

Original Article

## **Guiding the Future: Lived Experiences of Guidance Advocates in Facilitating Senior High Students' Career Choices**

Charly Guiao<sup>1</sup>, Josephine Baguio<sup>1,\*</sup>

Received: 04 May 2026; Revised: 30 May 2026;  
Accepted: 06 June 2026; Published: 08 June 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66074/K6X3N8P2>

### **Abstract**

This qualitative descriptive narrative study explored the lived experiences of guidance advocates in public senior high schools in Mati South District, Division of City of Mati, as they facilitated students' career decision-making. The inquiry addressed three aims: to identify the challenges encountered by guidance advocates, describe the coping strategies they used, and develop a career choices program responsive to the findings. Ten guidance advocates from five public senior high schools participated through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews, transcribed verbatim, coded, clustered into subthemes, and organized into major themes. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, reflexive documentation, audit trail procedures, and attention to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Findings showed three challenges: student career uncertainty, family and financial pressure, and weak career guidance support. Student career uncertainty reflected unclear self-direction, fear of wrong choice, and low self-confidence. Family and financial pressure involved limited family income, parent expectations, and practical course choice. Weak career guidance support included limited resources, scheduling barriers, and poor collaboration. Guidance advocates coped through structured guidance practice, resourcefulness and collaboration, and personal well-being protection. Structured guidance practice included prioritizing cases, group guidance, and simple tools. Resourcefulness and collaboration included free resources, professional

<sup>1</sup> Graduate School,  
Rizal Memorial  
Colleges, Inc., Davao,  
Philippines  
\* josephinebbaguio@  
outlook.com

support, and stakeholder partnerships. Personal well-being protection included work boundaries, emotional pacing, and self-care routines. The proposed career choices program integrated student self-awareness, decision support, anxiety management, family and financial planning, parent engagement, career information development, structured delivery systems, case documentation, school referral networks, and advocate well-being. The study concludes that effective senior high school career guidance requires not only individual counselor competence but also school-wide collaboration, resource provision, and institutional care for guidance advocates.

*Keywords:* career guidance, decision-making, guidance advocates, Philippines, senior high school

## **1. Introduction**

Career decision-making in senior high school occurs at a formative stage when students must connect present academic choices with future education, work, family expectations, and self-definition. Career guidance therefore functions as more than a routine school service; it is a developmental intervention that helps learners examine interests, values, abilities, opportunities, and constraints before they commit to pathways that may shape later life chances. International policy work has emphasized that career guidance supports smoother transitions across education, training, and employment, while also contributing to equity when it reaches students whose families have limited access to career information (Cedefop et al., 2021; Mann et al., 2020). For senior high school learners, this support is especially important because the transition from school to postsecondary education or work is no longer linear. Students encounter rapidly shifting labor markets, intense competition for scholarships, emerging occupations, and social messages that often privilege a narrow set of prestigious or economically secure careers.

Research on adolescent career development consistently shows that high school students benefit from structured interventions that combine self-assessment, information access, career exploration, decision support, and reflection (Wang et al., 2024). The same body of evidence suggests that career guidance must move beyond one-time orientation activities if it aims to strengthen students' confidence and readiness. Students need repeated opportunities to connect personal interests with realistic educational options, compare alternatives, and talk through fear or uncertainty. Career anxiety also deserves explicit attention. Yalçın and Koyuncu (2024) found that anxiety about career choices can influence students' decision

processes, while Parola and Marcionetti (2022) showed that parental career-related behaviors and career adaptability are intertwined with career decision-making difficulties. These findings are particularly relevant in contexts where family expectations and economic considerations weigh heavily on students' choices.

In the Philippine basic education system, senior high school was designed to help learners prepare for higher education, employment, entrepreneurship, and middle-level skills development. The Department of Education's Basic Education Development Plan 2030 frames quality basic education as a long-term national priority and calls for stronger systems, partnerships, and support mechanisms that can improve learner outcomes (Department of Education, 2022). Within this policy environment, guidance advocates are positioned as key personnel who help students interpret career options, manage personal-social concerns, and align educational choices with future aspirations. However, policy recognition does not automatically translate into adequate time, resources, personnel, or program structures at school level. Guidance advocates often need to perform career support alongside testing duties, administrative tasks, student discipline concerns, referral work, parent communication, and documentation requirements.

The work of guidance advocates becomes more complex in public senior high schools where student needs are diverse and institutional resources may be uneven. Students from low-income families may choose courses based on cost and employability rather than interest. Some learners may defer to parents, relatives, peers, or online trends because they lack confidence in their own judgment. Others may know what they want but fear that the family cannot afford the pathway. At the same time, guidance offices may lack updated career inventories, localized labor market information, digital tools, or protected schedules for individual counseling. These conditions create a practical tension: guidance advocates are expected to support informed, student-centered career decisions, yet their ability to do so depends on systems that may not fully support the work.

The literature has provided substantial attention to the value of career interventions, student readiness, and school-to-work transitions, but less is known about how guidance advocates themselves experience the everyday labor of career facilitation in under-resourced school settings. This gap is important because guidance advocates are not neutral conduits of information. They interpret policy, negotiate school schedules, mediate family expectations, improvise resources, absorb students' anxieties, and create spaces for learners to imagine possible futures. Their narratives can reveal how career guidance actually operates in schools and how institutional constraints shape the quality of support students receive.

This study addressed that gap by transforming the lived experiences of guidance advocates in Mati South District, Division of City of Mati, into evidence for program development. The study focused on three questions: what challenges guidance advocates encountered in facilitating career choices among senior high school students, how they coped with these challenges, and what career choices program could be developed from the findings. By centering the voices of guidance advocates,

the study contributes to the scholarship on career guidance by showing how student uncertainty, family pressure, limited resources, workload, collaboration, and advocate well-being converge in school-based career decision support. The study also offers a context-sensitive program that can guide schools in strengthening career services for senior high school learners.

## **2. Methodology**

This study used a qualitative descriptive narrative approach to present the experiences of guidance advocates as they supported senior high school students' career decision-making in public schools in Mati South District, Division of City of Mati, during school year 2025-2026. The design was suitable because the inquiry sought to describe the meanings, practices, challenges, and coping strategies expressed by participants in their own accounts rather than test variables or estimate statistical relationships. A descriptive narrative orientation allowed the research to preserve the practical and relational character of the participants' work while organizing their accounts into coherent themes that could inform a career choices program. The analytic stance was also consistent with contemporary qualitative guidance that values transparency, reflexivity, and theme development grounded in the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022).

The study involved ten guidance advocates from five public senior high schools, with two participants drawn from each school. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because they had direct experience with the phenomenon under study and could provide information-rich accounts of career guidance practice. Eligible participants were licensed guidance counselors or designated guidance advocates, were currently assigned to public senior high schools, had at least three years of experience in facilitating career guidance activities, and were actively involved in career guidance programs aligned with the senior high school framework. Individuals who were not directly involved in career facilitation, were assigned outside the senior high school setting, or did not meet the experience criterion were not included.

Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews guided by a researcher-made interview protocol. The guide contained open-ended questions on participants' experiences in facilitating career choices, the difficulties they encountered, the strategies they used, and the program elements they considered necessary for stronger career guidance delivery. Semi-structured interviewing allowed the researcher to ask common questions across participants while retaining flexibility for probes, clarifications, and follow-up questions. The interview guide underwent content validation by experts in qualitative research and guidance-related studies to strengthen clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research aims. Interviews were conducted in quiet and private settings or through secure online platforms, depending on participant availability and preference. With consent, interviews were audio-

recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by field notes that captured contextual observations and non-verbal cues.

Institutional and ethical requirements were completed before data collection. Approval was secured from the graduate school and the research ethics committee, followed by coordination with the appropriate Department of Education offices and participating school heads. Each potential participant received an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, the procedures, potential benefits, foreseeable risks, confidentiality safeguards, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw without penalty. Participants were assigned codes in the reporting of findings. Audio files, transcripts, notes, and related documents were stored in password-protected and encrypted systems, and identifying information was removed from transcripts and the final manuscript. These measures were necessary because the study asked participants to discuss workload, institutional limitations, family-related pressures, and emotionally demanding student concerns.

Data analysis followed a descriptive narrative process supported by thematic organization. The researcher read the transcripts repeatedly to gain familiarity with the accounts, marked significant statements that directly addressed the research aims, and grouped similar statements into meaning units. These meaning units were then clustered into subthemes and broader themes that reflected recurring patterns across participants while retaining the language of the advocates. The analysis moved from raw narrative accounts to thematic matrices, evidence summaries, and program implications. In line with Braun and Clarke (2021), the analysis emphasized the coherence of each theme, the adequacy of supporting extracts, and the relationship between themes and the research questions. Byrne (2022) further informed the decision to present a transparent link among participants' statements, subthemes, and theme-level claims.

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability procedures. Credibility was supported through member checking, review of interview summaries, careful use of verbatim excerpts, and comparison of interview data with field notes and relevant school guidance documents when available. Transferability was supported through contextual description of the public senior high school setting, participant qualifications, school distribution, and guidance work conditions. Dependability was addressed through an audit trail that documented interview procedures, transcription, coding decisions, theme development, and program generation. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive documentation, adviser consultation, and attention to the distinction between participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretation. Together, these procedures helped ensure that the findings represented the guidance advocates' experiences with methodological transparency and ethical care.

### **3. Results**

#### *3.1 Challenges encountered by guidance advocates*

##### **Theme 1: Student career uncertainty**

Participants described students as uncertain about their preferred pathways and inconsistent in how they expressed future plans. The evidence showed unclear self-direction, fear of wrong choice, and low self-confidence as recurring forms of uncertainty.

*“Some of them choose a strand or course because of friends, family pressure, or what they see online.” (P1)*

*“Some students change their answers every time we meet.” (P2)*

*“Students often express confusion by saying they have no dream yet.” (P10)*

*“Others seem restless because they are afraid of making a mistake that their family cannot afford.” (P10)*

*“Low self-esteem makes them choose below their potential.” (P5)*

##### **Theme 2: Family and financial pressure**

Participants reported that economic capacity and family expectations shaped the range of choices students considered feasible. The evidence showed that some students set aside preferred careers because of cost, parental preference, or the need to choose practical pathways with faster employment potential.

*“Some want to take medicine, engineering, or aviation, but they know their parents cannot afford the tuition, dormitory, or materials.” (P1)*

*“For many students, money decides before interest does.” (P2)*

*“As a guidance advocate, I often need to help them separate what they truly want from what others expect from them.” (P1)*

*“Family expectations also matter because some parents want careers that sound stable, even if the student has a different interest.” (P3)*

*“Some students sacrifice interest because the family needs them to earn soon.” (P4)*

##### **Theme 3: Weak career guidance support**

Participants identified limited materials, scarce assessment tools, insufficient time, and weak coordination as barriers to effective career guidance. The evidence showed that career sessions were often dependent on available time, while limited collaboration placed much of the career guidance burden on the guidance office.

*"The school lacks updated career materials, assessment tools, and printed resources." (P1)*

*"We have limited psychological tests and career inventories." (P2)*

*"Career sessions are often inserted only when teachers are absent or when there is extra time." (P1)*

*"Without collaboration, students receive mixed messages." (P2)*

*"When teachers and administrators are not involved, the guidance office carries the burden alone." (P10)*

### 3.2 Coping strategies used by guidance advocates

#### **Theme 1: Structured guidance practice**

Participants coped by organizing student concerns according to urgency, using group sessions for common concerns, and keeping basic documentation tools. The evidence showed that structured practice helped advocates reach more students despite limited time and large student needs.

*"I organize student concerns by urgency." (P1)*

*"I schedule career sessions by section and by level of need." (P2)*

*"I cannot meet all students for long sessions, so I use group orientation first, then individual counseling for those who need it most." (P3)*

*"I also prepare simple forms and checklists so sessions do not become too scattered." (P1)*

*"I also keep records so I can track students who need follow-up." (P8)*

#### **Theme 2: Resourcefulness and collaboration**

Participants used free resources, alumni, colleagues, advisers, administrators, and parents to strengthen career guidance delivery. The evidence showed that advocates compensated for limited formal resources by building support networks and using available information sources creatively.

*"I contacted former students who were already in college and asked them to share their experiences through an online session." (P1)*

*"I created a simple table from available scholarship announcements and posted it in the guidance area." (P2)*

*"I seek advice from fellow guidance advocates, especially when a case involves family conflict or serious indecision." (P1)*

*"I ask help from advisers, subject teachers, and other guidance personnel." (P2)*

*“I collaborate with teachers for student observation, with principals for program approval, and with parents for home support.” (P10)*

**Theme 3: Personal well-being protection**

Participants protected their professional functioning through work boundaries, emotional pacing, and daily self-care routines. The evidence showed that advocates recognized the emotional demands of career guidance and used personal regulation to sustain their service to students.

- “I set boundaries after work hours.” (P1)*
- “I avoid bringing student files home.” (P2)*
- “I remind myself that some students need more time.” (P1)*
- “I try not to take it personally. Some students are not ready yet.” (P2)*
- “I write down priorities and take breaks between sessions.” (P8)*

**3.3 Career choices program**

The proposed program was developed from the challenges and coping strategies identified in the interviews. Table 1 presents the key areas for enhancement, basis from the findings, program objectives, proposed activities, and expected outcomes.

**Table 1.** Proposed senior high school career choices program.

Key area for enhancement	Basis from the findings	Program objectives	Proposed activities	Expected outcomes
Career self-awareness and decision-making support	Students lacked clear self-direction and were uncertain about their interests, abilities, and future goals.	To help students understand their strengths, interests, values, and possible career pathways.	Conduct career self-assessment, interest profiling, values clarification activities, and guided career reflection sessions.	Students become more aware of their personal strengths and are able to make more informed career decisions.
Career anxiety and fear management	Students feared making the wrong career choice, disappointing their families, and experiencing future failure or regret.	To help students manage fear, uncertainty, and pressure related to career decision-making.	Provide counseling sessions, career decision-making workshops, stress management activities, and realistic career planning exercises.	Students develop greater confidence and emotional readiness in making career decisions.
Academic confidence and career motivation	Students with low self-confidence and poor academic performance tended to limit their career options.	To strengthen students’ confidence and motivation toward realistic and meaningful career goals.	Conduct strengths-based guidance activities, goal-setting workshops, academic encouragement sessions, and career motivation programs.	Students become more confident in exploring career opportunities aligned with their abilities and interests.
Family and financial career planning	Students’ career decisions were strongly influenced by limited family	To help students balance personal aspirations with financial realities	Organize scholarship orientations, affordable school option discussions, financial	Students and families become more informed about realistic and

	income, scholarship needs, and practical employment concerns.	and family circumstances.	planning sessions, and practical career pathway seminars.	financially manageable career pathways.
Parent engagement and career partnership	Parent expectations strongly affected students' career choices and decision-making processes.	To strengthen parent involvement and promote supportive family participation in career planning.	Conduct parent career orientations, parent-student dialogue sessions, and family career planning workshops.	Parents become more supportive and collaborative partners in students' career development.
Career information and resource development	Schools lacked updated career materials, assessment tools, and accessible career information resources.	To improve students' access to updated, reliable, and low-cost career information resources.	Develop career information corners, scholarship bulletin boards, digital career folders, alumni career sharing sessions, and official college information lists.	Students gain improved access to career information and educational opportunities.
Structured guidance delivery system	Career guidance sessions were irregular, rushed, or limited because of scheduling barriers and workload concerns.	To make career guidance more organized, consistent, and accessible within the school setting.	Prepare annual career guidance calendars, group guidance schedules, classroom career orientation plans, and student follow-up monitoring forms.	Career guidance activities become more systematic, organized, and sustainable.
Case prioritization and documentation	Guidance advocates relied on prioritization strategies to address students with urgent career concerns.	To strengthen monitoring and support for students requiring immediate or intensive career guidance assistance.	Train guidance advocates in student profiling, case prioritization, documentation procedures, and referral systems.	Students with serious career concerns receive more timely and focused support.
School collaboration and referral network	Weak collaboration among teachers, advisers, administrators, and stakeholders affected career guidance delivery.	To strengthen school-wide collaboration and shared responsibility in supporting students' career development.	Establish career guidance committees, adviser referral systems, alumni mentoring programs, and regular coordination meetings.	Career guidance becomes more collaborative and supported by the entire school community.
Guidance advocate well-being and boundary setting	Guidance advocates experienced stress and protected themselves through work boundaries, emotional pacing, and self-care routines.	To support the emotional well-being and professional sustainability of guidance advocates.	Conduct wellness seminars, stress management workshops, emotional pacing sessions, and self-care activities for guidance personnel.	Guidance advocates maintain emotional balance, resilience, and effectiveness in supporting students.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings show that student career uncertainty was not simply a lack of information but a developmental and emotional difficulty shaped by self-awareness, fear, confidence, and the perceived consequences of a wrong decision. This interpretation aligns with Wang et al. (2024), who emphasized that effective high school career interventions often require structured opportunities for exploration, self-assessment, counseling, and reflection. It also resonates with Yalçın and Koyuncu

(2024), whose work linked career anxiety with high school students' decision processes. In the present study, uncertainty appeared through unstable choices, fear of regret, and self-limiting beliefs, which suggests that guidance advocates need tools that address both cognitive clarity and emotional readiness.

The theme of family and financial pressure highlights the social location of career choice. Students did not choose from an open field of possibilities; instead, they weighed interest against tuition, transportation, family sacrifice, employability, and parental approval. Mann et al. (2020) argued that career readiness is closely tied to inequalities in access to information and support, and Cedefop et al. (2021) likewise framed career guidance as an equity mechanism for learners who need help to navigate opportunity structures. The participants' accounts support this equity perspective because financial constraints and family expectations narrowed students' perceived choices even before formal decision-making began.

Parental expectations in the findings should not be understood only as interference. In many Filipino families, career decisions are tied to collective aspiration, economic security, and family reciprocity. Parola and Marcionetti (2022) showed that parental career-related behaviors relate to students' career decision difficulties through career adaptability, which helps explain why advocates in this study had to mediate between student preference and family expectation. The implication is that career guidance programs should not isolate the student from the family context. Instead, parent engagement must be designed as a structured and respectful process in which families receive current career information while students retain voice and agency.

Weak career guidance support reveals a system-level problem. The lack of updated career materials, assessment tools, time, personnel, and collaboration limited the depth of guidance services that advocates could provide. This is consistent with the international view that career guidance requires investment, accessible information, quality resources, trained personnel, and coordination across institutions (Cedefop et al., 2021). It also connects with the Philippine policy direction under the Basic Education Development Plan 2030, which emphasizes improved systems, partnerships, and governance support for basic education delivery (Department of Education, 2022). The findings suggest that career guidance quality cannot rest on the dedication of advocates alone; it depends on whether schools allocate time, materials, and institutional authority to the program.

Structured guidance practice emerged as a pragmatic response to scarcity. Participants used prioritization, group guidance, forms, checklists, and follow-up records because they could not provide long individual sessions to every student. Wang et al. (2024) noted that high school career interventions vary in modality and that programs can combine individual, group, informational, and experiential components. The present findings extend that point by showing why mixed delivery modes become necessary in under-resourced settings. Group guidance allowed advocates to reach more learners, while case prioritization reserved individual attention for students with urgent or complex concerns.

Resourcefulness and collaboration were central coping strategies, but they also reveal gaps in formal support. Alumni talks, free online resources, scholarship bulletin boards, advisers, teachers, administrators, and parents became substitute or supplementary resources when materials and personnel were limited. Mann et al. (2020) stressed that career readiness improves when students can explore work and discuss futures with trusted adults, while Cedefop et al. (2021) described guidance as most effective when it connects people to reliable information and support networks. The participants' reliance on informal collaboration shows that many useful resources already exist around the school, but these resources require formal coordination to become a sustainable career guidance system.

The finding on personal well-being protection is especially important because career guidance is emotional work. Advocates listened to students who feared failure, families who carried financial pressure, and learners whose aspirations were fragile. Kim and Lambie (2018) showed that burnout among school counselors is linked to both internal and external factors, and Ko and Lee (2021) found that imbalance between self-care and care for others relates to counselors' burnout and life satisfaction. In this study, boundaries, emotional pacing, and simple self-care routines were not signs of detachment. They were protective practices that helped advocates remain present, ethical, and effective.

The proposed career choices program follows logically from the alignment between challenges and coping strategies. Because students experienced uncertainty and fear, the program begins with self-awareness, decision support, and anxiety management. Because families and finances shaped decisions, it includes family and financial career planning and parent engagement. Because guidance support was weak, it adds resource development, structured delivery, documentation, collaboration networks, and advocate well-being. This integration reflects the broader conclusion of the career guidance literature that student outcomes are best supported by multi-component interventions rather than isolated sessions (Wang et al., 2024).

For practice, the findings suggest that schools should treat career guidance as a shared instructional, developmental, and administrative responsibility. Guidance advocates need dedicated schedules, updated resource repositories, career assessment options, referral procedures, adviser participation, parent dialogue structures, and school leadership support. Department of Education policy already recognizes the need for stronger basic education systems and partnerships (Department of Education, 2022), but the participants' narratives show that implementation must reach the daily conditions of guidance offices. A career choices program will be more credible if it reduces the gap between policy expectations and the actual resources available to guidance advocates.

For research, the study contributes a grounded account of career guidance from the standpoint of those who facilitate it. Many studies examine student career readiness or the outcomes of interventions; fewer show how advocates negotiate competing demands inside public schools. By documenting the links among student uncertainty, family economy, school resources, coping practice, and advocate well-being, this

study positions guidance advocates as key interpretive actors in the career development ecosystem. Future inquiries may build on these findings through comparative studies across districts, mixed-method assessments of the proposed program, or longitudinal research that follows how students' decisions evolve after structured career guidance.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study concludes that the work of guidance advocates in senior high school career decision-making is shaped by a convergence of student uncertainty, family and financial pressure, and limited institutional support. Students' difficulties were seen in unclear self-direction, fear of wrong choice, low self-confidence, economic constraint, parental expectations, and practical course selection. At the same time, weak resources, scheduling barriers, and poor collaboration limited the reach and consistency of guidance services. These findings show that students' career decisions are not merely individual choices but situated decisions shaped by emotion, family realities, school structures, and access to information.

Guidance advocates responded through structured guidance practice, resourcefulness and collaboration, and personal well-being protection. Their use of case prioritization, group guidance, simple tools, free resources, professional support, stakeholder partnerships, boundaries, emotional pacing, and self-care routines demonstrated commitment and adaptability. However, these coping strategies should not be treated as substitutes for institutional support. They point to practical solutions, but they also reveal the need for schools to provide protected time, updated materials, clear referral systems, and coordinated career guidance structures.

The proposed senior high school career choices program offers a context-sensitive response to the findings. It brings together career self-awareness, career anxiety management, academic confidence, family and financial planning, parent engagement, resource development, structured delivery, documentation, collaboration networks, and advocate well-being. The central implication is clear: effective career guidance requires both student-centered practice and advocate-centered support. When schools strengthen the systems around guidance advocates, students are more likely to receive career guidance that is informed, realistic, inclusive, and personally meaningful.

## **Acknowledgment**

Sincere appreciation is given to all peer reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions, which helped the author to improve the quality of the manuscript.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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*Author Contributions:* Guiao, G., Baguio, J.; Study design, method conception, data collection, data analysis and manuscript writing