

A Phenomenological Study of Urban School Counselors'

Perceptions of Low-Income Families

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Abstract

This qualitative, phenomenological study explores urban school counselors' perceptions of low-income families in their schools. Ten school counselors participated in two rounds of individual interviews and answered two emailed reflective questions. Six themes emerged from the data: (a) perceptions of family characteristics and environment, (b) perceptions of family attitudes and actions regarding education, (c) awareness of obstacles and challenges for families, (d) struggle empathizing with low-income families, (e) choice of roles in working with low-income families, and (f) personal feelings and reflections in response to experiences with low-income families.

Implications for school counselors, supervisors, school counseling district supervisors, school counseling professional organizations, and counselor educators are discussed.

Keywords: urban, school counselor, school counseling, low-income families, perceptions

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In the United States, more than 14 million children are poor. Of these children, 70% have at least one family member working in a full- or part-time job (Children’s Defense Fund, 2009). Moreover, approximately 43% of African American families and 29% of Hispanic families are living in poverty (Fass & Carthen, 2008). Students from low-income families qualifying for free and reduced lunch constitute approximately 42% of the census in U.S. public schools (Education Trust, 2009a) and 46% of children in urban areas belong to families with low incomes. The number of children to who live in families with low incomes is increasing, even before the recent recession. From 2000 to 2007, the number of children living in poor families rose by 15% (Douglas-Hall & Chau, 2009). As a result of these economic challenges, parents and guardians may need extra support in helping their children succeed in school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Children from low-income families are more likely to face mental, educational, and physical problems (Wadsworth, Raviv, Reinhard, Wolff, Santiago, & Einhorn, 2008). Compared to students from families with higher incomes, they are more at-risk to struggle academically in school and are more likely to drop out before finishing high school, putting them at risk for inter-generational poverty (Barton & Coley, 2009). Children from low-income families often have unmet health and nutrition needs due to poor healthcare and lack of nutritious meals (Wadsworth, Raviv, Reinhard, Wolff, Santiago, & Einhorn, 2008). In addition, children from low-income families may have feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and low self-esteem when facing difficult schoolwork (Brown, 2009). They may struggle with paying attention and behaving

appropriately in school as well (Brown, 2009). Additionally, they may suffer from depression and anxiety due to the stresses of poverty on their families and subsequently on themselves (Wadsworth, Raviv, Reinhard, Wolff, Santiago, & Einhorn, 2008).

Low-income families tend to be less involved in their children's academic lives than middle-class families (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Reasons for this difference in involvement may include economic struggles, work obligations (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001), lack of confidence in their own academic abilities (Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007), obligations or problems in the home life, cultural differences including a sense of cultural discontinuity between home and school (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008), and other pressing responsibilities (Davis, 2005). Also, negative past experiences with the schools or feelings of intimidation may prevent family members from actively participating in their child's schooling (Davis, 2005; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). Families may feel uncertain about how they should become involved or how they can help their child to succeed academically (Thompson, 2002).

Role of School Counselor and Low-Income Families

School counselors, with training in human growth and development, have an important role in assisting low-income families with the challenges that can have a deleterious effect on their children's performance at school (Lee, 2005; Sink, 2002). School counselors can actively pursue relationships and partnerships with parents and guardians and community stakeholders and invite them to become a part of the school community (Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000).

Perceptions and Practice

By implementing a comprehensive school counseling program (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012) and advocating for social justice and equity, the school counselor can offer support, resources, collaboration, and advocacy for low-income families. Yet negative perceptions of low income families may hinder school counselors' work with this population. Previous studies suggest that educators have negatively biased perceptions towards low-income families (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1997; Morris, 2005). Currently, there is little in the literature examining the perceptions of urban school counselors about families, in particular those with low-incomes. Given that perceptions may affect the quality of performance (Heppner & O'Brien, 1994), this qualitative study of school counselors' perceptions provides the opportunity to unveil the meaning making of urban school counselors regarding the low-income families they serve (Creswell, 2007).

Research Design

A phenomenological study ultimately looks to answer questions about the "meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience" for a group of people (Patton, 2002, p. 104). In order to understand this consciousness, the researcher must carefully and thoroughly explore the interviewee's thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of the reality that surrounds him or her daily (Patton, 2002). A phenomenological study likewise assumes that consciousness is intentional and reality is "perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual" (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). This study utilizes this phenomenological qualitative approach as it investigates how urban school

counselors make sense of or perceive low-income families and how these perceptions become their realities and influence their collaborative efforts with this population (Patton, 2002).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine how school counselors perceive low-income families in their schools. An understanding of these perceptions may assist in reducing or removing barriers to successful collaboration with these families. This study was guided by the following research questions: What are urban school counselors' perceptions of the low-income families of their students? How might school counselors' perceptions affect their collaboration with these families?

Method

Participants

The participants for this study were ten urban school counselors in two urban school districts in a mid-Atlantic state. The United States Census Bureau (2002) defines "urban" as a territory that consists of a "core census block groups or blocks that have a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile" along with "surrounding census blocks that have an overall density of at least 500 people per square mile." Other characteristics associated with many urban areas include a high population of people of color, high crime rates, high levels of poverty, problems in the school systems, and structural density (Lee, 2005). The school districts employing the participants in this study each had at least 40% of its students receiving free and reduced lunch.

Of the school counselors interviewed for this study, four were elementary counselors, three were middle school counselors, and three were high school

counselors. Eight of the participants were female and two were male. Seven of the participants were African-American while three were white. The ages of the participants ranged from mid-20s to mid-50s. The years of experience working in an urban school ranged from one year to 21 years. Purposeful and snowball sampling were used as the researcher chose a small number of participants and then received recommendations for additional participants from the originally selected participants (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2003).

Research Team

A research team and an independent auditor were assembled in order to gain and utilize multiple perspectives throughout the research study and to increase the overall trustworthiness of the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). Each research team member as well as the auditor for the study has been trained in qualitative research and multicultural counseling through master's and doctoral degree counseling programs.

Data Collection

Both in-person interviews and emailed questionnaires were utilized to collect data from the participants in this study. The school counselors were contacted individually and were selected based on their willingness and availability to be interviewed twice over the course of twelve weeks. Before being interviewed in person, each of the school counselors were given a participant demographic sheet which asked about their work setting, years of experience as an urban school counselor, age, and race. After each interview was completed, in order to confirm the data and increase the overall credibility of the study (Hays & Singh, 2012), participants received a follow-up

email which inquired about their experience of the interview process and offered them an opportunity to add any additional information that they deemed necessary.

Data Analysis

In this study, the data analysis followed the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, which was adapted by Creswell (2003). To begin the data analysis, the audio recorded school counselor interviews were transcribed by the primary researcher (Creswell, 2003). This transcription enhanced the researcher's experience of immersing herself in the data.

After the first round of interviews were completed and transcribed, the primary researcher read over the transcriptions, looking for keywords, phrases and statements that may have been related to the urban school counselors' perceptions. She then read over the interview transcripts, making notations in the margins, analyzing the main ideas and descriptions, and trying to capture the essence of the interviewee's experience. She subsequently developed a preliminary coding scheme with categories and subcategories to be used as a classification system for the research team based on her findings of repeating patterns in the data (Patton, 2002). The transcriptions were then sent to the research team to be coded. The research team subsequently met to discuss emerging themes and patterns and the primary researcher revised the codebook based on the research team's consensus (Patton, 2002).

After the second round of interviews and the follow-up emails, the researcher and the research team repeated the coding process. The research team met again and came to a consensus on the emerging themes and patterns in the data. The final codes, themes, and patterns were sent to the auditor, who reviewed and confirmed the transcriptions and the findings of the research team.

Strategies to Increase Trustworthiness

Several strategies were implemented in order to increase the credibility of the study. The researcher utilized two methods of data collection: interviews and written reflective questions. After the individual interviews, the participants were emailed reflective questions. This triangulation of written and oral data allowed the researcher to explore the differences in themes and patterns that emerged from each type of data collection method (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Another strategy to increase the credibility of the study, member-checking, was employed by having each of the participants review the transcriptions of their interviews (Hays & Singh, 2012). At the start of the second interview, the participant was asked to review the first interview to see if any revisions or changes were needed. After the second interview, the participant was likewise asked via email to review the second interview. The data, therefore, were validated by each participant.

Finally, the researcher used an auditing system to validate the study's findings (Creswell, 2003). Throughout the study, the researcher kept an audit trail in order to "verify the rigor" of the study and to prove the data was collected (Patton, 2002, p. 93). The audit trail consisted of the transcriptions, code book, notations, and reflection journal. An external auditor was consulted at the conclusion of the research process to review the data and preliminary themes.

Findings

Six main themes emerged from the data: (a) perceptions of family characteristics and environment, (b) perceptions of family attitudes and actions regarding education, (c) awareness of obstacles and challenges for families, (d) struggle with empathizing with

low-income families, (e) choice of roles in working with low-income families, and (f) personal feelings and reflections in response to experiences with low-income families.

Theme 1: Family Characteristics and Environment

Each of the ten participants reported negative perceptions about low-income family characteristics, their environments, and/or their children's academic growth and success. Seven of the participants, for example, perceived that low-income families lack the knowledge to help their children succeed. For example, one school counselor explained that the low-income families "don't know the resources and they don't know how to ask for help or where to look for help."

In addition to perceiving the families to lack the knowledge to help their children to become academically successful, eight of the participants negatively described the low-income families' environmental conditions. One participant described how "you have a house where great grandma to your mother, no one has ever graduated from high school, everybody had kids as teenagers, drugs involved, everybody's been in and out of jail and that's all you see at your house." This participant, like several of the other participants, views the student's home life as lacking stability as well as positive role models, especially in regards to education, and as putting the student at-risk for dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, and incarceration.

In addition, seven of the participants perceived families as lacking parenting skills. One participant used an analogy of a fruit and its root to explain the consequences of the families' lack of discipline for the child.

Oftentimes we're dealing with the fruit of the root. Meaning the child being the fruit, the parent being the root. And if the root isn't stable or has no stability in

terms of a consistent discipline, set, or stable situation, then we're dealing with the fruit of that.

Finally, six of the participants perceived family members to be unmotivated. One participant expressed her aggravation in regards to family members not having a job. "Don't just sit and collect unemployment or whatever you're doing and let your kid go out there and work. It's just, you just want to shake them." Another participant described her method of helping unmotivated low-income families in her school.

It's like if you don't schedule the appointment for the parent, pick the parent up and transport them there, sit there while they're filling out the application, take them back home, call them back and say "Ok, did we ever find the birth certificate? Did we find the social security card? Well let me swing by your house and come get it so I can make copies because you know they need that before they can complete your application."

Similar to other examples given by the participants in regards to their work with the parents they perceive to be unmotivated, this participant seems to take a "hand-holding" approach to helping low-income families, as she makes more of an effort than the low-income family members do in meeting their needs or obligations with the school.

In the midst of these negative perceptions, four out of the ten of the participants, in an attempt to prevent generalizing or stereotyping, pointed out that not all low-income families are the same. This multiculturally competent attitude is noted in the literature, which states that school counselors should understand that each individual is unique and should refuse to stereotype a based on a cultural group (Pedersen, 2003). One participant described how

Every household has their differences. It's what the parents want or expect from their child and how knowledgeable the parents are in regarding to reasoning and their upbringing. How mature they are. Their outlook on life, priorities, all those things play a factor. To generalize and to say, I can't do that.

Another participant likewise recognized that "every pocket of low-income families is different" and should be helped based on their individual needs.

Theme 2: Family Attitudes and Actions Regarding Education

Similar to their negative perceptions about the low-income families' overall characteristics and environments, the participants also described how the families were challenging to work with as a result of their reactions and relationships to the school and school counselors: such as not showing concern for their child's education, going against the work and mission of the school, and being resistant to becoming a part of the school community. Seven of the participants indicated that low-income families do not make education a priority. One participant, for example, explained how families often put their own needs before the academic needs of their children.

Especially if it rains, and parents do have a vehicle, and they miss the bus, nine times out of ten, the kid's not going to come to school that day. Just because, or getting up early. Mom may have had fun the night before. Tired. "Oh man, where's the bus, I don't feel like getting up." Like I said mindset. Just you know, priorities. So I truly think if people had the mindset, the priorities in the right place, it would make a world of difference.

However, in the midst of these negative perceptions of the low-income families' priorities, most of the school counselors understood that their priorities may not be

focused on education because they are more focused on meeting their basic needs or “surviving til’ tomorrow,” as one participant phrased it. Another participant captured the general sentiments of the other participants about the families’ priorities of meeting their basic needs.

Families with um, the values of low-income, tend to not always put the value on education and sometimes they have other priorities like “Am I going to eat? Where am I going to sleep?”

In addition to their perceptions about the low-income families’ priorities, seven of the participants perceived the low-income families in their schools as undoing the positive work that school counselors do with students at school. While each of the participants did mention positive feelings associated with working with low-income families, including feeling needed, appreciated, and rewarded, the participants simultaneously seemed frustrated or detached from partnering with families. For example, one school counselor described how:

We just can’t take the child out, work on the child, and then the child go right back in that environment, it’s just going to be a challenge for the child to be mature enough to be consistent and disciplined when he or she is a child and is going to be asked upon to do the things that she needs to do in order for the family to work.

Finally, all the participants perceived the low-income families in their schools as difficult to engage. They reported that the low-income families are challenging to communicate with as well as resistant when it comes to attending school counseling

programs and functions. One participant, for example, expressed frustration with trying to contact parents.

Some parents don't have, uh, some parents don't respond to phone calls. Some we have a hard time getting an address. Sometimes we have a hard time getting a working number. Either it's disconnected or they won't respond for various reasons. Some parents know that their kids have some concerns and they refuse to answer the phone.

Theme 3: Awareness of Obstacles and Challenges for Families

While the participants negatively perceived certain controllable aspects of low-income families, they also recognized the obstacles and challenges that low-income families face in the midst of trying to care for their children. These challenges may contribute to the families' negative environments and lack of involvement in or focus on their children's education. Eight of the participants notably mentioned that they believe low-income parents do care for their children, despite surrounding challenges and obstacles in their lives. This recognition suggests the school counselors' ability to be multiculturally competent as they recognized many factors that may affect families' lives, even if they are not struggles that the participants themselves face (Locke, 2003, p. 177).

One such obstacle that low-income families face, as explained by five of the participants, is the families' background with education, as they may have had negative past experiences in their own schooling or with one of their children's previous educators. One participant described how:

Sometimes the parents have had lots of bad experiences with schools and so they don't really promote education, even though they want them to do well, they don't always promote it with their kids because either they don't know how or they just want to forget about that part of their life.

This recognition of past negative experiences may increase the school counselors' ability to empathize with the parents and their work to increase parental involvement as they acknowledge and understand the reasons why the parents may not feel comfortable becoming involved in their children's education (Erford, 2007).

Finally, in addition to acknowledging the families' negative past experiences with education, all of the participants recognized transportation, childcare, and/or work as formidable barriers to the families' increasing their involvement in their children's education. However, only three of the participants mentioned utilizing a partnership in collaborating with the low-income families in their schools. The reported partnerships included utilizing local church resources, having a school-community day in a nearby neighborhood, and providing food for families donated by the local food bank.

Theme 4: School Counselors' Struggle with Empathizing with Low-Income Families

This recognition of the low-income families' struggles and challenges may propel the participants' empathy towards the low-income families in their schools. Half of the participants made statements seeming to indicate that they empathized with the low-income families' situations. Two of the five participants felt as if this empathy came as a result of their own experiences as members of a family with low income, Empathy, which is defined in the literature as "experiencing the world as if you were the client, but

with awareness that the client remains separate from you” (Ivey & Ivey, 2007, p. 220). For example, one participant explained her perception of this cause-and-effect relationship between her own struggles and her increased empathy for the low-income families in her school.

Because I've walked in their shoes in many occasions, I know what it's like to have to use a kerosene heater because we don't have heat in the house so that's our only source of heat. I know the struggles so I think it makes me more compassionate to work with them, to go over and beyond to try to help them because someone helped me and my mother.

Although these five participants seemed confident about their ability to empathize with low-income families, eight of the participants, including three out of the five participants who initially claimed to be empathic, described an internal struggle with feeling unable to empathize or to imagine the hardships that the families experience in their everyday lives. For example, one participant claims that she “cannot imagine living like that” and the “worlds are just so different” in regards to the low-income families' environments. Later she asserts that the low-income families:

Really need people who um, someone who understands and someone who is empathetic. If you don't have any sympathy, empathy, compassion for people in situations like that you can't work with them because to low-income people you are very, very transparent.

Another participant described her resistance towards empathy based on her background as a member of a family with low income.

Growing up very poor like that without a dad, I have a hard time sometimes. I'm a little biased when people have excuses- "Well you know I live with my mom or I'm a single parent." Ok, that's tough, but you can survive, you can get through. You've just got to meet those challenges.

This same participant notably wrote in her follow-up email that the interview, which required her to "stop and think" and "take time to reflect," also "allowed me to visit my beliefs and brought to light a possible bias, based on my own childhood experiences."

Theme 5: School Counselors' Choices of Roles in Working with Low-Income Families

This empathy, or struggle to empathize, may affect the school counselors' choices of roles in working with low-income families. For example, eight of the participants reported that they provide needed resources for low-income families, which may have been driven by their recognition of and empathy for the families' lack of resources. One participant explained that "as a counselor my job is to be aware and informed of resources and be sure to inform my public or who I work with about these and just hope they take advantage of it." This role corresponds with the participants' aforementioned perception that low-income families lack the knowledge to help them succeed. The school counselors seem to work diligently in order to make up for the resources that the student and the family may be lacking as a result of the families' socioeconomic status.

Eight of the participants likewise reported that they diligently seek to meet the students' emotional, physical, and/or academic needs that they perceive are neglected

by the families. For example, one participant described her experience with a low-income student.

I have this little boy, there are three kids in the family, mom works nights. And I mean he must come into my office ten times a day and I'm like "You've got to go to class, you've got to go to class." But in my heart I know it's because, well he'll flat out tell me, "I hardly ever see my mom." He needs, he needs an adult in his life.

In another role, six of the participants emphasized that they choose to treat all families equally, regardless of socioeconomic status. One participant explained this commitment to equality, saying "I don't look at if they're low-income, middle income, high income. I treat everyone the same. I just address whatever the need is at that time." This choice to treat all families equally may stem from the school counselors' awareness of the obstacles and challenges that families face and a desire to promote equity in addition to equality (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Theme 6: School Counselors' Personal Feelings and Reflections in Response to their Experiences with Low-Income Families

Reflecting their negative perceptions of family characteristics, environments, and attitudes and actions regarding education, six of the participants reported feeling frustrated in their interactions with low-income families, which may affect the level of empathy that the participants have for the families. For example, one participant expressed how her work with low-income families:

Makes you bang your head up against the wall. It's really frustrating no matter how hard you try to reach out you either can't get in touch with them, they aren't

following up on their end of the deal. Um, so you're unable, it's like you can't make any progress. You're trying to engage this family to support this kid, they're not engaging, the kid's not being successful in a lot of cases...

In contrast to, or in combination with, this frustration, nine of the ten participants reported positive feelings as a result of their work with low-income families. The participants felt needed, appreciated, and/or rewarded as a result of their work with low-income families. One participant explained why she chose to work in an urban school over a school with a majority of middle or upper class families.

Those are the families that need your help the most. Um, and so it's very important to me because I sought it out. Those are the kind of families that I wanted to work with. Because I just wanted to make a difference.

Admirable in the face of challenges, these feelings of being needed, appreciated, and rewarded may outweigh feelings of frustration. The positive feelings may also serve as part of their motivation to work in an urban school. This motivation furthermore makes them unique from most counselors who prefer to work in more comfortable or familiar school settings (Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008). These positive feelings may likewise speak to the school counselors' resiliency and perseverance in the midst of challenges.

Finally, six of the participants recognized the need for self-awareness and reflection in regards to their work with low-income families. These participants are cognizant of the challenges that low-income families may bring to their daily work and how these challenges may influence their perceptions. This recognition likewise corresponds to the literature that cites self-awareness as the foundation for successful

multicultural counseling (McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Wininger, 2008). One participant explained her internal dialogue in her work with low-income families

Well I can't go in to working with a low-income family thinking "They're not going to value education" because then I'm not going to be effective, especially with those who do value it. I'm not going to be effective at all, because I'm focusing on the wrong thing.

As demonstrated in this quote, self-reflection may prevent detrimental effects of negative perceptions on a school counselor's practice. This self-aware participant is able to screen her own thoughts about the low-income families in her school.

Discussion

In this study the school counselor participants reported several negative perceptions of the low-income families in their schools such as a lack of knowledge to help their child succeed, negative environmental conditions, a lack of parenting skills, and a lack of motivation. The participants also explained how the low-income families' attitudes and actions can have a negative impact on their children's education as the families do not always see education as a priority nor are they eager to support and participate in their child's learning experience. These negative perceptions of low-income families correspond to the negative perceptions of low-income students reported in previous studies of school personnel (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1997; Morris, 2005). In the midst of their negative perceptions, the school counselors seemed to be aware of the obstacles and challenges that low-income families face in regards to becoming involved in the school. For example, just as low-income families' challenges are described in the professional

school counseling literature (Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, 2005 ; Dodson-Sims, 2005), the participants recognized that the low-income families in their schools may have had negative past encounters with the school or with educators.

All of the participants recognized transportation, childcare, and/or work as challenges to the families' involvement in their children's schooling. These same obstacles are emphasized in the literature as well, which challenges school counselors to creatively work to overcome such logistical obstacles in collaborating with families (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The literature also strongly suggests the use of community partnerships as a means of overcoming logistical challenges that families face (Erford, 2007; Thompson, 2002). However, only three of the participants mentioned utilizing such a partnership in collaborating with the low-income families in their schools. The participants' focus on parents who are already willing to participate in school programs, rather than on finding new and creative ways to reach out to parents or to actively engage parents who have not been involved before, likewise contradicts best practices of school counselors in the literature, which recommends that school counselors actively pursue relationships and partnerships with parents and guardians who may not be present in the school for a variety of reasons and invite them to become a part of the school community (Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000).

While the participants' stated desire to help students is commendable, it may also put them at risk for burn-out, as they go above-and-beyond the role of a school counselor (Lambie, 2006) and may even become enmeshed with the students (Ridge, Campbell, & Martin, 2003). This chosen role corresponds with the participants' perception that families lack parenting skills or that the families are unmotivated. The

participants seem to work to fill this void that they perceive to be in the students' lives as a result of the perceived apathy of the parents.

Ultimately, none of the participants mentioned being an advocate or proponent of social justice for low-income families, as is called for in the professional literature (ASCA, 2012; Cox & Lee, 2007; Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Perhaps none of the participants have yet made the association of their work with low-income families as an act of advocacy. Although the participants in the study mentioned the need for equality in their work, the lack of a mentioning of equity, in addition to advocacy and social justice, suggests a lack of understanding of the ways in which school counselors can be leaders in the educational field. The professional literature, on the other hand, challenges this attitude as it calls school counselors to be leaders and advocates for and collaborators with low-income families (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000).

Limitations

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection (Hays & Singh, 2012). It was therefore imperative that the primary researcher be aware of her own biases throughout the study (Maxwell, 2005). A reflective journal was kept to record her thoughts and feelings. She also consulted with the research team to analyze and confirm emerging themes and patterns. Finally, the primary researcher utilized member checking as she verified the transcripts with the school counselors to ensure that what they said in their interviews was consistent with their perceptions and that nothing had been misrepresented. Another possible limitation to the study in regards to the primary researcher and research team was the racial

uniformity of the research team, as all members were white. This uniformity may have limited the team's ability to contribute multiple multicultural perspectives to the data analysis process.

Selection of participants was limited to school counselors in two urban school districts in a mid-Atlantic state. The sample size was small and was not representative of school counselors as a whole nationally or internationally (e.g., school counselors in rural settings were not included). Also, there were only two males included in the sample, although this proportion is representative of the number of male school counselors in the selected school districts as well as nationwide (Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010). Also, three of the participants were white while seven of the participants were African-American. However, this proportion likewise mirrors the racial proportions of the two school districts from which the participants were selected. These limitations related to the participants' characteristics may limit the transferability of the study's findings.

A final limitation of this study included the nature of the emailed reflective questions sent as a follow up to the two face to face interviews. Because of the electronic communication, my ability as an active interviewer to further probe or discuss the participants' thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the study was limited. Conversely, because of the electronic nature of the questions, the participants may have felt more freedom in responding and may have felt it was easier to articulate their responses in written rather than verbal form.

Implications for Future Practice, Training, and Research

Counselor educators are advised to regularly challenge students to examine their perceptions, especially in the area of socioeconomic status, and invite and inspire them to be advocates for social justice, equality, and systemic change (Cox & Lee, 2007; Armstrong, 2007). As perceptions may influence practice, it is important for future counselors to become aware of their views of low-income families so that any bias or stereotype does not affect their work with this population.

Practicing school counselors need to consistently self-reflect in order to become more aware of their perceptions and how these perceptions may influence their practice (Erford, 2007; Linde, 2007). Illustrating this principle of self-analysis and reflection, one participant wrote in her follow-up email that the study reminded her “to take the time to reflect on how I am working with students and families. Sometimes we need to take a big step back and just evaluate how we do things as counselors.” Securing supervision may be one means of taking this step back and becoming more aware of one’s perceptions and gaining a greater self-awareness (Linde, 2007).

More research on the perceptions of urban school counselors of low-income families in their schools is needed as perceptions have been shown to influence practice (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1997). Further research, especially qualitative studies, might extend this study to include school counselors in multiple school districts across the United States. An expanded study may also include a more diverse ethnic and racial sample of school counselors as well as a sample that includes more male participants.

Future mixed methods research might explore the relationship between school counselors' perceptions of low-income families and the frequency of their work with this population. Perhaps school counselors who perceive families negatively may have less interaction with low-income families in their daily work. Therefore, this type of mixed-methods study might further re-confirm the notion that perceptions affect practice and may support continued exploration of perceptions and methods of changing perceptions with regards to diverse populations.

Conclusion

The participants reported that they enjoy working in urban schools as they feel rewarded and appreciated in their daily work. However, they often become frustrated with their students' low-income families, whom they perceived to be lacking the knowledge, motivation, or parenting skills to help their children succeed in school. Despite these negative feelings and perceptions, the school counselors were aware of the families' hardships and challenges and pressing issues besides education.

These contradictory positive and negative feelings reveal the school counselors' internal and external struggles in their work with low-income families. These struggles are agitated by a lack of knowledge of best practices in the literature for working with low-income families or the true meaning of concepts and terminology such as "equity" or "social justice." The findings in this study therefore support continued research and training in the areas of multicultural competency and self-awareness in future and currently practicing school counselors. Ultimately, if perceptions influence practice, then let us continue to practice what we preach: self-exploration and awareness along with acting for equity, opportunity, and systemic change.

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