

Perceptions of Elementary Learners on the Functions of School Counselors in Alamada, Cotabato, Philippines

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Abstract

This study explored the perceptions of elementary learners regarding the roles and functions of school counselors in selected public schools in Alamada, Cotabato, Philippines. It aimed to identify the learners' socio-demographic characteristics in terms of sex, age, and ethnolinguistic group, determine their perceived importance of various counselor roles, and examine whether significant relationships exist between these characteristics and their perceptions. A descriptive-correlational research design was employed, utilizing a validated structured questionnaire to gather data. The sample consisted of selected Grade 6 learners from Raradangan, Macabasa, and Pigcawaran Elementary Schools, chosen through convenience sampling. Descriptive statistics and Spearman-rho correlation analysis were used to analyze the data. Findings revealed that learners perceive all six counselor roles as very important, with the role of collaborator receiving the highest mean rating. Significant relationships were found between sex and perceptions of counselors as advocates, collaborators, coordinators, and managers, while age showed no significant relationship with any role. The ethnolinguistic group was significantly related only to the role of data utilizer. These results suggest that learners' perceptions of counselor roles are generally positive but can be influenced by specific socio-demographic factors. Based on the findings, it is recommended that school counseling programs be enhanced through gender-responsive and culturally sensitive practices. Strengthening collaboration among counselors, educators, parents, and community stakeholders is also vital to improving the delivery and impact of guidance services in elementary education.

Keywords: learners' perception, school counselor roles, socio-demographic characteristics, elementary education, guidance and counseling, Philippines

Introduction

Education continues to undergo significant transformation in response to technological advancements, evolving learner needs, and shifts in instructional delivery. As schools adapt to new educational landscapes, learners face increasing demands that go beyond academics, touching on their emotional, psychological, and social well-being. In this evolving environment, the role of school counselors has become more critical than ever (Shi & Carey, 2021).

School counselors are essential in supporting pupils' academic success, mental health, and overall personal development. They implement comprehensive guidance programs that promote the cognitive, emotional, and social growth of all learners (Bafadal et al., 2018; Lane et al., 2020). These programs provide safe and supportive spaces that help students navigate life challenges, enhance decision-making, and explore career paths. According to Arrieta et al. (2021), counseling services serve not only to resolve students' issues but also to guide them in making positive and well-informed choices.

Despite the institutional emphasis on counseling, misconceptions about school counselors' roles persist, particularly among learners. Some students are unsure about when and why to seek counseling services, while others perceive counselors solely as disciplinarians or academic advisors (Iyeke et al., 2018; Shi et al., 2014). These misunderstandings can limit the effectiveness of guidance programs and hinder student access to needed support.

Furthermore, learners' perceptions of school counselors may vary depending on age, gender, cultural background, and school environment. Research shows that such demographic factors influence how students interpret and engage with counseling services (Ngeno, 2022; Sultoni et al., 2018). For instance, students who perceive their counselors as approachable and trustworthy are more likely to seek guidance for both academic and personal matters (Bafadal et al., 2018). Conversely, students unfamiliar with the counselors' broader functions may underutilize or avoid these services altogether.

In response to these trends, guidance counselors have adopted multifaceted roles—as advocates, collaborators, data utilizers, and program coordinators—ensuring that learners receive timely, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate support (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Dahir & Stone, 2009). However, the success of these efforts depends on how well learners understand and value the presence and purpose of school counselors.

Given these dynamics, it becomes important to explore how learners themselves perceive the roles and functions of school counselors, especially at the elementary level, where foundational support can significantly influence long-term academic and personal growth. While existing literature focuses largely on secondary or tertiary learners, there remains a gap in understanding how young students experience and interpret the work of counselors in their daily school lives.

This study is anchored in Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), which emphasizes the dynamic interaction between personal factors, behavior, and environmental influences—a concept known as reciprocal determinism. According to this theory, individuals do not learn or form beliefs in isolation; rather, they acquire knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions through observation, interaction, and interpretation of their environment. This learning process is especially significant during childhood, where social modeling, reinforcement, and environmental cues shape developing minds.

This study seeks to determine the perceptions of elementary learners regarding the roles and functions of school counselors in the current educational context. Specifically, it aims to (1) identify the socio-demographic characteristics of the learners in terms of sex, age, and ethnolinguistic group; (2) determine which counselor roles are perceived as most important by learners; and (3) examine the relationship between learners' demographic characteristics and their perception of counselor functions.

Findings from this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how guidance services are received and valued by students. It is expected to provide actionable insights for school counselors, teachers, and administrators in refining programs that are student-centered, inclusive, and responsive to learners' real-life needs.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-correlational survey design. The descriptive design was appropriate as it allowed for a systematic and factual representation of the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and their perceived importance of various counselor roles and functions, providing a clear understanding of the current situation (McCombes, 2019). The correlational

design was used to determine the extent to which a relationship exists between the learners' socio-demographic variables and their perceptions of school counselors' roles and functions, without manipulating any variables (Fitzgerald et al., 2004). This approach is suitable for identifying patterns and associations that may inform future interventions or policy recommendations (Bhandari, 2021).

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study were selected from three elementary schools in Alamada, Cotabato: Raradangan Elementary School, Macabasa Elementary School, and Pigcawaran Elementary School. The target population consisted of Grade 4 to Grade 6 learners who had encountered or were familiar with school counseling services.

Sampling Procedure

A convenience sampling technique was employed to identify the respondents. This non-probability sampling method was chosen due to its practicality and efficiency in accessing respondents who were readily available and willing to participate during the data collection period (Nikolopoulou, 2023). This approach was appropriate given the constraints of time, resources, and accessibility, allowing the researchers to gather relevant data from a specific population (Golzar et al., 2022). While this method may limit the generalizability of the findings, it is commonly used in educational research where controlled random sampling is not feasible.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument utilized in this study was a structured questionnaire adapted from Kuhn (2004). It comprised 20 items aimed at assessing learners' perceptions of the roles and functions of school counselors, grounded in five core roles: leader, advocate, collaborator, coordinator, and data utilizer. Each item was rated using a five-point Likert scale, where 5 = Very Important, 4 = Important, 3 = Moderately Important, 2 = Slightly Important, and 1 = Not Important. To ensure the relevance and appropriateness of the content, the instrument underwent content validation (Roebianto et al., 2023) following guidelines adapted from the University of Southern Mindanao, Kabacan, Cotabato. Two experts in the field of education reviewed the items. Based on their evaluation, revisions were required to contextualize and enhance the clarity and validity of the questionnaire items for the set of respondents.

Data Gathering Procedure

A formal letter of permission to conduct the study was sent to the principals of the three participating schools: Raradangan ES, Macabasa ES, and Pigcawaran ES. Upon approval, the authors coordinated with the teachers to facilitate the schedule and the distribution of the questionnaires to the learners. It is important to ensure that while conducting the study, the classes were not hampered and learners were not disturbed.

Before doing the survey, the first author explained the purpose of the study to the respondents and assured them of the voluntary nature of their participation. They were informed that they can withdraw their participation without any consequences. Consent was sought from both the school authorities and the learners involved through the informed consent forms. The questionnaires were administered in a classroom setting, with the first author providing necessary guidance and clarifications, and even explaining terms using their vernacular language whenever learners had difficulty understanding them.

Data Analysis Procedure

Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, and weighted means, were used to summarize the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and perceptions of school counselors' roles and functions. These measures were appropriate for presenting categorical distributions and proportional comparisons (Agresti, 2018) and for summarizing the central tendency of

Likert-type responses at the scale level (Boone & Boone, 2012; Sullivan & Artino, 2013). The use of weighted means is also justified when items or cases carry different importance or sample weights in survey estimation (Cochran, 1977).

To determine the relationship between learners' socio-demographic characteristics and their perceptions, Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient (Spearman's rho) was employed. This non-parametric test was appropriate for analyzing ordinal data and assessing the strength and direction of associations between ranked variables (Mukaka, 2012).

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents in terms of sex, age, and tribe. Results reveal that this study had 61 (54.1%) male respondents and 72 (45.9%) female respondents. This data implies that there are more female respondents than male respondents. More so, the table shows that there were 99 (73.7%) who were 11 years old, 27 (20.3%) were 12 years old, and 8 (6.0%) were 13 years old. This finding implies that the majority of the respondents were 11 years old. Finally, in terms of tribe, Ilonggos were 87(65.4%) of the total respondents. Muslims were 27 (20.3%), Visayans were (6.0%), and Tagalogs were 7 (5.3%). The least of them was the Karay-as, with only 4 (3.0%). This finding implies that the respondents come from various groups of people and may represent diverse perspectives.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Socio-Demographic Profile	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Female	61	54.1
Male	72	45.9
Total	133	100
Age		
11 years old	99	73.7
12 years old	27	20.3
13 years old	8	6.0
Total	133	100
Tribe		
Ilonggo	87	65.4
Muslim	27	20.3
Visaya	8	6.0
Tagalog	7	5.3
Karay-a	4	3.0
Total	133	100

Learners' Perception of School Counselors' Roles and Functions

Table 2 presents the learners' perceptions of the roles and functions of school counselors across six domains: Leader, Advocate, Collaborator, Coordinator, Data Utilizer, and Manager. The table shows the weighted mean scores for each item, interpreted using a five-point Likert scale, to determine how important learners perceive each specific role and function.

The data indicate that learners highly value the school counselor's role as a leader. The highest-rated function was launching programs that help students gain knowledge about college and careers (mean = 4.04), followed by generating support plans for students facing personal issues (mean = 3.80), and initiating programs to help improve academic performance (mean = 3.74). All items were interpreted as very important, with a general mean of 3.86. These findings affirm the role of school counselors as institutional leaders who facilitate systemic support and educational access. Kuhn (2004) emphasized that counselors who lead must contribute to systemic change and ensure equal academic opportunities for all students. Similarly, Bafadal et al. (2018) assert that leadership in counseling contributes significantly to academic and emotional development, especially when it aligns with school-wide improvement efforts.

The learners also acknowledged the importance of counselors as advocates. The most highly rated role was encouraging students to choose transformative courses (mean = 3.77), while the lowest was bringing in outside specialists to address personal issues (mean = 2.98, interpreted as important). The general mean was 3.53, indicating that learners still see advocacy as a very important role. This finding aligns with Cigrand et al. (2015), who define student-focused advocacy as an essential function for removing barriers and increasing equitable access to resources. However, the lower score for community specialist involvement may suggest limited visibility or experience of students with such services. Lane et al. (2020) and Arrieta et al. (2021) support this by stating that advocacy includes ensuring culturally appropriate, accessible environments and student-centered interventions.

Among all roles, the collaborator domain received the highest general mean of 3.98. Students most valued the counselor's role in working with teachers, principals, and parents to support academic success (mean = 4.22), followed by addressing students' personal issues in collaboration with authority figures (mean = 3.95), and building community partnerships for career awareness (mean = 3.77). Bryan and Henry (2012) highlight that effective collaboration between school counselors and community members fosters student success. These findings are also in line with Sanders et al. (2019), who emphasized the importance of school-family-community partnerships. Learners' responses support the idea that a collaborative environment enhances students' developmental outcomes.

Students also recognized the importance of school counselors as coordinators of support services. Learners rated highly the roles involving the provision of a safe space for academic and personal discussions (means = 3.97 and 3.72, respectively) and college or career guidance (mean = 3.79), resulting in a general mean of 3.79, all interpreted as very important. This aligns with Borders and Drury (1992), who emphasized that school counselors coordinate interventions that foster both academic and personal development. Gysbers & Henderson (2012) further affirm that coordination includes aligning school resources with student needs to maximize achievement and well-being.

In the role of data utilizers, learners appreciated counselors' efforts in gathering information to help students with personal (mean = 3.85) and academic issues (means = 3.74 and 3.68). The overall general mean was 3.76, interpreted as very important. These findings support research by Zyromski et al. (2017) and Lapan et al. (2012), which shows that data-informed counseling improves academic outcomes and addresses equity issues. Koch and Knutson (2016) also emphasize the counselor's responsibility to use data in identifying and addressing achievement gaps. However, as Astramovich (2016) notes, many counselors still lack confidence in data use, highlighting a need for stronger training in this area.

Lastly, learners viewed the counselor's role as a manager as very important, with the highest-rated functions being maintaining school order through discipline (mean = 4.04) and managing

student records (mean = 4.01). Other tasks, such as scheduling, administering tests, and supporting special education, also received high ratings (means = 3.95 to 3.96), leading to a general mean of 3.96. These findings echo Toto (2014), who emphasized that counseling should be systematic and student-centered. Chepkemei (2014) and Mweemba (2016) also found that structured management and administrative functions of counselors contribute significantly to student discipline and school effectiveness.

Table 2. Respondents' perception on school counselors' roles and functions

	Mean	Verbal Description
Leader: The school counselor acts as a leader who:		
Launches new programs to help all students in gaining knowledge about college and careers.	4.04	Very Important
Generates new programs to assist all students with personal issues that may interfere with academic success.	3.80	Very Important
Initiates a new program to assist all students in performing better in school.	3.74	Very Important
Mean	3.86	Very Important
Advocate: The school counselor is an advocate who		
Help the students to select and make contacts with the local business people to develop their understanding of different careers.	3.82	Very Important
Encourage all students to select classes that will change them.	3.77	Very Important
Brings specialist from the community into the school to help students who are having personal problems that interfere with the schoolwork.	2.98	Important
Mean	3.53	Very Important
Collaborator: The school counselor is a Collaborator who		
Works with the teachers, principals, and parents to help all students do well in school.	4.22	Very Important
Talks with the teachers or parents about personal problems that students are unable to solve on their own.	3.95	Very Important
Brings local business people into the school to help students learn more jobs and careers.	3.77	Very Important
Mean	3.98	Very Important
Counsel/Coordinator: The school counselor works as Counselor/Coordinator who		
Assists all students in choosing college or career paths that are right for them.	3.97	Very Important
Provides all students with a safe place to talk about problems with academics.	3.72	Very Important
Provides all students with a safe place to talk about personal/social problems.	3.68	Very Important
Mean	3.79	Very Important
Data Utilizer: The school counselor is a Data Utilizer who		
Gathers information on all students who are having personal problems to make sure they get the help they need.	3.85	Very Important

	Mean	Verbal Description
Gathers information on student academic progress to make sure that all students are selecting challenging classes.	3.74	Very Important
Gathers information on students who need after-school jobs and find ways to get these students' part-time work.	3.68	Very Important
Mean	3.76	Very Important
Manager: The school counselor is a manager who		
Assists in maintaining order in the school through disciplinary intervention.	4.04	Very Important
Maintains school records and files.	4.01	Very Important
Assists in registration and scheduling.	3.95	Very Important
Administers achievement tests.	3.95	Very Important
Assist in special education services.	3.86	Very Important
Mean	3.96	Very Important

Legend	Verbal Description
1.00-1.49	Not important
1.50-2.49	Somewhat Important
2.50-3.49	Important
3.50-4.49	Very Important
4.50-5.00	Extremely Important

Relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and learners' perceptions on school counselors' roles and functions

Table 3 presents the results of the Spearman-rho correlation analysis examining the relationship between learners' socio-demographic characteristics—specifically sex, age, and ethnolinguistic group and their perceptions of school counselors' roles and functions. A significance level of 0.05 was used as the threshold for statistical significance.

Results indicate that sex has a statistically significant relationship with four counselor roles: advocate ($r = -0.253$, $p = 0.003$), collaborator ($r = -0.205$, $p = 0.018$), coordinator ($r = -0.262$, $p = 0.002$), and manager ($r = 0.316$, $p = 0.000$). These findings suggest that learners' perceptions of these specific roles differ significantly based on sex. This aligns with the findings of Shi et al. (2014), who observed that perceptions of school counselors often differ by gender, particularly in terms of willingness to seek support and the types of counselor functions students engage with. Similarly, Iyeke et al. (2018) noted that male and female learners demonstrate varying levels of metacognitive awareness regarding the value of counseling services, which may influence how they perceive counselors' role emphasis.

Meanwhile, no significant relationship was found between sex and the roles of leader ($p = 0.058$) and data utilizer ($p = 0.152$), indicating that perceptions of these roles are not influenced by the learners' sex. This may reflect a more universally recognized view of these functions, particularly those tied to leadership and data-driven decision-making, which are often less affected by gendered perceptions in the classroom setting.

In contrast, age was found to have no significant relationship with any of the counselor roles, as all p -values exceeded 0.05. These results are consistent with the findings of Sultoni et al. (2018) and Walker et al. (2020), who noted that age differences among younger learners, especially in primary education, often do not result in meaningful variation in perceptions of school-based services.

This suggests a developmental uniformity in how elementary learners understand and value the counselor's role.

With regard to ethnolinguistic group, the analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship only with the data utilizer role ($r = -0.189$, $p = 0.029$). This finding implies that learners' perceptions of how counselors collect and use student data—such as academic performance and personal concerns may vary across cultural or language backgrounds. This is in line with Arrieta et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of culturally responsive counseling practices and the need for data collection methods that are sensitive to diverse student populations. However, no significant relationships were observed between ethnolinguistic group and the other counselor roles, indicating a generally consistent perception of school counselor functions across diverse learner backgrounds.

These findings underscore the importance of considering socio-demographic variables—particularly sex and ethnolinguistic identity—in understanding how students perceive the multifaceted roles of school counselors. As emphasized by Shi & Carey (2021), multicultural counseling competence allows school counselors to better respond to students' cultural and linguistic needs, resulting in more positive academic and behavioral outcomes. Similarly, Ceballos et al. (2021) showed that identity-affirming counseling programs improved diverse students' engagement and sense of support, highlighting the value of tailoring school counseling services to reflect the diversity of student experiences.

Table 3. Relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and learners' perceptions on school counselors' roles and functions

Leader		Advocate	Collaborator	Counselor Coordinator	Data Utilizer	Manager
Sex Correlation Coefficient	-0.165	-0.253	-0.205	-0.262	0.125	0.316
Point-Biserial Correlation	No significant relationship	With significant relationship	With significant relationship	With significant relationship	No significant relationship	With significant relationship
P – Value	0.058	0.003	0.018	0.002	0.152	0.000
Age Correlation Coefficient	0.139	0.036	0.059	0.125	0.189	0.033
Spearman-rho	No significant relationship	No significant relationship	No significant relationship	No significant relationship	No significant relationship	No significant relationship
P – Value	0.112	0.681	0.497	0.153	0.029	0.705
Ethno Correlation Coefficient	-0.098	0.131	0.086	0.036	-0.189	-0.050
Spearman-rho	No significant relationship	No significant relationship	No significant relationship	No significant relationship	With significant relationship	No significant relationship
P – Value	0.260	0.131	0.325	0.682	0.029	0.569

Theoretical implications

This study applies Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory to understand how elementary learners form their perceptions of school counselors. According to the theory, individuals learn through the interaction of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors. In the school setting, learners observe how counselors interact with others, how their roles are communicated by teachers and staff, and how peers talk about or engage with them. These social cues shape students' understanding of what counselors do, even before they seek help themselves. The study's findings support this framework, showing that learners' perceptions vary based on personal characteristics, particularly sex and ethnolinguistic group, while age showed no significant influence. This finding suggests that while younger learners may share a general developmental stage, their identities still play a role in how they interpret their environment, including the presence and function of school counselors.

From a practical standpoint, the findings imply that school counseling programs must be designed with visibility, inclusivity, and responsiveness in mind. Counselors should take an active role in making their services known and approachable, especially in settings where learners may only associate them with discipline or academic tasks. Given the influence of gender and cultural background, counselors are encouraged to adopt gender-sensitive and culturally relevant approaches, ensuring that learners from different backgrounds feel seen and supported. The action to strengthen collaboration between counselors, teachers, parents, and community members can also help reinforce the value of guidance services across the school environment. Furthermore, introducing the different counselor roles to students in age-appropriate ways—through classroom visits, group activities, or community talks—can help build early awareness and trust. In this way, schools can ensure that students not only recognize but also make use of the full range of support that counselors are meant to provide.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that learners generally regard the functions of school counselors as highly important, with particular emphasis on collaboration. This result highlights the critical role counselors play in building supportive networks for learners' academic and personal growth. The findings also indicate that gender influences learners' views of several counselor roles, pointing to the need for guidance programs to consider gender-responsive approaches. In contrast, age does not appear to significantly affect learners' perceptions, which may suggest a consistent awareness of counselor roles across the elementary grade levels. Furthermore, learners from different ethnolinguistic groups may differ in their expectations and understanding of how counselors utilize data, which suggests the importance of culturally responsive practices.

In light of these conclusions, several recommendations are proposed. School administrators should strengthen the visibility and delivery of comprehensive school counseling programs, particularly focusing on collaborative efforts with teachers, parents, and community stakeholders. Counselors and educators should design gender-sensitive interventions that account for varying perceptions between male and female students. Professional development initiatives for school personnel should also emphasize the importance of supporting counselor-student relationships, especially in areas where significant perception gaps exist.

Moreover, culturally inclusive practices must be reinforced, especially in how counselors gather and use student data to inform interventions. Training programs should equip counselors with the cultural competence necessary to respond appropriately to diverse learner backgrounds. Finally, future research is recommended to replicate this study in other schools in the municipality of Alameda, Philippines, and educational levels, and to consider additional socio-demographic variables

such as parental education or socioeconomic status, to further enrich the understanding of learners' perceptions and their influencing factors.

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