

Latino High School Students' Perceptions and Preferred Characteristics  
of High School Counselors

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### Abstract

With a trendsetting change in the demographic population of public high school students, school counselors need to be equipped with multicultural competence to better understand the needs of the students they serve, especially Latino students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain Latino high school students' perceptions and preferred characteristics of their school counselor. Students' responses indicate that there is a lack of awareness of the role and function of school counselors among Latino students. In addition, students reported the need for a translator and the need for Hispanic school counselors, or, for the school counselor to speak Spanish. Implications for school counselors and counselor educators are provided.

## Latino High School Students' Perceptions and Preferred Characteristics of High School Counselors

The Latino population is growing so rapidly that the U.S. Census Bureau (2000) predicted that the Latino population will double from 12.5% to 24.4% by the year 2050. With a trend-setting increase in the Latino student population, and with many Latino students experiencing difficult circumstances such as (a) poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; Barth, 2001), (b) high teenage pregnancy rates (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 2002; Center for Disease Control, 2000), (c) high incidence of dropping out (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2003; Barth, 2001), and (d) low post-secondary educational attainment (Pew Hispanic Center, 2004; NCES, 2003), school counselors need to be well prepared to guide and care for Latino students. School counselors play a critical role in the lives of high school students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2006) and little research has been conducted concerning Latino perceptions of their school counselors.

### Student Perceptions of School Counselors

Researchers have neglected minority students' likes, dislikes, and preferred characteristics of school counselors. Furthermore, research concerning the relationship between school counselors and Latino students is scarce. In addition, the research that has been conducted concerning Latino perceptions of their school counselor, which are mostly negative, needs to be carefully examined since some of these studies have focused upon Latino students who (a) have dropped out of school (Ortiz & Guss, 1995), (b) are involved in dropout prevention programs (Ochoa, 1994), or (c) have been in community violence prevention programs (Jose-Kampfner, 1994). Each of these Latino

samples represents students who would not be considered to be mainstream, positively functioning students. With the growing Latino high school student population, and the lack of research aimed at understanding the perceptions of and needs of Latino students, it is also important to understand students' perceptions of their school counselor in relation to (a) factors that facilitate students' help seeking behaviors, (b) academic support, (c) personal problems, and (d) students needs.

West, Kayser, Overton, and Saltmarsh (1991) conducted a study that examined student perceptions that inhibit the initiation of counseling and found that students most frequently reported that they (a) do not like to tell a stranger about personal things, (b) are afraid counselors will break confidentiality, (c) believed that school counselors did not have time, (d) would be embarrassed to reveal real issues, and (e) perceived the school counselor to be busy or unavailable. West et al., (1991) suggested that client preparation and orientation are vital indicators of understanding what services are available, what counseling actually is, and the benefits of counseling. West et al., (1991) also found two major qualities of the school counselor, trustworthiness and competence, which facilitated help seeking behaviors among students. It seems that students' perceptions of their school counselor do impact their ability or willingness to seek help. Although that study was important in terms of understanding student perceptions, it neglected the examination of student race and ethnicity, and how students' race and ethnicity may impact their perceptions of their school counselors and how this may inhibit the initiation of counseling. Examining Latino students' perceptions of their school counselor will aid the school counseling profession in developing a better understanding of Latino student inhibitions of seeking school counseling services. In order to provide

equitable services to the Latino high school student population, it is important to understand similarities and differences between them and students of other racial backgrounds so that outreach and services can be provided within an appropriate cultural context.

School counselors play a vital role in providing academic support and checking graduation requirements. In a study conducted at an alternative school, Saunders and Saunders (2001) surveyed alternative school students' perceptions of their experiences and interactions with their former school counselor. Saunders and Saunders (2001) found that students rated their former school counselors highest on the item "My counselor provided academic guidance when I had questions about my classes." In contrast, Davila (2003) found that Puerto Rican students had negative experiences with their high school counselor concerning academic support issues. Latino college bound students in this qualitative study expressed (a) negative experiences with their school counselor, and (b) lacked academic planning and guidance from their school counselor. Students also expressed frustration and disappointment concerning their lack of career exploration and planning, as well as college preparation

Students seek guidance from school counselors for a variety of reasons, including help with personal problems. Saunders and Saunders (2001) found that alternative school students ranked their former school counselors lowest on items "My counselor helped me to deal with personal problems (family or other problems)" and "I felt comfortable going to talk to my counselor last year." Students did not perceive their former school counselors as being very approachable or helpful in helping students deal with their personal and family problems (Saunders & Saunders, 2001). Similarly,

Kampfner-Jose (1994) found that Latino students were aware that they needed someone to talk to about their personal problems and disappointed by the lack of support services. Students in this study understood the role of the school counselor and wanted someone to talk to about their personal problems. However, students believed that school counselors did not have time to listen to them. More research is needed to understand Latino student perceptions of their school counselor.

School counselors may play an important role in dropout prevention. Ochoa (1994) interviewed Latino students concerning drop-out prevention services. Forty-two percent of students interviewed indicated that they were not getting the help they needed from school counselors or that the school counselor was unavailable (Ochoa, 1994). One participant in that study stated that there was a need for more counselors. Similarly, Ortiz & Guss (1995) found that none of the participants in their study of high school drop outs were referred to counseling. When asked why they thought they were not referred, participants explained that school counselors fix schedules and that they believed that the school counselor would not know how to help them (Ortiz & Guss, 1995). It seems some Latino students are not aware of the services that school counselors can provide (i.e., academic, social, career, or dropout prevention) (Ortiz & Guss, 1995), and some Latino students are acutely aware of their needs (i.e., academic, social, and career), even when their needs go unmet (Ochoa, 1994). Although the American School Counselor Association has clear standards of school counseling services for all students (ASCA, 2006), previous researchers (Ochoa, 1994; Ortiz & Guss, 1995) indicated that Latino students are being neglected in terms of adequate school counseling services.

The lack of positive interactions with the school counselor, perceptions that the school counselor was not concerned, and lack of understanding concerning the role of the school counselor is disheartening. These findings demonstrate (a) the critical role school counselors can play in dropout prevention, and (b) the need for school counselors to not only address student needs, but to make more time for students. Previous findings concerning student perceptions, and more specifically, negative Latino students' perception of their school counselor, led to the current study.

The purpose of this study was to further explore Latino student perceptions of their school counselor. The major research questions of this study were (a) Do Latino students understand the role and function of the school counselor? (b) What is the nature of contact between Latino students and school counselors? (c) What is the nature of school counselor support as experienced by Latino students? and (d) How do Latino students perceive how they are treated by their school counselors'.

### Method

The rationale for choosing qualitative research methodology is directly connected to the nature of the populations being studied (Latino high school students) and the underlying goals of the research (to gain an understanding of how Latino students' perceive their school counselor). Because this study focused upon Latino high school students' perceptions, beliefs, and values, the authors felt it was important to employ qualitative research methods, including using a standardized open-ended interview (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996). This study was exploratory and inductive in nature. The researchers acknowledged the importance of culture informing qualitative research (Constantine & Sue, 2005) and the primary researcher used the following interviewing

behaviors (a) respected the culture of the group being studied, (b) respected the individual being interviewed, and (c) asked the same question in different ways (including translating questions into Spanish) (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996).

#### *Role of the researchers*

The researchers fulfilled numerous roles preparing and implementing this study. The role of the primary researcher was to build rapport with the interviewees. The researcher provided a comfortable, non threatening atmosphere. Prior to the interview, the researcher spent three days at the high school preparing for the study and obtained permission from the principle to conduct this study. The researcher also met with participants and explained the study. Parental/guardian and student informed consent forms were disseminated at this time.

The researcher's experience as a school counselor played a vital role during the interviews. As a result of working in the state in which the interviews took place, the researcher was familiar with the high school diploma requirements. This understanding reflected that the interviewer understood the students' experiences. In addition, the interviewer was able to ask more in depth questions as a result of her knowledge and experience as a former school counselor. The primary investigator is conversational in Spanish. This assisted in interpreting the interview questions, interpreting student responses, and assisting the students when they were stuck.

#### *Context of study*

This study was conducted at a traditional public high school located in a suburban city in the southeast. Of the 1169 students enrolled, 45.3 % of students were identified as economically challenged, and qualified for free or reduced lunch. Race of



students ranged as 40.97% were White, 40.88% were African-American, 10.98% were Hispanic, 5.36% were Asian, 0.17% were Native American, and 1.64% were Multiracial. In addition, 7.8% of students were identified as limited in English proficiency. The most recent drop-out rate data available indicated that there were 75 dropout events in 2003–2004.

### *Participants*

Student class schedules were examined to identify both elective courses and courses that required state testing. Students were not invited to participate in this study during a class that required state testing, which enabled identification and selection of participants. Students were selected based on their grade level (2 freshman, 2 sophomores, 2 juniors, and 2 seniors), and gender (one female and one male student per grade level). Students that met the criteria based on their availability of an elective course, grade level, and gender were then reviewed by the staff member responsible for attendance. Reputational-based selection (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004) was used as the staff member recommended students based on the number of absences for the semester. Students with the least number of absences were invited to participate. Examining attendance was critical due to end-of-course testing that occurred the following week. In addition, the assistant principal met with teachers to ensure that (a) students would not miss any important classroom time, and (b) teachers were adequately prepared and understood the reasons students were selected.

A total of eight Latino students participated in this study, representing grades 9, 10, 11, and 12. One male and one female were selected for each grade level. Ages of participants ranged from 15 to 18-years-old. Country of origin varied with two students

from Colombia, two students from Mexico, one student from the Dominican Republic, one student from Costa Rica, one student from Ecuador, and one student who was born in the United States (US). Number of years in the US ranged from 1-15 years. Four students reported living with both parents. Two students reported living with a brother and an aunt, while their parents resided in their country of origin. In addition, two students reported living with their mother while their father resided in their country of origin. All students reported speaking both English and Spanish with varying degrees of proficiency. Four students reported that their parent or guardian could speak both English and Spanish, while four students reported that their parent or guardian spoke Spanish only.

#### *Data gathering methods*

Participants were interviewed by the primary investigator using a 29-item semi-structured interview protocol. Interview questions are presented in Appendix A. Questions were created by the primary researcher based on a review of the literature concerning (a) the role of the school counselor (ASCA, 2006), (b) Latino students' perceptions of their school counselor (Baruth, & Manning, 1992; Davila, 2003; Jose-Kampfner, 1994; Ortiz & Guss, 1995), (c) alternative school students' perceptions of their school counselor (Saunders & Saunders, 2001), and (d) the general population of student perceptions of their school counselor (West, et al, 1991). The primary researcher and co-author met twice to gain consensus on the interview questions. All interviews were audio taped and the duration of interviews was 30-70 minutes. The data collected by the primary investigator did not contain any identifying information or any link to participants. Parental and guardian informed consent and student assent were

obtained from all students prior to interviews. Informed consent forms were two sided, with one side written in English and the other side written in Spanish.

### *Data analysis*

Audio tapes of all eight interviews were transcribed by the primary investigator. Transcripts were copied and given to the co-investigator. Transcripts were reviewed and examined independently and the authors began to code conceptual categories, which later emerged into specific themes (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996). The researchers met twice to compare conceptual categories and themes and five specific themes were selected by consensus based upon discussion. The academic, school counseling experiences, and gender diversity between the authors allowed for varying perspectives concerning the analysis of data. Differential interpretations and perceptions from the researchers of the participants' comments allowed for triangulation for specific themes. In addition, the primary investigator kept a reflective journal of field notes that she initiated at the inception of the research idea. The reflective journal contained both descriptive and reflective notes of the research process as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen, (1992).

### Results

The results from this study are reflective of the four major themes that emerged and include (a) preferred school counselor characteristics, (b) student needs, (c) help seeking concerns, and (d) accessibility of School Counselor. The researchers anticipated findings were consistent with previous studies concerning lack of awareness of role and function of school counselors among Latino students (e.g., Ochoa, 1994; Ortiz & Guss, 1995). Although none of the students in this study experienced the school

counselor initiating contact, three students reported meeting with their school counselor during the past year. However, one student had no contact with the school counselor and two students mistook other school personnel (i.e., guidance secretary and career coordinator) for the school counselor. Thus, it is not surprising that the students in this study did not have a clear understanding of the variety of available school counseling services. For example, students reported that their school counselor helped students (a) select classes for the next school year and making schedule changes, (b) with college admissions, and (c) meet requirements for graduation. Only two students reported that school counselors help with personal problems (i.e., if someone dies).

#### *Preferred School Counselor Characteristics*

Latino students had specific ideas of what kind of qualities are important for school counselors to possess. Students reported that they preferred school counselors who (a) are understanding, (b) could relate to students, (c) are patient, (d) are trustworthy, (e) try to help with problems, (f) take the time to listen, (g) are friendly, and (h) speak Spanish. One student made his point clear in stating that “They don’t speak Spanish and our English is not that good.”

Latino students also have specific characteristics or helping behaviors that they liked in their school counselor. Students liked that the school counselors helped them with their classes. One student reported that he liked that the school counselor had patience and was able to “spend a little more time.” Students were also aware of aspects of their school counselors that they did not like. For example, one student reported that he did not feel the school counselor was genuine in helping him make a decision about a class, while another student did not feel supported concerning a class

conflict and stated, “I wouldn’t want to come back to her for help or anything.”

### *Student Needs*

Students shared a variety of needs for a translator and the need for Hispanic school counselors, or for the school counselor to speak Spanish. Students reported several reasons they needed a Spanish speaking counselors including; (a) helping students transition to American schools (i.e., “explaining things” and “tell me what I am supposed to do, where I am supposed to go.”), (b) better ability to express emotions, (c) being understood, (d) helping their parents understand the school system, (e) helping with homework, and (f) decreasing the responsibility that the school places upon students to translate for other students, especially for students who are new to the United States. For example, one student reported:

I really do think there should be a Hispanic counselor in here because there’s a lot of girls that have come in that I have been helping with ESL. Because a lot girls don’t know English whatsoever and I have been called to interpret. But I think they should have a Hispanic person working in the school. Just to help.

Interestingly, participants also expressed concern for other non-Hispanic foreign students who needed assistance with acquiring a new language. One student suggested the need for a translator, “But not just for Spanish speakers, but for other people who speak, like the Asian people.” and “I feel sorry for them. They don’t know what’s going on because they can’t speak English. It’s really hard for them and I try to help.” This disclosure may be reflective of several intertwining factors, including a collective value system and sympathy for other minority students.

### *Help Seeking Concerns*

The researchers also anticipated negative perceptions of school counselors as supported by previous research conducted with Latino students (e.g., Kampfner-Jose, 1994; Davila, 2003). Students discussed their motivations for seeking school counseling services, as well as aspects that inhibited them from seeking school counseling services. There is a tremendous need to build trusting relationships with Latino students. With one exception, the students did not feel that the school counselor genuinely cared about them or cared about what was going on in their lives. Students reported:

They're just doing their jobs" and cited feeling "like a number." Another student stated, I don't think I would go to the counselors here, I guess, and tell them problems about my family. I don't think I would talk to them. I don't know. I guess I just wouldn't trust them. They're not the type of people I could trust. I don't have that confidence with them.

### *Accessibility of School Counselor*

Accessibility of the school counselor and school counseling services was another theme that emerged from this study. Students were inhibited from seeking school counseling services as a result of (a) limited time to get out of class, (b) lack of reconcilability, accessibility, and location of the school counseling office, (c) the school schedule not having breaks for students, and (d) limited time of school counselors (i.e., "You gotta go on their time cause they have other students"). Students in this study reported several variables that helped them to stay in school including: (a) family, (b) liked learning, (c) friends, (d) personal attitude, and (e) needing to speak English to get

a better job. Students made several recommendations to improve the school counseling program, including educating students and publicizing more about the school counseling program. One student suggested: "Put some posters outside in the halls for the peoples so they can come and see the counselor if they have some problems. Help Americans and Hispanics." Another student suggested diversity training for all students to address stereotypes that students hold about each other.

### Discussion

With the demographic trend shifting in the US, it is crucial that school counselors gain multicultural awareness and multicultural competence. Baruth and Manning (1992) recommended that school counselors be aware of the cultural differences, language problems, and family orientations that Hispanic American children experience. Constantine and Sue (2005) also addressed the issues of multicultural competence and contend that multicultural competence (knowledge, awareness, and skills) "is necessary in meeting the various needs of individuals belonging to diverse cultural groups or historically marginalized groups" (p. 4). This foundational knowledge, awareness, and skills enable school counselors to meet the needs of Latino students. Students in this study did not have a clear understanding of the variety of available school counseling services, nor did they understand the role of the school counselor. This lack of understanding of the students essentially leaves their academic, career, and personal/social needs unmet.

Students reported preferences for school counselor characteristics including, (a) understanding, (b) the ability to relate to students, (c) patience, (d) trustworthiness, (e) helpful with problems, (f) take the time to listen, (g) friendliness, and (h) Spanish

speaking. One student made his point clear and stated that “They don’t speak Spanish and our English is not that good.” These findings are supported by West et al., (2001) who found that students prefer school counselors who are trustworthy. School counselors and administrators need to do a better job of (a) educating students concerning the role of the school counselor, and (b) promoting school counseling services. Students also reported the need for a translator and described how having a translator would assist them in navigating the school system and help with their academic achievement. Students also reported the need for a Hispanic school counselor and described being better able to express themselves in their native language.

Students in this study experienced significant stressors in their life concerning living arrangements. Of the eight students, two resided with both biological parents, while one resided with an aunt, two resided with an older sibling, and three resided with their mother while their father resided in their country of origin. None of the students in this study sought counseling services from their school counselor concerning personal problems. One student stated that he missed his parents and two students stated that they missed their country of origin. Counseling services may have aided in students’ transition to the US and to the school, as well as helped students navigate existing and new living arrangements. School counselors must be aware of the numerous emotional and social stressors of Latino students’ lives that intersect together.

This study helps to enrich the understanding of the practice of school counseling, the impact of the relationship between school counselors and Latino students, and supports improvement of training for current and future school counselors. One major



limitation of this study was that the majority of the interviews were conducted in English. Several students reported being better able to express themselves speaking Spanish and a more fluent Spanish speaking researcher may have enhanced both the rapport with students, and the students' ability to communicate their thoughts and experiences. Another limitation of this study includes the race of the primary investigator, who was White. Several students reported that they would have preferred a Hispanic school counselor. Perhaps students would have revealed more or felt more comfortable sharing their experiences with a Hispanic researcher. Gender may have also played a role in the collection of data as cultural values may have influenced students comfort level.

Replication of this study in other settings (i.e., rural, metropolitan, and urban) is necessary to further understand Latino student perception's of school counselors. Replication of this study with a larger number of participants will possibly confirm and expand upon these results. It is possible that replication with a Spanish speaking Hispanic researcher may result in a deeper understanding of Latino student perceptions of their school counselor. In addition, replication with a Spanish speaking Hispanic researcher is needed to confirm or expand these results of this study.

With the population of Latino students rising across the nation, public school officials must be knowledgeable and must attempt to minimize the factors that negatively impact the education and future of Latino high school students, in order to serve Latino students with equality and fairness. This research is needed to (a) improve school counselor's understanding of Latino students and their needs, (b) improve multicultural training and supervision for school counselors, and (c) to advocate for Latin

students, by addressing the numerous barriers to higher education, and attempt to bring this issue to the forefront among members of the mental health community. One way that school counselors can begin to minimize barriers and help Latino students is to learn Spanish. Learning Spanish would facilitate communication between the school counselor and students, as well as assist students in expressing their emotions. As a result, Latino students may utilize school counseling services more. This study helps to enrich the understanding of the practice of school counseling, the impact of the relationship between the school counselor and Latino students, and support improvement of training for current and future school counselors.

Findings for this study have implications for counselor education training programs. Counselor education programs must continue to emphasize multicultural counseling competence in training school counselors. This emphasis will help draw awareness, and hopefully sensitivity, to school counselors' understanding of cultures different from their own. In addition, counselor educators can collaborate with and assist school systems in evaluating their school counseling programs. School systems often implement evaluations to improve services for students, and the results can be used to better understand student perceptions and the services they receive.

### Summary

With a trend setting increase in Latino students in the United States, understanding the perceptions of Latino high school students concerning their school counselor is critical. As a result of school counselors delivering vital academic, social, and career services to students, how Latino students perceive their school counselor, may impact the services they receive. It is important for school counselors to be aware

of these perceptions in order to facilitate student growth and success. Further, as the results of this study suggest, it is important that federal and state funding be made more available to provide adequate resources for school counseling programs so that students will have greater access to, and subsequent utilization of, school counseling support services.

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## Appendix A

## Interview Questions

1. What is your school counselor's name?
2. Describe what your school counselor does?
3. What qualities do you feel are important for school counselors to have?
4. Does your school counselor possess these qualities?
5. What do you like about your school counselor?
6. What do you dislike about your school counselor?
7. What characteristics would make your school counselor more approachable?
8. Have you met or talked with your school counselor this year?
9. How has your school counselor made it a point to see you this year?
10. How has your school counselor helped you this year?
11. How has your school counselor helped you *throughout* the school year?
12. Is there anything that keeps you from meeting with your school counselor?
13. How are you supported by your school counselor?
14. What expectations does your school counselor have of you?
15. How does your school counselor treat you?
16. Do you feel that your school counselor genuinely cares about you or cares about what is going on in your life?
17. How does your school counselor communicate to you that he/she wants you to be successful?
18. Has your school counselor discussed college or future plans with you this year?
19. What has helped you to stay in school?

20. Do you get information sent home in the language your parents can read?
21. What is your country of origin?
22. How long have you been in the US?
23. How long have you been attending this High School?
24. What language(s) do you speak?
25. What language(s) do your parent(s)/guardian speak?
26. Are language differences an issue?
27. Would you prefer that your school counselor speak English or Spanish to you?
28. Would you prefer that your school counselor speak English or Spanish to your parents?
29. Is there anything else that you feel is important for me to know about your experiences with your school counselor?



### Biographical Statement

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