

Guiding from the Distance: Counselling Experiences During the Pandemic

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Abstract

The main goal of this study is to describe narrative moments of guidance counselors on transactional distance in education during COVID-19 pandemic. Sharing their stories, eight (8) participants who ventured on tele-counseling with their clients were the data source. Three variables of Transactional Distance Theory had some parallel inclinations to event structures: i. dialogue (counselor-client interaction), ii. structure (tele-counseling and communication needs), and iii. learner autonomy (client participation in distance education). These variables exemplified a community-based learner support system. Each narrative drew out a web of concerns such as limitations and practicality applying a set of guidelines in multimodal counseling sessions. Almost exclusively, the findings were contained within the structure of narratives reflecting an aghast transition to tele-counseling that demands a committed and sustainable network of learner support. Mechanisms involved foster a two-way, technology-mediated communication to achieve a collaborative learner support system between the guidance counselor and the client.

Keywords— stories of transactional distance, distance education, guidance counselors, remote counseling, narrative inquiry

I. INTRODUCTION

Taking the heed on the call for counseling services to be available and exploring their possibilities during the implementation of varied distance learning modalities, guidance counselors have ventured into e-counseling because of its accessibility, convenience, and efficiency (Wells, 2021). Just like Wells, Snow and Coker (2020), contrary to the aforementioned features, presented that many counseling faculty considered, in-class, face-to-face (F2F), personal encounters as foundational and irreplaceable counselling and psychotherapy strategy. The abrupt growth of distance education due to the pandemic has also triggered the relevance of transactional distance (Moore, 1993; 2013) in various educational levels such as in the basic education (Epperson & Blevins, 2020; Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2008) and higher learning (Gavrilis, 2020; Mbwesa, 2014).

Given the constraints during this health crisis, the novel mode of counselling is a useful adjunct to traditional modes of practice (Wells, 2021) and continues to challenge the sovereignty of the purely residential experience amidst the advent of distance learning (Snow & Coker, 2020). Also, there are two motivations in providing education programs including counseling particularly, the desire to provide greater access for traditionally underserved populations (Bennett-Levy et al., 2012) and to view distance education programming as a source of revenue, growth, and efficiency (Jones, 2015). Snow and Coker believed that the counseling profession should take the lead in proactively investigating the promise of the distance education experience, including the technologies, pedagogies, and methods.

With all these, there are also available virtual trainings for teachers to upskill and reskill themselves such as behavioral trainings (Jones, 2015), integration of technological advances

into clinical training and practice (Barnett, 2018), and other web-based modality of trainings (Chapman, et al., 2011) specially to investigate the impact and efficacy of technology-based counseling offered in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions (Wells, 2021). Having the limitations of face-to-face interaction, high-tech counseling (Layne & Hohenshil, 2005) has been seen to have significant implications to the future of technology in the counseling profession. Recognizing the use and role of technology has been emphasized by Anthony (2003) in counseling and psychotherapy. Although there are pros and cons in online counseling (Speyer & Zach, 2011), Murphy, et al. (2009) noted that there are more and more clients who are turning to cyber counseling (Mallen et al., 2003) and Richards (2009) reported satisfaction with online counseling and the service's impact within the community of service users or the clients.

This paper investigates transactional distance as experienced by guidance counselors in turbulent settings caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Guidance services must address the need for a technology-augmented counseling to contextualized situations, particularly in learning communities that they currently serve the stakeholders especially the learners. The Philippine guidance counselor practicum-based training has addressed this need and the quick-shift to distance education forced the counseling programs to be done virtually.

II. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

In the Philippines, the Department of Education or DepEd (2020) has reinforced a mental health awareness campaign amid COVID-19 situation. As stated, the DepEd continues to extend assistance to its constituents as at least 600 personnel nationwide were able to learn more about Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services and Psychological First Aid. Contrary to the good intentions of DepEd, the overarching issue of the guidance counselors in the Philippines has continued even at the present as observed by Cervantes, et al. (2019).

It was noted that the issues and challenges of the guidance counselors were the lack of training, limited technology and skills, and guidance counselors' insufficiency (Cervantes, et al., 2019). While there are constraints encountered in terms of vulnerability to heightened risks of stress, fatigue, burnout, and poor mental health due to the nature of their work, Tayoto (2019) said that school counselors appeared to have been strengthened in performing their job as a result of their professional resiliency and effective self-care strategies.

Generally, counseling, a strong support in the welfare of the students, is needed in addressing the different concerns of students (Arrieta, et al., 2021). This also nurtures them toward achievement of personal competence, being aware of their surroundings, and relating to significant others with social values (Ignacio & Fabella, 2019). To elaborate, learners' concerns focused on mental health issues, feeling of isolation, voluminous requirements and unstable internet connection. In addressing them, guidance counselors provided individual and group counseling, communicated with the parents, collaborated more closely with the class advisers, teachers, and academic heads, strengthened the homeroom and guidance period, and held mental health activities (Arrieta, et al., 2021). All these can be found in interventions that nurture academe-community-workplace interface under academic development, followed by those under career development, and the least, those under personal-social development (Flores & Rodrigo, 2013).

To rationalize the focus of this research on the narratives of guidance counselors during the pandemic in ensuring the holistic development of the learners, Gallardo and Chavez (2022) shared that, despite their crucial role, there is little research exploring the experiences and perceptions of guidance counselors in terms of wellness programs, well-being, self-care practices, and retention. Contextualizing this in the present study, the "transactional distance (TD)", the perception of psychological distance

between the student and his peers, his instructor (guidance counselor in this case), and the learning content, has long been a prominent construct in research on distance education (Moreno, et al., 2021; Stapleford, et al., 2020; Nelson, 2019) wherein guidance counseling plays a vital role in terms of clients' satisfaction and its outcome as a whole (Murphy, et al., 2009). The researcher looked into the narratives through the meaning-making of guidance counselors on their environment in the new normal educational landscape. The researcher gathered the lived experiences of the guidance counselors and their challenges in the new normal (Arrieta, et al., 2021), guidance activity in both career counseling and youth support practice (Ignacio & Fabella, 2019), and work environment and intrapersonal factors (Gallardo & Chavez, 2022).

All these have to be given value in education especially in formulating policies paving way to student counseling practice in ODL-based academic institutions, particularly with respect to informing online ethical imperatives (Wells, 2021) in order to set guidelines on the demonstration of skill development that would be evidenced in the practice of appropriate interpersonal skills, and counseling techniques and strategies within the context of a counseling session (Cicco, 2011) in terms of its outcomes, acceptability, and impact of support (Bennett-levy, et al. 2012).

III. RESEARCH FOCUS AND QUESTIONS

This study focused on describing the transactional distance from the narratives of guidance counselors reflected by their lived experience in distance education amidst the pandemic. This also aimed to understand the needs and solutions or practices of guidance counselors to hurdle the challenges encountered in counseling at a distance that emerged because of the educational crisis. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions: What does transactional distance reveal about the narrative structure of guidance counselors who have provided their counseling services in a distance education during COVID-

19 pandemic? What do guidance counselors in the academe learn from the experience on transactional distance and how does this inform their counseling practices in distance education?

IV. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

While the philosophical precursor of this paper adheres to the epistemology of subjectivism, this Narrative Inquiry (Benson, 2005) explored on some implications of developments in educational technology for distance education particularly used in counseling service that encapsulates the centrality of qualitative enquiry in relation to understanding and improving experience. As our educational landscape has radically changed due to the pandemic, postmodernism (Crotty, 2002) as a theoretical perspective captures the contingency of counseling services and the experience of the guidance counselor in the new normal—the big stories that cultures are telling themselves in order to understand and legitimate their practices (Lyotard, 1993) and the narratives that are fragmenting into disorderly array of little, local stories and struggles, with their own irreconcilable truths (MacLure, 1995).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) define narrative inquiry as "collaboration between the researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. It is the use of narratives as a qualitative inquiry approach for investigating educational issues, reflecting its value as one of the mind's core sense-making activities (Lodge, 1990). In this sense, guidance counselors do not just simply tell stories—they enact them (Pentland, 1999).

Consequently, narrative is a means of gaining an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved with the resulting insights having the potential to 'directly influence policy, practice, and future research (Merriam, 1998). For this qualitative research method dedicated on documenting how guidance counselors made sense of their key life as service providers and support to learners even faced with many constraints in distance education, the Transactional Distance Theory

([TDT], Moore, 1993; 2013) can be a useful framework for the new normal counseling practice. Applying the theory's concepts, the TDT suggests that if we reduce the psychological space between participants (i.e. clients) and instructors (i.e. guidance counselors) through counseling strategies appropriate for virtual or limited face-to-face interaction, it will likely lead to better outcomes and client satisfaction.

Participants

The participants of this narrative inquiry research consisted of guidance counselors who have ventured their counseling practices into various delivery modes aligned to the learning continuity plan of their respective schools. There were eight (8) participants who willingly shared their narrated moments of transactional distance having schools that resorted to implementing distance education amidst the constraints brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Procedures of the Study

The researcher requested the consent of the guidance counselors to share their narratives about counseling in distance education. This cohort of guidance counselors has provided their services and programs through tele-conferencing and other virtual modalities. This meant that their own counseling practice to their clients has been influenced by transactional distance since the start of the pandemic in the Philippines. Since this study is a narrative inquiry, the researcher came up with varied methods to analyze stories of guidance counselors gathered through an in-depth interview for each case and through the counselor's reflection logs. The study used an open-ended interview guide to secure a productive and efficient gathering of narrative moments from the participants.

Inspired by the work of Kaufmann (2007), this paper made use of narrative analysis of the interview data collected using Bal's (1999) concept of an event and Moustakas's (1994) concept of data reduction. This involved identifying narratives using surface features for the description extracted from

phenomenological data (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015; Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). In narrative inquiry, its research method permits a 'holistic way of characterizing the phenomena of human experience (transactional distance)' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.2) which recognizes the role of the story-teller (guidance counselors) for inclusion and as a means of drawing individual cases together in order to make sense of them (Merriam, 1998).

V. FINDINGS

This paper investigated the experience of guidance counselors on how transactional distance affected the provisions of support to learners through counseling. Through the narratives shared by the participants, the discussion revolves on the stories of adjustments to the new normal, use of technology, and emphasis of the stakeholders' involvement respectively. A grounding to the theory of transactional distance further supports how the counseling in distance education can be better understood in the new normal.

Narrative Structure of Transactional Distance among Guidance Counselors. There were three (3) narrative structures that surfaced regarding transactional distance as shared by the guidance counselors particularly about the difficulty of counselor-client interaction, client counseling needs for tele-counseling, and willingness to participate as indicated in Table 1. Although separation by space and time is the most prominent characteristic of distance education, transactional distance is the actual guiding principle in the learning modality, influencing the process of teaching and learning (Moore, 1993)—in this case, the counselor and the client.

Table 1: Nature of Transactional Distance in Counseling

Variables of Transactional Distance	Narrative Moments of Guidance Counselors	
	Narrative Structure	Themes
Dialogue	<i>Introduction</i>	<i>Counselor-Client Interaction</i>
Structure	<i>Middle</i>	<i>Tele-counseling and Communication Needs</i>
Learner Autonomy	<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>Client Participation in Distance Education</i>

Difficulties in Building Up Counselor-Client Interaction

The *introduction* of the narratives from guidance counselors unearthed one of the elements of transactional distance which is the dialogue. This explained the experience of difficulty in establishing rapport between the counselors and their clients in distance education. To elaborate, the guidance counselors had hesitations on the way they have to explore new mode of counseling just like Kurt who said, “[...] *the first time I conducted a remote counseling was difficult...*” and Darnel who shared, “[...] *the very first time I did my remote counseling, I was worried on how can I connect with my client since the session will be done via phone call because [the] client is also hesitant for a video call.*” All worries of guidance counselors were also evident in the narrative of Weena:

I find it hard to establish rapport with the students during the remote counseling, maybe because of some factors that I consider very challenging. The internet connection was not stable and I, as a Guidance Counselor, am hesitant to go on with the session [...] I'm stressed and not effective in dealing with the client, compared to having a face-to-face interaction.

Even seasoned guidance counselors had a hard time dealing with transactional distance. This was emphasized by Meg who said that:

Building rapport with client/ learners from a distance can be a challenge especially this remote counseling is new to me even as a Guidance Counselor for more than 13years. I felt uncomfortable at first; but as I joined webinars and group meetings, I learned how special remote counseling is.

Inequities in Providing Tele-Counseling and Communication Needs

While there has been training provided on tele-counseling, guidance counselors seemed to experience insufficient support from the administration to have a quality outcome of tele-counseling for the clients or learners. In the *middle* of the discussion, most of their narratives textured stories on the need for a technology-based support system for an enough communication to be established by the guidance counselors with their clients. This is similar to the next variable of transactional distance on structure. It was pointed out by Jose that “*Most interactions with learners are done online and via phone call. [...] The unavailability of technological resources of learners makes it challenging for counselors to run programs and render appropriate services.*” In addition to this, Sandra felt her inability to provide quality services to the stakeholders:

I feel that this pandemic was very limiting about offering services to our stakeholders and we have just relied on community services available to our learners. I have initiated an online survey to check on the mental health of our learners, teachers, and non-teaching staff but the limitations as to connectivity remained a problem.

Another sentiment on tele-counseling was enumerated by Sandra:

[...] I consulted my principal but since IATF (Inter-Agency Task Force) regulations and the school as well don't allow learners to be in school [...], I just referred the case to the family in close coordination with the teacher adviser of the learner. Remoteness greatly affected how the case could have been managed and how the

learner could have processed herself and the issues as compared to conducting these in F2F. Indeed, schools must address the technological needs of both the guidance counselors and the learners in order to optimize the benefits that they can have through guidance services and programs in distance education. Meg illustrated a realistic scenario about her clients:

The students had little knowledge about the use of ICT in (remote) counselling because of the limited internet connection and some don't have gadgets. I struggled to fully realize my role during the pandemic. The barriers that I faced are a part of feeling the lack of support and available policies that undermined my work.

For tele-counseling becomes a trend now, Lance felt that “using gadgets has become a second nature wherein [...] there is no significant difficulty to move from face-to-face counseling to the virtual one. On the other hand, one of his clients no longer participated in the next counseling sessions. Lance laid out some reasons:

I learned later on, after having a personal talk with her [...], several reasons why she discontinued counseling including but not limited to: not being comfortable with virtual counseling, feeling awkward talking to a male counselor, rapport-building not fully established, and having symptoms of anxiety and depression due to the distance during the pandemic...

Should these structure concerns be given enough attention, more and more clients could have been reached out as supported by Sandra's narratives: “It is a very challenging feat for a counselor in a public school, knowing that learners cannot readily connect to an internet just to have sessions with us.” Meanwhile, Weena revealed that one “[...] can't cater all the students being referred, so [...] the most critical cases are given immediate attention first.”

Challenges in Dealing with Clients' Needs to Participate

Even though they have extended their time and effort in accommodating clients beyond office hours and even during weekends and holidays,

guidance counselors still cannot cater a client's diverse needs online. The *conclusions* in the guidance counselors' narratives usually summarize the accomplishments of their services and programs in the form of tele-counseling and virtual consultations. This is also anchored on how a guidance counselor promotes learner autonomy to address the psychosocial needs within the safety of the client's home guided by a parent or the community as a whole. All these can be gleaned on the statement of Jose who said,

To minimize these [miscommunication and transactional distance], I prefer to talk to them rather than sending chats. If the learner has the resources to use the internet and is capable of viewing pictures and videos, I use pictures with instructions highlighting some parts [...] to aid their queries. My clients need to feel valued. The fact that they reached out means also they acknowledged that, regardless of the distance, help is available.

Amidst the difficulty of not meeting clients in a F2F modality, Darnel continues to reach out to the parents in order to help learners along the way. As specified by Darnel,

[...]it would take me more sessions to observe the openness or reservations of the client. Involvement of the parents who have the willingness to work together for the better outcome of the session has a great impact for the learner to trust and be more open.

Kurt also revealed that there is a challenge to validate the responses of the client in all the sessions. He expounded that:

Somehow, this (validating a client's response) was a challenge because I used to observe every detail both the verbal and non-verbal cues [...]. Having done this online, it is hard to make an assessment of whether the client is telling the truth or not.

Having all these challenges, Darnel cited three (3) cases that she had handled exploring the features of tele-counseling to cope with transactional distance. At the end of her narratives, she shared her emotion toward the sessions as follows:

[...] *It was heartwarming to get the child involved to a tele-conference via video call and be back in school having constant positive feedback. The session comes to an end when the client is able to open up with his parents and is more self-reliant.*

As this scenario is on a case-to-case basis, Darnel also highlighted the challenge for a support system needed by the client at home. She elaborated that:

[...] *support from the parents seemed insincere, as reaching goals set during each session was a failure. What makes the case difficult are the behavioral and the academic problems of the learner that are not mitigated at home—the new normal learning environment. Hence, I needed to explore another approach for this matter.*

Basically, Sandra pointed out, that in order for a learner to actively participate in tele-counseling, one needs to use strategies involving various individuals in a learning community. She said,

I highlighted through our virtual orientation for class advisers that our approach (in tele-counseling) is community-based while learners could immediately ask for help or assistance in times of need from their family members and the barangay officials or the community wherein they are located. I emphasized the significance of referral protocols and the willingness to ask for help.

Tele-Counseling Practices in Distance Education. Transforming the narrative events (introduction, middle, and conclusion) of the guidance counselors into their current practices, the researcher employed the lens of Transactional Distance Theory to systematically analyze significant narrative moments from the descriptions of tele-counseling and other services initiated by the guidance counselors making a responsive learner support in a distance education. This is stipulated in Table 2.

Table 2: Narrated Practices of Guidance Counselors in Distance Education

Variables of Transactional Distance	Tele-Counseling Practices of Guidance Counselors
Dialogue	<i>Consultation Time, Netiquette, Updating and Monitoring</i>
Structure	<i>Guidelines and Protocols, Multi-modalities, Technology-Mediated</i>
Learner Autonomy	<i>Community-Based, Collaborative Approaches</i>

In terms of *dialogue*, guidance counselors recalled how they adjusted to the new normal counseling and devised plans to update and monitor progress of the clients in each session. This involved consultation time and netiquette to be observed by both parties—guidance counselor and client. Jose mentioned about monitoring and updating clients undergoing tele-counseling:

Whether there is a pandemic or not, this can aid us counselors for follow up purposes and update the clients' status. It is also helpful during emergency cases since hotlines and contact information have been made available for them. Although we try to be as open and available to our learners, boundaries are still established [...] such as instituting consultation time and netiquette.

Jose added to his narrative that:

[...] *the Department of Education and the Philippine Guidance and Counseling Association or PGCA issued guidelines on how to do online and/or tele-counseling to ensure confidentiality and to regulate the counseling process.*

The initiative and inventiveness of the guidance counselors can also be observed amidst all the limitations. Jose further shared his experience and emphasized, “[...] *to somehow deliver my message clearly, I usually try to be resourceful by using a combination of online platforms and following this up with a phone call to establish (better) rapport.*”

As an affirmation, Christian acknowledged that the transactional distance felt during tele-counseling challenges the guidance counselors to make ways for services to reach the clients:

I think distance counseling is a challenge when overcome can hone the skills of the counselor. I believe that counselors are challenged to be more creative, focused, and attuned with subtle nuances of his/her client, to have effective interventions given in online platforms.

Understanding the role of technology in tele-counseling, **structure** must be considered in schools offering distance education. The narratives of the guidance counselors accentuated the guidelines and protocols that must be appropriately applied to the multi-modalities as a description to online platforms blended with the limited face-to-face consultations, if permitted. *Christian* said, “there were changes in the counseling practices because we have shifted to distance counseling and employed the use of the online platforms for communication.” Moreover, he went into the details that:

[...] although the steps in the counseling process can still be utilized remotely, for me, the set-up changes its “quality”. While the tone of voice can reveal the emotions of my client, there are still some non-verbal cues that can be missed out during distance counseling.

Along with the challenges in using technology in tele-counseling is the proactive response of the guidance counselors to explore possibilities in providing support programs to the learners. *Kurt* experienced struggles in using technology in counseling but he persevered for his client:

[...] to be honest, I have difficulty with tele-counseling because I don’t have enough knowledge and skills about it. Having persistence and determination, I used these

values to explore on my own and attend training on tele-counseling. All these enhanced my skills but it is not a guarantee that the client will open up to the counselor with all honesty and may not feel comfortable due to distance.

In addition to this, *Sandra* insisted that there must be administrative support for smooth technology-mediated counseling to exist in schools. She said,

I think the focus should be on administrative support to provide psychosocial services available to all learners. Improving access to guidance and counseling services will make learners benefit from it greatly. The technology that needs to be provided in schools to carry out tele-counseling online must connect the guidance counselors and the client to go on with the sessions accordingly.

Lastly, guidance counselors have to deal with **learner autonomy** in conducting counseling in distance education. While this involves the client’s personal choice to participate, community-based and other alternative approaches have been recommended by the guidance counselors.

Community-Based Tele-Counseling for Learner Autonomy. As the focus of the services and programs conducted by the guidance counselors, learner autonomy is the center of their narratives on tele-counseling. Indicated in Table 3, the researcher used the major series of events in all the stories capturing guidance counselors’ involvement with the community as a learner support in distance education.

Table 3: Narratives on a Community-Based Tele-Counseling in Distance Education

Tele-Counseling in Distance Education	Stories of Tele-Counseling Sessions as Narrated by Guidance Counselors
Community-Based Approach for Learner Autonomy (based on the variable of the TDT)	<i>Online or Remote Counseling Sessions Two-Way, Technology-Mediated Communication Collaborative Counseling</i>

VI. ONLINE OR REMOTE COUNSELING SESSIONS

Guidance counselors labelled their services given to the clients as online, remote, or distance counseling sessions. The majority also

referred to this as tele-counseling. *Lance* described the session, “I think that if the proper counseling steps and principles are being followed, counseling will still be effective even if done remotely.”

Likewise, Kurt expounded the challenge of practicing tele-counseling sessions in his school facing issues on the internet and screen time:

Because many clients cannot continuously connect to the internet or have limited connectivity, we have settled to chat messaging. And if it's done through video conferencing, it does not end for an hour but extends up to 2 hours which is even more tiring and becomes a burden while I attend to the needs of my family while I work from home.

As stated, Kurt recognized the advantages and disadvantages of conducting tele-counseling sessions. He also shared that the changes in the platform are also dependent on the internet connection or its availability to both the guidance counselor and the client:

The changes made counseling approach to have positive and negative impacts in delivering counseling services. There are times that I have a strong (internet) connection resulting in a better online session. But of course, a back-up plan is always prepared to minimize the constraints brought by intermittent internet connectivity.

The same work-from-home sentiment was observed in the narratives of Darnel who gave the following fine points on tele-counseling:

Having online session, either via phone call and text messaging or video conferencing and chat, goes beyond an hour making it more tiring and at some point, a burdensome endeavor because one has to spend time with the client compromising one's family bonding while extending the work schedule at home.

Darnel continued her discussion on online or remote counseling sessions and recommended that practicing guidance counselors must reflect and learn from her own experience:

Working and thinking about work-home boundaries for me is easier said than done since one cannot just ignore a client even in the middle of the night when he needs your full attention and support particularly during the phase of establishing rapport [...] which has a great impact for the continuity of the online sessions.

VII. TWO-WAY, TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

It was explicit in the narratives of the guidance counselors on how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) becomes vital in distance education. Meg shared,

The extent of the use of ICT is currently integrated to counseling services which changed my practices including the process. Online questionnaires and virtual interviews were used to collect data from students. The students were made to write about their life stories as well online. Then, learners have to undergo a series of sessions mediated by technology.

As technology mediates the communication between the guidance counselor and the client, Meg further explained how professional counselor-client interaction is built online which is highly contingent to the extent of ICT integration and all other ethical imperatives:

Remote counseling and other learner support services are direct provisions for academic and personal learner needs that use technology as a two-way communication—that is, one of the important factors in minimizing transactional distance. Working online involves a distinct set of ethical challenges [...] In all cases, the established values, principles, and personal moral qualities provide useful points to consider in remote or online counseling.

Among the narratives of the guidance counselors, the majority of them have been practicing tele-conferencing according to the principles and guidelines recommended by the DepEd and PGCA. Through this, implications of tele-counseling to ethical responsibilities were asserted in the narratives of Jose who said, *Technology-mediated communication works when there is availability of resources, proper training, accessibility of guidelines, and of course, the counselor's willingness to adapt [...]. The PGCA has given us training on online counseling and DepEd has issued guidelines especially on using not only one media but also combining different means to reach one's goals to benefit the client.*

VIII. COLLABORATIVE COUNSELING

Collaborative method of counseling does not only focus on establishing rapport between the counselor and the client but also focusing on social relationships. As *Darnel* specified,

This also becomes an avenue to appreciate the importance and collaboration of the learners, parents, and other institutions. For effective counseling, the learners and parents should be aware of the problems and learner needs and must be responsive for any intervention or provision.

From an institution implementing a school-wide manner of tele-counseling, *Sandra* has become the guidance counselor who has empowered other members of the learning community to provide sufficient support system to the learners:

I have adjusted mainly on my expectations and the way to conduct online sessions. What has been successful was the great support of class advisers in every section so that follow up and referral could be done properly. I have been active in disseminating information regarding guidance services and protocols to provide appropriate assistance to clients.

Triaging support needs of the learners, *Weena* maximized her networks to make help available to the learners. *Weena* shared,

I talked with the advisers and enabled them on how to handle students with mild problems. In that way, I will be able to spend more time with students who most need my help. Most of my sensitive cases were also referred to a specialist like a psychiatrist and DSWD (Department of Social Welfare and Development).

Aside from what has been practiced by *Weena*, some guidance counselors resorted to referral protocols in order to provide the immediate assistance needed by the client. For instance, *Meg* mentioned about community support agencies and online resources that the learners can easily access for mental health and guidance counseling services:

Students may benefit from online support, but results cannot be guaranteed or assured. In some cases, counseling may be ineffective or

cause other issues to arise. When working with students who require immediate attention, they should be referred to local community support agencies and readily available online resources guided by their parents at home.

For a bulk of time and space is spent by the client at home, *Kurt* highlighted the importance of parent involvement during the tele-counseling sessions that the “[...] active involvement of the parents or the guardian in the process creates a big impact in the counseling and life of the client or learner.”

Darnel affirmed this strategy in order to connect the support system initiated by the school into the homes of the clients who are with their parents in the whole duration of the sessions. *Darnel* recognized that:

[...] the active involvement of the parent/guardian in the counseling process brought a great impact in my case. [...] Those parents who commit themselves to support the counseling process and to work with the learners regarding the tasks related to the achievement of our counseling goal contribute to positive outcomes and continuity of tele-counseling sessions.

One unique observation of the researcher in the narratives is the construct on *counselors working with counselors*. While other stakeholders are necessary during the implementation of the tele-counseling sessions, guidance counselors consider their colleagues as a form of self-help in addressing concerns they encounter with their clients. This is one significant nature of a community-based support system that is implicit but important in delivering quality and effective tele-counseling in distance education. As *Lance* illustrated,

The number of available counselors in schools is also a big factor. It would be better if I can work with fellow counselors and cater to as many learners as we can; but sadly, this is still a challenge. As much as I want to get better at the job, I can only cater to as many learners as I can.

Weena is also concerned on how she and her fellow counselors can effectively handle tele-counseling sessions. She further stressed on her

narratives that counselors must be trained to effectively provide services in remote conditions:

The DepEd should initiate programs for counselors so that we could be effective in handling remote cases, make a well-thought guidance program suited to the situation and make a strong support system that caters the student's needs and other concerns.

Lastly, a community-based support system in real practice needs to be given enough value. This starts with a cohort of guidance counselors who are considered think-tanks to conduct appropriate assessment strategies and provide necessary interventions online. It can be underscored in the narratives of Meg:

Careful consideration on what appropriate strategy to be used is also reliant on how the guidance counselors respond to students. When they become so distressed or disturbed that need to be referred to additional services or support from healthcare providers or a social network, clients with the guidance counselor must complete the Suicide Risk Assessments, if possible. The crucial role of the guidance counselors in providing learner support at a distance and making clients aware where to find help through emergency services even at home must not be taken for granted.

With a focus on learner autonomy, the online or remote counseling sessions, two-way, technology-mediated communication, collaborative counseling are elements for an effective community-based support system to sustain its existence and serve its purpose in distance education.

IX. CONCLUSIONS

Looking into how Transactional Distance or TD can be minimized in tele-counseling opens more opportunities to provide quality sessions integrated into learner support systems. The theory in TD can be used as a lens to systematically implement the tele-counseling services and other mental health-related programs which involve technology in the context of distance education. Through a set of cases in the form of stories from the participants, counselor-client interaction, tele-

counseling and communication needs, and client participation in distance education are parallel to narrative structures with implications on how to provide quality and outcomes-based learner support systems in the new normal. The narrative events uncovered dialogue mechanisms such as consultation time and netiquette regarding the updating and monitoring sessions of the clients. Moreover, the integration of technology to such counseling sessions prescribed the understanding on how tele-counseling itself becomes contextualized based on the guidelines and protocols set by respective authorities such as DepEd and PGCA. In terms of learner autonomy, the inert conditions of the learners, along with assessment strategies, is the start-up of a more collaborative tele-counseling to take place mediating the guidance counselor and the client defying communication gap.

In spite of the innovativeness on the use of multimodal platforms and strong commitment of guidance counselors, their advocacy on promoting a holistic development of learners during distance education does not end with their tele-counseling interventions but also with a community-wide baseline of need-centered strategies—an approach using the connection of school and home. This includes the parents, mental health or social work service providers, and fellow guidance counselors who, in one way or another, contribute to a network of learner support systems. The call for using tele-counseling as an adjunct to various conventional resources of learner support can be practical, efficient, and responsive mitigation wherein face-to-face interaction between the guidance counselor and the client is limited especially to schools that implement distance education.

X. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

XI. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author,

ATS (removed for review purposes), upon reasonable request.

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