How would you characterise your role?', 'What do you spend your time doing?' and 'How do you think other stakeholders perceive your role? The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

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Table 2. Themes and Subthemes of How Filipino School Counsellors Perceive Their Roles

Theme	Subtheme
Theme 1. A wide-ranging, embedded, and marginalised role	A dual role: Challenges and opportunities
	A marginalised role: Being underutilised
Theme 2. The role of school principals	Relationships with school principals
	The principal's role in shaping school culture

Data Analysis

We adopted a reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012), where the researchers' interpretation of participants' responses to interview questions is considered an essential part of the analysis. As such, although the analysis should accurately and credibly reflect participant's experiences, themes do not simply emerge but are constructed creatively as part of the analysis. After initial reading to generate ideas about possible themes, the transcripts were coded semantically. Codes were then clustered together into themes consisting of a central organising concept to enable a more conceptual level of analysis (Clarke et al., 2015), and the themes were reviewed against the coded data. Throughout the process, the researchers met to discuss the developing themes, which enabled different perspectives and understandings to be drawn upon and to ensure that the themes were mutually exclusive and internally coherent. Data collection and analysis were carried out recursively until a point of theoretical saturation was reached. A summary of the themes is given in Table 2.

Findings

Analysis of the data yielded two themes, each with two subthemes. The first theme describes role duality as a central feature of counsellors' experience, and their marginalised position in school. The second theme reflects the influence of counsellor-principal relationships on counsellors' work, and the core role of school principals in shaping a school climate that enables counsellors to work effectively.

Theme 1. A wide-ranging, embedded, and marginalised role

Subtheme. A dual role: Challenges and opportunities

Most of the participants reported having teaching duties in addition to their role as counsellors. This dual role led to an increased workload, taking time away from counselling and leading to ambiguity and confusion for both the counsellors themselves and other stakeholders.

Being a teacher meant that the students might be 'a bit reluctant to talk' because 'they know that I also know all the other teachers' (P16). The dual role was also ambiguous for the counsellors themselves, as P13 explained: 'A teacher and a counsellor have different roles and responsibilities and sometimes it's difficult because it kind of overlaps and you don't really know which you will choose because both are equally important.' Participants had to be careful to clarify with the students which role they were playing in different situations: 'A teacher would tell them what to do, but when I'm in the counselling room I have to be really careful and remind them that I'm just here to listen' (P4). P2 described being a counsellor as influencing her teacher role: 'I make sure when I enter their classroom, I'm all smiles, I'm not like the terror teacher, because they will have difficulty approaching me.'

The dual role confused some students: 'We still have to explain what the role of the counsellor is, what the guidance office is, what we do' (P1). This confusion was also common among parents and teachers. Only a minority of counsellors felt that members of the school community understood their

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role, and this was often associated with being wealthier: 'I think it has something to do with their socio-economic background, they are more familiar with the roles of school counsellors' (P14)

Almost all the participants said that their roles were associated with discipline. For some, this was part of their formal role: 'We are the guidance counsellor and discipline officer in one, so that's a very confusing role' (P9). Even when this was not the case, many counsellors said that discipline was perceived as being part of their role. P8 thought that 'generally, the perception of the students is that they associate counselling with the discipline office', and that 'sometimes the teachers get confused with the guidance and discipline office'. This made it difficult for counsellors to work with students, as P13 explained: 'It's very difficult for me to play the role of a counsellor because some kids are really afraid, they will think that they have done something wrong or that they will be punished.' Many of the participants echoed this view, such as P1, who noted that parents' perceptions were also negative: 'They think that if their daughter goes to the counsellor, she did something wrong.' P2 said that students called the guidance office 'a horror house'. This perception was deeply ingrained because of the discipline role counsellors took on 'way back decades ago in our country' (P16).

The dual role also meant that counselling might be neglected. P12, for example, said that 'I cannot do [counselling] because I have 257 students that I have to give feedback to, and it's really tiring', and P2 reported that 'I cannot do most of the role of the guidance counsellor because I'm also a teacher.' Participants said that a clear job description was helpful. This meant being 'very specific on the things that I need to do' (P10) and having 'clear responsibilities like counselling, facilitating guidance classes, attending to referrals, coordinating with parents' (P7).

Dual roles, while difficult to manage, did offer some opportunities for counsellors to be more effective, albeit in a limited way. Indeed, some participants felt that their role as a teacher made them more available and approachable to the students, whom they could naturally get to know better, underlining the benefits of a dual teacher-counsellor role. For example, P2 felt she could get to know the students better before they were referred to counselling: 'I can speak to them every day, so before they got referred to me, I know their story.' Counsellors were also more available and 'more approachable' (P16), and more experience with children as a teacher could lead to counsellors being 'more perceptive towards their needs, because I've gone through that experience of relating with the children' (P4).

Subtheme. A marginalised role: Being underutilised

Despite having a heavy workload due to their dual roles, the counsellors felt they had a lower status than teachers, mostly manifested as counsellors being asked to carry out roles that were unrelated to counselling. Most were given clerical tasks, which took a great deal of time: 'We do clerical tasks most of the time ... so basically that's how I spend my day-to-day work' (P13). P1 described how she was treated as a 'nanny': 'Sometimes, they make the guidance counsellors act like nannies. [A student] is supposed to go home but the driver hasn't arrived, so she has to stay in the guidance room.'

These duties took time away from the counsellors' core roles, 'because I have to do other things which are taking the time, or which are beyond my job or my responsibility' (P11). As a result, counsellors were unable to focus on their main area of work: 'We don't do actual counselling, we just do administrative work, mediation with the parents and the students' (P2). Additional duties also meant that counsellors had a heavy workload: 'I have the workload as a teacher plus the workload of a counselor' (P5).

When speaking about their low status, counsellors felt they 'just have to accept it' (P1) and that, because they had so little power, 'they can't really refuse' to carry out the tasks assigned to them (P4). Counsellors' low status was underlined by the lack of resources allocated to counselling. P9, for example, described her frustration at not even having a room to conduct counselling:

> *The sad thing is we don't have a cubicle so that we could talk to the student privately. It's just like a pantry, so we just divide it with a cabinet, and then there's just a curtain. There is really not a door or a room for us to speak privately with the students. So in that sense, there's no confidentiality at all.*

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As well as a high workload, counsellors complained that their salaries were low compared to that of teachers: 'We are not getting the salary we deserve, not to mention the amount of work we have' (P1). This was especially frustrating given the qualifications necessary to become a licensed counsellor, as P13 expressed: 'We have to have a master's degree, we have to have to pass the licensure examination, but we only would get the same compensation on that of a new teacher, so I think it's very unfair for the counsellors.' P4 underlined the consequence of low salary as a lack of incentive to become a counsellor: 'The guidance counsellors are not given a higher salary grade so they would rather just be teachers.'

Theme 2. The Role of School Principals

Subtheme. Relationships with school principals

The findings suggest that collaboration between principals and counsellors was supportive of counsellors working effectively.

Supportive principals were collaborative and solution oriented. P8 noted that the counsellors 'closely coordinate' with the assistant principal, and P11 noted that the administrators 'tend to be action focused and they ask "What can we do? What can the teachers do? What can you give? What can you give us that can contribute for us to solve the problem?"' In schools where counsellors felt that their administrators were less available and supportive, participants said that they would establish a more 'consultative relationship' (P16) were they part of the administration. When a senior leader was supportive, counsellors expressed greater work satisfaction: 'We're very happy that the administrators do recognise our role as guidance counsellors, and they give support' (P7). Support from principals was sometimes shown financially: 'He is very supportive, and he is allocating a budget for the guidance program' (P12).

Good relationships between counsellors and principals were associated with counsellors feeling they could be more effective. The counsellors often had relatively distal relationships with principals and had little influence over school policy, however. This may be a result of the high power-distance of Filipino society, instantiated by the power of the school principal, who determines the roles assigned to counsellors. For example, the participants felt that, often, the management structure of the school was rather rigid: 'We are very hierarchical. If you're the boss, you have to be called Ma'am' (P8). This meant that if counsellors did not have positions of formal leadership in the school, they had little influence: 'I cannot influence them because I am not in that leadership role or I am not in that privileged position' (P16). Administrators were also sometimes inaccessible. P9 noted that the principal often 'has class or he's busy or he has already gone out of school, so that's really a problem for us'. Unclear line management was another hurdle: 'You don't know where you belong; most of the time I think that I should be reporting directly to the principal, but they want me to be part of the values education department' (P12). For these reasons, it could be hard to influence administrators to effect positive change. P15, for example, described how 'it took me one and a half years, struggling' to convince her principal to buy some resources. Counsellors mostly relied on middle managers or coordinators to act as intermediaries: 'Usually our coordinators are the ones who talk to the principal. She's our spokesperson and we really rely on her, especially when we ask for requests. Through her we are able to reach to our principal' (P3).

It was also helpful if there was some way of having 'a straight line' to the principal, as P11 put it. This seemed to be a result of an attitude of openness on the part of the principal: 'They are open to what we want, the problems that we bring to them. I think they are very open and welcoming in that manner' (P11). Supportive principals were also open to letting counsellors take some risks: 'They're open to give us the chance to experiment' (P10). This attitude of openness and trust was reflected in the culture of schools where counsellors felt able to communicate directly with administrators, as P13 explained:

> *In school I think we have that environment where I feel confident that I can voice out whatever I want to say, especially with my superiors. Mostly I think that they are very supportive of us and I think they are also willing to cooperate.*

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Many counsellors, however, were not able to explain their roles to principals, who saw them as simply responding to problems as they arose, showing a profound misunderstanding of counsellors' roles:

> *[The principal thinks] we do not do much, we only wait for students to come in into our office to discuss their problems and then, when there's no students coming in, we don't have anything to do. But I think in counselling we have to be proactive. The program should be preventive. We really have to think ahead, provide programs that the students will need someday, so that problems will not arise and get more complex. (P16)*

Counsellors emphasised the importance of educating the administration about the roles and importance of school counselling because 'they don't really understand our role' (P17). P11 felt that administrators had 'no deep knowledge of what counselling is, so that's why we really have to be proactive to orient them and to show them what we are doing'.

Subtheme. The principal's role in shaping school culture

While the importance of relationships between counsellors and their principals was clear in the data, the influence of school principals extended further. Participants were clear that principals had an important role in shaping the school's culture and ethos in supporting counselling and in enhancing the community's understanding of counsellors' roles.

Our findings show that principals had an impact on the community's openness to counselling in their messaging about counsellors' roles to the school community. P3, for example, felt that, because of the principal's advocacy, 'most of the students and the teachers really know the role of the guidance office' (P3). Some school leaders were seen as powerful advocates for counselling: 'What I really like about my present school is that the administration is very aggressive in telling the people who the people are in charge of different things in school' (P4). As a result of this, counsellors felt that the community had a better understanding of their role: 'Gradually as the community also gets to understand the role of the counsellor with the support of my superior, my role as counsellor is now clearer as compared to the first year of my stay in the office' (P3).

Counsellors felt supported when the school had clear policies and practices about counselling. It was particularly striking that most participants reported that their school had very clear policies about maintaining confidentiality and the conditions under which confidentiality could be broken, and this seemed to be an area where counsellors felt supported in their work: 'I'm so happy because they can tell me things that they did not divulge [to other people] and I'm happy with that because they feel safe' (P14).

More broadly, a school's ethos could support counselling. For example, P3 felt that 'the core values of the school are aligned with our program' and gave a specific example: 'Faith and service are two of the core values of the school. Since counsellors do service by helping our students and teachers, I believe the administrators are able to see our performance in relation to that vision of the school.' This observation was echoed by P14: 'We're getting enough support from the school because they give a good premium regarding the formation of these young people primarily because we are a Jesuit school and formation is a big chunk of Jesuit education.'

A role description that was also clearly aligned to the school's mission was particularly helpful. For example, P1 felt that the administrators asked her opinion about things because, whereas teachers were concerned with academics, counsellors fell into the category of staff involved in 'formation'.

Discussion

The aims of this study were to examine how Filipino counsellors perceived their roles and the factors that enabled or impeded their effectiveness. The first two themes (*dual roles* and *marginalised roles*)

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bring into focus the inherently wide scope of school counselling in the Philippines, and the role ambiguity and role duality commonly experienced by school counsellors.

Role duality appears to be an entrenched and persistent feature of counselling in the schools we investigated, despite the Code of Ethics of the PGCA (2021) stating that counsellors should avoid dual relationships, defined as a 'second, significantly different relationship with their client/counselee' (p. 18). The dual roles experienced by Filipino guidance facilitators have been reported in previous, small-scale research in which counsellors felt that such role duality led to their neglecting important counselling duties (Cervantes et al., 2019). The traditional role of teachers in the holistic development of children leads to a tendency to see counselling as falling under teachers' remit, and this is accentuated by the poor development and public understanding of counselling in the Philippines. While role duality and role ambiguity are not synonymous, a lack of role clarity is often a consequence of the wide-ranging nature of the profession (Cinotti, 2014; Lambie & Williamson, 2004), and can negatively impact the services counsellors provide (Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017; Harrison, 2022; van Schalkwyk & Sit, 2013). Our findings suggest that both a lack of role clarity and the dual roles of school counsellors in the Philippines are closely connected and impede their effectiveness.

While counsellors' roles should be clear and strongly focused on providing counselling, and dual roles avoided, a role that recognises the embedded and multifunctional position of counsellors in schools may be very useful in addressing the limited help-seeking behaviours seen in the Philippines. The importance of counsellors being embedded into their school communities and seen as 'insiders' has been highlighted by research in the United Kingdom (Harris, 2009) and in Hong Kong (Harrison, 2019): greater psychological and physical proximity to young people makes counsellors more accessible. Filipino counsellors who are embedded in schools and therefore occupy a more central role, who understand the cultural features that shape students and parents' perceptions of and behaviour towards help-seeking, and who occupy roles that are recognisable to young people, will be able to make themselves more available in culturally appropriate ways.

Several cultural features need to be considered in relation to counsellors' positioning in schools. First, Filipino society is collectivist with a strong family orientation, and it is within units of social organisation that individuals traditionally find support (Tuason & Arellano-Carandang, 2015). Many Filipinos are reluctant to discuss mental health issues outside of these small social circles, which might also be reflected in students' discomfort with seeing their school counsellors (Tuason & Arellano-Carandang, 2015). Second, the notion of self-development inherent to much counselling may be relatively more alien in Filipino society, given its communitarian nature (Hofstede, 2005), where the self is construed more strongly within a social context than is the case in Western cultures, where independence is emphasised (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Third, communication among Filipinos tends to be indirect, with negative emotions supressed or not clearly expressed (Fernandez et al., 2000). Finally, in a high power-distance society, counsellors may naturally be regarded as authority figures, making them relatively less accessible.

Recognising that school counsellors work in settings that are strongly focused on education, DeKruyf et al. (2013) have proposed the notion of a 'conjoint professional identity' (p. 273), which combines the role of educator and mental health professional. In the Philippines, the conceptualisation of counsellor identity in such a way may be useful in recognising the dual nature of counsellors' roles, given the persistent and deeply ingrained presence of such duality in the cultural setting, and enabling them to be more centrally positioned within the school community.

School counselling programs are most effective when they involve all community stakeholders (Low, 2015; Low et al., 2013), and when characterised by collaboration, teamwork, and effective communication (Luk-Fong & Lung, 2003). In the cultural context of Southeast Asia, this community focus is especially important. In the Philippines, the adoption of an eco-systemic approach to school counselling, focusing on establishing relationships between parents and counsellors, has been proposed as an effective means of addressing children's mental health needs (Tarroja & Fernando, 2013). Such a model calls for counsellors to be more centrally positioned and more empowered in their schools.

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Counsellors' roles should not, therefore, be marginal ones, especially given that school counsellors occupy a position in the overlap between several different systems and stakeholders. The ASCA (2019) National Model is clear that counsellors are more effective when they occupy positions of leadership, describing counsellors as agents of systemic change in schools. However, school counselling in Asia is often perceived as an auxiliary role, and not an activity of central importance, such as teaching (Harrison, 2022). Far from occupying a central role where counsellors might be able to forge an identity that recognises the dual nature of their role, our findings show that systematic and systemic lack of empowerment are common features impeding the effectiveness of counsellors in the schools we investigated, and that they have little opportunity to self-advocate given the hierarchical nature of school management structures.

The second two themes (*relationships with principals* and the *principal's role in shaping school culture*) draw attention to the central importance of close communication between counsellors and principals in establishing role clarity and positioning counsellors centrally and in a way that recognises their multifunctional role, echoing the findings of previous research conducted in Western settings (Breaker, 2021; Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017; Leuwerke et al., 2009). In a study into the importance of the relationship between Filipino school counsellors and principals, David (2017) found that a close working alliance in which principals understood the parameters of counsellors' work, and counsellors recognised and respected the authority of principals, was important to the effective functioning of counsellors. David (2017) concluded that 'unclear work parameters' (p. 11) strained the counsellor-principal relationship and impeded counsellors' effectiveness. The present study's findings emphasise the importance of clear roles for both counsellors and principals.

A substantial body of research, mostly conducted in the U.S., has found that principals' perceptions of school counselling are not consistent with the role descriptions found in counselling models such as the ASCA National Model (Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005; Lawrence & Stone, 2019; Perusse et al., 2004). In the Philippines, David (2017) identified a lack of principals' understanding of counsellors' work, principals assigning inappropriate tasks to counsellors, and principals having unrealistic expectations of counsellors, as impediments to effective counselling.

The centrality of counsellors' positioning in schools, and a school's narrative around the importance of counselling are essential, therefore. The present study's findings suggest that school principals have a very significant role to play in shaping these narratives and positing counsellors in ways that recognise their importance and the multifunctional nature of their work. This is consistent with previous research that has indicated the importance of the principal's role in shaping the culture and ethos of a school, in developing a school community's understanding of counselling, and in ensuring that counsellors are carrying out roles that allow them to be most effective (Breaker, 2021).

A school whose mission is explicitly focused on wellbeing or holistic development can be a more fertile environment for the development of counselling, and a principal in such a school may be more likely to assign appropriate roles. For example, counselling in the Philippines has traditionally been provided by religious institutions, and schools with an overtly religious tradition may be more supportive of counselling as a form of pastoral care. The alignment of counselling services with traditional means of help may also enable counsellors to be more culturally available and therefore more effective.

Dahir et al. (2019) have suggested a model that schools could implement for improving the relationship between counsellors and principals. The model consists of sharing information, engaging in shared decision making, ensuring mutual respect for the work of both counsellors and principals, and a shared vision of student success. As such, counsellors need to be proactive in positioning themselves as leaders (Wingfield et al., 2010). However, relationships between counsellors and principals in the Philippines are strongly influenced by the hierarchical nature of Filipino society, reflected in a typically rigid school management structure. In the high power-distance setting of the Philippines, a truly collaborative approach to leadership may be difficult to achieve. David (2017) found that principals and counsellors tended to be in a hierarchical relationship, with obedience to a principal's authority being expected of counsellors. Counsellors should therefore find culturally appropriate ways to engage with school leaders to clarify their roles (Havlik et al., 2019). In the Philippines, any influence counsellors

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can effect is unlikely to occur through formal positions of leadership, and will rely significantly on the relationship between counsellors and the school principal. David (2017) has suggested that 'the blending of the roles and responsibilities of principals and counsellors' (p. 7) can be a more empowering way for counsellors to work. In the context of the high power-distance and communitarian culture of the Philippines, relationships that recognise the differential power of principals and counsellors, and focus on social interdependence, may be supportive of clearer roles.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While in keeping with an exploratory qualitative methodology, the study was small in scale. A larger scale study that collects data across a wide range of schools would provide a more representative picture. In particular, significant differences between public and private schools exist that were not explored. The participants were mostly working in private schools due to the difficulty of recruiting counsellors in public schools where, in practice, the position of counsellor is often a para-professional one. Public school counsellors are more poorly resourced, and social stigma related to mental health issues is likely to be more pronounced in public schools. As such, the problems of role duality and role ambiguity highlighted in the present study are probably accentuated in public schools. This is an area that awaits further research. The present study explored only the perspectives of school counsellors, but those of other stakeholders would contribute additional data on counsellor roles and provide important input for triangulating our findings. The study was qualitative, and future studies may use a quantitative approach to explore how the challenges and opportunities faced by school counsellors impact counsellors' job satisfaction, wellbeing, and the level of support they can provide to students.

Conclusion

Role duality and ambiguity are persistent features of school counselling in the Philippines. This presents a challenge for counsellors and constitutes an impediment to their effectiveness. However, positioning counsellors in ways that recognise and leverage the multifunctional nature of their role and enable them to be embedded in the school community may allow them to be more accessible to young people in culturally appropriate ways. School principals have a vital part to play in recognising the importance of school counsellors, positioning them more centrally, clarifying their roles and job scope, and limiting role duality that impedes their effectiveness while recognising the multifunctional and embedded nature of their work. Counsellors should also work collaboratively with principals in culturally appropriate ways to articulate a narrative to the school community which clarifies and supports counsellors' roles.

Data availability statement. The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Financial support. This study was funded by a University Research Assistance Basic Grant from Far Eastern University, Manila, Philippines.

Conflicts of interest. None.

Ethical approval. This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of The Education University of Hong Kong (Ref no. 2020-21-0203).

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Cite this article: Harrison MG, King RB, and Hocson SMG (2023). The Roles of School Counsellors in the Philippines: Challenges and Opportunities. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools* **33**, 161–174. https://doi.org/10.1017/jgc.2023.4