

**EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF REGISTERED GUIDANCE
COUNSELORS IN MANAGING CASES OF SEXUALLY ABUSE AMONG
TEENAGERS IN SCHOOL DIVISION OF CAVITE:
A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH**

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of five Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in managing cases of sexual abuse among teenagers in public high schools under the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Cavite. Guided by Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach, the research aimed to understand (1) their lived experiences in handling such cases, (2) the signs of vicarious trauma they encountered, and (3) how they conducted and managed counseling interventions. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and reflexive journals and analyzed using Moustakas' phenomenological reduction and synthesis. The study was anchored on Trauma Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Resilience Theory, which helped frame the emotional, institutional, and adaptive responses of RGCs to trauma work in school settings. Findings revealed that RGCs face emotional strain, ethical challenges, and institutional limitations that hinder their ability to fully support students. Despite this, they employed trauma-informed strategies rooted in empathy, flexibility, and personal initiative. Signs of vicarious trauma—including emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbances, and personal withdrawal—were evident, with RGCs relying on faith, family, and internal coping rituals to manage their well-being. The study underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms, including the implementation of school-based mental health laws, role delineation for RGCs, and the provision of structured emotional support systems to sustain counselors in their vital work with trauma-affected youth.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Registered Guidance Counselors, Teenage Sexual Abuse, Vicarious Trauma, Coping Strategies, Resilience.

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the key concepts, theoretical foundations, and relevant phenomena related to the research problem intended to be explored and understood in this study. It presents a comprehensive overview of the study's context, including the background of the problem,

statement of the problem, review of related literature and studies, theoretical framework, purpose of the study, significance, scope and delimitations, definition of terms, and summary. These components collectively establish the foundation for a meaningful exploration of the phenomenon at the heart of this research.

Background of the Study

Managing cases of sexual abuse involving teenagers is a critical and emotionally demanding responsibility placed upon Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in the public-school setting. These professionals serve as frontline responders to disclosures of abuse, often navigating sensitive legal, ethical, and emotional complexities.

In the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Cavite, there have been reported incidents of sexual abuse within school settings, highlighting the crucial role of Registered Guidance Counselors in addressing such cases and ensuring that schools remain safe and nurturing spaces for learners (ABS-CBN News, 2022).

Despite the vital role of RGCs in safeguarding student well-being, many public schools in Cavite lack licensed RGCs. Due to the limited number of qualified counselors, many guidance offices are still led by teacher-designates or non-RGC personnel appointed under the “grandfather’s clause.” RGCs assigned to schools often take on multiple roles and are shared across clusters, covering a wide range of responsibilities—from case management to Psychological First Aid (PFA) and child protection activities. This heavy workload, combined with the emotional toll of abuse disclosures, places RGCs at high risk for burnout and vicarious trauma.

Registered Guidance Counselors are positioned at the frontlines of mental health support in educational institutions and are mandated by Republic Act 11036, or the Philippine Mental Health Act, to deliver immediate psychological assistance to students in distress. However, despite their pivotal role, there remains a notable lack of scholarly attention toward the lived experiences of RGCs in managing cases of sexual abuse among adolescents in Cavite. Their emotional burden, professional responses, and coping mechanisms are often unexamined in both national and international literature.

Beyond the academic gap, there also exists a practical knowledge gap—particularly in understanding how RGCs, in real-world school contexts, navigate the psychological impact of abuse disclosures, maintain their well-being, and manage these sensitive cases with minimal institutional support. The absence of formal training, trauma protocols, and consistent debriefing mechanisms presents a challenge that remains largely undocumented in the Philippine setting.

Wymer et al. (2020) emphasized that counselors working with trauma survivors are highly susceptible to vicarious trauma, which can manifest as emotional exhaustion, intrusive memories, and negative shifts in worldview. Yet, the nuanced realities of school-based counselors handling such trauma cases remain insufficiently explored. Maizel (2021) also found that many school counselors report feeling unsupported and professionally adrift due to the absence of structured protocols and supervision in managing abuse disclosures. Moreover, Trepal et al. (2020) highlighted that inconsistent institutional support contributes to professional burnout, which compromises the well-being and effectiveness of school counselors. To address these gaps, this study explored the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors in the Schools Division of Cavite in managing cases of sexual abuse among teenagers. Employing a transcendental phenomenological approach, the study aimed to gain deeper insights into their emotional journeys,

counseling practices, and the forms of support necessary to sustain their critical roles in the school setting.

Problem Statement

Sexual abuse and sexual exploitation were critical issues that affected a significant number of teenagers worldwide, leaving long-lasting psychological, emotional, and social consequences. In the Philippines, the situation was no less alarming. Particularly in the Schools Division of Cavite, various cases of sexual abuse among teenagers had been reported, making it a pressing concern for educational institutions and mental health professionals. Schools, which were expected to be safe spaces for learners, had become one of the primary environments where abuse was disclosed or at times even occurred.

Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) were designated as frontline mental health professionals in schools, mandated by Republic Act 11036 or the Philippine Mental Health Act, to respond to the psychological needs of students in distress. In cases involving sexual abuse and exploitation, RGCs were often the first point of disclosure and played a pivotal role in trauma intervention. Despite their crucial responsibilities, there remained a limited body of research that centered on the lived experiences of RGCs handling these sensitive cases, particularly in the local context of Cavite. Most existing literature focused on the perspectives of survivors or general counseling practices but rarely shed light on the counselors themselves (Maizel, 2021; Trepal et al., 2020).

Moreover, counseling professionals were at risk of experiencing vicarious trauma, defined as the emotional residue of exposure to the trauma narratives of others (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Wymer et al., 2020). RGCs may have absorbed the pain and suffering of the teenage survivors they supported, which could have led to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and shifts in their worldview. While vicarious trauma was widely acknowledged in international counseling literature, little was known about how it manifested in the day-to-day practice of Filipino school counselors. The lack of structured supervision and trauma-informed institutional support systems further complicated their roles and mental health outcomes (Maizel, 2021).

In addition to emotional challenges, RGCs often faced practical barriers such as limited resources, lack of training in trauma-specific interventions, and the persistent stigma surrounding sexual abuse cases in schools. Understanding the coping strategies, counseling techniques, and decision-making processes they applied when managing teenage victims of sexual abuse was vital to enhancing the quality and sustainability of school-based mental health care. However, the specific approaches and internal experiences of RGCs in Cavite remained underexplored, leaving a significant research gap that this study addressed.

This research, therefore, explored the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors in Cavite who handled cases of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation among teenagers. Using a psychological phenomenological approach, the study examined the challenges they faced, the signs of vicarious trauma they encountered, and the coping mechanisms and counseling strategies they used. The findings aimed to inform future programs, policies, and support systems that would not only strengthen school-based mental health services but also promote the well-being of counselors who bore the emotional weight of working with abused youth.

Review of Related Literature

This review of related literature explored existing studies on the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in managing cases of sexual abuse among teenagers. Organized thematically, this section discusses barriers to disclosure, emotional and psychological impacts on counselors, trauma-informed practices, systemic challenges, coping strategies, and theoretical foundations. These themes framed the study's objective of addressing gaps in understanding the experiences of RGCs in the Philippine setting, particularly within the context of Cavite.

Barriers to Disclosure

Disclosure of sexual abuse was influenced by societal, cultural, and individual factors. Roberts (2020) highlighted that male victims of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) often encountered unique barriers, including norms surrounding masculinity, fear of retribution, and anticipated disbelief. These factors reinforced feelings of shame, guilt, and stigma, which often silenced victims. Obong'o et al. (2020), in their study in Zimbabwe, similarly reported that fear of retaliation and institutional inadequacies hindered safe disclosures. These findings underscored the critical role of guidance counselors in creating a trauma-sensitive environment that fostered trust and minimized the stigma surrounding disclosure.

In the school setting, Slane et al. (2021) noted challenges in distinguishing normal adolescent behavior from abuse indicators, especially in cases involving self-generated sexual content. For RGCs, these situations required trauma-informed responses and digital literacy to support disclosure and provide safety for victims. The Asia Network (2022) also reported that 17.1% of Filipino children aged 13–18 experienced sexual abuse, with 5.3% occurring in educational institutions, reinforcing the school system's role in early detection and response.

Emotional and Psychological Impacts on Counselors

The emotional toll of managing CSA cases had been well-documented. Counselors frequently experienced vicarious trauma (VT), secondary traumatic stress (STS), and burnout. Wymer et al. (2020) found that early-career clinicians working with CSA survivors reported emotional exhaustion and worldview shifts, especially in the absence of proper supervision. In the Philippine context, Repollo et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative study during the COVID-19 pandemic to examine compassion fatigue among mental health practitioners engaged in telepsychology. The study revealed that individuals with high levels of empathy, an external locus of control, and elevated personal expectations were more vulnerable to experiencing compassion fatigue. These traits, while often associated with effective helping professionals, also increased emotional strain when left unmanaged. The researchers emphasized the critical role of self-care practices, such as maintaining work-life boundaries and implementing structured schedules, as protective factors against burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Salvilla and Bedoria (2021) added that coping with vicarious trauma required intentional self-awareness, strong peer support, and spiritual or emotional renewal. Dayal et al. (2021) found that most trauma counselors struggled to separate their personal and professional identities, with only one participant demonstrating conscious strategies to protect their psychological well-being. This emphasized the need for deliberate coping mechanisms and institutional support. Helpingstine et al. (2021) observed that many counselors experienced intrusive thoughts,

nightmares, and difficulty setting emotional boundaries when managing disclosures of abuse.

Knight (2013) emphasized that emotional reactions such as sadness, exhaustion, and irritability were common among school counselors handling trauma cases. These reactions, while often seen as problematic, can be understood as natural responses to prolonged exposure to client distress. Rather than indicating a lack of professionalism, these emotional experiences reflect the human cost of trauma work.

Figley (1995) introduced the concept of “compassion fatigue,” which arises from the intense emotional labor involved in helping others who are suffering. School counselors, by the nature of their work, are especially susceptible to this phenomenon due to repeated exposure to students’ traumatic stories.

Baggerly and Osborn (2006) found that school counselors often experience emotional strain when managing crises, especially in cases involving sexual abuse. Despite these challenges, many were able to maintain ethical practices and student-centered approaches by relying on professional support networks and reflective practice.

Trauma-Informed Practices

Trauma-informed care has become essential for professionals handling CSA cases. Berger et al. (2020) identified significant gaps in teachers’ trauma awareness and response strategies, revealing that many lacked training and institutional guidance. These challenges mirrored those experienced by RGCs, who were often left to manage complex disclosures without adequate trauma-specific protocols or training. Trauma-informed care empowered counselors to recognize signs of trauma, respond with empathy, and design individualized interventions that met each survivor’s emotional and psychological needs.

Murn and Schultz (2020) emphasized the multidimensional nature of trauma’s impact, introducing the “Ripple Effect of Sexual Violence Wheels” as a framework for holistic response. This included strategies such as emotional regulation, social reconnection, and mindfulness—approaches that could be adapted by RGCs in school settings. The Philippine Mental Health Act (RA 11036) supported these practices by mandating the provision of psychosocial services to affected students, recognizing the need to address trauma, depression, and anxiety among victims.

Systemic Challenges and Support Mechanisms

Systemic issues posed significant challenges to the effective delivery of trauma services. In Catanduanes, Villamartin (2022) found that social workers and guidance advocates faced a lack of funding, personnel, and program coordination when managing child abuse cases. These findings reflected the situation of many RGCs in public schools, who often managed high caseloads without access to clinical supervision or interdisciplinary support.

Allen and Bond (2020) also highlighted fragmented inter-agency collaboration as a barrier to addressing sexual abuse in educational settings. These gaps revealed the importance of building strong school-based and community-linked referral systems that could assist RGCs in responding holistically and sustainably to CSA cases. Maizel (2021) found that many school counselors felt unsupported and “like tentacles without a head,” lacking recognition and clear frameworks to guide them during trauma disclosures.

Self-Care Practices and Resilience

Resilience was a key factor in sustaining the professional capacity of RGCs. Gallardo and Chavez (2022) emphasized that self-care, whether through prayer, family time, journaling, or fitness, was essential for maintaining wellness among guidance counselors in the Philippines. Counselors who engaged in holistic well-being activities were more likely to maintain job satisfaction and reduce emotional fatigue.

Moreover, during the pandemic, RGCs adopted digital mental health techniques and mindfulness practices to manage burnout (FEU Guidance Study, 2023). These findings aligned with Resilience Theory, which described adaptation as a dynamic process of accessing personal and environmental resources to withstand adversity (Ungar, 2021). The lived experiences of RGCs in Cavite supported this framework as they demonstrated ways to endure trauma exposure while remaining committed to student care.

Broader Context and Gaps

Globally, the United Nations (2023) reported that approximately 120 million girls under the age of 20 had been subjected to forced sexual contact. In the Philippines, 2,890 out of 4,079 child violence cases reported by the Child Protection Network Foundation Inc. between January and May 2024 involved sexual abuse. The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) also recorded 331 cases of child exploitation and online sexual abuse between 2019 and 2021. These alarming statistics justified the urgency of trauma-informed guidance services in schools. Despite the crucial role of RGCs, few studies have captured their lived realities using a phenomenological approach. Most existing literature emphasized the victims' perspectives, overlooking the psychological, emotional, and professional struggles of counselors. This study responded to that gap by exploring how RGCs in Cavite experienced, responded to, and coped with the emotional weight of managing teenage sexual abuse cases, with the goal of improving both counselor welfare and student outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

This study explored the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in managing cases of sexual abuse among teenagers in Cavite. To comprehensively examine this complex phenomenon, the study was anchored in three interrelated theories: Trauma Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Resilience Theory. These theories collectively provided a robust foundation for understanding the emotional, professional, and systemic dimensions of the RGCs' experiences.

Trauma Theory, developed by Judith Herman (1992) and supported by the framework of McCann and Pearlman (1990), served as the primary foundation for interpreting the emotional and psychological toll experienced by RGCs. Originally designed to explain the effects of traumatic experiences on survivors, Trauma Theory has also been applied to helping professionals who are exposed to their clients' trauma. This study it helped explain how repeated exposure to the traumatic narratives of teenage sexual abuse led to vicarious trauma, emotional fatigue, and internal distress among counselors. The theory framed the participants' accounts of emotional exhaustion, blurred boundaries, and changes in worldview, shedding light on the invisible wounds they carried as frontliners in school-based trauma interventions.

Ecological Systems Theory, proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, revised in 2005), was utilized to examine the environmental and systemic factors that shaped the RGCs' professional

experiences. According to this theory, human behavior and functioning are influenced by multiple levels of the environment—from direct surroundings such as schools and families (microsystem), to institutional policies and governance structures (exosystem), and broader cultural and societal norms (macrosystem). This theory was relevant in understanding how RGCs, despite their professional commitment and competence, were often constrained by system-level barriers such as unclear role delineation, excessive workload, and a lack of trauma-specific institutional support. Participants described how being tasked with multiple responsibilities beyond counseling—such as clerical work, testing, and discipline monitoring—negatively affected the quality and depth of their counseling interventions. These overlapping duties, coupled with limited personnel and the absence of structured protocols, hindered their ability to provide focused and sustained psychological support to teenage survivors of abuse. Thus, the theory helped to explain how the RGCs' struggles were not rooted in individual shortcomings but were embedded in the fragmented and overloaded systems they worked within.

Resilience Theory, formally developed by George A. Richardson (2002), was employed to understand how RGCs managed to remain professionally functional and emotionally grounded amid adversity. The theory highlights that resilience is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process of rebounding from stress through internal resources (e.g., optimism, personal meaning-making) and external supports (e.g., peer collaboration, faith, and institutional guidance). In this study, participants shared coping practices such as prayer, journaling, social support, and self-care routines. These narratives demonstrated that resilience among RGCs was both personal and contextual shaped by their own reflective choices and the presence or absence of supportive environments.

Together, these three theories: Trauma Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Resilience Theory—provided a solid conceptual framework for analyzing the complex realities faced by RGCs in handling cases of teenage sexual abuse and exploitation. They highlighted not only the emotional consequences of their work, but also the systemic barriers they faced and the strategies they employed to remain strong in their critical role within the school system.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in managing cases of sexual abuse among teenagers in Cavite. As described by Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology aims to uncover the essence of a phenomenon by setting aside the researcher's biases and focusing on the participants' experiences through reflection and reduction. This study focused on understanding the challenges encountered by RGCs, the strategies they employed, and how they coped with the emotional and professional demands of handling sexual abuse cases and related responsibilities. Creswell (2013) emphasized that phenomenological research is most appropriate when the goal is to deeply understand the shared meanings of lived experiences among individuals.

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors in managing cases of sexual abuse among teenagers?
2. What signs of vicarious trauma did Registered Guidance Counselors experience when managing cases of sexual abuse involving teenagers?

3. How did Registered Guidance Counselors conduct and manage their counseling sessions when handling cases of sexual abuse involving teenagers?

Scope and Delimitation

This study was conducted during School Year 2024-2025 and employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of five (5) Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) who managed cases of sexual abuse involving junior and senior high school students in public high schools within the Schools Division of Cavite. The participants were all licensed professionals holding official plantilla positions in their respective schools, ensuring that they were formally recognized to perform full-time guidance and counseling functions.

To be included in the study, participants were required to have at least one year of experience as an RGC and to have personally handled at least one case of sexual abuse involving a student. The study focused on their counseling approaches, the challenges they encountered, the signs of vicarious trauma they experienced, and the coping mechanisms they employed in managing the emotional and professional demands of their roles. The goal was to uncover the essence of their lived experiences, particularly in the context of their work in handling sensitive and trauma-related cases.

Significance of the Study

This study was highly significant as it addressed urgent concerns related to education, mental health, and child protection-particularly focusing on how cases of sexual abuse among high school students were managed within public schools. By exploring the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in Schools Division of Cavite, the study aimed to contribute meaningful insights that could strengthen the existing counseling systems and improve the overall well-being of the students.

Specifically, the results of the study were expected to be beneficial to the following:

Students this study may indirectly contribute to enhancing the quality of counseling services provided in schools, ensuring that students who have experienced sexual abuse or exploitation receive appropriate care, psychological support, and guidance. The findings may inform school-based interventions aimed at fostering a safe, responsive, and trauma-informed environment conducive to student recovery and well-being. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of empowering students to take an active role in their own protection by promoting awareness, self-respect, and the confidence to seek help and make informed decisions to safeguard themselves from abuse and exploitation.

Parents may benefit from the study through its emphasis on the importance of emotional support, open communication, and collaboration with schools. By understanding how counselors support children in trauma, parents may be more guided in responding appropriately and preventing further harm through informed and engaged parenting.

Teachers may gain greater understanding of the roles and limitations of RGCs, enabling them to build more effective partnerships in supporting learners. The study may also equip them with a deeper sensitivity to trauma-related behaviors and how to respond empathetically and refer students when needed.

School Administrators may use the findings as a basis for strengthening institutional systems that support both students and guidance counselors. The study may inform policies,

protocols, and staff development efforts to ensure that schools are better equipped to respond to sexual abuse cases with care, coordination, and accountability.

Future researchers may find this study a useful foundation for further exploring the inner experiences of school counselors, the impact of trauma work, and the systems surrounding child protection and mental health in educational settings. It may also contribute to the body of qualitative research in Philippine school guidance and psychological support services.

Senator Juan Edgardo “Sonny” Angara, as the current Secretary of the Department of Education, may use the findings of this study as empirical support in strengthening policies and programs related to guidance services, child protection, and mental health within schools. The study may informed strategic reforms and resource allocation that support both student welfare and counselor well-being.

Mr. Christopher P. Hernandez, as the current National President of the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association (PGCA), may considered the findings in identifying the present needs and challenges of Registered Guidance Counselors handling trauma-related cases. This study may support PGCA’s ongoing advocacy for counselor well-being by informing professional development programs, promoting trauma-informed practices, and advancing initiatives that protect counselors from the impact of vicarious trauma and emotional fatigue.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were defined operationally to give a clearer definition on terminologies.

Child Protection Framework refers to the policies, programs, and guidelines established by educational institutions, the Department of Education (DepEd), and other relevant stakeholders to safeguard children from abuse, exploitation, violence, and neglect.

Child Sexual Exploitation refers to situations where a child is manipulated, coerced, or forced into sexual activity in exchange for money, goods, favors, or other benefits, often involving a third party or system of abuse.

Coping Strategies refer to the specific methods or practices employed by Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) to manage the emotional demands, stress, and psychological effects of handling sensitive cases. These may include self-care, supervision, mindfulness, or professional support.

Counseling Approach pertains to the strategies, techniques, or interventions used by RGCs to support students in addressing personal challenges, particularly those involving sexual abuse and exploitation. These approaches may include trauma-focused counseling, one-on-one sessions, or group interventions.

Department of Education (DepEd) refers to the executive department of the Philippine government responsible for ensuring access to, promoting equity in, and improving the quality of basic education in the Philippines. In this study, DepEd also refers to the implementing body of child protection and mental health policies in schools.

Emotional Fatigue refers to the mental and emotional exhaustion experienced by professionals, such as RGCs, as a result of continuous exposure to emotionally intense situations and trauma cases.

High School Students are adolescents enrolled in junior or senior high school who may require support in navigating academic, emotional, and psychosocial challenges during a critical stage of development.

Impact refers to the significant effects of managing sexual abuse cases on RGCs, which may include emotional strain, psychological distress, and changes in professional perspectives or personal well-being.

Lived Experiences refer to the personal, first-hand accounts and meanings constructed by individuals in this study, RGCs as they navigate the emotional, professional, and ethical dimensions of managing cases of sexual abuse.

Managing cases refers to the systematic process undertaken by Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in handling reports of sexual abuse involving students. This includes receiving disclosures, conducting initial assessments, coordinating with relevant stakeholders (e.g., school heads, parents, child protection committees, DSWD), providing counseling interventions, ensuring confidentiality and safety, making appropriate referrals, and documenting the case through proper channels. It involves both preventive and responsive measures that aim to protect the child, support recovery, and comply with institutional and legal protocols.

Mental Health refers to a person's emotional, psychological, and social well-being, which affects how they think, feel, and act. In this study, it also encompasses the mental wellness of both the students and the RGCs handling trauma-related cases.

Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association (PGCA) refers to the accredited national professional organization for guidance counselors in the Philippines. It advocates for the rights, development, and welfare of Registered Guidance Counselors and promotes ethical practice and continuing education in the field.

Preventive Measures refer to proactive actions or strategies taken to reduce the risk of sexual abuse and exploitation, such as awareness campaigns, educational seminars, and child protection policies.

Professional Development refers to structured learning opportunities and training designed to help RGCs enhance their skills, knowledge, and competencies in managing sensitive and trauma-related cases.

Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) refer to licensed professionals under the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) who hold plantilla positions in public schools and are tasked with providing counseling, psychosocial support, and guidance services to students.

Resilience of RGCs refers to the ability of counselors to adapt, recover, and maintain effectiveness despite experiencing emotional or psychological challenges while managing sensitive cases.

Sexual Abuse refers to any non-consensual sexual act inflicted upon a person, often involving coercion, manipulation, or force. This includes acts such as molestation, rape, harassment, or any sexual activity that violates a person's dignity and safety.

Support Systems pertain to formal and informal networks available to RGCs, such as colleagues, supervisors, school heads, family, and professional organizations, that help them manage stress and maintain effectiveness in their roles.

Trauma-Informed Practice refers to an approach in counseling that acknowledges the presence and impact of trauma in individuals and incorporates strategies that prioritize safety, trust-building, empathy, and empowerment throughout the intervention process.

Transcendental Phenomenological Study is a qualitative research approach rooted in the work of Edmund Husserl and expanded by Clark Moustakas, which focuses on uncovering the essence of lived experiences by setting aside the researcher's preconceptions and centering on participants' subjective meanings.

Vicarious Trauma refers to the internal transformation or emotional impact experienced by professionals, such as RGCs, due to their empathetic engagement with the trauma narratives of others. This may manifest as emotional fatigue, intrusive thoughts, or changes in worldview.

Summary

This chapter explored the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in managing cases of sexual abuse among high school students in public schools within the Schools Division of Cavite. Anchored on Trauma Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Resilience Theory, the study sought to understand the emotional, professional, and systemic challenges RGCs face while handling such sensitive cases.

The background established the alarming prevalence of sexual abuse and exploitation among adolescents in the Philippines and emphasized the critical role of RGCs in providing frontline psychological support. However, a significant gap in the literature exists regarding how these counselors cope with emotional burdens, navigate systemic barriers, and apply specific counseling strategies in trauma cases.

The statement of the problem outlined three core areas of investigation: (1) the lived experiences of RGCs in handling sexual abuse cases, (2) signs of vicarious trauma experienced, and (3) how counseling sessions were conducted and managed. The purpose statement clarified that the research adopted a transcendental phenomenological approach, guided by the frameworks of Moustakas and Creswell, to uncover the essence of the RGCs' shared experiences.

The significance of the study was discussed about students, parents, teachers, school administrators, policymakers (including the DepEd Secretary), the PGCA, and future researchers, the scope and delimitation defined the focus on five RGCs with at least one year of experience and direct involvement in at least one sexual abuse case during SY 2024–2025. Definitions of terms were also provided to ensure clarity and consistency throughout the

2. METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research method, research design, research setting, sample, procedure, data collection method, data collection procedure, data analysis, trustworthiness, reflexivity, and ethical considerations of the study.

Research Design

The researcher used a qualitative research methodology, which is appropriate for investigating complex human experiences through in-depth, contextual exploration. As Johnson et al. (2020) explained, qualitative research seeks to interpret lived experiences and uncover the meanings individuals assign to events in their lives. Unlike quantitative methods that prioritize objectivity and generalizability, qualitative approaches aim to capture subjective perspectives, making them suitable for studying sensitive issues such as trauma and emotional challenges.

Specifically, this study employed Transcendental Phenomenology, a qualitative approach grounded in the philosophical works of Edmund Husserl and expanded by Clark Moustakas (1994). This method emphasizes the essence of lived experiences and incorporates the process of epoche—bracketing the researcher's assumptions and judgments to allow an unbiased understanding of participants' perspectives. Moustakas (1994) asserted that transcendental phenomenology focuses on what participants experienced and how they experienced it, enabling researchers to illuminate the shared structure of the phenomenon under study.

Research Setting

This study was conducted in the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Cavite, specifically involving Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) assigned to public secondary schools across different districts. The five (5) participants RGCs were selected from schools located in the districts of Tanza, General Mariano Alvarez (GMA), Indang, and Trece Martires. These areas were chosen based on the availability of licensed RGCs holding plantilla positions in their respective schools.

At the time of the study, there were only eight (8) officially appointed RGCs deployed across the entire SDO Cavite. Of these, two were unable to participate due to personal and work-related constraints, and one was assigned for pilot testing. The remaining five qualified RGCs consented to take part in the main study.

Data gathering posed logistical challenges due to the geographical distance between the researcher's workplace and the schools of the RGCs. All interviews were conducted after regular working hours, requiring the participants to extend their time and energy beyond their official duties. This created scheduling difficulties, as sessions had to be arranged around each participant's availability and workload.

It is important to note that while SDO Cavite covers numerous districts, many schools remain without licensed RGCs. The limited number of plantilla positions results in the prioritization of larger schools for RGC deployment. In districts without RGCs, guidance services were handled by teacher-designates or guidance advocate teachers who assume counseling duties on top of their teaching load. These guidance advocates are typically allotted only two hours per week for guidance functions, which significantly limits their capacity to provide comprehensive support to students. As a result, addressing the mental health and child protection needs of learners remains a challenge in many public schools within the division.

Sample

This study purposefully selected five (5) Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) from public high schools under the supervision of the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Cavite.

The participants were chosen based on the following inclusion criteria:

1. They held official plantilla positions as licensed RGCs in public secondary schools within SDO-Cavite;
2. They had at least one (1) year of professional experience as an RGC;
3. They had personally handled at least one (1) case of sexual abuse involving a student;
4. They demonstrated signs of vicarious trauma based on self-report and reflective narratives; and
5. They expressed willingness to voluntarily participate in the study

The selection ensured that the participants had direct exposure to trauma-related counseling cases in the school setting, allowing them to provide rich, experience-based insights. Their licensure and service within SDO-Cavite affirmed their professional competence and ethical commitment to the students' mental health and protection. This deliberate sampling reinforced the credibility and depth of the study by prioritizing participants with authentic, relevant lived experiences aligned with the research objectives.

The selection of RGCs ensured that the participants had adequate exposure to trauma-related counseling, providing them with the depth of experience necessary to contribute rich, meaningful insights. Their licensure affirmed their adherence to ethical standards and professional competencies required in trauma-informed counseling. This deliberate selection enhanced the

credibility of the study by prioritizing participants who could authentically articulate the emotional and professional complexities of handling sexual abuse cases within the school setting.

Sampling Procedure

This study employed purposive sampling to identify and select participants who could provide rich and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Purposive sampling, as defined by Palinkas et al. (2015), is a non-probability technique commonly used in qualitative research, where participants are intentionally chosen based on specific characteristics aligned with the study's objectives.

The participants met the following inclusion criteria: they were licensed RGCs with official plantilla items under SDO-Cavite; had at least one year of service; had managed at least one case of sexual abuse involving a student; exhibited signs of vicarious trauma; and provided informed consent to join the study.

Participant recruitment was facilitated through the researcher's existing collegial relationships with fellow RGCs, which were established through prior collaboration in trainings, division-led initiatives, and professional networks. Given this rapport, formal coordination through school administrators was not required. Instead, the researcher reached out to potential participants directly via personal messages and professional communication channels, while strictly observing ethical protocols.

All prospective participants were provided with a copy of the interview guide, informed consent form, letter of intent, and ethical clearance from the university and the Department of Education – SDO Cavite. Of the eight eligible RGCs in the division at the time of the study, two declined due to work-related demands and one was assigned for pilot testing. The remaining five met all inclusion criteria and consented to participate, forming the final sample for this phenomenological inquiry.

This deliberate, criterion-based approach ensured that the participants possessed the depth of experience required to meaningfully address the research questions and contribute to the overall credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Data Collection Method

The study utilized semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary method of data collection. This approach, grounded in the work of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), allowed participants to narrate their lived experiences in their own words, enabling the researcher to gather rich, detailed, and context-specific insights. It provided an open and flexible structure that allowed for probing deeper into emerging themes, while still maintaining alignment with the study's central objectives. This was essential in understanding how Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) managed not only cases of sexual abuse but also the broader emotional and professional responsibilities tied to their guidance and counseling roles in public schools.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed data triangulation by incorporating reflexive journals as a supplementary data source. These journals, written by the participants after their interview sessions, captured personal thoughts, emotions, and internal reflections. They served as intimate narratives that offered deeper insight into the RGCs' lived realities—revealing emotional burdens, coping strategies, and perspectives that may not have surfaced during the interviews themselves. This dual-source approach enriched the data and provided a more holistic portrayal of the participants' professional experiences.

Aside from the three main research questions, the interview protocol included two open-ended questions placed at the end of the session. These questions invited participants to share their personal aspirations as RGCs and their hopes for improving the guidance and counseling system in public schools. The aim was to capture forward-looking perspectives that went beyond their current struggles—highlighting how workload, systemic limitations, and lack of institutional support shaped their goals and visions for more effective mental health service delivery.

In addition to data triangulation, the study employed theory triangulation by integrating three interrelated theoretical frameworks: Trauma Theory McCann & Pearlman (1990), Ecological Systems Theory Bronfenbrenner (1979), and Resilience Theory Ungar, (2021). Trauma Theory guided the exploration of the psychological impact of repeated exposure to student trauma disclosures, highlighting the emotional toll experienced by RGCs. Ecological Systems Theory helped contextualize their experiences within broader systems such as school structures, family dynamics, and institutional policies. Meanwhile, Resilience Theory supported the analysis of how RGCs adapted to these stressors by drawing on personal strengths and external support systems.

By integrating both methodological (interviews and reflexive journals) and theoretical triangulation, the study ensured a comprehensive and multi-layered understanding of the lived experiences of RGCs in the School Division Office of Cavite not only in their handling of sexual abuse cases but also in how they navigated the ongoing challenges of their profession in school-based mental health and child protection services.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process began with securing a formal request letter from the university, which served as the basis for obtaining official approval from the Department of Education-Schools Division Office (DepEd-SDO) of Cavite. This clearance granted the researcher ethical permission to conduct the study among Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) across public high schools in the division.

Due to the researcher's prior collegial relationships with fellow RGCs, formed through joint participation in trainings and SDO-led activities, participant coordination was done directly through personal communication rather than through school administrators. This rapport enabled smoother engagement while still upholding the ethical protocols of research. Each potential participant was provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, scope, confidentiality measures, and voluntary nature of participation. Signed informed consent was collected prior to any data gathering.

Encouraging the RGCs to open up during the interviews was not difficult, as the researcher is also a Registered Guidance Counselor. Having previously worked with the participants in various trainings and SDO-led activities, a sense of familiarity and professional trust was already established. Moreover, the prior distribution of the interview guide helped minimize apprehension and allowed participants to reflect on the questions ahead of time, contributing to more open, comfortable, and meaningful conversations.

The primary method of data collection involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by open-ended questions designed to elicit comprehensive, reflective responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim for accuracy. These sessions were scheduled according to the participants' preferred times and platforms, often after regular working hours, to accommodate their busy schedules and ensure their comfort.

Prior to conducting the research outside the school, the researcher ensured that all necessary permissions were secured. During the interviews, efforts were made to maintain clarity and rapport-if participants did not understand certain questions, the researcher rephrased or repeated them for better comprehension. Likewise, follow-up questions were asked for clarification or elaboration, and detailed notes were taken throughout the sessions. The researcher also remained flexible and empathetic, acknowledging that the participants were often fatigued from work and were generously extending their time. Each interview was intended to last for approximately one hour. Two RGCs exceeded this duration due to their detailed and emotionally reflective responses. The remaining three interviews lasted between 35 to 50 minutes, as those participants were more concise and direct in their answers-likely influenced by their prior receipt of the interview guide questions, which allowed them to prepare their responses in advance. Several challenges emerged during data collection, including distractions in the participants' workplaces, occasional interruptions, repeated or overlooked questions, and mutual fatigue between the researcher and participants. These factors occasionally disrupted the flow of conversation but were handled with flexibility, understanding, and professionalism from both sides.

To enhance the study's credibility and provide additional depth to the findings, participants were also invited to submit reflexive journals. These written narratives offered supplementary insights into their emotional states, personal reflections, and coping experiences beyond the interviews. The inclusion of reflexive journals supported the study's data triangulation strategy, ensuring that multiple sources of data contributed to a more holistic understanding of the RGCs' lived experiences in managing sexual abuse cases and fulfilling their guidance roles within the school setting.

Data Analysis

This study followed the transcendental phenomenological data analysis method as outlined by Moustakas (1994), which aims to uncover the essence of participants' lived experiences by setting aside the researcher's biases through the process of epoche or bracketing. The data collected through semi-structured interviews and reflexive journals underwent a systematic process of analysis to arrive at the universal meanings of the Registered Guidance Counselors' (RGCs') experiences in managing cases of sexual abuse among teenagers.

The analysis began with epoche, where the researcher engaged in critical reflection to set aside personal biases, assumptions, and prior knowledge about the phenomenon. This step was crucial in allowing the participants' voices to emerge authentically, without being filtered through the researcher's own perspectives.

Following epoche, the researcher proceeded with horizontalization, where every significant statement from the verbatim transcripts and reflexive journals was given equal value. These meaningful units were carefully reviewed and extracted to ensure that no relevant experience or emotion was overlooked.

Next, the researcher clustered these statements into invariant meaning units and organized them into themes and thematic categories. These were then grouped according to Moustakas' universal structures: time, body, space, relationship to self, relationship to others, and the world, and place. This stage allowed the researcher to understand how the RGCs' experiences manifested across emotional, psychological, and environmental dimensions.

From these themes, the researcher developed textural descriptions, which focused on what the participants experienced. This was followed by the construction of structural descriptions, which explained how the experiences occurred in the participants' personal and institutional contexts.

Finally, the researcher synthesized the textural and structural descriptions to create a composite description of the essence of the phenomenon. This narrative captured the shared meanings and core truths underlying the participants' experiences, while also preserving the uniqueness of each individual's journey as an RGC managing sexual abuse cases in the school setting.

This rigorous and reflective process ensured that the findings remained grounded in the participants' authentic narratives, contributing to a credible and meaningful understanding of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in this qualitative study was established through deliberate and documented actions that ensured the rigor, authenticity, and reliability of the findings. Rather than relying on theoretical definitions, this section presents the concrete steps undertaken to uphold the quality and credibility of the research.

To ensure credibility, the study employed data triangulation by gathering information from two sources: semi-structured interviews and reflexive journals. Five Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) participated in in-depth interviews that explored their lived experiences in managing cases of sexual abuse among teenagers. These interviews were guided by open-ended questions and conducted in a setting that allowed for emotional safety and candid responses. In addition, participants submitted reflexive journals that captured their insights, emotions, and reflections during the course of their involvement. By combining multiple sources of data, the study was able to cross-validate responses and present a more truthful and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the participants, their professional backgrounds, school contexts, and the challenges they faced. Each narrative included context-specific experiences drawn from actual cases handled by the RGCs, allowing future researchers or practitioners to assess the relevance of the findings to similar school settings.

To establish dependability, the researcher documented all procedures in a clear and organized manner. This included records of how participants were selected, how interview protocols were developed, and how the data were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed. An audit trail of these research activities is available as part of the study's appendices.

Confirmability was ensured through the consistent practice of reflexivity and the use of a reflexive journal maintained by the researcher. This journal contained entries about emotional responses, ethical decisions, and methodological reflections throughout the study. As a fellow Registered Guidance Counselor, the researcher engaged in bracketing and self-awareness to distinguish personal experiences from those of the participants. These reflexive practices helped minimize bias and ensured that interpretations remained grounded in the participants' authentic narratives rather than the researcher's assumptions.

Additionally, the use of participant-authored journals reinforced the authenticity of the data, capturing firsthand reflections and emotional truths. Together, these deliberate practices triangulated data collection, rich contextual detail, transparent documentation, and ongoing

reflexivity demonstrate how trustworthiness was embedded into every stage of the research process.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards to ensure the protection, respect, and dignity of all participants, acknowledging the sensitivity of the topic involving Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) who managed cases of sexual abuse and exploitation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants received a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, objectives, procedures, and their rights, including the freedom to decline participation, withdraw at any time, or refrain from answering specific questions. Signed consent forms documented their voluntary participation.

To safeguard participants' confidentiality and anonymity, personal information was anonymized, and pseudonyms or codes replaced names in transcripts and reports. Data were securely stored—digital records were encrypted and password-protected, while physical documents were kept in locked storage. All collected data were destroyed upon completion of the study in compliance with ethical research practices. Furthermore, the researcher upheld the principles of the Philippines' Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173), ensuring responsible and secure handling of all collected information.

Participation was entirely voluntary, and the researcher respected participants' autonomy, refraining from probing into areas that could cause discomfort. Interviews were conducted in a supportive, non-intrusive manner, and the researcher remained attentive to any signs of emotional distress. Should participants have experienced discomfort, they were offered breaks or the option to terminate the interview. Contact information for psychological support services was also provided when needed.

The study prioritized integrity and objectivity by employing reflexivity to identify and address potential biases. Findings were reported honestly and transparently, rooted in the participants' authentic narratives. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's institutional ethics review board, and official permission was secured from the Schools Division of Cavite. Additionally, the researcher remained culturally sensitive, using appropriate language and practices that respected the cultural context of the participants.

By adhering to these ethical considerations, the researcher aimed to protect participants' well-being, uphold their rights, and ensure the integrity of the research process. This commitment to ethical rigor strengthened the credibility and reliability of the study's findings, contributing valuable insights to the field.

Summary

This chapter presented the methodological foundation of the study, which explored the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in managing cases of sexual abuse among teenagers in public high schools under the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Cavite. Anchored in transcendental phenomenology Moustakas, (1994), the study aimed to uncover the essence of these experiences by setting aside researcher biases through the process of epoche, allowing the authentic voices of participants to emerge.

Five licensed RGCs were purposefully selected based on strict inclusion criteria: they held official plantilla positions within SDO-Cavite, had at least one year of experience, had handled at least one case of sexual abuse, demonstrated signs of vicarious trauma, and voluntarily consented

to participate. These participants were drawn from four districts where licensed RGCs were available.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured, in-depth interviews supported by reflexive journals submitted by the participants. This dual-source strategy provided methodological triangulation, allowing the researcher to capture both verbal and written dimensions of the participants' emotional, ethical, and professional realities. Additionally, the interview guide concluded with two on-ended

questions designed to uncover the participants' personal aspirations and hopes for improving the quality of school-based mental health services especially amid overlapping responsibilities and limited systemic support.

The study also employed theory triangulation by integrating Trauma Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Resilience Theory to analyze how RGCs processed trauma, functioned within institutional systems, and sustained professional resilience. Data were analyzed using Moustakas' phenomenological method, which included epoche, horizontalization, clustering of meaning units, and the synthesis of textural and structural descriptions.

Trustworthiness was established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability — supported by reflexivity and clear audit trails. Ethical standards were rigorously observed, and all necessary permissions and safeguards were in place.

Overall, this chapter established the study's rigor, ethical soundness, and intentional design ensuring that the voices of RGCs were faithfully represented and that the researcher's own experiences did not bias the findings.

3. RESULTS

This chapter outlines the procedures for data collection and analysis, including the demographic profiles of the participants, as well as the discussion, presentation, and interpretation of the findings. Verbal transcriptions were carefully conducted to ensure that all spoken responses were accurately captured and thoroughly examined. From the data, emerging themes were identified, allowing the researcher to categorize and structure the information into coherent and meaningful patterns. Relevant details reflecting the participants' lived experiences, personal profiles, and insights were coded and systematically organized into themes.

Operational Data Collection

Interview guide questions were carefully crafted to align with the study's objective of gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in handling cases of sexual abuse involving teenagers. These guide questions were reviewed and validated under the supervision of the researcher's dissertation adviser, who is also a licensed psychometrician, ensuring appropriateness and sensitivity to the topic.

Given the study's focus on the personal and professional experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs), the guide questions were designed to explore their experiences, counseling approaches, strategies used in handling cases of sexual abuse among teenagers, as well as the emotional and psychological impact of these cases and their coping mechanisms. These questions served as the basis for the semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher.

Prior to data collection, the researcher secured formal approval from the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Cavite to conduct the study among RGCs under its jurisdiction. Letters of intent and invitation were sent to the potential participants. To establish rapport and reduce apprehension, the researcher also sent the approved permit to conduct the study, the intent letter, the guide

questions, and the informed consent form via Messenger days before the scheduled interview. This allowed participants to mentally prepare and feel at ease, especially since some initially expressed hesitation due to fears of being unable to answer certain questions or concerns about the sensitive nature of the topic.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted at the participants' preferred time and place to ensure comfort and convenience. At the beginning of each session, the researcher explained the study again, answered clarifying questions, and obtained the participants' written informed consent. With their permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy, while the researcher also took down notes of significant responses and non-verbal cues. This dual method helped preserve the integrity of the participants' narratives.

The researcher exerted extra effort to reach participants located far from the researcher's workplace, demonstrating a strong commitment to gather rich and diverse data. During the interviews, some participants became emotional while recalling their significant experiences. These emotional moments highlighted the profound impact of their roles and the sensitivity of the cases they managed. Listening to their stories provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the emotional challenges and resilience these RGCs embody in managing cases of sexual abuse and exploitation.

All collected data were carefully transcribed, examined, and organized into relevant categories to facilitate meaningful analysis and interpretation.

Operational Data Analysis

The process of data analysis in this study followed the principles of phenomenological research, aiming to extract the essence of the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) who have handled cases of sexual abuse involving teenagers. After conducting and audio-recording the interviews with the participants' consent—the researcher transcribed the recordings verbatim to ensure that every detail, expression, and emotion conveyed during the interviews was accurately preserved. Transcription was done with careful attention to the nuances of each participant's narrative. The researcher reviewed the recordings multiple times to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and ensure the depth of each response was captured. Alongside the transcripts, handwritten notes taken during the interviews were also considered to enrich the context and interpretation.

Data were organized and analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. Significant statements and phrases related to the research questions were extracted and initially coded. Through the process of horizontalization, each relevant statement was treated with equal value, while overlapping or repetitive data were eliminated. These statements were then clustered into meaning units, which were synthesized into themes and categories that reflected shared patterns across participants' lived experiences.

Themes were analyzed about the study's three core research questions: (1) the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in managing cases of sexual abuse among teenagers; (2) the counseling practices and strategies they employed; and (3) the signs of vicarious trauma they experienced. From these themes, the researcher constructed textural descriptions (what participants experienced) and structural descriptions (how they experienced it).

To deepen the interpretation, the researcher identified universal structures—namely, Time, Body, Space, Relationship to Self, Relationship to Others/World, and Place—that captured the essential meaning of the participants' experiences. These were cross-referenced with relevant

literature and theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 to support and enrich the findings.

Throughout the analytical process, the researcher engaged in epoché and sustained reflexivity, intentionally bracketing personal biases to preserve the authenticity of the participants' voices and ensure a faithful representation of their lived realities.

Participants' Demographic Profile of the Participants

It is important to note that while RGCs regularly counsel a large number of students on a daily and weekly basis, often responding to academic, behavioral, and emotional referrals, the number of cases involving sexual abuse and exploitation remains relatively low. This is not a reflection of limited engagement but rather of the sensitive and underreported nature of such cases. For instance, RGC Tala handled four cases in 1.6 years, while others reported managing between three to five cases over several years. These numbers, though fewer in quantity, are significantly more emotionally taxing and professionally complex, often requiring multiple sessions, inter-agency coordination, and extensive documentation. This distinction underscores the unique burden carried by RGCs when handling these traumatic and high-stakes situations.

RGC 1 – TALA

RGC Tala is a 30-year-old male who has been serving as a Registered Guidance Counselor in a public school for 1 year and 6 months. Despite being relatively new in the role, he has already managed four cases of sexual abuse and exploitation involving teenagers. He has not attended any formal training related to OSAEC (Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children), which may present certain challenges in addressing these sensitive cases.

RGC 2 – ARIA

RGC Aria is a 50-year-old female who has served as an RGC in a public school for 8 years. Throughout her service, she has managed three cases related to sexual abuse. She has undergone training on Capacity Building Against OSAEC, which likely contributed to her preparedness in handling such complex and delicate situations.

RGC 3 – LIRA

RGC Lira, a 60-year-old female, is the most senior among the participants with 38 years of service as a public-school guidance counselor. She also reported having managed three cases of sexual abuse. With her vast experience and participation in Capacity Building Against OSAEC training, she brings deep insight and long-term professional perspective on the issue.

RGC 4 – MAYA

RGC Maya is a 44-year-old female with 16 years of experience as an RGC in a public school. She has handled four cases of sexual abuse. Despite her years of experience, she has not undergone any specific training related to OSAEC, highlighting a potential gap in continuing professional development for experienced counselors.

RGC 5 – DALIA

RGC Dalia, also 44 years old, has served as a Registered Guidance Counselor for 1 year and 3 months, but she has been in the guidance field for several years prior to her appointment.

Her years of experience as a guidance advocate or designate have exposed her to a range of student concerns, including sensitive cases of sexual abuse. Among the participants, she reported managing the highest number of cases, with a total of five. Her participation in Capacity Building Against OSAEC training may have enhanced her confidence and competence in handling these complex and emotionally demanding cases effectively.

Discussion, Presentation, and Interpretation

This chapter presents the findings of the study through a psychological-phenomenological lens using Moustakas' (1994) approach. The lived experiences of five Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) are organized by research sub-questions (SOPs) and clustered into five overarching themes with a total of 23 categories. These themes reflect the emotional burden, institutional struggles, professional strategies, and personal transformations experienced by the RGCs as they handled cases of teenage sexual abuse in public high schools.

Reflexive journals were triangulated with interview data to validate and enrich the analysis. Quotes from participants are followed by line numbers for reference. A total of 78 codes were generated from the participants' responses and can be seen in Appendix L. Each theme and category begin with a brief introduction to provide narrative flow and interpretive depth.

1. Lived Experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors in Managing Cases of Teenage Sexual Abuse

Theme 1: Emotional and Psychological Impact on Counselors

The experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) are deeply marked by emotional immersion and psychological toll. Managing teenage sexual abuse cases exposes them to trauma not as distant observers, but as active participants in the emotional weight carried by their students. This theme captures the emotional residue, exhaustion, and cognitive dissonance experienced by RGCs as they navigate their professional duties while protecting their well-being.

Category 1: Harrowing and Draining Experience

Participants expressed that the experience of handling abuse cases is emotionally taxing and deeply unsettling. They described their roles as painful and overwhelming, often absorbing the grief and trauma of their students. These accounts reflect a profound psychological engagement that goes beyond routine counseling.

"It's mabigat. It's harrowing. Masakit sa pakiramdam... I feel their pain." – RGC Tala (Line: 14–17)

"At first, it felt very draining... you start thinking about the trauma the child has gone through." – RGC Maya (Line: 25–29)

For the counselors, especially RGC Tala and RGC Maya, managing cases of sexual abuse is not merely a procedural responsibility. Their use of emotionally charged terms like "mabigat," "harrowing," and "draining" signify how the emotional pain of the student transfers silently to the counselor. These responses reflect the intense psychological burden and emotional absorption they experience — often leading to exhaustion beyond physical tiredness.

RGC Tala described the weight of empathy, expressing that he doesn't just listen — he feels the pain. RGC Maya reinforced this by saying that the trauma sticks with her thoughts, even after the session is over. These illustrate how deeply embedded vicarious trauma becomes in the daily reality of RGCs, especially when no support system is in place to help them process it.

McCann and Pearlman (1990), in their foundational work on vicarious traumatization, explained that professionals who are repeatedly exposed to traumatic disclosures begin to experience disruption in their cognitive schemas — including their view of the world, safety, and self. This supports how RGCs in this study absorb and internalize students' pain, sometimes without even noticing that their own mental health is being affected.

Herman (2021) also emphasized in *Trauma and Recovery* that counselors working with abuse survivors often develop trauma symptoms themselves, especially when they lack institutional support and regular supervision. This validates the emotional weight expressed by both participants, showing that their experience is not just subjective, but part of a known psychological phenomenon.

Berger et al. (2020) further emphasized the need for trauma-informed training for school counselors. Their study revealed that emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue among counselors are significantly reduced when they are supported with proper training and systems of care. In contrast, when left alone to carry the emotional burden — as in the case of some RGCs in this study — counselors become vulnerable to burnout, guilt, and emotional numbing.

Thus, the harrowing and draining experiences described by the RGCs in this category are evidence of the emotional cost of care, deeply rooted in both practice and literature.

Category 2: Professional Detachment and Struggle

Even with years of professional experience, RGCs struggled to detach from the emotional weight of the cases. This category describes how they attempt to remain composed and effective while silently wrestling with the pain, guilt, and self-doubt triggered by their work.

“Nadadala. Yes, ma'am. Many times, yes.” – RGC Tala (Line: 21)

“Though minsan parang nape-penetrated niya yung isip mo... I wish I could have done better... didibdibin mo siya...” –

RGC Tala (Line: 26–31)

For RGC Tala — the only male participant in the study — the emotional impact of managing cases of sexual abuse is both unavoidable and deeply personal. In his interview, he openly admitted how difficult it is to draw a line between being present for the student and being consumed by the trauma. He described how the stories he hears from survivors “penetrate” his thoughts, and that he often finds himself internalizing the pain, carrying it even after the sessions are over.

In his reflexive journal, RGC Tala revealed, “There were times that these thoughts and feelings follow me in my sleep, and I do not feel relaxed nor energized at all when waking up.” He further expressed that this emotional fatigue begins to affect not only his professional effectiveness but also his personal capacity to care for his loved ones, including his pets. His writing exposes the quiet battles counselors fight behind the scenes — when they feel that they are no longer in the right mental state to help others.

This candid admission illustrates the essence of vicarious trauma — a psychological experience where helpers begin to experience the emotional residue of their clients' suffering. Salvilla and Bedoria (2021) highlighted that guidance counselors in the Philippines are especially prone to this due to lack of structured support systems. The guilt and frustration that RGC Tala carries — such as wishing he could have done more — is a common response in cases where systemic barriers prevent counselors from acting fully on their instincts to protect and intervene.

Dayal et al. (2021) also discussed how counselors begin to experience identity disruptions when they carry these burdens long term, even questioning their effectiveness or value — something RGC Tala echoed in his journal when he said, “I consistently worry that I am not enough... or I am no longer in a good position to help anyone.”

Additionally, Gallardo and Chavez (2022) observed that Filipino counselors often operate in emotionally charged environments without adequate tools for psychological recovery. RGC Tala’s growing cynicism, as he described, “my worldview and set of beliefs are less optimistic and more cynical now,” shows how constant exposure to trauma gradually reshapes even one’s philosophy about life.

Despite all this, his journal ended with a quiet strength: “They may be down, but not out.” These words capture the heart of this category — counselors continue to show up even when their emotional reserves are nearly empty. Their inner struggle between emotional closeness and professional distance is not a flaw, but a sign of their humanity — and the need for systems that care not just for students, but for the helpers, too.

Category 3: Emotional Exhaustion and Overload

Beyond the initial shock and empathy, RGCs eventually reach a point of emotional depletion. This category highlights how repeated exposure to traumatic student disclosures leads to compassion fatigue, burnout, and emotional dullness, which gradually erode their capacity to provide effective care.

“Pagod na pagod ako — minsan tatlo hanggang apat na kaso sa isang linggo... Ayoko nang ma-Lunesan!” – RGC Maya (Line: 543–549)

“There are days I feel emotionally blank, like I have nothing left to give.” – RGC Aria (Line: 288–291)

These statements from RGC Maya and RGC Aria reflect a deep and persistent form of emotional fatigue. More than physical tiredness, this exhaustion stems from ongoing exposure to disturbing cases, often without sufficient time to recover. RGC Maya described the overwhelming burden of handling multiple trauma cases in a week, while RGC Aria shared the numbness and inner emptiness she sometimes feels, indicating a depletion of emotional energy.

This experience aligns with Gallardo and Chavez (2022), who identified compassion fatigue as a common risk among Filipino guidance counselors—manifesting as emotional depletion due to continued caregiving in high-stress environments. Repollo (2024) likewise noted that unsupported school counselors often show signs of long-term burnout, such as mental fatigue, emotional detachment, and a gradual loss of professional motivation.

Wymer et al. (2020) emphasized that cumulative exposure to others’ trauma can impair a counselor’s emotional regulation, decision-making, and overall mental health. When left unaddressed, these symptoms can escalate to professional withdrawal or breakdown. This category affirms that emotional exhaustion is not a sign of personal weakness, but rather an occupational risk in trauma work. Without structural support, counselors are left to carry heavy emotional loads alone. The narratives of RGCs Maya and Aria underscore the need for institutional interventions—such as wellness programs, routine debriefing, and reasonable caseloads—to ensure the sustainability and well-being of school-based mental health providers.

Category 4: Sleep Disruption and Lingered Thoughts

Participants shared that their thoughts often linger long after sessions, disturbing their sleep and rest. Vivid recollections and mental replay of disclosures underscore how trauma seeps into their off-duty hours, impacting their well-being.

“It affects my sleep. There were nights when I couldn’t sleep at all.”

-RGC Dalia (Line: 335–336)

“You picture it in your mind... Even if you didn’t experience what the student said, you imagine their trauma and it affects your sleep quality.”

-RGC Tala (Line: 616–620)

RGC Dalia shared, “It affects my sleep. There were nights when I couldn’t sleep at all.” (Line: 335–336), while RGC Tala echoed this by saying, “You picture it in your mind... Even if you didn’t experience what the student said, you imagine their trauma and it affects your sleep quality.” (Line: 616–620). These reflections reveal that the emotional burden of their work invades even their most private and restorative moments their rest.

In another account, RGC Tala added, “I still carry the burden even after the session. I find myself thinking about the student even when I’m at home.” (Line: 467–472), showing how trauma disclosure doesn’t end when the counseling session concludes it lingers, replays, and imprints itself into their thoughts and dreams. His reflexive journal revealed feelings of sadness, anger, and frustration — all rooted in the ongoing emotional toll and the perceived helplessness within flawed systems meant to protect the youth.

This phenomenon reflects one of the most physically and emotionally taxing symptoms of vicarious trauma: disrupted sleep caused by emotional overload and unprocessed psychological stress. McCann and Pearlman (1990) described how trauma-exposed professionals often experience cognitive and emotional residue, which manifests in biological functions such as sleep. These residual effects, insomnia, fatigue, and restlessness, are more than just symptoms; they are signs of deep psychological wear.

Repollo (2024) likewise found that mental health practitioners who handle intense emotional cases frequently report irregular sleep, especially when formal debriefing mechanisms or peer support are absent. Gallardo and Chavez (2022) confirmed that Filipino guidance counselors, in particular, experience emotional spillover in their personal lives, with sleep disruption as a common result. Wymer et al. (2020) further emphasized that when institutions fail to provide trauma-informed care for caregivers, burnout accelerates with sleep disturbance as one of the earliest and most ignored indicators.

This category reinforces a critical truth: trauma work does not end at the counseling office. Without institutional structures for support, counselors like RGC Dalia and RGC Tala are left to carry not only the pain of others but also the invisible scars that disrupt their healing. Their rest and ultimately, their well-being, become collateral damage in the noble work of caring for others.

Theme 2: Systemic and Institutional Challenges

While RGCs are trained to support students emotionally, their roles are often made more difficult by external barriers. This theme explores the institutional, systemic, and interagency gaps that hinder effective case management, leaving RGCs feeling helpless and unsupported.

Category 1: Delicate and Systemic Nature of Sexual Abuse Cases

Participants described the inherent delicacy and complexity of managing sexual abuse cases, especially those involving family members or individuals in positions of trust. These cases are not only institutionally difficult but also emotionally fragile, requiring great care, discretion, and nuanced judgment. This category explores both the emotional sensitivity of these situations and the systemic factors that complicate timely and appropriate intervention.

“For me, to describe this experience in handling cases of sexual abuse, I think this is a delicate issue and a complicated situation that needs proper attention.” – RGC Aria (Line: 36–37)

“Nung first time kong makarinig ng ganitong case ay shocked... dahil part ng family yung gumagawa ng abuse.” – RGC Lira (Line: 43–45)

RGC Aria and RGC Lira captured the gravity of managing sexual abuse cases by emphasizing their delicate, complex, and emotionally charged nature. RGC Aria described it as a situation that requires careful handling, not just because of its emotional weight, but due to the sensitive dynamics involved between victims and those close to them. For her, these cases require not only empathy but also strategy and heightened caution. RGC Lira, meanwhile, recalled the shock she felt upon learning that the perpetrator in her case was a member of the child’s own family — a revelation that magnified the emotional stakes and complexity of intervention.

These testimonies reflect how sexual abuse cases often exist in emotionally tangled and socially sensitive contexts, especially when perpetrators are family members, guardians, or people in authority. Such dynamics complicate not only disclosure and trust but also the counseling process itself.

Allen and Bond (2020) emphasized that educators and counselors often feel ill-equipped to address sexual abuse cases due to their complexity and the emotional and legal sensitivity required. They noted that many practitioners hesitate to intervene deeply for fear of mishandling the case or further traumatizing the child.

Obong’o et al. (2020) also found that when sexual abuse involves people close to the victim, disclosure becomes more difficult, and so does the work of the counselor. Fear, confusion, and shame from the child’s side, coupled with systemic or familial resistance, create an emotionally fragile terrain that counselors must navigate with both strength and care.

Gallardo and Chavez (2022) observed that in the Philippine context, guidance counselors often operate in schools with limited trauma training and heavy caseloads, making them especially vulnerable to emotional overwhelm when managing these complex cases.

This category affirms that handling sexual abuse cases demands more than clinical skill — it requires emotional stamina, cultural sensitivity, and unwavering ethical grounding. And as these narratives show, counselors carry not just the stories, but the fragile hopes and fears of children trapped in situations that even adults find difficult to confront.

Category 2: Institutional Constraints and Lack of Support

Even when students are ready to speak, institutional gaps delay appropriate intervention. RGCs are forced to operate within systems that lack clear protocols, quick referral pathways, or interdisciplinary collaboration.

“Grade 6 pa pala siya nang maabuso, pero Grade 8 na siya nang lumabas ang kaso.”

*Bago namin nai-report, naghanap muna kami ng pamilyang susuporta sa kanya —
sobrang bigat, pati BP ko tumaas.” – RGC Maya (Line: 39–46)*

RGC Maya's statement reveals the long delay between the abuse and the eventual disclosure of the case, a gap that reflects the institutional and systemic barriers embedded within the school and community. Even when the student was ready to speak, institutional constraints such as the lack of an immediate support structure forced RGC Maya to delay the reporting process. Instead of acting swiftly, she first had to search for a family that could provide safety and support to the victim, knowing the potential backlash or danger of moving without preparation.

The emotional and physical toll of this burden is also evident. Maya's mention of her blood pressure rising is not a casual remark; it's an embodiment of how institutional gaps place the weight of the system on the counselor's body. Rather than being supported by protocols or multidisciplinary teams, the RGC is often left to carry the full responsibility alone.

According to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD, 2021), delays in reporting are often due to the lack of trained child protection personnel within schools and the absence of secure family environments where victims can be safely relocated. This echoes Maya's account and shows that her hesitation wasn't due to inaction but the lack of safe and viable options.

Villamartin (2022) also observed that in many Filipino schools, counselors are the sole point of response for trauma cases, with minimal coordination from school heads or social workers. This leads to delays, emotional burnout, and a sense of isolation among RGCs who wish to act but are institutionally restrained.

Furthermore, Asia Network (2022) pointed out that community stigma and lack of inter-agency collaboration are major contributors to underreporting and mishandling of abuse cases. RGC Maya's need to 'look for a family first' demonstrates how fractured the response system is even within formal structures like public schools.

Berger et al. (2020) stressed the need for trauma-informed training and administrative support in educational institutions to ensure that counselors are not left alone in critical situations. Without proper structures, even the most dedicated RGCs face emotional, ethical, and procedural dilemmas.

The experience shared by RGC Maya underscores a painful truth: that the institutions meant to protect often fall short, and it is the counselor—alone, unguarded—who absorbs the weight. In the absence of clear support systems, it is compassion that holds the case together—but at great cost to the caregiver.

Category 3: Limited Authority and Parental Resistance

In many cases, RGCs reported feeling powerless when parents or guardians refused to cooperate. This resistance often stemmed from financial dependence on the abuser or fear of public exposure, severely limiting the counselor's ability to act.

“Well, I have a case of a female student experiencing sexual abuse from her tito... Actually 67 years old siya... the mother knew it but cannot do anything about it.” – RGC Aria (Line: 40–42)

RGC Aria's experience highlights one of the most paralyzing barriers in case management — the limited authority of counselors when parents or guardians themselves refuse to act. In this case, despite clear signs of abuse, the mother chose inaction due to economic dependence on the abuser. Aria was left in a morally and professionally frustrating position: she knew what had to be done, but the institutional and familial power dynamics did not allow it.

This is not an isolated incident. Asia Network (2022) reported that financial vulnerability is a key reason why many families choose to ignore or cover up abuse, especially when the perpetrator is the family's breadwinner. This aligns with Aria's statement that the mother knew, but "couldn't do anything." Such situations highlight how counselors are not only battling trauma they are also navigating poverty, dependence, and denial.

Villamartin (2022) further noted that RGCs often find themselves "powerless enforcers" of protection policies, especially in settings where legal mechanisms are weak or cultural pressures are strong. Even if a counselor wants to intervene, parental resistance becomes a wall that is both emotional and procedural.

Berger et al. (2020) emphasized that when parents or families are resistant, counselors must rely heavily on inter-agency collaboration. But in many school settings, these collaborations are underdeveloped or nonexistent. This forces counselors to carry the weight of an entire system-without the authority to enforce it.

RGC Aria's case captures the helplessness many RGCs feel: they know what must be done for the child's welfare, but they are institutionally and legally blocked from acting unless the family cooperates. This emotional bind-the knowing, but not being able to act-becomes a silent burden that wears down even the strongest professionals.

In situations like these, counselors are left to protect as far as their boundaries allow-but must also live with the knowledge that those boundaries may never be enough.

2. What signs of vicarious trauma do Registered Guidance Counselors experience when managing cases of sexual abuse involving teenagers?

Theme 3: Vicarious Trauma and Its Effects

This theme captures the personal cost of trauma work on RGCs themselves. As they listen to and support survivors, they too begin to carry emotional scars often silently. Vicarious trauma manifests in their thoughts, relationships, worldview, and well-being

Category 1: Loss of Empathy and Emotional Numbness

Participants describe feeling emotionally distant or blank after repeated exposure to trauma cases. This emotional numbing, while often unconscious, becomes a defense mechanism to keep functioning in the face of overload.

"Sometimes I feel myself detaching, like I'm watching the session from outside myself." – RGC Lira (Line: 308–310)

"You feel helpless because of your limitations as a guidance counselor... you can only do so much." – RGC Tala (Line: 584–587)

Both RGC Lira and RGC Tala speak of a type of psychological detachment that counselors sometimes experience-a subtle yet serious sign of emotional numbing. RGC Lira describes a sensation of disconnection, where she feels like an outsider in her own counseling session. RGC Tala expresses helplessness over the limited actions he can take, which gradually erodes his emotional responsiveness.

McCann and Pearlman (1990) emphasized that vicarious trauma can alter a helper's sense of connection to others. Over time, counselors may begin to emotionally "shut down" as a survival mechanism, to protect themselves from emotional flooding.

Dayal et al. (2021) explained that sustained exposure to traumatic narratives can lead to emotional distancing-a state where counselors unconsciously suppress their emotions to continue

functioning. While this may offer short-term protection, it can also compromise the counselor's ability to form authentic connections with clients.

Maizel (2021) pointed out that when counselors are emotionally unsupported, numbness becomes an unintended consequence. It is not about lacking compassion, but being overwhelmed by too much of it without relief.

This category shows that empathy fatigue is real and it is often silent. It reminds us that even the most dedicated counselors need space to feel, process, and recover. What appears as detachment may actually be a sign that the emotional system has been stretched too far for too long.

Category 2: Spillover into Personal Life and Relationships

RGCs shared that their professional burdens often seep into their personal lives affecting their families, moods, and energy. The emotional load doesn't stop at the office door.

"I get easily irritated at home. My kids notice when I'm not emotionally present." – RGC Maya (Line: 342–344)

"Kawawa yung asawa ko... shock absorber ko siya." – RGC Dalia (Line: 587–592)

The emotional toll of trauma work often follows counselors beyond the walls of the school. RGC Maya candidly shared that her irritability at home does not go unnoticed by her children. In her reflexive journal, she revealed how emotionally draining counseling sessions are, describing the feeling as "as if a part of me has been emptied out." She noted that spending time with her kids and nurturing her plants helps her find peace and recharge from the emotional demands of her role.

Similarly, RGC Dalia acknowledged in both her interview and journal that she relies heavily on her husband for emotional unloading. She stated, "my way of coping mechanism is through unloading to my husband... It eases me to unload my burdens." This reflection adds context to her poignant line during the interview, "Kawawa yung asawa ko," showing how her spouse becomes an emotional container for the pain she carries home from work.

These honest accounts affirm the emotional spillover that occurs when professional burdens disrupt personal peace. The home intended as a space for rest becomes another site of emotional processing. Gallardo and Chavez (2022) found that Filipino counselors often bring their work-related stress into family life, especially when institutional support is lacking.

Repollo (2024) emphasized that compassion fatigue can manifest through strained family relationships and chronic emotional depletion. Slane et al. (2021) also observed that emotional reactivity in trauma counselors often spills into home life when unresolved trauma accumulates.

This category confirms that vicarious trauma affects not just the counselors but also the people who care for them. Without structured avenues for decompression, such as debriefing mechanisms or mental health programs, the emotional toll silently seeps into family relationships—often leaving counselors to carry the weight alone.

Some RGCs cope by withdrawing socially or avoiding emotional engagement, even with close friends or colleagues. This detachment is often a response to emotional saturation.

Category 3: Social Withdrawal and Relationship Strain

"After sessions, I don't want to talk to anyone. I isolate myself even from friends." – RGC Dalia (Line: 347–350)

"May kirot, may sakit pero... Pag nasa school tayo, school... pag nasa bahay, bahay." – RGC Tala (Line: 264–265)

RGC Dalia and RGC Tala both reflect the emotional distancing that often follows trauma work. For Dalia, post-session withdrawal has become a routine coping response; she disengages from social interaction, even with friends, in order to conserve energy and shield herself from additional emotional input. Meanwhile, Tala attempts to draw a line between his professional and personal space, though the statement reveals a subtle struggle with compartmentalization.

Salvilla and Bedoria (2021) found that many Filipino counselors engage in emotional withdrawal as a form of self-preservation. This avoidance, while protective in the short term, can hinder emotional processing and impact social relationships long-term.

Ungar (2021) highlighted that resilience among trauma-exposed professionals includes the ability to remain socially connected. When counselors begin to retreat from interpersonal interaction, it can signal emotional exhaustion or the absence of supportive environments.

Berger et al. (2020) emphasized that without intentional decompression routines or peer debriefing, counselors are more likely to withdraw and internalize distress.

This category shows that social withdrawal is not just tiredness it is often a cry for space and safety. Unless counselors are given space to process what they carry, relationships beyond school even with those they love may suffer.

Category 4: Changed Beliefs about Safety and Justice

Over time, repeated exposure to abuse cases alters counselors' beliefs about the world. They begin to question once-firm assumptions about justice, family, and institutional safety.

"I used to believe all kids had someone to protect them. Now, I question that belief every time I handle these cases."

– RGC Tala (Line: 479–482)

RGC Tala's powerful realization reflects a profound psychological shift—a transformation in belief systems shaped by prolonged exposure to trauma. His words echo the disillusionment that occurs when counselors witness repeated violations of safety and trust, particularly among children who are supposed to be cared for by their own families.

This loss of belief in the protective nature of the world—particularly of adults and institutions—is a classic manifestation of vicarious trauma. What once felt certain becomes destabilized. What once felt sacred, like the right of every child to be protected, becomes a question filled with pain.

McCann and Pearlman (1990) emphasized that trauma-exposed professionals may experience a breakdown in their assumptions about safety, justice, and humanity. Over time, these shifts can affect a counselor's worldview and ability to trust systems and people.

Roberts (2020) also observed that when abuse occurs within families or trusted relationships, the counselor's own values and beliefs are challenged, especially when justice is not served or the system fails to act.

Ungar (2021) reminded us that resilience includes meaning-making-finding new grounding even after core beliefs are shaken. Without opportunities to reflect and recalibrate, RGCs may carry this erosion of belief into other aspects of their life and practice.

This category emphasizes that working with abused children does not just change the counselor's emotions-it can rewire their entire belief system. And unless this shift is processed in a safe and supportive environment, it may leave lasting scars on their personal and professional identities.

Category 5: Sense of Purpose and Impact

"Pero at the same time, nagkakaroon ka din ng fulfillment kasi alam mo na somehow nakatulong ka..." – RGC Maya (Line: 30–32)

Despite the emotional toll and ethical challenges of managing sexual abuse cases, RGC Maya highlights a vital source of motivation — the quiet, personal fulfillment that comes from knowing one has made a difference. Her reflection captures the duality that many guidance counselors face: while the work is emotionally draining, it is also deeply meaningful.

Gallardo and Chavez (2022) found that Filipino counselors derive much of their professional resilience from the sense of purpose they feel when helping students overcome adversity. RGC Maya's statement confirms this-her fulfillment stems not from grand victories but from small moments of knowing she helped a student feel safe, supported, or seen.

Ungar (2021) emphasized the importance of multisystemic resilience-that in environments full of systemic barriers, professionals can still find meaning in their personal actions and relational connections. Maya's sense of purpose is rooted not in policy or structure, but in personal impact, making this an important theme in counselor well-being.

Even as they face internal conflict, external resistance, and institutional gaps, many RGCs like Maya hold on to meaning as their anchor. It becomes their source of renewal the reminder that even in the midst of darkness, their presence can create light.

This category affirms that fulfillment is not just a reward it is a survival mechanism for counselors working in emotionally difficult terrain. Purpose transforms pain into persistence.

Category 6: Coping Through Care, Support, and Faith

In the face of emotional exhaustion and vicarious trauma, Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) turn to a variety of coping and recovery mechanisms. This category explores the intentional strategies they use to manage their emotional well-being — from personal self-care routines, expressive outlets, and spiritual grounding, to informal peer support and help-seeking behaviors. These practices serve not only as responses to stress, but as protective rituals that allow them to continue their critical work with strength and compassion.

"Journaling... then after I read what I wrote, somehow the heaviness is lifted and I can sleep well." – RGC Tala (Line: 639–647)

"Kapag malinis ang bahay at okay ang pamilya, watching K-drama... parang doon ako nakakabawi." – RGC Maya (Line: 655–668)

"Wala pong formal support. Minsan sa colleague ako nakakakuha ng kaunting tulong, pero bihiran rin kasi ang training." – RGC Dalia (Line: 687–691)

"Kailangan ko ng help... talk to the right person." – RGC Aria (Line: 350–352)

"Pagdating sa emotion, family talaga... saka sa Lord." – RGC Dalia (Line: 664–668)

RGCs draw strength from a range of coping strategies from personal rituals to interpersonal and spiritual anchors. These mechanisms are not just responses to stress but deliberate acts of emotional preservation. Whether it's journaling, prayer, quiet moments with family, or simple routines like cleaning and watching comforting shows, these counselors find ways to heal and recharge in the face of intense trauma work.

RGC Tala uses expressive journaling and color association to process emotion and regain clarity, while RGC Maya finds comfort in maintaining a peaceful home and bonding with loved ones. Both demonstrate that recovery can be built through daily acts of self-care. On the other hand, RGC Dalia and RGC Aria emphasize the importance of relational and spiritual grounding highlighting the power of prayer, family conversations, and the rare but essential support from peers. Aria's statement, "Kailangan ko ng help... talk to the right person," reflects not weakness but a healthy willingness to seek help.

Gallardo and Chavez (2022) explained that Filipino counselors often rely on self-directed rituals when formal supports are lacking. Salvilla and Bedoria (2021) also noted that in the absence of institutional debriefing, spirituality and peer conversations act as emotional buffers. Repollo (2024) and Ungar (2021) further confirm that resilience among trauma-exposed professionals must be supported by both personal habits and relational systems.

This unified category affirms that for RGCs, recovery is a multi-dimensional process. It is spiritual, relational, emotional, and deeply personal. In environments lacking formal support systems, these coping anchors become essential lifelines helping counselors stay grounded, capable, and compassionate in the face of others' pain.

3. How do Registered Guidance Counselors conduct and manage their counseling sessions when handling cases of sexual abuse involving teenagers?

Theme 4: Counseling Practices and Techniques

This theme explores the actual strategies and approaches that Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) employ when conducting counseling sessions with teenage survivors of sexual abuse. Their methods reflect a balance of professional training, trauma-informed practices, and deeply personal efforts to ensure safety and trust within each session.

Category 1: Mental and Emotional Preparation

Before engaging with students, RGCs emphasize the need to prepare themselves emotionally and mentally. This preparation helps ensure they can respond with empathy and presence, even in the face of emotionally difficult disclosure

"Mentally training or conditioning myself... preparing myself for what I'm about to hear. If ever I cry, I'll ask for a break to process myself and let the student do the same." – RGC Tala (Line: 386–392)

"Before facing them, I need to be prepared — like a soldier before going to the battlefield. We must be armed." – RGC Tala (Line: 394)

"I really prepare — knowing the full story, background, and matching the right approach. But sometimes, I get emotionally affected when reminded of my own trauma." – RGC Maya (Line: 303–305)

For RGCs Tala and Maya, emotional preparation is not a formality it is a psychological ritual that protects both the counselor and the student. The language they used “conditioning,” “training,” and “arming” reflect how emotionally charged and mentally exhausting each counseling session can be when dealing with cases of sexual abuse. RGC Tala likened his preparation to going to battle, suggesting that counselors expect emotional impact and must steel themselves before each encounter.

RGC Maya further deepened this perspective by admitting that while she thoroughly prepares for each session, past traumas of her own can be triggered. This admission affirms that emotional readiness includes recognizing one’s own vulnerability, and adjusting accordingly to maintain the quality of care.

Dayal et al. (2021) emphasized that trauma counselors must engage in personal reflection and readiness practices before entering sessions involving trauma disclosure. Without this, the risk of emotional spillover and counselor burnout becomes significantly higher.

In addition, Salvilla and Bedoria (2021) pointed out that Filipino mental health professionals often work in emotionally overwhelming settings without adequate debriefing mechanisms. RGC Tala’s mention of taking a break if needed reflects an internal system of self-monitoring, a protective measure in the absence of external support.

Berger et al. (2020) advocated for the importance of institutionalizing trauma-informed training to help RGCs learn structured emotional regulation strategies. The insights of both participants illustrate how, in the absence of such training, counselors rely on personal discipline, inner strength, and peer consultation.

Ultimately, this category reflects that emotional preparation is not a pre-session checklist it is an act of self-preservation, and a commitment to enter each session with the presence and balance that every survivor deserves.

Category 2: Rapport-Building and Session Planning

Participants emphasized the importance of building rapport, gathering background information, and skillfully guiding conversations when necessary. These strategies form the backbone of a safe, structured, and emotionally supportive counseling session especially when working with students who have experienced trauma.

RGC Lira underscored a foundational principle in trauma-informed counseling: trust must come before talk. For students who have experienced sexual abuse, disclosure is rarely immediate. It begins with a felt sense of safety and connection. Lira’s intentional rapport-building becomes a bridge between silence and disclosure — a signal to the student that they are seen, not judged.

In trauma work, rapport is not simply about being friendly. It involves creating a secure emotional environment, especially for adolescents whose vulnerability may be heightened by fear, shame, or mistrust. Gallardo and Chavez (2022) emphasized that Filipino counselors often lean on relational strategies rooted in empathy and respect to build this emotional safety — precisely what Lira demonstrated in her approach.

Helpingstine et al. (2021) noted that without trust, interventions may be resisted, and students may withhold essential details. Establishing rapport gives back a sense of control to the student — an empowering step toward healing. As Lira showed, rapport-building is more than technique; it is protection. It is a promise that the student will not face their pain alone.

At the same time, maintaining structure in the session is just as vital. RGC Tala shared, “I use directing skills to refocus when they go off-topic...” (Line: 444–459). His approach shows

that even while building rapport and emotional presence, counselors must remain attentive to the flow and purpose of the conversation. Trauma survivors often drift or avoid painful content a natural defense mechanism. In these moments, the counselor's role is to gently guide the conversation back to safety and relevance.

Berger et al. (2020) emphasized that trauma-informed counselors must balance emotional space with therapeutic direction. Helpingstine et al. (2021) added that redirection is often essential for processing trauma, but it must be done with sensitivity. Tala's strategy reflects this balance keeping the session focused without disrupting the student's emotional rhythm.

This merged category highlights that effective trauma counseling is a delicate dance of presence and structure. Counselors must anchor the student in trust, gently guide them when needed, and always hold space for healing to unfold not with force, but with compassion.

Category 3: Use of Creative and Expressive Techniques

RGCs often turn to non-verbal or artistic strategies such as journaling, drawing, or color symbolism, to help students' express emotions that may be difficult to verbalize. These methods offer gentle yet powerful alternatives to talk therapy.

"Maybe you can express it through your drawing or through arts." – RGC Tala (Line: 425–430)

RGC Tala's suggestion to use drawing as a form of communication highlights the power of non-verbal expressive techniques in trauma counseling. For students who have experienced sexual abuse, words may feel unsafe, unavailable, or inadequate. Art, on the other hand, offers a way to process and express pain without the fear of being judged or misunderstood.

Tala's statement reveals an important truth in trauma care that creative expression can become a gateway to healing. Using arts as a counseling technique acknowledges that disclosure does not always need to come in sentences. Sometimes, it comes in colors, shapes, and images that speak from the subconscious.

Gallardo and Chavez (2022) observed that creative approaches in school counseling are particularly effective with adolescents, as they allow emotional expression in a way that feels safe and personally controlled.

Helpingstine et al. (2021) also emphasized that alternative modalities such as drawing, journaling, and play therapy have been shown to help trauma survivors externalize distressing experiences in a less confrontational way. In using this technique, Tala gives the student an option that is both gentle and empowering.

This category shows that the counselor's role includes finding creative paths to communication especially when traditional talk therapy becomes too heavy or limiting. Art becomes more than just activity it becomes language, release, and connection.

Category 4: Respectful Encouragement and Safe Space

Respecting a student's pace and silence is a vital part of trauma-informed care. This category emphasizes how RGCs prioritize presence over pressure, fostering environments that feel emotionally secure and free of judgment.

I understand that you don't want to talk right now, but in case you change your mind or you want to speak your mind, I am just here beside you...RGC TALA (Line: 425–430)

RGC Tala's approach reflects a deep understanding of trauma recovery that silence is not a barrier, but a valid and healing response. Rather than pressuring a student to speak, Tala offers quiet assurance and emotional proximity. "Even if they don't speak right away, I stay... and they know I'm here," he implied in his journal. This gentle presence communicates to the student that their pace will be honored and their safety upheld.

For Tala, silence is not discomfort it is care. He reframes silence not as absence, but as presence with respect. In a world where noise often fills the gaps in conversation, Tala allows the quiet to speak. It becomes a space where survivors can simply exist without being interrogated, rushed, or judged.

This mindset aligns with Berger et al. (2020), who emphasized that trauma-sensitive spaces must welcome silence as part of the healing process, not something to "fix." Helpingstine et al. (2021) likewise noted that many survivors of trauma struggle to verbalize pain, and that a counselor's calm, steady presence can often be more powerful than any spoken reassurance.

Gallardo and Chavez (2022) observed that Filipino counselors often rely on empathy driven strategies that center emotional connection. Tala's method reflects this cultural nuance showing that being present and non-intrusive allows students to build trust on their own terms.

Wymer et al. (2020) further affirmed that when students are allowed to control the pace and direction of conversations, the risk of retraumatization is greatly reduced.

This category affirms that creating safe spaces is not just about physical privacy it is about emotional freedom. The freedom to speak, or not. The freedom to breathe, to sit in stillness, and to trust that healing does not need to be rushed. In trauma-informed counseling, silence can be sacred. And presence, without pressure, can be the first step to recovery.

Category 5: Time-Bound and Interrupted Sessions

Many RGCs struggle with the reality of shortened or interrupted sessions due to competing responsibilities. This category captures their efforts to still provide meaningful support despite systemic time constraints.

"Nakokompromise... Pero nakokompromise mo sa most of the time..." – RGC Tala (Line: 557–563)

RGC Tala's candid reflection reveals how the counseling sessions he conducts are often compromised due to overwhelming school responsibilities. Despite his commitment to the student's healing process, the delivery of trauma-informed care becomes difficult to sustain when time is fragmented and his attention is divided. His statement reflects a quiet frustration that, even with the best intentions, the space needed for genuine connection and deep engagement with students is frequently interrupted.

In his reflexive journal, RGC Tala further admitted that some sessions feel "bitin" (unfinished), especially when counseling is squeezed between meetings, report submissions, or other assigned duties. He described moments where he wanted to continue supporting a student but had to cut the session short due to conflicting schedules. These constraints not only reduce the quality of care, but also affect his own emotional readiness, leaving him feeling inadequate or disconnected as a counselor. This struggle aligns with the findings of Maizel (2021), who emphasized that school counselors managing trauma cases often suffer from diluted session quality because of workload conflicts and insufficient institutional support. When guidance counselors are

required to juggle multiple roles, the emotional and relational demands of trauma counseling become increasingly difficult to fulfill. The case of RGC Tala exemplifies how even compassionate and skilled counselors are challenged when the system does not give them the space and time needed to fully support their students.

Category 6: Ensuring Safe and Private Counseling Environment

Creating a physically and emotionally safe space is a critical foundation of trauma-informed counseling. Participants emphasized the importance of privacy and safety not only within the school but also at home. This category highlights how both counselors and families take proactive steps to protect victims from further harm, including physical separation from perpetrators when possible.

“Gumawa ng paraan si nanay na ihiwalay yung bata.”
– RGC Lira (Line: 68)

RGC Lira’s brief but meaningful statement captures an essential part of ethical and trauma-informed practice, the importance of creating a physically and emotionally safe space for the victim. In this case, it was not only the guidance counselor but the parent who collaborated in making that space possible by separating the child from the abuser. While this may appear simple on the surface, the act of ensuring physical distance is a critical first step in preventing re-traumatization. In trauma-informed care, space and environment are not passive settings, they are part of the intervention.

Berger et al. (2020) emphasized that counselors must be intentional in creating settings where students feel both emotionally and physically protected. Safety enables disclosure, and disclosure enables healing. RGC Lira’s experience shows how collaboration with families-when it exists- becomes a protective force.

Additionally, Helpingstine et al. (2021) explained that when victims of abuse are still living within unsafe environments, even the most skilled counseling interventions can fall short. This further underscore the need for safe spaces not just within school walls, but within homes- and the critical role counselors play in helping families recognize this.

Gallardo and Chavez (2022) noted that Filipino guidance counselors often have to mediate between institutional limitations and community-based responses. RGC Lira’s example reflects a rare but powerful success where the family and counselor worked in alignment.

This category affirms that ethical practice is not just about rules or codes-it’s about creating and protecting space where a child can finally exhale, speak, and begin to heal.

Theme 5: Hopes and Aspirations for the Future

Even while burdened and fatigued, RGCs express hope for systemic change. This theme captures their professional dreams for role clarity, support systems, and policies that reflect the weight of their responsibilities.

Category 1: Call for Institutional Support

Even beyond their day-to-day challenges, RGCs carry a heartfelt plea: they need stronger systems to support the emotional and professional demands of their role. Their reflections

reveal that resilience in trauma work cannot be sustained by personal will alone — it must be reinforced by institutions that understand and uphold their value.

RGC Tala expressed this need, saying, “This profession most of the time calls for our heart rather than our mind.” (Line: 721), highlighting that their work requires deep emotional labor that often goes unrecognized. He stressed that RGCs are not just policy implementers — they are frontline caregivers of students in crisis. Without adequate systemic support, the emotional toll becomes overwhelming. He further added, “Sayang naman po ang pagiging RGC ko kung gagawin lang akong panakot... guidance should not be feared.” (Lines: 741–764), reinforcing the need for schools to view guidance as a source of healing, not discipline.

As Ungar (2021) emphasized, resilience in trauma work must be multisystemic, supported not just by inner strength but also by institutional scaffolding. Without clear support structures, counselors are left to carry the emotional weight alone.

Category 2: Role Clarity and Recognition

Another recurring concern among RGCs is the erosion of their professional identity. RGC Aria voiced frustration over blurred roles, stating, “We’re supposed to counsel students and look after their best interests... But if we’re constantly distracted by other tasks, how can we do that?” (Lines: 773–788). Her insight captures a common challenge among guidance counselors in public schools — being pulled into administrative or clerical duties that dilute the heart of their profession.

Both RGC Tala and RGC Aria felt that their core role is misunderstood or misapplied, leading to professional fatigue and disillusionment. Without proper role delineation, even well-trained and committed counselors begin to question their effectiveness.

This category underscores that RGCs do not just seek appreciation — they seek rightful alignment between their expertise and their actual function in the school system. Recognition and clarity are not luxuries; they are foundations for professional dignity and effectiveness.

Category 3: Vision for Mental Health Advocacy in Schools

Amid these frustrations, RGCs remain hopeful that they envision a school culture that embraces mental health as a priority, not a sideline concern. They advocate for the full implementation of the Basic Education Mental Health and Well-being Promotion Act, inter-departmental collaboration, and teacher training on trauma-sensitive practices.

Their vision is not grandiose. As they shared, they simply ask for clarity, respect, and the space to do meaningful work. They dream of a system where guidance is not feared, but trusted. Where teachers, parents, and administrators work in sync to create safe and responsive spaces for the youth.

As Ungar (2021) affirms, systems that promote shared accountability, mental health literacy, and trauma-informed education do more than support professionals — they protect the well-being of the entire school community.

Essence

The lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in managing cases of teenage sexual abuse are marked by a profound emotional, ethical, and professional journey. At the heart of their work lies a deep sense of compassion and responsibility that often goes beyond their formal roles. These counselors navigate the harrowing realities of student trauma while carrying invisible burdens of their own. Their narratives reveal not only the challenges of

navigating institutional constraints and blurred role boundaries but also the personal toll of vicarious trauma that seeps into their thoughts, homes, and relationships. Yet, in the face of this emotional strain, the RGCs find strength in their calling, anchoring themselves in faith, family, and their unwavering desire to protect and empower their students. Their counseling practices are a blend of technical skill and human warmth, often shaped more by heart than by script. Through quiet resilience, reflective practice, and deeply relational work, they emerge not just as professionals but as wounded healers striving to fulfill a mission that demands both mind and soul. This essence affirms that school-based trauma work is not only procedural—it is profoundly personal.

Summary

This chapter presented the results of the study on the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in managing cases of teenage sexual abuse in public high schools. Using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach, the researcher analyzed in-depth interview data and reflexive journals to generate significant statements, meaning units, and synthesized descriptions of experience. A total of 5 themes and 22 categories were developed, structured across the three main research questions and one open-ended question.

For request question 1, which explored the lived experiences of RGCs, two themes and seven categories emerged: (1) Emotional and Psychological Impact, including harrowing experiences, emotional exhaustion, and sleep disruption; and (2) Systemic and Institutional Challenges, involving institutional constraints, parental resistance, and the complexity of abuse cases. These themes reflected the counselors' emotional burden and the structural barriers that limit their response.

The request question 2, which investigated the signs of vicarious trauma, generated one theme with six categories under Vicarious Trauma and Its Effects. Counselors reported emotional numbness, personal relationship strain, worldview shifts, and various coping mechanisms involving self-care, spirituality, and support systems.

For request question 3, focusing on how RGCs conduct and manage their counseling sessions, one theme with six categories was identified: Counseling Practices and Techniques. Participants emphasized mental and emotional preparation, rapport-building, session structuring, creative approaches, and the importance of privacy and presence in trauma-informed care.

The open-ended question captured RGCs' Hopes and Aspirations for the Future as a unifying theme, with three categories on their call for institutional support, role clarity, and the advancement of school-based mental health advocacy.

Although overlapping insights were noted across SOPs, these intersections emphasize the holistic, emotional, and systemic complexity of trauma work in school settings. The findings illuminate the quiet strength, ethical commitment, and human vulnerability of RGCs as they strive to protect and support abused teenagers within often imperfect systems.

4. DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the summary of findings, implications, conclusions, recommendations, limitations, and reflections on the study.

Summary of Findings

The following sections provide a concise yet comprehensive summary of the key findings. The presence of overlapping themes—such as early signs of vicarious trauma and coping mechanisms appearing under both RQ1 and RQ2—is a natural result of the interconnectedness of lived experience. As Moustakas (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized, participants do not separate their feelings, behaviors, and reflections into academic categories. Rather, their narratives flow across emotional, professional, and behavioral domains. In qualitative research, especially within the phenomenological tradition, such overlaps reinforce the validity of the findings by demonstrating thematic consistency and saturation (Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2019).

In this study, Moustakas' phenomenological approach was used to explore the lived experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in managing cases of teenage sexual abuse. Data were gathered through interviews and reflexive journals, and analyzed to generate themes and categories aligned with the study's three main research questions. The findings reveal the emotional, professional, and practical dimensions of the counselors' experiences, including their counseling practices and the signs of vicarious trauma they encounter. These results were further validated through cross-analysis of the participants' reflexive journals, ensuring the credibility and depth of the study. The following sections provide a concise yet comprehensive summary of the key findings.

1. What are the experiences of Registered Guidance Counselors in managing cases of sexual abuse among teenagers?

For request question 1, which focused on the lived experiences of RGCs in managing cases of teenage sexual abuse, the analysis revealed two major themes encompassing seven categories. First, RGCs described profound emotional and psychological impact, including harrowing emotional immersion, emotional fatigue, sleep disturbances, and inner struggles to maintain professional boundaries. Second, systemic and institutional challenges hindered effective case management. These included the complex nature of abuse cases, lack of support systems, institutional inaction, and limited authority in the face of parental resistance. The findings affirm that RGCs are emotionally invested and deeply affected by their work, often navigating it with little structural support.

2. What signs of vicarious trauma do Registered Guidance Counselors experience when managing cases of sexual abuse involving teenagers?

For question 2, which explored the signs of vicarious trauma experienced by Registered Guidance Counselors, the analysis yielded one overarching theme encompassing six categories. The findings reflected the personal toll of repeated exposure to trauma, as RGCs reported emotional numbing, loss of empathy, internalized helplessness, and disruptions in their worldview. Their professional burdens often extended into their personal lives, leading to relationship strain, irritability, and social withdrawal. Despite these challenges, some counselors found strength in their sense of purpose and coped through self-care routines, supportive peer conversations, spirituality, and family connection. These results affirm that vicarious trauma is a lived and pressing reality for RGCs—one that calls for greater recognition and systemic support.

3. How do Registered Guidance Counselors conduct and manage their counseling sessions when managing cases of sexual abuse involving teenagers?

For question 3, which explored how Registered Guidance Counselors conduct and manage their counseling sessions, the analysis revealed one central theme composed of six categories. The findings highlighted a thoughtful and intentional counseling process, beginning with mental and

emotional preparation before each session. RGCs emphasized the importance of building rapport, applying creative techniques such as art and journaling, offering trauma-informed encouragement, and ensuring that sessions took place in emotionally and physically safe spaces. However, time constraints, frequent interruptions, and heavy workloads often compromised the depth and consistency of care. Despite these challenges, RGCs employed adaptive strategies and maintained a strong commitment to providing meaningful, student-centered support.

Open-Ended Question: Hopes and Aspirations for the Future. One theme with three categories emerged. RGCs expressed a strong desire for institutional support, clearer role definitions, and a school culture that prioritizes mental health. They advocated for training, debriefing systems, mental health legislation implementation, and better recognition of the emotional labor involved in their work. These hopes reflect their continued commitment to students, despite professional fatigue.

Overall, the findings portray the emotional complexity, ethical commitment, and resilient practices of RGCs as they carry out trauma-related counseling in public school settings. The themes are interconnected across SOPs, not as repetitions, but as reflections of how lived experiences, emotional consequences, and counseling practices are inseparable in trauma work.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study emphasize the critical need for institutional reforms that prioritize the well-being of Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) engaged in trauma work. Schools must establish structured support systems—such as regular debriefing sessions, balanced counselor-to-student ratios, and access to formal mental health programs—to mitigate emotional overload and vicarious trauma. These support structures must move beyond informal collegial support and become embedded in school policy.

The study also affirms the value of integrating creative and expressive techniques such as journaling, drawing, and color-based tools into standard trauma counseling protocols. These strategies provide alternative pathways for students to process trauma and should be part of the regular toolkit for RGCs.

Role clarification emerged as another urgent concern. RGCs must be allowed to focus on student mental health and crisis intervention, not be burdened with clerical work, administrative duties, or disciplinary enforcement. Clear role boundaries will help preserve their emotional energy and professional identity.

In addition, training and capacity-building programs should be redesigned to emphasize trauma-specific strategies such as trauma-informed communication, managing emotional spillover, and vicarious trauma awareness rather than general counseling approaches. By equipping RGCs with the proper tools and system support, schools can ensure more sustainable, empathetic, and responsive guidance services.

Theoretical Implications

This study reinforced and expanded on the foundational principles of four key theoretical frameworks: Trauma Theory, Ecological Theory, Resilience Theory, and Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenology.

Grounded in Trauma Theory, the findings illustrate that trauma is not confined to direct victims but extends to those who bear witness to their pain. The RGCs experienced emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbances, intrusive thoughts, and spiritual weariness, all classic indicators of

vicarious trauma. These patterns affirm that trauma can be absorbed secondhand and must be acknowledged as a professional risk requiring institutional safeguards.

The relevance of Ecological Theory was also clear. The counselors' experiences were shaped not only by personal capacities but also by system-level forces, including parental resistance, inadequate school protocols, and fragmented referral pathways. The challenges they faced reflect the interconnectedness of individual, institutional, and societal systems. This highlights that trauma intervention in schools must occur across levels, not just within the guidance office, but in coordinated collaboration with families, school leadership, and community agencies.

Aligned with Resilience Theory Richardson (2002), the RGCs demonstrated dynamic adaptation despite their emotional strain. Their resilience was not static or purely internal; it was fueled by faith, reflective practices, meaningful work, family support, and hope. These coping anchors reflect Richardson's model of resilient reintegration, where individuals respond to adversity through growth, recovery, and reconnection with sources of strength. The study confirms that resilience in trauma-exposed professionals is multisystemic and meaning-driven.

Finally, the use of Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenology allowed the researcher to explore not just what RGCs experienced, but how they made sense of their roles while carrying invisible wounds. Through bracketing and thematic synthesis, the universal structures of Body, Time, Space, and Relationship to Self and Others were revealed in the participants' narratives from physical exhaustion to emotional distancing, to strained personal ties and inner growth. The methodology itself became a way to honor the humanity of the counselors.

Collectively, these frameworks affirm that trauma work in school settings is deeply personal, relational, and systemic. Addressing the needs of RGCs demands a response that is as layered as the trauma they carry, grounded in theory, enriched by practice, and sustained by systems that care not just for students but also for the healers.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher arrived at the following conclusions:

1. RGCs undergo profound emotional, psychological, and ethical strain in managing cases of teenage sexual abuse. Their experiences transcend professional obligation, revealing a deeply personal and transformative journey. They absorb not only the narratives of student survivors but also the emotional residue that lingers in their bodies, thoughts, and relationships. Despite overwhelming caseloads and systemic gaps, RGCs continue to serve with compassion sustained by inner commitment, reflective practice, and an enduring sense of purpose.
2. The presence of vicarious trauma among RGCs is undeniable. Emotional exhaustion, detachment, sleep disruption, and even shifts in worldview emerged as clear indicators. These symptoms often go unnoticed or unaddressed due to the absence of formal support systems such as debriefing, supervision, and trauma-specific training. Yet, in the face of this emotional toll, RGCs turn to self-directed coping strategies of faith, family connections, creative outlets, and personal rituals—revealing a quiet resilience shaped by both vulnerability and strength.
3. Despite limited institutional training and systemic constraints, RGCs conduct trauma-related counseling sessions with intentionality, care, and adaptability. Their approaches include mental and emotional preparation, building rapport, honoring student silence, and integrating creative techniques like journaling and art. These practices reflect a trauma-informed mindset rooted not just in professional ethics, but in deep empathy and human presence. Their sessions are anchored not in rigid techniques, but in flexibility, intuition, and relational safety.

Overall, the study concludes that the work of Registered Guidance Counselors in handling teenage sexual abuse is not only professionally complex but also deeply human. Their ability to remain present for others while carrying invisible wounds of their own reflects both the cost and the calling of school-based trauma work. Addressing their needs through systemic support, role protection, and trauma-informed care is not just beneficial, it is essential.

Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive analysis of the study's results and findings, the following recommendations are proposed by the researcher.

For Students: Promote safe and open access to counseling services. Establish trauma-informed classroom environments that encourage self-disclosure and healing.

For Parents: Engage in open communication with children and collaborate with school counselors. Learn how to support trauma recovery without judgment or pressure.

For Teachers: Attend orientation on trauma-informed teaching. Know when and how to refer students appropriately and support the work of the RGCs.

For School Administrators: Institutionalize case debriefing and emotional support programs for counselors. Reduce non-counseling responsibilities and ensure equitable distribution of workload to allow RGCs to focus on their core function—addressing student mental health and trauma concerns.

For DepEd & Secretary Sonny Angara: Use these findings to inform the implementation of RA 11036 and the Basic Education Mental Health and Well-being Promotion Act. Allocate funding for trauma support programs and ensure that RGCs are provided with regular and mandatory training on trauma-informed counseling, vicarious trauma management, and sexual abuse case handling.

For PGCA & Mr. Christopher Hernandez: Integrate trauma resilience, vicarious trauma recovery, and specialized case management into national training frameworks. Advocate for wellness programs, clear caseload limits, and the establishment of structured peer supervision to reduce burnout among RGCs.

For Future Researchers: Explore the long-term psychological effects of school-based trauma work. Consider conducting comparative studies between designated guidance teachers and licensed RGCs to deepen the understanding of trauma load and effectiveness. It is also recommended to expand future studies beyond a single Schools Division Office (SDO) and include participants across different regions to capture a more diverse range of experiences and perspectives, especially in areas where the number of RGCs is limited.

Limitations

This study was limited to five Registered Guidance Counselors within the Schools Division of Cavite, where only a small number of licensed RGCs were available for participation. As a result, the findings reflect a focused but limited scope and may not fully represent the broader experiences of RGCs across different school divisions or regions. Additionally, the study was constrained by time and the emotional sensitivity of the topic, which may have influenced the depth and openness of participant disclosures. As qualitative phenomenological research, the results are not intended for generalization but rather to offer deep, contextual insights into the lived experiences of RGCs handling cases of teenage sexual abuse.

Reflection

As both a Registered Guidance Counselor and a doctoral student, conducting this study became more than an academic pursuit; it turned into a deeply emotional and reflective experience. The use of reflexive journaling throughout the research process allowed the researcher to acknowledge how personal experiences and professional identity shaped the approach, interpretation, and connection with the data.

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that providing participants enough time to process and respond encouraged more meaningful and heartfelt conversations. When participants struggled to express themselves, simpler or Taglish versions of the questions were offered, creating a more relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. This helped build a safe space where trust could grow a vital component when discussing sensitive topics like sexual abuse and exploitation.

The participants responded to the questions at varying paces and emotional depths. Some could recall their experiences with clarity, while others found it difficult, especially when recounting cases involving perpetrators within the family. One RGC, who had handled the highest number of such cases, viewed it as a routine part of the profession an indication of how prolonged exposure to trauma can normalize even the most painful stories. In contrast, others still carried the emotional burden visibly, noting changes in their physical health such as weight loss and stress-related fatigue. Despite this, their commitment to serve and their compassion for students never wavered.

One story that affected the researcher profoundly was about a child abused by their father. As a mother, this struck a deep emotional chord. The researcher imagined what it would feel like if it were their own child and found themselves grappling with overwhelming anger toward the perpetrator and even the passive response of some parents. These emotions were carried long after the interviews ended, reflecting the silent pain counselors often hold.

Through this study, the researcher developed a deeper appreciation for the counseling profession. Initially, the researcher did not envision a career in this field and had dreams of a business career. However, this journey revealed that fulfillment doesn't always come from wealth or prestige. Sometimes, it is found in quiet service listening to wounded children and walking with them toward healing.

Establishing rapport with the RGC participants helped lighten the weight of this work. The researcher approached them with gratitude, flexibility, and respect, and in turn, the RGCs opened their hearts, generously sharing their time and stories. As someone working in the same field, the researcher found it easier to relate to their approaches and understand their realities. From the use of case notes, logbooks, and session guides to unique techniques developed over time, each RGC had a system shaped by experience and necessity. The researcher also shared personal methods, and it was affirming to hear that some found them helpful and worth trying in their own practice.

There was also a sense of mutual learning. The relationship between the researcher and the participants was not just researcher and subjects; it was a partnership of colleagues exchanging best practices, supporting one another, and affirming their shared goals in student care. The honesty of the RGCs eased some of the researcher's fears about the risks and responsibilities of counseling. It became clear that everyone carries the same commitment and concern for students; they simply need more support.

As the interviews progressed, it became evident that the RGCs' aspirations are deeply aligned: to improve the quality of their professional careers for the betterment of the school community and, above all, for the children they serve. This common aspiration is not only about

enhancing their individual practice but also about creating a more supportive and effective educational environment for students who face trauma. The RGCs expressed a shared vision of strengthening the school system's capacity to address the emotional needs of students, recognizing the need for more trained professionals in the field, as well as the critical importance of adequate institutional support. Their drive for personal and professional growth is rooted in their desire to contribute to their students' well-being.

The recent passage of the Mental Health Law in Basic Education offers a ray of hope. They look forward to a time when this law is fully implemented ensuring proper roles, protection, and compensation for guidance counselors. As frontliners in mental health, they carry the weight of others' trauma, often in silence. And yet, our purpose is clear: to provide timely intervention and compassionate support to every student in need.

One statement from a participant deeply resonated with the researcher: "Tayo ay registrar slash events coordinator slash liaison officer." It encapsulated the reality many RGCs face expected to juggle roles far beyond their primary function. This multitasking often dilutes the quality of their counseling services, yet the heart of their work remains rooted in their love for students.

This research journey reaffirmed that counseling is more than compliance with policies or administrative reports; it is heart work, sacred work. And in telling the stories of others, the researcher has also reclaimed parts of their own.

Summary

Chapter 4 discussed the findings drawn from the lived experiences of five Registered Guidance Counselors (RGCs) in handling cases of teenage sexual abuse, using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological approach. Three core themes emerged: the emotional and systemic challenges of case management, signs of vicarious trauma, and the intentional practices RGCs use in conducting trauma-informed counseling. An open-ended question also revealed their aspirations for institutional support, role clarity, and full implementation of mental health programs in schools. The study's implications highlight the need for structured debriefing, trauma-specific training, clearer role boundaries, and policy-based counselor support. The conclusions affirm that RGCs experience deep emotional and ethical strain, yet continue to serve with compassion and resilience. Recommendations were made for students, parents, teachers, school administrators, DepEd, PGCA, and future researchers to help strengthen trauma response in education. The study's limitations include its small, localized sample and the sensitive nature of the topic, which might have affected the depth of disclosures. Finally, the researcher's reflection revealed how the study became a personal journey of empathy and shared healing, underscoring that school-based trauma work is both emotionally sacred and professionally vital.

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