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## Research Article

### Stress and Coping Theory: Experiences of Designated Teacher-Counselors Supporting Sexual Violence Victims

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#### ABSTRACT

This article examines the experiences of designated teacher-counselors in secondary schools within the Milagros District, focusing on their role in supporting student survivors of sexual violence. The study used narrative inquiry to illustrate how teacher-counselors navigate emotionally charged situations, frequently developing close, sympathetic relationships that put them under psychological stress. One recurrent narrative stood out as emblematic, highlighting the conflict between individual dedication and structural constraints, including poor training, ambiguous function definitions, and minimal institutional support. In the absence of structured mental health services, the analysis exposes how teacher-counselors rely on informal coping mechanisms, challenging widely held beliefs about school-based care. Some contend that although these spontaneous reactions show resiliency, they also highlight the urgent need for official, trauma-informed infrastructure. The study presents deeper concerns about how schools define care roles and how equipped they are to assist those who provide care for others.

**Keywords:** *Coping strategies, Institutional support, Sexual violence, Teacher-counselors, Trauma-informed care*

#### Introduction

Stress is inherent in teaching but for designated teacher-counselors, the added pressure of fulfilling two roles teaching and offering psychological support makes it even more so. Resilient coping is necessary to safeguard their wellbeing and professional efficacy. According to Lazarus and Folkman, stress is the result of interactions between a person and their surroundings when demands are perceived as placing a strain on or surpass the person's

capacity, possibly endangering their health. Responding to situations of sexual assault, a pervasive and extremely distressing issue, is one of the most serious challenges teacher-counselors encounter. Student rapes have become a major global issue, drastically altering the educational paths of students (Kennedy & Prock, 2018). The issue is also justified by Aebi et al. (2021). Tener et al. (2022) emphasized the psychological cost of poor training of people providing counseling assistance to the students

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who survived sexual assault. Similarly, the study by Ndebele, Ravhuhali, and Legg-Jack (2022) showed that such educators are highly pressurized because of a lack of training and resources.

Although the Republic Act No. 11036 and DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012 will provide mandate on the provision of mental health services and child protection in schools, there is a dearth of empirical research on the experiences of secondary teacher-counselors in helping survivors of sexual violence, especially in rural settings such as the Milagros District, Masbate.

Little research has been done so far on how these educators address the emotional, psychological and institutional pressures of such cases or how they adjust in resource constrained environments. This paper will fill this gap by discussing their obstacles, coping mechanisms, and effects of DepEd policies and these barriers in the context of the stress and coping theory by Lazarus and Folkman, which highlights the dynamic relationship between people and their surroundings.

The research will be restricted to the identified secondary teacher-counselors in public schools of the Milagros District, the Masbate Province that managed cases with student survivors of sexual violence. It puts emphasis on their experiences, the problems they face, methods they use to cope with them and how their DepEd policies influence them. Teacher-counselors that were directly involved in such cases were limited to make sure that relevant and insight information is provided. Other school personnel or other counselors not in the district do not form part of the research. Since the researcher is conversant with the local context, then it is considered reasonable to limit the investigation to this context. Results are expected to yield grounded knowledge that can be useful in policy development, better support systems, and enhance the practices related to psychosocial interventions in other rural schools under a similar situation.

## **Statement of the Problem**

This paper set out to examine the experiences of secondary school teacher-counselors, who were designated to work with victims of sexual violence. The following are some of the questions that are particularly targeted by this research:

1. How do designated secondary school teacher-counselors in Milagros Districts experience the process of supporting the victims of sexual violence?

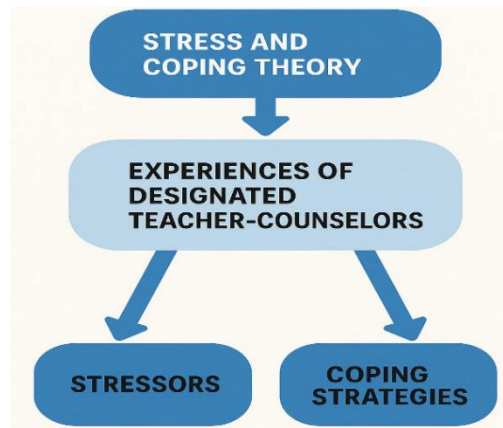
## **Significance of the Study**

The outcome of the proposed study will be beneficial to the DepEd officials, school administrators, and mental health practitioners since it presents the neglected reality of appointed teacher-counselors dealing with sexual violence cases. It will be used as an indicator to create trauma-informed policies, institutional support, and training programs to achieve successful and ethical care of students and teachers in rural schools.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The paper is a qualitative study that tried to learn about the complicated, experience of designated teacher-counselors working with survivors of sexual violence. According to Mutch (2005), qualitative research aims at investigating the realities of participants in order to gain more insight into a given phenomenon. In this case, we look at the conflict between teacher-counselor as an educationalist and emotional parent, which in most cases is not well trained or supported by the institutions. The paper is grounded on the Stress and Coping Theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) that describes how people evaluate stressful problems and use coping mechanisms including; emotional distancing, self-care, and peer support to stay healthy. The given framework displays the psychological necessities of teacher-counselors and emphasizes the urgent necessity of trauma-aware, systematic changes to assist the individuals working with survivors of sexual violence.

## Conceptual Framework



Miles and Huberman define a conceptual framework as either graphically or narratively stating the key elements that are going to be examined namely the key factors, constructs, or variables and the presumed relationships between the factors. The study conceptual framework entailed three key conceptual elements, which included experiences of identified teacher-counselors, narrative description of such experiences in the terms of Stress and coping theory, and the subsequent understandings and suggestions to improve institutional support and alignment of policy. The data will be composed of the rich stories of teacher-counselors, such as their emotional conflicts, coping mechanisms, and experiences with school-based and DepEd support systems. Narrative analysis is used to process them subject to the Stress and Coping Theory. The theory aided the explanation of how the participants created meanings of their roles and challenges. The deliverable of this model is a more in-depth comprehension of the realities teacher-counselors have to deal with, the institutional voids that impact their functioning and welfare, and the creation of evidence-based suggestions to inform education policy, school-based mental health programs, and trauma-informed practices.

## Materials and Methods

### *Research Design*

The research design in this study is a descriptive qualitative approach, which aims to find out the lived experiences of designated secondary school teacher-counselors in

assisting survivors of sexual violence. According to Kim, Sefcik, and Bradway (2017), the design presents detailed context-specific narratives of the experiences of the participants without presuppositions related to theory. It allows one to have a deep insight into the issues that teachers-counselors go through, how they cope with it and how the DepEd policies affect their duties. This would make it possible to derive practical and grounded insights that can be used to inform future policy and to support interventions.

### *The Respondents*

The participants to be involved in the study are the specified teacher-counselor of designated secondary schools in Milagros Districts who have aided rape survivors. These people are critical in offering psychological, emotional and academic support to the victims in the form of students. In order to get the respondents, the research will adopt the snowball sampling technique, which is appropriate when dealing with sensitive issues with participants who are difficult to access. The early eligible participants will be requested to invite additional qualified teacher-counselors to their professional circles (Naderifar, Goli, and Ghaljaie, 2017). Such peer-referral process builds trust and also makes sure that the respondents include those with first-hand and relevant experience.

### *Instrument*

A semi-structured interview schedule based on the qualitative principles of

interviewing provided by Kallio et al. (2016) will be applied, where the researcher will be focused on the depth and consistency of the answers. The interview questions will be pegged on the primary research objectives and will follow the lived experiences of specified teacher-counselors working with survivors of sexual violence. A prepared interview guide that has well-designed open-ended questions will be used to obtain detailed and rich responses. According to Naz et al. (2022), structured or semi-structured interviews can be used as effective instruments of finding out the experiences and perceptions of research subjects regarding key themes of area of inquiry. As suggested by Patton (1982), the standardized open-ended interview is where a predefined number of questions are worded and placed in a specific order, as it is necessary to reduce the degree of variation in the types of questions asked to interviewees (p.164). The structure will enable a significant comparison of interviews as well as be flexible to understand new insights.

### **Data Analysis**

Narrative analysis was used to make sense of the lived experiences of teacher-counselors, paying attention to how the respondents made sense of their positions, emotional dissonance, and coping strategies. Each interview was seen more of a complete story keeping in context and flow. With the Stress and Coping Theory, the analysis emphasized the manner in which the participants appraised the challenges and coped with the stress through institutional constraints. The researcher followed the major narrative aspects, including turning points, tensions and making sense, to find out common understanding and personal differences. Member checking guaranteed the accuracy and authenticity. The presented analysis offered knowledge on the basis of which trauma-informed practice and policy improvements could be made.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Lived Experiences of Designated Secondary School Teacher-Counselors***

The stories of the participants demonstrated an in-depth emotional and moral dedication to the need to help sexual violence

victims. Teacher-counselors were driven by empathy, compassion, and powerful sense of justice to establish a strong personal connection with victims since it was not only a professional responsibility but also a moral one to them. This affective involvement is an expression of what Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define as **primary appraisal**- in the context of which individuals assess a situation as of personal importance and emotional challenge. To such teacher-counselors, the trauma that the survivors experienced developed as a form of stress which they internalized. It is highly seen in the statement of Participant 1:

*“Upset by the fact that as the process is done there will be no sleepless nights as you will be doing the same thinking what may happen, are you doing the right thing to the victim and to myself, and in doing this, is my safety being placed into danger as well”. P1*

Their reactions of continuing to support them despite the emotional burden show emotion-oriented coping whereby people cope with the emotional reaction to the stress, which is mostly achieved by empathy, moral reasoning and personal commitment. Although this type of coping did support the development of compassionate care, it also led to the risk of emotional burnout particularly when there was a lack of the support of the institution. Teachers are usually unprepared to deal with such disclosures and do not have the correct training or the support mechanisms, as Cares et al. (2024) discovered.

Lazarus and Folkman believe that distress is the result of the fact that demands on coping surpass resources. The experience of the participants is one of the examples that prove this inequality and emphasize the necessity of the organized, trauma-informed intervention that helps the survivors and the emotional health of their caregivers. Finally, to maintain effective, loving care, the needs of the victims are not the only ones it is necessary to address, but also the ability of teacher-counselors to cope.

### ***Challenges that Designated Secondary School Teacher-Counselors***

This segment gives the stories of teacher-counselor designates on the difficulties they encounter in helping victims of sexual violence.

Participant 1 noted that the victims are not disclosed especially where the abuser is a family member that make it difficult to intervene early. She also commented on how traumatic it is to deal with such traumatic experiences and there is no institutional support except the required reporting policies and the seminars which are held at times, and it is hard to do her job successfully. This is a primary appraisal of high emotional demand and secondary appraisal of lack of resources through the prism of the Stress and Coping Theory by Lazarus and Folkman, which results in psychological stress in case institutional support and coping resources are not present.

A major problem that was raised by participant 2 involves her low competency because she is not a licensed guidance counselor. She can only be involved in documentation, reporting and referrals, which are not enough to deal with cases that may need more psychological interventions. As she shared:

“We feel constrained. We attempt to listen and refer but we are not trained to provide proper counseling particularly in rape cases. We have a more record keeping referral type business.”

She also emphasized on the absence of special training in dealing with the cases of sexual abuse. She was trained in suicide prevention and Psychological First Aid but she realized that it was not sufficient in the area of rape cases. She complained that she was the first responder in the school and lacked the power and equipment to provide quality care. It is an indication of a limited coping whereby problem-oriented strategies are limited and emotion-oriented responses lack support as per the theory, this can further enhance stress and emotional exhaustion.

The stories highlight issues that recur, and these are lack of training, confusion in roles, and lack of institutional support.

“I’m not a licensed guidance counselor... I can only record, report, and refer cases.” – P1  
“We’ve had some training on suicide prevention and Psychological First Aid, but nothing specific on rape or abuse cases.” – P2

These restrictions make them feel powerless, not capable of giving significant psychological assistance. Their marginal status is also

driven by the fact that they lack licensed counselors and have to resort to outside services.

As the findings indicate, there is definite discrepancy between the expectations of teachers and counselors and the institutional support. This is consistent with Stress and Coping Theory, which underscores the reality of escalated stress in case situational demands are in excess of coping resources, which affects well-being and performance.

Combined, the findings pointed to the dire necessity of systemic change in the form of a specialized training, better definition of roles, and the maintenance. The provision of adequate resources to the teacher-counselors is not only a policy requirement but also an essential measure of reacting to sexual violence in schools effectively and with human compassion.

### ***Coping Mechanism of Designated Secondary School Teacher-Counselors***

Participant 1 used self-care and relaxation to help her overcome stress. She pointed out the importance of making personal limits particularly in handling abusers or their families to be able to withstand emotional drainage and remain psychologically steady. In support of this is the Stress and Coping Theory by Lazarus and Folkman which goes on to assert that stress occurs when perceived demands outweigh the available coping resources. Individuals respond by applying emotion-centered strategies such as establishing boundaries and caring about oneself as ways of containing distress in situations where one has few direct options.

According to participant 2, the emotional weight of dealing with sexual abuse cases is too much. Although she attempts to keep work and personal life apart, upsetting thoughts continue to exist. As a way of coping, she finds solace in light activities such as viewing Korean dramas, listening to music and opening up to close peers.

These reactions also helped affirm the theory that people rely on the available emotional outlets available to them, i.e. entertainment and social support, as coping mechanisms in the absence of formal support. These coping

mechanisms are useful in maintaining individual well-being in the face of unsolved work pressures.

The two participants disclosed the use of informal coping strategies in order to remain emotionally functional. One also rated the emotional impact as 5 out of 10 and found relief in humorous shows and company. Another placed the value of the personal space and mindfulness.

This pointed out what the theory states; in cases where external resources (e.g., institutional support) are inadequate, individuals offset it by internal coping strategies. Although these will provide short term relief, they will not address systemic stressors.

The results revealed that teacher-counselors are resilient but unsupported by institutions to share emotional load of their work. This highlights one of the central tenets of Stress and Coping Theory, which is that stress exists and can reach its peak as long as personal coping is not supported by the environment.

Finally, though individual tactics are praiseworthy, they are not sufficient. The insights are that they demand immediate reforms that will offer orderly mental services to teacher-counselors. To aid the givers, to provide assistance to the helpers, to be in agreement with the educators, to give some thought and care to the teachers, is a requirement to a justifiable and observant education.

### ***Influence of DepEd Policies and Support Systems to Designated Secondary School Teacher-Counselors***

Participant 1 recognized the fact that the Department of Education requires the submission of sex abuse cases to the division level, but she has no clear institutional support of the presence of the policy. Periodic seminars are provided and there are no regular support and follow up systems to assist teacher-counselors deal with such cases efficiently.

Participant 2 expressed similar worries, indicating that guidance counselors are not licensed, and the teachers are expected to assume such positions without adequate training. Bullying rather than serious abuse is likely to be dealt with by structures such as the Child Protection Committee. Majority of the cases are

simply referred to external agencies. Despite the adherence to the protocols, the deficit of integrated mental health services and long-term support decreases their ability to provide the relevant care.

The experiences of the participants were an expression of the concepts of the Stress and Coping Theory of Lazarus and Folkman in which the stress occurs when people view the demands of a situation surpassing the available coping resources. Here, the lack of institutional support prompts teacher-counselors to operate with very few instruments in handling emotionally challenging experiences, which leads to the increased psychological stress and constrained the ability to use problem-oriented coping mechanisms.

One of these themes is that of high emotional load on teacher-counselors who are supposed to address trauma with no training or resources to do so. This lack of attitude between policy and practice puts them in a position of responsibility and unreadiness to meet the demands that extend beyond their functions as educators.

The results indicated the theory that coping depends on the conditions of the environment. In case of the institutional support being feeble, people must depend on personal strategies, which are possibly insufficient in the case of the long-term stress. Teachers are exposed to burnout because of the lack of alignment between job demands and the support mechanisms.

These are not the only difficulties. Similar gaps are demonstrated by other studies. Schools in Cadiz City did not have licensed counselors, meaning that the unqualified staff had to be placed in positions which they had not been training. Studies conducted by Alcazaren et al. also established that a good number of designates were not qualified to deliver effective care, which undermined service delivery and even exposed students to more hazards.

The experiences of the teacher-counselors point to the systematic flaws. There are policies that are not always taken into consideration of the emotional and psychological realities of abuse cases. This results in teachers playing a dual role with lack of enough support and proves the theory right by claiming that coping

effectiveness is reduced by chronic stress that has not been relieved.

Finally, this evidence suggests that such institutional changes as the employment of professional training, the implementation of follow-through mechanisms, and trainings based on trauma are necessary. The teacher-counselor is a position that should be supported in order to have a safe and responsive learning atmosphere both in students and staff.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

The lived experiences of the identified teacher-counselors working in the Milagros Districts are indicative of the extent of emotional investment and moral dedication they put in dealing with sexual violence cases. Such teachers go beyond professional duty providing them sometimes with heartfelt but emotionally draining relationships with survivors. Although this builds trust, it also subjects them to emotional burnout particularly when not properly trained and not under the protection of institutions. Their stories indicate a serious issue, that is teacher-counselors are overwhelmed by the responsibilities they have when they are supposed to act as quasi-counselors when they are not given the mental health resources or the professional support systems.

Therefore, these experiences underline the necessity to go further than the existing compliance regarding the procedures which are provided by institutions including the Department of Education. In as much as reporting and referral are required by policies, they do not go all the way in countering the emotional, psychological, and professional burdens associated with helping survivors. The use of informal coping strategies like watching light programs, sharing with friends whom one will trust and setting boundaries is good though not effective in the long term. Although it is reflective of personal resilience, these practices indicate that there is a failure within the system that exposes the teacher-counselor to burnout.

Considering these results, it is advisable that schools and policy-makers have systematic and trauma-informed support networks in place to help teacher-counselors. Their professional development should include capacity-

building programs that concentrate on trauma care, crisis response, and ethical practice. Moreover, the introduction of licensed guidance counselors into the schools needs to be prioritized, and Child Protection Committees need to be reformed to effectively address the cases of serious abuse. Support to school personnel needs to be extended to mental health activities, as well.

At some point these insights may provide a basis for creating a full support system that meets the specific needs of teacher-counselors. A more responsive and structured system is essential—not only to safeguard student welfare but to affirm that those who care for others are equally supported and protected.

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