





A Phenomenological Study on the Roles of Guidance Advocates in Dealing with Suicidal Ideations Among Adolescent Students in Public Schools

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences, coping strategies, and insights of guidance advocates in dealing with suicidal ideation among adolescent students in public schools in the division of Davao del Norte. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews (IDI) with five guidance advocates. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed different experiences of guidance advocates, including recognizing warning signs of suicidal ideations, building rapport to promote emotional well-being, establishing a safe and trusting environment, and navigating challenges in making informed decisions. In dealing with suicidal ideation among adolescent students, guidance advocates employed different strategies, including implementing flexible strategies, cultivating emotional regulation, and mobilizing collaborative practices. The study also highlighted key insights from guidance advocates, which center on maintaining professional boundaries and emotional regulation, practicing collaboration to ensure effective support, providing life-affirming and compassionate support, and finding fulfillment and personal growth in the guidance role. The findings suggest that the role of guidance advocates in dealing with suicidal ideation among adolescent students is best understood as a shared and system-supported responsibility rather than an individual task alone, emphasizing the need for strengthened collaboration, emotional preparedness, and continuous professional development among school stakeholders.

Keywords

Guidance and counseling; Guidance advocates; Suicidal ideation; Adolescent students; Public schools

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Author Contributions

The authors contributed to conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, and supervision. The author approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescent suicide remains a significant public health and educational concern worldwide. Suicidal ideation, defined as thoughts, considerations, or preoccupations with ending one's life, has become increasingly prevalent among young people

and is recognized as a major predictor of suicide attempts and completed suicide. Studies have shown that adolescents may experience suicidal thoughts as a result of complex interactions among psychological distress, depression, bullying, social isolation, family conflict, traumatic experiences, and limited access to supportive resources (Orri et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2021; Liew et al., 2023). Given the amount of time students spend in school, educational institutions have become critical settings for the early identification and prevention of suicide-related behaviors. Schools play an essential role in promoting mental health and well-being by providing supportive environments where students can access emotional and psychological assistance. Research has demonstrated that school connectedness, positive relationships with adults, and access to school-based mental health services can reduce the risk of suicidal ideation and enhance students' resilience during periods of emotional distress (Marraccini & Brier, 2022; McPhail et al., 2024). Effective suicide prevention efforts within schools often depend on trained personnel who can identify warning signs, provide immediate support, and facilitate appropriate referrals when necessary (Walsh et al., 2023; Warren et al., 2024).

Within many school communities, the growing demand for mental health support often exceeds the availability of licensed guidance counselors and mental health professionals. As a result, teachers and designated guidance advocates frequently assume responsibilities related to student counseling, crisis intervention, and emotional support (Gunawardena et al., 2024; O'Farrell et al., 2023). These individuals often become the first point of contact for students experiencing psychological distress and are expected to recognize indicators of suicidal ideation while maintaining a safe and supportive environment. Their role extends beyond observation, as they help create spaces where students feel heard, understood, and supported. Studies have emphasized that school personnel are uniquely positioned to identify students at risk and facilitate early intervention measures that may prevent the escalation of suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Connors et al., 2022; Nishimura et al., 2024). However, guidance advocates often face challenges such as limited mental health training, uncertainty in responding to high-risk situations, emotional strain, and difficulties balancing professional responsibilities with students' complex psychosocial needs (Gunawardena et al., 2024; Ramakrishnan et al., 2026).

Although previous studies have extensively examined the prevalence, risk factors, and intervention strategies associated with adolescent suicidal ideation (Rakoff et al., 2023; García-Fernández et al., 2024; Kweon et al., 2025), much of the existing literature has concentrated on students, intervention outcomes, or program effectiveness. Research has identified factors such as bullying, poor mental health, inadequate social support, and emotional difficulties as predictors of suicidal thoughts and behaviors among adolescents (Liew et al., 2023; Xiao et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2025). Other studies have explored school-based prevention programs and collaborative intervention strategies aimed at reducing suicide risk among young people (Hart et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2023; Salimova & Rusnáková, 2024). Despite these contributions, limited attention has been given to understanding the lived experiences of guidance advocates who directly support students experiencing suicidal ideation. There remains a need to explore how these individuals perceive their roles, navigate emotional and professional challenges, and make meaning of their experiences within the school setting.

This study is significant because it seeks to illuminate the experiences of guidance advocates whose contributions often remain unseen in suicide prevention efforts. Understanding their perceptions, decision-making processes, coping strategies, and professional insights can provide a deeper appreciation of the realities involved in supporting adolescents at risk of suicide. The findings may contribute to the development of more responsive mental health policies, professional development programs, and intervention frameworks that strengthen the capacity of schools to address adolescent suicidal ideation effectively. Through a phenomenological approach, this study aims to uncover how guidance advocates recognize warning signs, build supportive relationships, implement intervention strategies, and derive meaning from their experiences. By giving voice to those directly involved in helping vulnerable students, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on school-based mental health services and adolescent suicide prevention while offering practical insights for educators, school administrators, policymakers, and mental health practitioners.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of guidance advocates in dealing with suicidal ideation among adolescent students in public secondary schools in the Division of Davao del Norte. Phenomenology is appropriate when the purpose of the study is to understand how individuals perceive and make meaning of a shared experience. Through this design, the researcher was able to uncover the essence of participants' experiences, including their roles, challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights as they support students experiencing suicidal thoughts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Locale

The study was conducted in selected public secondary schools in the Division of Davao del Norte, Philippines. This locale was chosen because of the increasing need to understand how guidance advocates in the area respond to adolescent suicidal ideation and provide school-based mental health support.

Participants

The participants of this study were teachers designated as guidance advocates in public secondary schools in the Division of Davao del Norte. These individuals were selected because they had direct experience in handling cases involving adolescent students with suicidal ideation. Their firsthand involvement provided rich and meaningful accounts relevant to the purpose of the study.

Sampling

The study utilized purposive sampling in selecting participants. This technique is commonly used in qualitative research to identify individuals who possess specific knowledge and experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. By

using purposive sampling, the researcher ensured that all participants were capable of providing in-depth information regarding their roles and experiences as guidance advocates.

Procedure

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews (IDI). This method allowed participants to openly share their experiences, emotions, and reflections in a confidential and supportive environment. In-depth interviews were particularly appropriate for this study because they enabled the researcher to explore sensitive issues such as suicidal ideation while obtaining detailed and authentic narratives from participants (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020).

Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach involved familiarizing with the interview transcripts, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, and developing themes that represented the essence of participants' experiences. Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic yet flexible process for interpreting qualitative data and preserving the richness of participants' stories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ahmed et al., 2025; Dawadi & Tamang, 2020).

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher employed strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail. Member checking allowed participants to verify the accuracy of their statements, while peer debriefing provided an opportunity for external review of the analysis process. These procedures enhanced the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the study (Shenton, 2004).

Ethical Considerations

This study observed strict ethical standards to protect the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants, considering the sensitive nature of adolescent suicidal ideation. Prior to data collection, approval and permission were secured from the appropriate authorities, and each participant was fully informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and the voluntary nature of participation. Written informed consent was obtained before the interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the secure storage of audio recordings and transcripts. Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Interviews were conducted with empathy and sensitivity, and appropriate support or referral was made available if any participant experienced emotional discomfort. The study adhered to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice to ensure that participants were treated with honesty, fairness, and utmost care.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results and discussions from the participants on their roles in dealing with suicidal ideations among adolescent students in public schools. It combines the key themes that emerged from the data, offering a clearer view of the practices and experiences of guidance advocates in helping at-risk students, while highlighting these themes through the lens of different authors. Additionally, this chapter provides implications for counseling practice, recommendations for future research, and the researcher's conclusion on this study.

Recognizing Warning Signs of Suicidal Ideations

The findings indicate that guidance advocates rely on behavioral, emotional, and situational cues in identifying students who may be experiencing suicidal ideation. Observable manifestations such as social withdrawal, isolation, reduced participation in school activities, self-harming tendencies, and concerning online expressions were perceived as critical indicators requiring immediate attention. These observations suggest that guidance advocates function as frontline mental health responders within the school environment, often detecting signs of distress before formal intervention becomes necessary. The present findings are consistent with Marraccini and Brier (2022), who emphasized the importance of school connectedness and supportive adult relationships in identifying students at risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors. The ability of guidance advocates to recognize subtle behavioral changes reinforces the protective role of school personnel in suicide prevention efforts. Similarly, Rakoff et al. (2023) reported that adolescent suicidal ideation is associated with various psychosocial stressors that frequently manifest through observable emotional and behavioral difficulties. This suggests that warning signs should not be viewed as isolated behaviors but rather as indicators of underlying psychological distress. The findings further resonate with Liew et al. (2023), who identified bullying experiences as a significant predictor of suicidal ideation among adolescents. The social withdrawal and isolation described by participants may therefore reflect responses to adverse peer experiences and unresolved emotional challenges. Likewise, Bangalan et al. (2023) emphasized the complex interaction of risk and protective factors in shaping suicidal behavior, highlighting the importance of comprehensive assessment and contextual understanding.

The findings are further supported by Ivey-Stephenson (2020), who reported that suicidal ideation among high school students is often accompanied by emotional distress, hopelessness, and observable behavioral changes. Similarly, Orri et al. (2020) emphasized that mental health problems frequently precede suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts among adolescents, highlighting the importance of early identification within school settings. Abrahamyan et al. (2020) also noted that exposure to violence and adverse life experiences contributes to emotional withdrawal and increased vulnerability to suicidal ideation. These studies reinforce the importance of vigilance among guidance advocates in recognizing behavioral and emotional indicators that may signal elevated suicide risk. A notable contribution of the present study lies in demonstrating how guidance advocates interpret warning signs within their daily interactions with students. Unlike quantitative investigations that primarily identify predictors of suicidal ideation, the present findings provide insight into how school personnel recognize and respond to risk in real-world educational settings. The results underscore the need for

continuous training in suicide risk identification and early intervention strategies to strengthen school-based mental health services.

Building Rapport to Promote Emotional Well-Being

The findings reveal that guidance advocates view rapport-building as a foundational element in promoting students' emotional and psychosocial well-being. Participants emphasized creating safe spaces, allowing students to process emotions at their own pace, and maintaining continuous support through regular follow-up interactions. These practices demonstrate that effective guidance extends beyond crisis intervention and involves the development of meaningful relationships that encourage help-seeking behaviors. This finding aligns with Marraccini and Brier (2022), who highlighted the role of positive school relationships in reducing suicidal thoughts and strengthening students' sense of belonging. The willingness of students to disclose emotional concerns appears closely linked to the quality of their relationships with trusted adults. Similarly, Shilubane et al. (2023) found that supportive interactions between students and school personnel contribute significantly to emotional stability and resilience among adolescents.

Furthermore, Walsh et al. (2023) emphasized that effective school-based suicide prevention programs are characterized by sustained engagement, regular monitoring, and proactive support mechanisms. The participants' emphasis on follow-up sessions and ongoing communication reflects these principles and suggests that rapport-building is not a one-time activity but an evolving process that strengthens students' confidence in seeking assistance. The importance of rapport-building is further reflected in the findings of Radez et al. (2021), who identified trust and supportive relationships with adults as critical facilitators of help-seeking among adolescents experiencing mental health concerns. Likewise, Joseph (2021) emphasized that empathy, authenticity, and unconditional positive regard create conditions that encourage individuals to express emotional concerns openly. The present findings suggest that guidance advocates who establish caring and accepting relationships are better positioned to foster emotional safety and facilitate students' willingness to seek support during times of distress. The present study contributes to the literature by illustrating how rapport is cultivated in the context of public schools where guidance advocates often manage multiple responsibilities. The findings suggest that emotional well-being is fostered not only through professional expertise but also through consistent human connection, empathy, and accessibility.

Establishing a Safe and Trusting Environment

The findings demonstrate that establishing a safe and trusting environment is central to encouraging students to disclose emotional concerns and seek support. Participants emphasized reassurance, confidentiality, respect, and non-judgmental communication as essential elements in fostering trust. The results further indicate that students' readiness to share personal experiences develops gradually and requires sensitivity to individual differences and emotional readiness. These findings are consistent with Vandewalle et al. (2020), who emphasized that therapeutic relationships are strengthened when individuals experiencing suicidal ideation perceive empathy, acceptance, and emotional safety. Trust appears to function as a prerequisite for meaningful engagement, particularly among students facing psychological distress. Similarly, Jonsson and Dennhag (2023) found that compassionate interactions are associated with lower levels of depression and suicidal ideation among adolescents, highlighting the importance of emotionally supportive environments. The findings also support Marraccini and Brier's (2022) assertion that school connectedness serves as a protective factor against suicidal behaviors. The establishment of trusting relationships may therefore strengthen students' perceptions of belonging and support, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and hopelessness.

These findings are also consistent with Slemmon et al. (2017), who argued that perceptions of safety significantly influence individuals' willingness to disclose psychological concerns and participate in supportive interventions. Furthermore, Schlagbaum et al. (2021) highlighted the influence of interpersonal relationships and peer environments on adolescent suicidal ideation, suggesting that trusted social connections serve as important protective factors. The creation of emotionally secure environments within schools may therefore encourage students to discuss sensitive concerns before crises escalate. The present study extends existing research by highlighting how guidance advocates intentionally create conditions that facilitate disclosure and engagement. Rather than viewing trust as an outcome of counseling, the findings suggest that trust functions as a critical mechanism through which counseling becomes effective.

Navigating Challenges in Making Informed Decisions

The findings suggest that decision-making in cases involving suicidal ideation requires flexibility, ethical judgment, and context-sensitive assessment. Participants described relying on experiential knowledge, situational awareness, and collaborative consultation when determining appropriate interventions. Such findings highlight the complexity of guidance work, particularly when balancing student confidentiality with safety considerations. The results align with Warren et al. (2024), who emphasized that effective school-based mental health services require professional judgment, ethical awareness, and coordinated intervention strategies. Similarly, Gunawardena et al. (2024) found that educators frequently serve as first responders to student mental health concerns, often making critical decisions despite limited formal mental health training. Walsh et al. (2023) further noted that successful suicide prevention initiatives rely on integrated systems of assessment, referral, and collaboration.

The participants' emphasis on seeking support from colleagues and external professionals reflects the recognition that effective decision-making is strengthened through shared expertise and multidisciplinary engagement. These findings are supported by Oehrtman (2022), who emphasized that student success depends on strong intra- and interprofessional collaboration among school personnel and community partners. Similarly, Reese (2021) noted that educational professionals often face complex responsibilities that require inclusive and collaborative approaches to address diverse student needs effectively. The findings contribute to existing knowledge by illustrating how guidance advocates navigate

uncertainty in high-risk situations. The results suggest that decision-making in guidance practice is not solely procedural but involves continuous evaluation of contextual factors, ethical responsibilities, and student needs.

Implementing Flexible Strategies

The findings reveal that guidance advocates employ flexible and student-centered approaches when supporting adolescents experiencing suicidal ideation. Participants emphasized adapting interventions according to individual circumstances, encouraging student participation in decision-making, and integrating peer, family, and referral support systems when necessary. These findings support Walsh et al. (2023), who argued that effective suicide prevention interventions are characterized by responsiveness to individual needs and the incorporation of supportive relationships. Similarly, García-Fernández et al. (2024) found that interventions for suicidal behavior among adolescents are most effective when tailored to the specific circumstances of each individual.

Rochelle et al. (2025) further emphasized that successful implementation of school-based suicide prevention programs requires contextual flexibility and stakeholder engagement. Likewise, Nuñez et al. (2024) demonstrated that school-based interventions adapted to adolescents' unique circumstances significantly reduced suicidal ideation among vulnerable learners. Teriba and Dawson (2024) also highlighted the importance of flexible counseling approaches that respond to changing social and environmental realities affecting students. The present findings reinforce the notion that rigid intervention approaches may fail to address the complexity of students' experiences and circumstances. A significant contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how flexibility is operationalized within school settings. The findings suggest that student-centered interventions allow guidance advocates to respond more effectively to diverse needs while maintaining appropriate professional and institutional support structures.

Cultivating Emotional Regulation

The findings indicate that emotional regulation functions as both a personal coping strategy and a professional competency among guidance advocates. Participants described maintaining composure, exercising patience, and engaging in self-care practices to effectively manage the emotional demands associated with supporting students experiencing suicidal ideation. These findings align with Xiao et al. (2022), who highlighted the relationship between emotional difficulties and self-injurious behaviors among adolescents. The emotional stability of support providers may therefore contribute to creating an environment that promotes safety and emotional regulation among students. Similarly, Kweon et al. (2025) emphasized that the effectiveness of school-based suicide prevention efforts depends not only on intervention programs but also on the preparedness and emotional readiness of school personnel.

Kim et al. (2022) further noted that supporting students with suicidal ideation requires coordinated responses involving emotionally competent professionals capable of responding appropriately during crises. The importance of emotional regulation among guidance advocates is further supported by Hong and Wang (2024), who found that resilience and positive self-evaluation reduce compassion fatigue among helping professionals. Likewise, Noor et al. (2025) identified emotional self-management as a critical protective factor against burnout in helping professions. Lombardero-Posada et al. (2022) similarly emphasized the importance of self-care practices in sustaining professional effectiveness and psychological well-being. The findings suggest that emotional regulation strengthens guidance advocates' capacity to provide consistent, objective, and supportive assistance. The present study contributes to the literature by highlighting emotional regulation as a protective factor not only for students but also for guidance advocates themselves. This finding underscores the importance of self-care initiatives, supervision, and professional development programs that support practitioner well-being.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This phenomenological study concluded that guidance advocates play a vital and deeply human role in addressing suicidal ideation among adolescent students in public secondary schools in the Division of Davao del Norte. Their lived experiences revealed that they serve as listeners, protectors, and sources of hope for learners facing emotional distress. Despite challenges such as limited training, inadequate mental health resources, and the emotional burden of handling sensitive cases, they remained committed to identifying warning signs, providing immediate support, and coordinating appropriate interventions. Their experiences underscored that effective responses to suicidal ideation are anchored in empathy, confidentiality, collaboration, and genuine concern for students' well-being.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that the Department of Education and school administrators strengthen school-based mental health programs by providing regular training, clear intervention protocols, and accessible referral systems for guidance advocates. Schools should also establish emotional support mechanisms, such as supervision and debriefing sessions, to help guidance advocates cope with the demands of their role. Parents and community stakeholders are encouraged to collaborate closely with schools to promote a supportive environment for adolescents, while future researchers may further explore the perspectives of students, parents, and professional counselors to enrich understanding and improve suicide prevention efforts in educational settings.

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