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**URBAN SCHOOL COUNSELORS' PERCEPTIONS OF LOW-INCOME  
FAMILIES**

by

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B.A. December 2005, College of William and Mary

M.Ed. May 2008, College of William and Mary

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of Old Dominion University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

COUNSELING

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

May 2010

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **URBAN SCHOOL COUNSELORS' PERCEPTIONS OF LOW-INCOME FAMILIES**

Rebekah F. Cole  
Old Dominion University, 2010  
Director: Dr. Tim Grothaus

There is a paucity of research on the topic of professional school counselors and their perceptions of families. The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study was to examine how urban professional school counselors perceive low-income families in their schools. To accomplish this investigation, ten school counselors in two urban school districts were interviewed twice and were then sent an email with follow-up questions. The data was analyzed for themes and patterns, which were subjected to verification procedures. Three categories emerged from the data: urban school counselors' perceptions of the low-income families in their schools, effects of school counselors' perceptions on their collaboration with low-income families, and school counselors' personal feelings and reflections in response to their experiences with low-income families.

This dissertation is dedicated to Sherlanda, who lit the flame of equity in my soul.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

#### Overview

“However configured, however constrained, families come with their children to school. Even when they do not come in person, families come in children’s minds and hearts and in their hopes and dreams” (Epstein, 2001, p. 4). This phenomenological qualitative study explored urban professional school counselors’ perceptions of the low-income families of their students. Previous research (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997) indicates the importance of the family’s involvement in children’s education and academic achievement. Families are crucial to the success of students, especially those in urban schools who may be at-risk for failure or dropout (Bryan, 2005; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Lee, 2005). In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act mandates that schools partner with families and communities in Title I schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). This partnership is important in order to increase the academic achievement of students from low-income families who may struggle in school (ASCA, 2004b; Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; New American Alliance, 2009). Therefore, it is imperative for schools and professional school counselors to make the effort to connect and collaborate with their students’ families (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Epstein & Sanders, 2001).

The relationship and collaboration between families and schools is especially important in urban schools where students often struggle (Barton & Coley, 2009). The professional literature indicates that if there is a separation between families and the

school, the student will be less likely to succeed than if the two are somehow linked (Epstein, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Educators' perceptions may be a crucial factor in the separation between low-income families and schools. For example, Gollnick and Chinn (2006) report that students recognize that teachers do not give equal opportunities for class participation for students from low-income families compared with their higher-income peers.

In order to ameliorate the separation between school and family, professional school counselors are in a unique position to act as a bridge between the school and the family because of their educational training, communication and collaboration skills, and position in the school. (Alliman-Brissett, Turner, & Skovholt, 2004; Erford, 2007). Examples of such collaboration may include professional school counselors promoting family advocacy activities and events, providing the families with skills training, and giving the families places to spend time in the school (Bemak, 2000). Other ideas for involving families in their child's schooling include professional school counselors running parent education workshops, making home visits, recruiting family members to be volunteers, maintaining regular two-way communication with families, leading family support programs (Erford, 2007; Epstein, 2001), and connecting families with valuable community resources (Bryan, 2005). Additionally, professional school counselors are advised to seek feedback from family members about their child and the school in order to gain a better understanding of the family's perspective, to make them feel heard and valued, and to tap their expertise about their children (Amatea, Smith-Adcock, & Villares, 2006). This awareness may be gained through parent and guardian groups, which have proven effective in sharing with and learning from families (Bradley,

Johnson, & Rawls, 2005). Family members also can become involved in professional school counselors' advisory committees and collaborative efforts within the community. When families become involved with outside organizations, a greater and more effective support system is created (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hays, 2007).

Currently, there is a paucity of research on the topic of professional school counselors and their perceptions of families. While articles have been written on the nature and definitions of collaboration in general (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Cobert; 1996; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000), there are few qualitative or quantitative studies exploring the nature or effects of professional school counselors' work with low-income families. Scholars instead have limited the scope of their work to other important aspects of this topic, such as advocating for and defining partnerships between school counselors and families, especially in low-income schools (Bemak, 2000; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

This study expanded on these approaches by qualitatively exploring professional school counselors' perceptions of school-family partnerships. To date, it appears that none of the available research has qualitatively explored these perceptions. This qualitative study provided a platform for cultural topics not yet investigated. Ultimately, qualitative research may challenge complacency, which is especially important for this study which involves a minority population (Chang, Hays, & Gray, 2010). This investigation, therefore, provided a forum for discussion of the professional school counselors' thoughts, feelings, and outlooks. These domains are important, as noted by cognitive-behavior counseling theory, which asserts that thoughts affect behavior

(Capuzzi & Gross, 2007). Professional school counselors' perceptions may well influence their practice with the students and families in their schools.

### **Significance for Professional School Counselors**

There are a number of guidelines that support professional school counselors' work with low-income families. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has provided a best practice model for designing and implementing comprehensive, developmental school counseling programs. This model expresses the need for family involvement in the school counseling program (ASCA, 2005a). As a method of fulfilling this call to collaborate with families, professional school counselors can help bridge the gap that often exists between families and schools, especially in urban schools (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). ASCA's Ethical Standards for school counselors mandate that professional school counselors take the initiative to collaborate with students' parents or guardians (ASCA, 2004a). The ASCA position statement on cultural diversity furthermore asserts that professional school counselors collaborate with stakeholders, which includes parents and guardians, for the success of all students (ASCA, 2009). Professional school counselors are thus charged with working with families to promote academic achievement of all students (ASCA, 2004b).

ASCA's Ethical Standards (2004a), ASCA's National Model for School Counseling Programs (2005a), and the ASCA position statement on comprehensive school counseling programs (2005b) mandate that professional school counselors work with families. Coupled with evidence supporting the benefits of family involvement for student success (Bryan, 2005; Epstein, 2001; Erford, 2007), an examination of professional school counselors' competence in effectively and ethically collaborating

with this underserved population appears to have merit. Counselor self-awareness and understanding of others' worldviews are considered foundations for multiculturally responsive interventions (McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Wininger, 2008; Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006). Exploring a relatively unexamined aspect of this collaboration, professional school counselors' perceptions of the low-income families in their schools, may lead to enhanced self-awareness and understanding for professional school counselors participating in this study and also inform professional school counseling practitioners, along with their supervisors and counselor educators, about an area potentially ripe for professional growth. This awareness may lead to more effective professional school counselor training, professional development, and practice. The hope is that the ultimate beneficiary of any gains in these areas would be the underserved students and their low-income families.

### **Purpose Statement**

Given the well-established correlation between family involvement and student success (Epstein, 2001; Erford, 2007), the purpose of this study was to examine how professional 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. Counselor educators, school counseling district supervisors, and others involved in professional school counselor training and professional development may be able to use the insights gleaned from this study to assist professional school counselors in collaborating with their students and their students' families in a more ethical and effective fashion (Bryan, 2009).

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are urban professional school counselors' perceptions of the low-income families of their students?
- How might professional school counselors' perceptions affect their collaboration with these families?

### **Overview of the Methodology**

This investigation was guided by the phenomenological tradition in qualitative inquiry which seeks to explore the participants' meaning making experience and how they translate this experience into their consciousness (Patton, 2002). Ten urban professional school counselors from two urban school districts in a mid-Atlantic state were interviewed, using a semi-structured interview, to explore their perceptions of the low-income families of their students. Each professional school counselor was interviewed twice and then was sent an email with follow-up questions. This study aimed to explore, in Patton's words, the "meaning, structure, and essence" (p. 104) of the counselors' perceptions as they work with students and their low-income families. The data was triangulated by means of member checking, the use of a research team and external auditor, and the researcher and research team's continued self-examination and reflection.

The interviews were conducted over the course of twelve weeks. In order to gain the participation of the counselors, two school district directors of school counseling were first contacted and asked for permission to interview their counselors. The individual professional school counselors were then contacted and subsequently selected based on their willingness and availability to participate in the interviews and the follow-up email.

The setting for the semi-structured interviews was a place chosen by each professional school counselor interviewed. In each interview, questions related to the perceptions that the school counselors have of the families of students with low income were asked (Appendix A). The interview questions were open-ended and follow up probing questions were asked in order to solicit additional information. The follow-up email consisted of process questions related to the interview experience (Appendix A).

The researcher for this study was a 26-year-old white female in the Ph.D. Counseling Program at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA. She has experience working as a school counseling intern and graduate assistant in elementary, middle, and high schools in both urban and suburban settings. The researcher may have her own biases as a result of her multicultural studies in master's and Ph.D. programs, such as her belief that professional school counselors should act as advocates for all students and their families. In order to gain self-awareness and limit the influence of assumptions and bias throughout the study, the researcher kept a process journal to record her thoughts and feelings. She also utilized a research team for consensus coding of the data as well as employing an independent auditor to review her study.

The researcher received exempt status for the study through the Human Subjects committee in the College of Education at Old Dominion University. She additionally adhered to American Counseling Association (ACA) and the American School Counselors Association's (ASCA) ethical guidelines throughout the project. All data was kept confidential and secure and each of the participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form prior to their interviews. The interviews were approximately 30-50 minutes in length and were transcribed by the researcher in order to enhance her

immersion in the data. The participants were then sent a follow-up email with process questions related to the interviewing. The interviews and emails were then coded to determine themes and patterns by both the researcher and a research team.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

#### **Low-income families.**

The term “low-income families” refers to families under an income threshold, set by the U.S. Census Bureau, determined by the size of the family and the ages of its members. If the family’s income is below the determined threshold, then it is considered to be impoverished (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Free and reduced lunch rates are indicators of poverty in the school system because census data related to poverty is not collected annually (Federal Education Budget Project, 2009). In the state in which this study was performed, students receive free meals at school if their family’s income is at or below 130% of the poverty level. If the family’s income is between 130% and 185% of the poverty level, they may receive meals at a reduced price (Virginia Department of Education, 2009b). In this study, students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch are considered as belonging to low-income families.

#### **Family-school partnerships.**

Family-school partnerships are defined as a “shared responsibility of families and educators for supporting students as learners. Working as partners is an attitude—not solely an activity to be implemented” (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, p.37-38). These partnerships are collaborative relationships in which school counselors, administrators, and staff work together to help students achieve academically (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). In addition, these partnerships involve “long-term commitments, mutual



respect, widespread involvement of families and educators in many levels of activities, and sharing of planning and decision-making responsibilities” (Swap, 1993, p. 47).

#### **Professional school counselors.**

Professional school counselors are “proactive leaders and advocates for the success of all students” (Erford, House, & Martin, 2007, p. 3). Professional school counselors “provide essential services in comprehensive programs to address the educational, career, personal, and social development of all students” (Schmidt, 2003, p. 27). In addition, “professional school counselors are in a key position to increase opportunities for family members to be involved and supportive of their child’s education” (Erford, 2007, p.229).

#### **Urban.**

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 Achievement Gap.**

The “Achievement Gap” refers to the phenomenon that occurs when “groups of students with relatively equal ability don’t achieve in school at the same levels” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 6). On its website the National Governors Association (2009) asserts that the Achievement Gap is a “matter of race and class” as a “gap in

academic achievement persists between minority and disadvantaged students and their white counterparts.” The No Child Left Behind Act was created in 2002 in response to the Achievement Gap in an attempt to reduce the disparities in academic achievement between different student groups (Barton & Coley, 2009).

#### **ASCA National Model.**

The ASCA National Model for School Counseling Programs asserts that counselors should be involved in advocacy (ASCA, 2005a). Advocacy is the “act of empowering individuals or groups through actions that increase self-efficacy, remove barriers to needed services, and promote systemic change” (McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Winger, 2008, p. 613). In schools advocacy “involves the systematic identification of student needs and accompanying efforts to ensure that those needs are met” (Erford, House, & Martin, 2007, p. 7).

#### **Collaboration.**

Collaboration involves professional school counselors working “with a wide array of stakeholders within the school, school system, and community” (Erford, House, & Martin, p. 7). This includes consultation, which involves professional school counselors “meeting with a student’s parents and teachers to discuss the student within the student present in an effort to address issues of student equity, access, and success” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 24).

#### **Comprehensive school counseling programs.**

One model of a comprehensive school counseling program is defined and outlined in the ASCA National Model (2005). Key aspects of a comprehensive school counseling program include a school counseling curriculum, individual student planning, responsive

services, system support, use of disaggregated data for accountability and systemic change, advocacy, leadership, and collaboration.

### **Empathy.**

Empathy is defined 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). “Being able to be empathic also requires an ability to suspend judgment and bias to walk in the other’s shoes” (Greason & Cashwell, 2009, p. 4). In order to do this, “the counselor must be able to tolerate a client’s difficult feelings and the difficult feelings that may arise in the counselor- rather than avoiding them or overidentifying with them” (Greason & Cashwell, p. 4).

### **Summary**

Professional school counselors are called to actively work with families in order to promote the academic success of all students, especially in urban schools (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008). Students from families with low incomes tend to be in the lower achieving end of the achievement gap (New American Alliance, 2009). This study explored professional school counselors’ perceptions of families with low incomes in two urban districts. Currently, there is a lack of literature, especially qualitative studies, exploring these perceptions and the effect these perceptions may have on the services provided by school counselors to these students. In the next chapter, a review of the literature illustrates the educational status quo of students from low-income families, highlighting the Achievement Gap; the role of the multiculturally competent professional school counselor; comprehensive school counseling programs in the past and present; the professional school counselor’s role promoting social justice, acting as an advocate for

and with low-income families, and collaborating with schools; and an exploration of perceptions of low-income families and how perceptions may influence practice.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Overview**

This chapter features a review of the professional counseling and education literature relevant to urban professional school counselors, their perceptions, and their role and work with low-income families. The review will commence with a discussion of the current educational status of students from families with low income. The need for professional school counselors to work with and to support low-income families will then be explored. This need aligns with the profession's model for school counseling practice and professional school counselors' role as advocates for equity and social justice. One aspect of this model comprehensive school counseling program, namely school-family collaboration, will be presented and specific studies will be reviewed relating to these partnerships and professional school counselor perceptions. To establish the validity of a study of these perceptions, the review will continue with a brief examination of the link between perceptions and practice. In addition, the perceptions of other educators in schools will be presented, as well as a discussion of professional school counselors' roles in responding to negatively biased educator perceptions toward families with low income. Finally, this review will conclude with an argument for the need for qualitative exploration in the area of professional school counselor perceptions of low income families in their schools, given the current gap in the literature in this important area.

#### **Low-income families and their children's education**

Children living in low-income families are common throughout the country and the public schools. 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 (The Education Trust, 2009a) and 46% of children in urban areas belong to families with low-income. The number of children to who live in families with low incomes is increasing. Between 2000 and 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; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Giles, 2005).

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 that earn 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). 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). 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).

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; Van Velsor & Orozco). Families may feel uncertain about how they should become involved or how they can help their child to succeed academically (Thompson, 2002).

Professional school counselors are challenged to play an important role in assisting low-income families with these challenges that have a deleterious effect on their children's performance at school (Lee, 2005). Professional school counselors, as a part of their role as culturally competent helpers in the school (Locke, 2003), are called to act as leaders in assisting and collaborating with low-income families (Colbert, 1996; Bryan, 2005). Knowledge of professional school counselors' perceptions of low-income families may lead to a better understanding of their current practice and how their perceptions may influence the quality of their collaboration with these families.

### **The Achievement Gap**

The obstacles that students from low-income families face often act as challenges or barriers to the students in fulfilling their potential for academic success. These challenges become evident in the “Achievement Gap,” which refers to the phenomenon that occurs when “groups of students with relatively equal ability don’t achieve in school at the same levels” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 6). Holcomb-McCoy’s description of “groups” refers to race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. The Achievement Gap, currently the most popular topic in the education field (Cockley, 2006), tends to be more prevalent in schools that are not working towards equitable treatment of all students (Cockley, 2006; Holcomb-McCoy; Cox & Lee, 2007). Equitable treatment refers to empowering and equipping students to succeed in school at the same level as their peers from higher-income families (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Factors that contribute to the Achievement Gap include teachers with little experience and low expectations, school personnel who lack cultural competence, lack of family involvement in their child’s education, a disparity of resources, and the failure to identify students with special needs (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Statistics illustrate the Achievement Gap between students from low-income families and students from higher-income families. Students who are eligible for free lunches are about two years of learning behind the average student of the same age from non-eligible families (New American Alliance, 2009). By the time the average student from a low-income family reaches the twelfth grade, he or she is at the reading level of an eighth grader (Kahlenberg, 2006). Students in public schools with a minority of students from low-income families are 22 times more likely to succeed academically than students in schools with a majority of students from low-income families (Kahlenberg, 2006). In



addition, only 9% of the freshmen in the United States' 120 "Tier 1" colleges are from the lower half of the socioeconomic distribution (New American Alliance, 2009).

However, many schools are "proving that race and poverty are not destiny" (New American Alliance, 2009, p. 6) and schools that are committed to helping students succeed do so (The Education Trust, 2009a). One example of this commitment is within a high school in Elmont, NY. Within this school, 24% of its students receive free or reduced lunch yet there are minimal achievement gaps between students from different groups and the high school is known as a high achieving school. The school boasts low dropout rates and the school faculty, administration, and staff hold the expectation for students that they will attend, and graduate from college. Showing his commitment to equity, a former principal of this high school asserted that "because a poor child lives in the projects doesn't mean he can't learn" (The Education Trust, 2006, p. 10).

Another example of success with closing the Achievement Gap can be found within an elementary school in Northern Virginia. Although 80% of its students receive free or reduced lunch, the school is one of the highest achieving schools in its county. In 2008, 100% of its students met state reading standards and 96% of its students met state math standards. The faculty in the school are committed to the success of each of their students. Each student is expected to succeed and is given the resources to do so. The principal of this exceptional school trains her staff to "make a difference" and to believe they can give students the best educational opportunities possible (The Education Trust, 2009b, p. 3).

Professional school counselors, working from a social justice perspective, are likewise challenged to work proactively to help students achieve academically (Hines &

Fields, 2004; Howard & Solberg, 2006). Ways in which they can act as leaders in closing the Achievement Gap include counseling and intervention planning, consultation, school-family-community partnerships, exhibiting leadership by acting as an advocate for and with these students and their families, engaging in action research to demonstrate practices that reduce these pernicious performance disparities, and challenging others' biases (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Hines & Fields, 2004). Professional school counselors must also be aware of the effects of negative messages portrayed by society to students with low-income families. These messages may affect students' self-esteem, behavior, and academic achievement (Howard & Solberg, 2006). In order to combat these messages and to close the Achievement Gap, professional school counselors' work with the students' families is crucial for academic success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

### **The Role of Professional School Counselor**

The professional school counselor is called to demonstrate the values of equity and equality for all students and their families by working for the academic, career, and personal/social success of students (ASCA, 2005a; Bryan, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Lee, 2005). Equitable treatment refers to providing students from low-income families the opportunities or resources they may be lacking due to their socioeconomic status. On the other hand, equal treatment refers to holding the same expectations of all students, despite their differences (Holcomb-McCoy).

The professional school counselor's role in collaborating with low-income families can be understood via an examination of the history of the profession (Stone & Dahir, 2006). The role of the professional school counselor has changed in response to the needs of United States society throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, expanding

throughout the course of each decade (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). One of the first signs of the school counseling profession's going beyond its original focus on vocational counseling was seen in Philadelphia's White-Williams foundation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Cutler, 2000). In addition to training counselors and placing them in elementary and high schools, the foundation provided scholarships to low-income students and emphasized the need of the schools to partner with families. The foundation focused on promoting the school's responsibility for social outreach. The Philadelphia school board responded by forming parent and teacher educational groups that focused on and utilized collaboration, although most of the country's school systems retained the vocational model for their school counseling programs (Cutler).

An exploration of the profession's history of multiculturalism is rooted in the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements, when school counselors began to consider issues of diversity and multiculturalism, which continue to be important issues in the field today for professional school counselors working with low-income families (Herr & Erford, 2007). Also during the 1970s, Gilbert Wrenn's work (1973) focused counselors on issues of human growth and development, which includes the need for the school counselor to understand a person's role in the family as well as the context of the society in which they lived. In response to the profession's responsiveness to multiculturalism in the 1970s, school counselors and educators began to formulate the idea of guidance as a program, not merely as a group of services offered by the counselor (Gysbers & Henderson, 2005). In the late 1990s, specific funding was aimed at decreasing the student to counselor ratio in schools by means of the Elementary School Counseling Act. This act provided legal recognition of school counselors' roles being

more than vocational and career guidance. Later, this act came to include secondary schools as well (Herr & Erford).

The ASCA governing board unanimously adopted the term professional school counseling instead of guidance counseling in 1990 (Lambie & Williamson, 2004; ASCA, 2005a). The association published national standards for school counseling programs in 1997, emphasizing the need for professional school counselors to demonstrate how they contributed to all students' success (Schwallie-Gidis, ter Maat, & Pak, 2003). These standards called for fewer administrative and clerical roles and duties for professional school counselors and more time spent meeting students' academic, career, and personal/social needs (ASCA, 2005a).

The professional school counselor's role and identity was also influenced by the Educational Trust and the National Center for Transforming School Counseling (NCTSC). This initiative promoted the notion of professional school counselors as advocates promoting social justice, working to provide equity for all students, especially those from low-income families and students of color (Education Trust, 2009a). Professional school counselors were no longer merely consultants and collaborators, but were leaders in working towards systemic change (Bemak & Chung, 2005).

The ASCA National Model was introduced in 2003. It gives a framework for a professional school counselor's role in developing and implementing a comprehensive, data-driven school counseling program. The four quadrants or "elements" of the model are foundation, delivery, management, and accountability. These elements are permeated by the tenets of leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change (ASCA, 2005a). The model ultimately helps to answer the questions "What do school counselors

do?” and “How are students different as a result of what school counselors do?” (ASCA, 2008).

Recent legislation that has affected professional school counseling is the No Child Left Behind Act, implemented in early 2002. This act propelled state governments to improve schools and reduce the disparity in educational success between children from low-income families and children of higher-income families, in part by enhancing family participation in their children’s education. Affirming the need for professional school counselors, the legislation included many areas relevant to professional school counselors, such as dropout prevention, career counseling, substance abuse counseling, and work with gifted and talented students (Herr & Erford, 2007).

Currently, professional school counselors are called to actively pursue partnerships with parents and guardians (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000) and invite them to become a part of the school community (Erford). As leaders, professional school counselors are invited to “take responsibility for helping each student understand himself or herself as a unique, competent, and valued member of a diverse cultural community rather than a deprived minority in a dominant culture” (Lindsey, Roberts, & CampbellJones, 2005, p. 44). Some practical ways professional school counselors can extend this invitation are by increasing their visibility inside and outside of the school building, being active in the community in which the school is located, being accessible for phone calls and meetings, and creating flexibility in their schedules (Davis, 2005). Other strategies include providing childcare and transportation for families to attend school functions as well as having social events for families and school personnel to

break down any negative perceptions or feelings that may exist (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Providing refreshments and nametags at meetings (Erford), home visits, positive phone calls, use of church or community centers for meetings and conferences, meeting outside of school hours, and use of translators are additional strategies for building positive connections with families (Erford; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Thompson, 2002). As family members feel welcomed into the school, they may be more likely to make the decision to become involved in their child's education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

### **Professional School Counselors and Comprehensive School Counseling Programs**

ASCA's position statement (2005) on comprehensive school counseling programs asserts that "professional school counselors design and deliver comprehensive school counseling programs that promote student academic achievement." Because a school's partnership with families helps students achieve (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007), school-family collaboration is a means of fulfilling this call of the profession. Comprehensive school counseling programs provide a vehicle for this collaboration (ASCA). Professional school counselors should therefore be intentional in working to remove barriers to collaborating with and delivering services to families.

The ASCA National Model provides an outline for designing, implementing, and evaluating a comprehensive school counseling program. Aspects of a comprehensive school counseling program, all of which may include work with families, include designing a school counseling curriculum, conducting individual planning, delivering responsive services, convening an advisory council, collecting and reporting data, creating and using action plans based on data identifying needs, maintaining performance standards, and reporting results. Each of these components is based on the ASCA

National Model's elements of foundation, delivery, program management, and accountability (ASCA, 2005a).

The delivery component of a comprehensive school counseling program includes individual planning and responsive services. Individual student planning involves meeting with students to discuss their educational options and opportunities. Professional school counselors provide relevant information and resources to help students decide on a course for their future. Throughout this process, parents and guardian participation is essential (Stone & Dahir, 2006) as students do not exist outside of their family systems (Davis, 2005). A professional school counselor's responsive services "include interventions needed for at-risk students, group counseling, consultation, referral to community agencies, crisis intervention and management, and prevention activities" (Stone & Dahir, 2006, p. 221). Family concerns are a common topic for professional school counselors (Stone & Dahir). Interventions may include working with family members to resolve family and individual problems. This family involvement is crucial throughout the helping process (Schmidt, 2004), as counseling in the schools has been shown to be more effective with family involvement than without it (Erford, 2007; Wilson, 1986).

The next aspect of a comprehensive school counseling program, program management, involves schools counselors' use of advisory councils, student data, and action plans to implement their comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2005a). Parents and guardians are key players on professional school counselors' advisory panels, as they can become involved in the school and offer their suggestions for improvement of school counseling services. The use of master calendars is another way

of connecting with families, alerting them of school counseling activities and inviting them to become involved (ASCA).

Finally, the fourth program aspect, accountability, refers to the use of data to show how professional school counselors make a difference in the lives of their students. Professional school counselors do not design their programs based on their own ideas, but design them around the needs of the students and school stakeholders (Schmidt, 2004). One possible tool to use with families is a needs assessment, which could provide information about a student's home life and alert the professional school counselor about any family problems. If the professional school counselor knows about the family, there may be more opportunity for open communication and family involvement in the helping process (Schmidt). Each of ASCA's components of a comprehensive school counseling program provides the framework and lays the foundation for working with families. As professional school counselors heed the call to design and execute comprehensive school counseling programs, they simultaneously heed the call to include families in their work. Given the importance of a collaborative partnership with families, especially those with low income, this study will explore professional school counselors' perceptions of these families while investigating how their perceptions may affect the quality of the services they offer (Capuzzi, & Gross, 2007).

### **Culturally Competent Professional School Counselors**

Not only are professional school counselors responsible for designing and implementing a comprehensive school counseling program to meet the needs of students and their families, they are charged with carrying out their programs in a culturally competent fashion (Pederson, 2003). Professional school counselors are called to exhibit



a thorough understanding of “norms that stem from the majority culture in assessing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of students’ parents and families” as well as different ways of parenting and discipline rooted in diverse cultural practices that may not be as familiar (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004, p. 180). Such cultural competence may be practiced in meetings with the individual families as well as facilitating family support groups and training faculty and school staff to act in culturally responsive fashion (Schmidt, 2003). Professional school counselors should be responsive to and respectful of the diversity inherent in families as well (Cobia & Henderson, 2007). Families, in turn, should be able to trust that professional school counselors are aware of and familiar with their culture and norms and have the skills necessary to communicate and collaborate with them (Robinson-Wood, 2009).

Awareness is an important aspect of being culturally competent (ASCA, 2004). A professional school counselor first must be self-aware, having an understanding of her or his own culture and identity and how this culture affects the ways she or he perceives others (Locke, 2003). Self-awareness precedes a thorough awareness of other cultures, especially the exploration and recognition of “cultural baggage” that may “cause certain things to be taken for granted or create expectations about behaviors and manners” (Locke, 2003, p. 177). In the process of becoming more self-aware, counselors also may explore their own family histories, looking to gain an understanding of how this history has shaped and affected them as professional school counselors (Erford, 2007).

Professional school counselors should also be knowledgeable about the components of cultures, such as poverty. “The educator must understand the devastating effects poverty has on all facets of an individual’s life and must see the role that

education plays in solving the problem” (Pedersen, 2003, p. 177). While learning about different cultures, professional school counselors understand that each individual is unique and refuses to stereotype a student based on his or her cultural group, ultimately avoiding ethnocentrism (Pedersen). Professional development is one way to gain this awareness, as the professional school counselor embarks to continually learn more about students’ and their families’ ways of life through workshops, conferences, seminars pertaining to multicultural topics and training, and immersion in the community via meaningful relationships with community members (ASCA position statement on comprehensive school counseling programs, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2007; McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Wininger, 2008). A professional school counselor should become familiar with his or her school’s surrounding community culture as well, in order to be able to provide families with resources and to gain other opportunities for collaboration (Virginia School Counselor Association, 2008).

In conjunction with possessing multicultural competence and awareness, professional school counselors also are challenged to self-identify as advocates who work on behalf of students and families (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Pedersen, 2003). Advocacy is the “act of empowering individuals or groups through actions that increase self-efficacy, remove barriers to needed services, and promote systemic change” (McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Wininger, 2008, p. 613). Counselors who are advocates are much more than helpers; they are activists (McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Wininger). The ASCA position statement on cultural diversity specifically labels professional school counselors as advocates who “remove barriers that impede student success” (ASCA, 2009). Professional school counselors who are advocates rise up and “attack the causes

that perpetuate” inequity in their schools (McAuliffe, Danner, Grothaus, & Doyle, 2008). Bemak and Chung (2005) assert that this advocacy role is crucial for professional school counselors in combating the Achievement Gap.

Therefore, because of the struggles and stresses that low-income students face, professional school counselors are called to act as advocates to provide an equitable school experience (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). According to Field and Baker (2004), professional school counselors “who are effective advocates monitor the school climate and environment to identify ways in which students’ voices are not heard or devalued” (p. 57). In addition, a professional school counselor advocate goes beyond his or her work in the school building in order to provide students and their families with information and resources and provides support and interventions where needed (Field & Baker).

Advocating for and with families is an important component of the advocacy competencies listed by Trusty and Brown (2005). Professional school counselors recognize each family’s strengths and should capitalize on these strengths in order to help each family help its child succeed. Professional school counselors also work to connect with families and build productive, constructive relationships with them and assist them in securing any resources they may need. This relationship-building comes as a result of effective communication skills and a desire for collaboration (Trusty & Brown).

Professional school counselors are expected to assist families in becoming self-advocates, able to work towards equitable opportunities for themselves and for their children (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Professional school counselors also help family members to navigate the school system and provide them with the information

they need to advocate for their children (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes; Ratts, DeKruvf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). They give families the political resources they need to gain a voice in the local and state governments (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Professional school counselors are called to act as communication assistants between the families and schools, making sure family members' voices are heard by the school's staff and administration. Partnership between families and professional school counselors leads to advocacy efforts becoming stronger, more active and efficient (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes).

In addition to their advocacy work and training with families, professional school counselors work to equip and to challenge other educators to take on the mindset of an advocate as well. "Advocacy asks the counselors to unveil the daily and hidden slights, make the familiar unfamiliar, or help the seemingly certain and fixed oppressive practices to be questioned or ameliorated" (McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Wininger, 2008, p. 616). Professional school counselors challenge themselves to confront teachers and administrators' negative attitudes towards and stereotypes of students, even if it is not an easy or comfortable task (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Professional school counselors must work to move beyond this "Nice Counselor Syndrome" where they attempt to "live up to their reputation of being nice people by the manner in which they consistently strive to promote harmony with others while avoiding and deflecting interpersonal conflicts in the school setting" (Bemak & Chung, 2008, p. 374). Other personal factors that may prevent counselors from actively advocating in their schools include personal fears, apathy, an avoidance of being seen as a troublemaker by school administrators, anxiety, discomfort, and/or feelings of powerlessness (Bemak & Chung).

In order to serve as advocates, professional school counselors must think through their actions, considering the repercussions and costs (Ratts, DeKryuf & Chen-Hays, 2007). However, while recognizing their limitations and working to compensate for them (Ratts, DeKryuf, & Chen-Hays), professional school counselors have the responsibility to challenge themselves to make sure that each student in their schools is treated equitably (Bemak & Chung, 2008). In order to promote such advocacy within the school, professional school counselors might hold professional development seminars on equity and equality and provide teachers, administrators, staff members and families with communication and advocacy techniques. Professional school counselors therefore encourage teachers and families to become empowered as leaders in the school and community, working on behalf of their students to promote systemic change (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007).

In their work as advocates, professional school counselors promote social justice (ASCA, 2005a). “Social justice targets the marginalized groups of people in society—it focuses on the disadvantaged. Social justice recognizes that there are situations in which application of the same rules to unequal groups can generate unequal results” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, pp. 17-18). In addition, social justice calls attention to the attempted oppression of one group over another (Herlihy & Watson, 2007). Ultimately, as professional school counselors gain a clearer understanding of the “role that dominant cultural values have in shaping the educational success and failure of youngsters,” they will be more empathic to the struggles and needs of their students (Holcomb-McCoy, p. 18). The ASCA position statement on equity recognizes that professional school counselors are called to work towards equitable treatment for all students, especially

those who are underrepresented and have been negatively perceived by members of the school and community in the past (ASCA, 2006). This study, through its exploration of professional school counselor perceptions, was therefore important in order to investigate the nature professional school counselors' thoughts and feelings associated with low-income families.

### **Family-School Collaboration**

One specific way for professional school counselors to fulfill their current role as advocates and proponents for social justice may be to build partnerships with families. School-family partnerships are one proactive way to enhance family-school collaboration (Davis & Lambie, 2005). Professional school counselors are in an important position to help families because of their position in the school, their training in human growth and development, and their counseling training (Sink, 2005). School-family-community partnerships are defined as "collaborative relationships in which school professionals partner with family and community members and community-based organizations, including businesses, churches, libraries, and social service agencies, to implement programs and activities to help students succeed" (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 441). Examples of such partnerships include mentoring, tutoring, and volunteer programs (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). Educational programs are likewise important as they provide parents and guardians with new resources and ideas for raising successful children. As families are invited into the school and the school gains from their talents and expertise as well as helping to meet their needs, the families are likely to feel valued and to appreciate the school's efforts to build relationships with them (Schmidt, 2003). Just as families may benefit from partnerships with schools, schools can benefit from

partnerships with families. Parents and guardians provide a resource to educators in solving students' problems and encouraging their learning. They also have been shown to provide assistance in helping the school reach its educational goals and discovering best practices for teachers within the school (Amatea, Daniels, Bringman, & Vandiver, 2004).

Using their multicultural skills and cultural awareness (McKenna, Roberts, & Woodfin, 2003), professional school counselors are charged with recognizing that family involvement is crucial to a child's education (Hederson & Mapp, 2002). Not only is a strong school-family alliance crucial for a student's academic success (Bryan, 2005; Sink, 2005), it is critical for "successful family environments" as well (Dauber & Epstein, 1993, p. 53). In turn, academic programs that have parent and guardian involvement and support are more successful than those without family member participation (Davis, 2005).

Therefore, it is imperative for schools to make the effort and to have the desire and ability to connect with their students' families (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Epstein & Sanders, 2001; McKenna, Roberts, & Woodfin, 2003; Swap, 1993). Schools should make clear their expectations and guidelines regarding the importance of their work with families in their mission statement, policy, and practice (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 68). If there is a separation between families and the school, the student will be less likely to succeed than if the two were somehow linked (Epstein, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy). The professional school counselor can function as a liaison between the family and the school, becoming an intermediary resource for both stakeholders (McKenna, Roberts, & Woodfin, 2003).

This school-family collaboration involves effective and culturally competent communication between counselors and families and is a reciprocal relationship (Davis & Lambie, 2005). On the one hand, schools provide valuable information about the educational curriculum and best practices for continuing a child's education at home (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The school informs families about supporting their children and building connections with them in the home (Schmidt, 2003). Conversely, families provide equally valuable information to the schools about the child's past experiences, learning styles, and character and behavior traits (Holcomb-McCoy). Families become partners in problem solving and support for their students' teachers. Families also provide educators with an increased ability to recognize strengths (Amatea, Daniels, Bringman, & Vandiver, 2004). In the processes of relationship-building and collaboration, counselors can better help students when they are supported by students' families and have open lines of communication with them (Schmidt).

Overall, these school-family-community partnerships benefit schools and families in a variety of ways, including feelings of acceptance into the school community (Bryan, 2005; Davis & Lambie, 2005) and becoming empowered and equipped with the resources they need to support their children (Bryan & Henry, 2008). When the professional school counselor adopts this empowerment attitude, she or he demonstrates her or his belief that "many competencies are already present or at least possible within families" (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, p. 71).

Also, when family members are involved in their child's education, their child is more likely to be successful in school (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The child will be more likely to pass his or her classes, have better attendance, behavior, and social skills and



will be more apt to graduate and attend college (Erford, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Family and community involvement improves the quality of schools as well. Schools are provided with better resources (Bryan & Henry, 2008) and outside partners contribute crucial funding (Henderson & Mapp).

Instead of believing family members to be “too lazy, incompetent, or preoccupied to participate in school programs” (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001, p. 97), the professional school counselor can adopt the assumption that all families want to be involved, want their children to excel in school, and recognize and promote the research supported notion that family engagement is vital to students’ success (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Professional school counselors are likewise challenged to act under the assumption that parents and guardians care for their children and want what is best for them (Lewis & Forman, 2002).

Through school-family-community partnerships, the professional school counselor might also encourage parents and guardians to become empowered leaders in the school and community and to take on an active role in their children’s education (Bryan, 2005; Lindsey, Roberts, & CampbellJones, 2005). Professional school counselors, through their leadership in facilitating these partnerships and through staff development and education, ensure that members of the school “appreciate the expertise and diverse perspectives that poor and minority parents bring to the problem-solving process” (Bryan, p. 223). As a result of these partnerships, students benefit by means of the extra support and resources provided through them (Bryan; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Grant & Gillette, 2006; Madsen & Mabokela, 2005).

A quantitative study by Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy (2004) examined school counselors' perceptions of their involvement in school-family-community partnerships. Seventy-two professional school counselors in South Carolina were surveyed and asked about their perceptions about topics such as the importance of being involved in partnerships, their role in school-family-community partnerships, the type of partnerships that are important, and the role of the partnerships in their school. The study found that professional school counselors found it important to be involved in partnerships and felt as if they played a major role in the partnerships. However, the professional school counselors reported that their involvement in some partnerships were more important than others. For example, they rated mentoring programs being more essential than family education programs and home visitor programs. The high school professional school counselors did not see partnerships as being as important in their schools as elementary professional school counselors did.

The limitations for the study include a low response rate of 24%. The study was also limited to professional school counselors in South Carolina. Because the study was quantitative, it is limited by its inability to explore the questions with the professional school counselors who were faced with forced-choice responses. Recognizing these limitations, the authors stressed the importance of the study as a basis for future research. They specifically call for qualitative study to provide an "in-depth study of attitudes, beliefs, events, and policies that influence school counselor involvement in school-family-community partnerships" (p.170). The study reported in this dissertation attempts to answer this call by exploring professional school counselors' perceptions of the low-income families in their schools and the reasons that professional school counselors may

or may not be involved with families. Because this study is qualitative, it will allow more freedom, flexibility, and depth in understanding the nature of the professional school counselors' viewpoints of low-income families. It finally provides a forum and discussion of a cultural topic not extensively explored in previous literature (Chang, Hays, & Gray, 2010).

A follow-up quantitative study by Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy (2007) explored the factors that influence professional school counselor involvement in school-family-community partnerships. The results of a factor analyses reveal that professional school counselors' attitude toward families is one of four factors related to their involvement in school-family-community partnerships. However, because this study was quantitative, there was no elaboration or explanation about the nature of these attitudes. The participants were limited in their choices to describe their attitudes about families and the questions related to families seem to be more fact-based rather than perception-based. At the end of this study, Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy recognize these limitations and call again for further research in exploring professional school counselors' capacity and intentionality in building school-family-community partnerships. The authors extend the invitation to school counselor educators, stating that "it is important that counselor educators and researchers collaborate with school counselors to implement and study school-family-community partnerships" (p. 452). This study, therefore, attempted to fulfill this call as the primary researcher collaborated with professional school counselors to discover important perceptions and how these perceptions may affect their practice. The results may be used by school counselor educators and supervisors in their training of future counselors and in their supervision of practicing counselors in the field.

## **Perceptions and Practice**

In addition to attempting to answer Bryan and Holcomb McCoy's call for further research, this study aims to investigate a foundational aspect of school counselors' collaboration with low-income families, that is, their perceptions of these families. Given the dearth of research on this topic in general, an exploratory qualitative research study which paints a thick and rich picture of these influential perceptions appears to be merited. The interviews with several urban professional school counselors can provide a forum for an exploration of their perceptions, how these perceptions might influence their interactions with these families, and how they came to formulate these views.

While limitations of studies examining perceptual data have been noted in the literature (Hays, 2008), the importance of perception and its influence on practice have also been supported. For example, a major tenet of cognitive behavioral counseling theory is that cognitive activity influences behavior (Capuzzi & Gross, 2007; Seligman, 2006), especially in the area of multicultural practice (Heppner & O'Brien, 1994). Professional school counselors' perceptions, which may be considered as cognitions or attributions (Hays), may well affect their behavior and practice. Cognitive therapy also asserts that a person is able to become aware of his or her thoughts that affect his or her behavior, which may ultimately lead to a change in behavior or lifestyle (Archer & McCarthy, 2007).

The study of professional school counselors' perceptions is also supported by social learning theory, which asserts that behavior is the result of modeling (A. Ivey, D'Andrea, M. Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 2007). Professional school counselors are seen by students, teachers, staff members, and administrators in the school and are called to be

leaders in their communities (Bryan, 2005). Therefore, according to this theory, their behavior may influence others. As professional school counselors become more self-aware and therefore multiculturally competent, they will be better able to model this behavior for others (McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Winiger, 2008; Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006). Given the strong potential for connection between professional school counselors' perceptions and their practice, it would appear to be important to explore these perceptions and the influences they may have on performance.

Previous studies in education show the effects of perceptions on performance and demonstrate the need to further investigate the perceptions of urban professional school counselors and how these perceptions may influence their practice. For example, a quantitative study done in China by Chen and Li (2004) utilized a self-report measure to investigate the correlation between self-perceptions of social competence and self-worth in Chinese children. The results of the study revealed that self-perceptions and school performance "made unique and positive contributions to the prediction of each other" (Chen & Li, p. 583). Therefore, the children's self-perceptions may have contributed to their school performance, which in turn may have contributed to their self-perceptions.

A quantitative study done by Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens (2008) in Belgium likewise explored the effects of perceptions on performance by studying students' perceptions of the learning environment, which included student-activating and lecture-based educational settings, and academic achievement. The results indicated that if students positively perceived and appreciated their learning environment, they were more likely to perform well academically. If students negatively perceived their learning environment, they were less likely to perform well academically.

### **Perceptions about students and their low-income families**

Because perceptions may influence practice, it is important to study and become aware of the perceptions of educators in relation to their students. While there are few studies that explore the perceptions of professional school counselors, evidence of teachers and professional school counselors' negative perceptions of low-income students and their families have been shown to impede their willingness or desire to help them (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Bryan, 2005; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1997; Lawson, 2003; Morris, 2005; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Warren, 2002; Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007). Abbate-Vaughn (2006), for example, found that less than six percent of graduating teachers wish to work in underserved urban settings.

While there seems to be little in the research in relation to educators' perceptions of low-income families themselves, recent studies have examined teacher perceptions of students from low-income families (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008; Morris, 2005; Warren, 2002; Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007). While a knowledge of teachers' perceptions of students is helpful to the educational field, an awareness of professional school counselors' perceptions of low-income families will be helpful to the education field as well as the counseling field, which has a foundation in social equality and advocating for social justice (McAuliffe, Danner, Grothaus, & Doyle, 2008). It is particularly important to explore the perceptions of professional school counselors, who are called to be bridges, not barriers, between schools and families (Erford, 2007). Because there is a paucity of such studies thus far investigating professional school counselors' perceptions of low-

income families, an understanding others' perceptions of low-income students helps to understand the need for further studies related to this topic.

Giles (2005) describes these patterns of negative descriptions of low-income families as a "deficit narrative." Schools may blame parents and guardians for their children's academic problems and difficulties and may not offer hope or support to the families. Family members are placed in inferior positions and are perceived as looking for what they can get, not what they can give (Giles, p. 235). These negative attitudes towards parents and guardians prevent positive working relations and can create formidable barriers between schools and families who usually desire to have productive relationships with teachers (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007).

Morris' study (2005) shows that both African-American and White teachers perceive an inverse relationship between social class and academic ability. In this particular study, middle class students were noted for their intelligence while the lower class students were associated with academic struggles and troubled behavior. Overall, there was an "assumed possession (or lack) of capital in the form of academic skills" (Morris, p. 116).

In a similar study by Auwarter and Aruguete (2008), teachers were found to perceive students from low-socioeconomic status families as having less promising futures than high socioeconomic students. Teachers who see socioeconomic status as a "predetermining factor for students' achievement" felt helpless when teaching low socioeconomic children. These feelings of helplessness may have negatively affected the time and energy they invested in teaching (Auwarter & Aruguete, p. 245). In a similar study, Gollnick and Chinn (2006) reported that students perceived that teachers did not

give their peers from low-income families as many opportunities for class participation as they did to their peers from higher-income families.

In 2008, a corresponding study by Warren indicated that teachers held families responsible for their students' lack of skills. This tendency to blame the families resulted in the teachers' sense of low self-efficacy and responsibility for teaching low-income students. Warren's study also found that teachers did not value the cultural diversity of the low socioeconomic status families. For example, the teachers negatively viewed the families who spoke English as a second language instead of viewing the bilingualism as a potential strength and valuable ability. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) recognize this characterization of differences as "deficits" that is common in schools that "typify a culture characteristic of a middle-class, educationally oriented, Euro-American lifestyle" (p. 76).

In a qualitative study done by Lawson (2003) in an elementary school, teachers likewise perceived family members to be at fault for not becoming involved in their children's education. These perceptions led to stigmatizing parents and guardians (Lawson). Subsequently, interviews with parents in the same school revealed that, despite their true desire to help and to partner with teachers, they felt alienated from the school because their opinions were not often considered or valued and as a result often became disagreeable with teachers, ultimately refusing to become involved in the school-wide activities (Lawson).

Another helping profession, the medical field, has also explored perceptions of low socioeconomic families by physicians and patients. van Ryn & Burke (2000) found that a patient's socioeconomic status significantly influenced physicians' perceptions.



The participating physicians perceived lower socioeconomic status patients to be less intelligent, less likely to having a demanding career and more likely to be difficult. Like teachers whose perceptions affect their teaching efforts (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008), the researchers believed that these perceptions may affect the quality of care that low socioeconomic status patients may receive (van Ryn & Burke).

A similar study was conducted by Woo, Ghorayeb, Lee, Sangha, and Richter (2004) involving medical students and their perceptions of low socioeconomic status patients. The students were found to perceive a low socioeconomic status patient as having “less social support, poorer overall health and poorer prognosis, and to be more adversely affected with respect to his occupational duties” (Woo, Ghorayeb, Lee, Sangha, & Richter, p. 1918). In addition, the second year medical students’ perceptions were more negative than the first year medical students’ perceptions (Woo, Ghorayeb, Lee, Sangha, & Richter).

Despite the resounding call for them to serve as advocates and culturally competent collaborators (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000), professional school counselors, like teachers and physicians, have been found to have negative perceptions of low-income students and their families in a quantitative study by Auwarter and Aruguete (2008). Besides this study, there is a gap in the literature in relation to professional school counselors and their perceptions of low-income families. Auwarter and Aruguete’s results revealed that professional school counselors perceived students of low socioeconomic status as having a lower academic ability as well as being less likely to finish high school. The study had an admirable

return rate of its surveys at 52% and was able to show the counselors' specific biases, although these biases were based on only four case studies.

Because the study was quantitative, the professional school counselor participants were limited to forced-choice responses. They were not able to elaborate on or justify their responses. Without any dialogue, the connection between their perceptions and actions was not explored. A qualitative study on the perceptions of professional school counselors would expand the Auwarter and Aruguete study so that the perceptions could be explored and professional school counselors will have the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. This open qualitative forum, where the data is emergent and flexible (Patton, 2002), will generate a wider breadth and depth of knowledge that may contribute to a new level of awareness in the professional school counseling field.

### **Summary**

As seen in the previous review of the literature, low-income families face many challenges, especially involving their children's education. Unfortunately, educators often perceive low-income students and families negatively and are subsequently less willing to provide extra support and resources (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Bryan, 2005; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hampton, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1997; Lawson, 2003; Morris, 2005; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Warren, 2002; Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007). It appears that school-family collaboration is essential element in ensuring success for all students, not just the handful who currently succeed despite systemic conditions which are not supportive (Davis & Lambie, 2005). Professional school counselors are in an ideal position to partner with low-income families. By implementing the ASCA National Model and acting on a commitment to

social justice and equity, the professional school counselor can offer support, resources, and collaboration, in addition to advocating for and with low-income families.

Despite its nobility, one might wonder if this ideal role outlined in the ASCA National Model is being fulfilled in everyday school counseling practice. “The suggestion that school counselors should be involved in leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and liaison roles in partnerships among schools, families, and communities does not guarantee that school counselors routinely enact such partnership roles” (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 443). Studies suggest that educators and others in professional service have negatively biased perceptions towards low-income families. Currently, there is little in the literature examining the perceptions of urban professional school counselors of families, in particular those with low-incomes. These perceptions may affect the quality of a professional school counselor’s performance in working with low-income families. An emergent and flexible qualitative study of perceptions will provide the opportunity to unveil the meaning making of urban professional school counselors regarding the low-income families they serve (Creswell, 2007). An enhanced understanding of the selected professional school counselors’ perceptions of low-income families may lead to better training, understanding, and practice for those in the school counseling profession, as they strive to tap the potential of these partnerships to enable these underserved students to succeed.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to examine how urban professional school counselors perceive the low-income families in their schools and to explore how these perceptions affect their collaboration with these families. Awareness of these perceptions and their influence on a professional school counselor's practice may influence professional development efforts to prepare professional school counselors and professional school counselors-in-training to work with low-income families. Ultimately, the results of this study may lead to enhancing the quality of services for the students from low-income families in urban schools.

#### **Rationale and Assumptions of the Qualitative Design**

There is a need for additional qualitative research with a multicultural focus, especially in school counseling (Holcomb-McCoy & Day-Vines, 2004; Sheu & Sedlacek, 2009). Qualitative research may help the profession gain a better understanding of how school counselors perceive themselves as cultural beings and conduct their work with diverse populations. Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy (2004) call for qualitative research in the area of school counseling and school-family partnerships, specifically in the area of "attitudes, beliefs, events, and policies" that influence school counselors' perceptions of and partnerships with families (p. 170).

Qualitative phenomenological studies exploring professional school counselors' perceptions about their work with diverse families may add a rich, descriptive perspective to the field that otherwise may not be captured in quantitative inquiry. 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). A phenomenological qualitative approach therefore seems appropriate for this study, as it looks to investigate how urban professional school counselors make sense of or perceive the low-income families they work with and how these perceptions become their realities and influence their collaborative efforts with this population (Patton). 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 phenomenological exploration of consciousness and perceptions fits with the constructivism, which examines the “multiple realities constructed by people and the implications of those constructions for their lives and interactions for others” (Patton, p. 96). The researcher, therefore, will use a constructivist lens, which emphasizes “meaning making” and knowledge creation” in an environment where “humility and reflexivity are ultimate, as she explores the professional school counselors’ realities and how these realities translate to their work with low-income families in their schools.

Unlike most quantitative research, which is tightly pre-planned and calculated, qualitative research is emergent and flexible (Patton, 2002). The researcher may change the research questions throughout the process as he or she discovers new perspectives to take or new directions to pursue. In the course of the study, codes are molded into themes

which become new knowledge generated from the study (Creswell, 2003). This flexibility may lead to unexpected and unintended discoveries (Patton).

Interviews are one type of qualitative data that allows the researcher to “enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). Interviews add insight into the persona of the participant (Gillham, 2005). Interviews additionally give accurate and detailed information about the participant’s thoughts, feelings, and opinions (Patton). Because this phenomenological study sought to investigate the urban professional school counselors’ perceptions of low-income families and to explore how these perceptions may influence their collaboration with these families, use of interviewing and qualitative methodology appeared appropriate. Through the semi-structured interviews, the nature of each school counselor’s perceptions may have become apparent to the researcher and the research team.

### **Research Questions**

This research study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are urban professional school counselors’ perceptions of the low-income families of their students?
- How might professional school counselors’ perceptions affect their collaboration with these families?

### **Role of Researcher**

“Qualitative research is not primarily concerned with eliminating *variance* between researchers in the values and expectations they bring to the study, but with understanding how a *particular* researcher’s values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusions of the study” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 108). In order to gain this understanding, the researcher must report his or her past experiences as well as his or her

biases that might influence the study because of the interpretive nature of qualitative research (Creswell, 2003). The researcher must bracket, or know and account for, her or his own beliefs to fully take in the essence of others' beliefs and perceptions of their realities (Patton, 2002). This process of self-searching and self-reflection is called the *epoche* (Patton).

In order to increase the study's level of trustworthiness, this researcher used a research team in order to provide multiple perspectives and triangulation for the data and study. The research team members were selected based on their experience and training with qualitative research as well as their willingness to provide help, time, and support to the study. Research team members were asked to reflect and report on biases that may influence their analysis of the data by writing a self-reflection paper (reported below). The research team members' process of self-reflection may have assisted them in understanding and bracketing their own beliefs as they analyze others' perceptions and beliefs throughout the study (Patton, 2002).

The researcher for this study was a 26-year-old white female in the Ph.D. Counseling Program at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA. She has experience working as a school counseling intern in elementary, middle, and high schools in both urban and suburban settings. She agrees with ASCA (2005) that advocacy for social justice and equity is an important role for the professional school counselor. The researcher may therefore have her own biases because of her strong belief that all school counselors should be multiculturally competent advocates and should work towards social justice within the school and community. These beliefs have been developed in the multicultural classes she has taken in her master's program and doctoral program and her

study of constructivist thinking. In order to gain self-awareness and to maintain objectivity and subjectivity throughout the study, the researcher kept a process journal to record her thoughts and feelings, which is included in the study. The journal highlighted biased thinking and will assist with an understanding of the researcher's role and the objectivity of her own perceptions as the study develops. The researcher realizes that her perceptions are not truth; they are merely perceptions and can affect the way she conducts her research.

A research team and an independent auditor were assembled in order to gain multiple perspectives throughout the research study. Each research member has been trained in qualitative research and multicultural counseling through Counseling Master's and Ph.D. programs. One research team member was a white, 29-year-old female Counseling Ph.D. student with a background in mental health counseling. Another research team member was a white, 25-year-old female Counseling Ph.D. student with a background in mental health counseling. The auditor was a white, 52-year-old male counselor educator with a Ph.D. in Counseling. Because the research team members were the same race, their perspectives may have been limited when reviewing the data.

After being asked to reflect on their personal biases and how these biases may affect their analysis of the data, the research team members reported that they had a strong belief in advocating for oppressed members of society, especially those with low-income. One of the research team members reported that she attended a K-12 private school and was never exposed to low-income students or families until she volunteered with students from families with low-income during her undergraduate years. While volunteering had an "eye-opening experience" of the ways in which low-income families



are oppressed and are often denied opportunities. This research team member acknowledged that during coding, she tended to have a more negative view of the participants if they weren't going "out of their way" to help low-income students and their families. The second research team member reported that she has had experience working with low-income students in an educational setting and held the belief that that low-income families have not had the education or role models in order to be successful in American society. She also recognized that her former work in schools impacted the way she coded that data as she may have been reminded of her previous clients and their families. Throughout the research process the research team dialogued about how their experiences, beliefs, and values were impacting the coding process. The primary research team member led these conversations and challenged the research team members to self-reflect in order to maintain their objectivity.

### **Research Plan**

The participants for this study were urban elementary, middle, and high school professional school counselors. The school districts employing the participants each had at least 40% of its students receiving free or reduced lunch. This percentage matches the state's free and reduced lunch standard to receive Title I funding. Title I schools are designated by the federal government, based on their percentages of students receiving free or reduced lunches, as needing extra funding for programs to increase students' academic achievement (Virginia Department of Education, 2009a). Free and reduced lunch rates are indicators of poverty in the school system because census data related to poverty is not collected annually (Federal Education Budget Project, 2009). The

professional school counselors were made aware of these criteria when asked to participate in the study.

This study utilized purposeful and snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling involves choosing participants based on the information they can provide to the study. With snowball sampling, the researcher asks participants for recommendations of other participants to participate in the study (Creswell, 2008). In this study, the researcher chose a small number of participants in one region of a mid-Atlantic state based on criteria related to the research question stated above. The researcher then received recommendations for additional participants meeting the study's criteria from originally selected participants (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2003). As a result of meeting these criteria, the participants were qualified to provide information to answer the research questions (Patton; Maxwell, 2005). Patton labels these cases "information-rich cases" as by meeting the set criteria they have the qualifications and experiences to serve as valuable learning opportunities for the researcher (p. 230).

After gaining exempt status for the study from the College of Education Human Subjects Review Committee at Old Dominion University, the researcher contacted the school counseling directors of two urban school districts, informed them of the nature of the study, and asked for permission to contact the school counselors in their district. The two school districts were selected because they meet the criteria of being urban school districts and because the researcher had contacts within each of the school districts that may assist in gaining entry into the system to access potential participants. Professional school counselors who were referred by the researcher's contacts in the school districts

were contacted individually and subsequently were selected based on their willingness and availability to be interviewed twice over the course of twelve weeks.

Before being interviewed, each of the professional school counselors was asked to read and to sign an informed consent document (Appendix B) explaining to them the purpose of the study as well as the confidentiality parameters. They were also given a participant demographic sheet (Appendix C) which asked about their work setting, years of experience as an urban professional school counselor, age, and race/ethnicity. After the two semi-structured interviews, participants received a follow-up email (Appendix A) which inquired about their experience of the interview process and offered them an opportunity to add any additional information that they deemed necessary. Throughout the research study, all data not currently being used was kept in a secure, locked location. The interview transcriptions were destroyed at the completion of the data analysis and no names or geographical locations appeared anywhere in the written descriptions of the study in order to protect the confidentiality of the professional school counselor participants.

Because the interviews explored the personal thoughts and feelings of the participants, the researcher adhered to a strong ethical framework to guide the research study (Patton, 2002). Throughout the research process, the researcher attempted to show a high level of respect for the participants (Creswell, 2003) and carefully followed the American School Counseling Association's Ethical Standards (2004a) as well as the American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics (2005). The participants were fully and clearly informed of the nature of the study both verbally and through a written document. They were likewise informed of the measures taken to protect their

confidentiality as the transcriptions of the interviews were protected during the research process and were destroyed after they are analyzed. In addition, no names appeared anywhere on the study. The participants were voluntarily interviewed only after they have given written and verbal consent to the researcher.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

This phenomenological qualitative investigation consisted of two individual semi-structured interviews and a follow up e-mail (Appendix A) with each of the ten urban professional school counselor participants (Patton, 2002). The number of ten participants was derived through an examination of the literature regarding sample sizes for phenomenological qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007). A smaller sample size allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the data (Breakwell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002) via multiple interviews/interactions with each participant, allowing for comprehensive and saturated data to be collected (Creswell, 2008; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Qualitative research lends itself to fieldwork, as the researcher is able to enter the world of the participant (Patton, 2002). Therefore, the setting for the semi-structured interview was a place of the professional school counselor's choosing. In each interview, questions were asked related to the perceptions the counselors have of their students' low-income families and how this may affect their professional interactions with these families. The questions were open-ended and the researcher attempted not to lead the interviewee. Probing questions such as "Can you tell me a little more about that?" or "What was that like for you?" were asked when it seemed appropriate.

Each participant was interviewed twice by means of a semi-structured, open-ended 30-50 minute audio recorded interview (Patton, 2002). Each participant was asked

the same set of questions that had been developed in the interview protocol (Appendix A), resulting in a sense of uniformity within the study (Patton). The protocol for the second interview was revised after the research team had coded the first set of interviews. The question related to the perceptions of the faculty, staff, and administration was taken out in order to maintain the focus of the interview questions on the professional school counselors' perception. This pre-determined structure of the interview protocol allowed the researcher to guide and direct the interview (Creswell, 2003). Probes, transitions, and follow-up questions were included to garner additional relevant information. Each question was designed in such a way that it seems singular, neutral and open-ended (Patton) and was aimed at gathering information about current roles, challenges, and overall descriptions and perceptions of the participants' work with low-income families. After each interview was completed, the transcription of the interview was sent to each participant to review and confirm.

### **Data Analyses and Reduction**

A phenomenological study looks to explore a participant's consciousness and the ways that this consciousness affects one's daily life (Creswell, 2007). This exploration analyzed the consciousness and meaning making of professional urban school counselors through an analysis of their reported perceptions. Creswell outlines a structured method for phenomenological analysis which is an adaptation of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Moustakas, 1994). The first step in this method is a horizontalization of the data, which is achieved by identifying and listing statements that the researcher perceives as significant in the transcripts and assigning equal value to each. These statements are then grouped into themes which are interpreted for meaning. After studying these themes the

researcher writes a description and gives specific examples of the participants' phenomenon, ultimately looking to "develop a synthesis of the meanings" and to discover the essence of the phenomenon for the urban professional school counselors (Moustakas, p. 181).

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 professional 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 key words, phrases and statements that may be related to the urban professional 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).

Simultaneously, the research team, consisting of two doctoral students trained in qualitative research, engaged in the initial coding process mirroring that of the primary researcher. The primary researcher and the research team met to discuss the first round of interviews. The primary researcher recoded the transcripts based on the research team's consensus, which was decided on after a discussion of the similarities and differences between each person's findings and an explanation of each research team member's choice of codes (Patton, 2002). The interview protocol for the second round of interviews

was then adjusted based on this analysis and discussion by the researcher and the research team. One question regarding staff and administrators' perceptions of low-income families was removed as it was seen to detract from the focus on the participants' perceptions.

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 from the interviews and the responses to the follow-up emails. The final codes, themes, and patterns were sent to the auditor, who reviewed the transcriptions and the findings of the research team. The research team met for the last time to reach an agreement on the final coding. The auditor was then sent the data for a final review and supported the final codebook as he confirmed the data collection and coding process.

### **Verification Procedures**

Creswell (2003) recommends specific strategies to increase trustworthiness of a qualitative study. One of the strategies, member-checking, was employed by having each of the participants review the transcriptions of their interviews. This served as a means of triangulating the data. At the start of the second interview, the participant was asked to review the first interview to see if any revisions or changes are needed. After the second interview, the participant was asked via email to review the second interview. The data, therefore, it was confirmed by each the interviewee.

Another of Creswell's (2003) strategies to validate the accuracy of the findings is to include a rich, thick description of the study's procedures and findings. A detailed description of both the data collection and analysis procedures may be used to analyze

and replicate the study or to possibly expand on the research focus. This final report is rich in detail in order to provide its audience with enough evidence for a thorough and clear understanding of the results. Use of verbatim transcripts transcribed by the primary researcher help to enrich the data as well (Maxwell, 2005). In order to mitigate the possibility of participants' sharing socially desirable answers to the inquiries, prolonged engagement with participants, relationship building throughout the interview process, and follow-up questions were used.

Creswell (2003) recommends that researcher bias be explored and reported as well. This researcher bias cannot be eliminated; it can only be explored, acknowledged, and bracketed (Maxwell, 2005). The researcher, then, should not deny that he or she has his or her own biases, but should interpret the data based on this self-awareness (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). This study contains an account of the researcher's bias throughout the process of the study as the researcher self-reflected in a journal in an effort to remain objective. As the researcher became aware of her biases, she may have been more able to prevent them from affecting her interpretation of the data (Maxwell). The biases of the research team, as well, were reported in the study. As the research team members become more aware of their biases, they may have been able to reduce the effect that their biases may have had on their interpretation of the data.

Finally, in alignment with Creswell's (2003) recommendations, the researcher used an auditing system to validate the study's findings. 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. However, any identifying information



related to the interviewees was removed. An external auditor, a counselor educator with training and experience in qualitative research, was consulted at the conclusion of the research process to review the data and preliminary themes. He was asked to read a draft of the final report, asking any questions and making suggestions related to enhancing the validity of the study.

### **Limitations**

There are several threats to the trustworthiness and reliability of interview data (Breakwell, 2007). One possible limitation of any study can be participant attrition, which is the loss of a participant because of his or her decision to drop out of the study (Collins & Sayer, 2000). However, in this study, all ten participants participated in both the first and second round interviews. Nine out of the ten participants returned the follow-up questions via email.

Researcher effects may also have added a limitation to the study as participants may not have felt comfortable sharing their exact thoughts and feelings with the researcher (Breakwell, 2007). Past research has shown that the researcher has an effect on the participant's willingness to be interviewed and to provide answers to interview questions. Participants will also be more likely to be more honest with a researcher who seems similar to himself or herself. Finally, "the characteristics of the interviewer interact with the subject matter of the interview to determine how the interviewee will respond" (Breakwell, p. 248). Possible characteristics of the researcher in this study that may have influenced interactions with participants included age, gender, and race. As far as the research team characteristics, the research team members were of the same race, but were diverse in age. Perhaps this lack of racial diversity affected their interpretations of the

data. Participant characteristics and behaviors may likewise have acted as limitations of the study (Breakwell, 2007). Qualitative interviews may be affected by the interviewee's emotions to certain questions and may result in "distorted responses" (Patton, 2002, p. 306), that is, the interviewee may have a reaction to the researcher and may provide "self-serving" responses (Patton, p. 306) or may not tell the truth (Breakwell).

Another limitation of the study was its lack of generalizability due to the limited sample and the limited geographic region used to draw the sample from, which stems from the qualitative tradition and methodology of the study (Patton, 2002). Cronbach (1975) addresses the issue of generalizability, suggesting that the researcher consider each participant's traits, his or her different environments, and the different events happening during the study. Then, "any generalization is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion" (p. 125).

### **Summary**

This qualitative, phenomenological study explored ten urban school counselors' perceptions of low-income families and how their perceptions may affect their collaboration with these families. The researcher believes this may potentially enhance awareness on this important topic for the field of professional school counseling. Through interviews and follow up emails, the professional school counselors were invited to explore their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions and the ways in which these perceptions influence their interactions with low-income families. Then the researcher, research team, and auditor analyzed the interviews in order to discover codes, themes, and to deduce and report meaning. Ultimately, this information may be used to improve

upon the research, teaching, and practice of school counseling which may be beneficial to students and their families.

## Chapter IV

### Findings and Interpretations

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to show the findings that emerged from the participants' responses to the research questions:

- What are urban professional school counselors' perceptions of the low-income families of their students?
- How might urban professional school counselors' perceptions affect their collaboration with these families?

This chapter is organized into four sections. The first section consists of profiles of the participants. The second section contains description of the data collection and analysis. The third section includes a presentation of the results. The final section outlines conclusions from the data analysis.

#### Participant Profiles

Table 1 lists the demographic profiles of the study's participants, as listed on the demographic forms given to the participants at the conclusion of their first interview.

Table 1

#### *Summary of Participant Profiles*

Participant	Demographic Characteristics
P1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African American</li> <li>• Female</li> <li>• Late 30s</li> <li>• M.S. Degree</li> <li>• 6 years in an urban school</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Currently High School</li> <li>• Full time</li> <li>• Listed services to families as: none listed</li> </ul>
P2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White</li> <li>• Female</li> <li>• Late 40s</li> <li>• M.S. Degree</li> <li>• Less than 1 year in an urban school</li> <li>• Currently High School</li> <li>• Full time</li> <li>• Listed services to families as: family workshops at every grade level, individual program planning, senior parent workshops- financial aid, onsite admissions, what to expect from senior year</li> </ul>
P3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African American</li> <li>• Female</li> <li>• Late 40s</li> <li>• M.S. Degree</li> <li>• 16 years in an urban school</li> <li>• Currently Middle School</li> <li>• Full time</li> <li>• Listed services to families as: active parenting groups, individual consultation, provide community resources</li> </ul>
P4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African American</li> <li>• Male</li> <li>• Early 30s</li> <li>• M.A. Degree</li> <li>• 3 years in an urban school</li> <li>• Currently Elementary School</li> <li>• Full time</li> <li>• Listed services to families as: Food Bank coordinator, Charter Ed coordinator</li> </ul>
P5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African American</li> <li>• Female</li> <li>• Late 30s</li> <li>• M.S. Degree</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 years in an urban school</li> <li>• Currently Middle School</li> <li>• Full time</li> <li>• Listed services to families as: tutoring, referrals- social worker, in-home counseling, mentor, academics, study skills, daily needs, community support</li> </ul>
P6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African American</li> <li>• Female</li> <li>• Mid 30s</li> <li>• M.S. Degree</li> <li>• 5 years in an urban school</li> <li>• Currently Elementary School</li> <li>• Full time</li> <li>• Listed services to families as: parental communication, awareness activities, collaboration with teachers and administrators</li> </ul>
P7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African American</li> <li>• Female</li> <li>• Early 30s</li> <li>• M.S. Degree</li> <li>• 7 years in an urban school</li> <li>• Currently Elementary School</li> <li>• Full time</li> <li>• Listed services to families as: consulting services when students are in need of counseling resources, referrals to community agencies and for assistance (clothing, food, shelter), workshops, conferences about students</li> </ul>
P8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African American</li> <li>• Male</li> <li>• Mid 50s</li> <li>• M.A. Degree</li> <li>• 21 years in an urban school</li> <li>• Currently High School</li> <li>• Full time</li> <li>• Listed services to families as: academic advisement, mentoring</li> </ul>

P9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White</li> <li>• Female</li> <li>• Mid 50s</li> <li>• M.S. Degree</li> <li>• 19 years in an urban school</li> <li>• Currently Middle School</li> <li>• Full time</li> <li>• Listed services to families as: food, resource</li> </ul>
P0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White</li> <li>• Female</li> <li>• Mid 20s</li> <li>• M. Ed. Degree</li> <li>• 2.5 years in an urban school</li> <li>• Currently Elementary School</li> <li>• Full time</li> <li>• Listed services to families as: parent workshops, individual and group counseling, offer community resources and services</li> </ul>

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

The data collection consisted of two rounds of individual interviews followed by three reflective questions sent via email. The participants volunteered for two 30-50 minute interviews and one follow-up email. The individual interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by the researcher. The email responses were printed for analysis purposes.

### **First Round of Interviews**

For the first round of interviews, the primary researcher met with each the ten participants individually in a location of their choosing. The information contained in this first round of interviews addressed the research question: What are urban professional school counselors' perceptions of the low-income families of their students? Interview

questions utilized to explore this research question included the following: (a) What are the families like in your school? What do you appreciate about working with families in your school? (b) What is the most challenging aspect of working with families of your students? (c) What is your current role in working with families? (d) How would you describe low-income families in your school? In your opinion, what criteria are needed for a family considered “low-income?” (e) Can you describe how low-income families influence or affect their children’s education? How did you come to this conclusion? (f) In your opinion, what is the school’s role in working with or interacting with families with low income? (g) What is your role, as a school counselor, in working with or interacting with families with low income?

While each of these questions was asked during the interviews, I also utilized prompts, probes, and follow-up questions such as “Tell me more about that” in order to solicit more detailed information and/or specific examples. After each interview was completed and transcribed, it was emailed to the participants for their review and confirmation.

Once each of the interviews were completed and transcribed, I read each transcript several times in search of initial themes. I then developed a codebook for the purpose of consensus coding. Simultaneously, two doctoral students, who are both trained and experienced in qualitative research, read and coded each transcript. We then met for a consensus coding meeting.

### **Second Round of Interviews**

The second round of interviews followed the same procedure as the first round of interviews. However, the second round of interviews focused on eliciting responses



specific to answering the second research question: How might professional school counselors' perceptions affect their collaboration with these families? After the first round of interviews and coding, based on the emerging themes and patterns, the primary researcher and the research team decided to modify the second interview protocol. The question related to the attitudes and beliefs of faculty and staff in the school was removed as seemed unrelated to the focus of the other questions. Therefore, in order to solicit answers this question, specific question in the interview protocol included: (a) How, if at all, might low-income families differ from middle- and upper class families when it comes to their children's education? (b) Would you please describe your own interactions with low-income families? Would you share an example or two to illustrate your experiences? (c) How, if at all, is the amount or type of work you do with low-income families different from the work you do with middle and upper class families? (d) How, if at all, do the family members' attitudes or behaviors affect your work with low income families? (e) Do you have personal experience with either being a member of a family with low income or being very close and connected to a family or families with low income? How do you believe your experience contributes to your views about families with low income and the ways you interact with these families? (f) How might your views and experiences with low-income families in your school affect how you work with them? (g) What are your beliefs about working with low income families? How important is it to for you? How did you come to this conclusion?

The procedure for the data analysis for the second round of interviews was similar to that of the first round of interviews. After the interviews were completed and transcribed, they were e-mailed to the participants to be checked for accuracy. The

transcripts were then re-read and coded by the primary researcher as well as the research team. The research team then met for a final round of consensus coding. No new themes emerged as the second round of interviews confirmed the themes that had emerged from the first round of interviews.

### **Reflective Questions**

Three reflective questions were sent to each participant via email once the second round of interviews was completed. The questions for reflection were: (a) Is there anything from our last two sessions that you would like to add to or clarify? (b) What was it like for you to participate in the interviews? (c) Please describe how this interview process may affect the way you view or practice school counseling, if it was affected at all.

The data analysis for the reflective questions was similar to that of the first and second round of interviews. The responses were first printed and coded by the primary researcher and then were reviewed and coded by the research team members and were discussed in the second consensus meeting. No new themes emerged, as the data from the reflective questions confirmed the themes and patterns from the first two rounds of interviews.

### **Results**

The information in this section reflects the product of the phenomenological data analysis. The results are organized into three general sections to present findings for (a): Category I: Urban School Counselors' Perceptions of the Low-Income Families in their Schools, (b): Category II: Effects of School Counselors' Perceptions on their Collaboration with Low-Income Families, and (c): Category III: School Counselors'

Personal Feelings and Reflections in Response to their Experiences with Low-Income Families.

### **Category I: Urban Professional School Counselors' Perceptions of the Low-Income Families in their Schools**

Based upon the participants' responses, this *perceptions* category was divided into three properties, which offer more information about each category (Creswell, 2007). The properties in Category I are as follows: "family characteristics and environment," "family attitudes and actions regarding education," and "awareness of obstacles and challenges for families." This category gave an accurate and comprehensive description of how the participating professional school counselors perceived the low-income families in their schools. Each of the three properties is then divided into subproperties that more specifically describe the professional school counselors' perceptions. Each of these subproperties is defined and described according to the participants' responses. For further clarification, Appendix F contains an outline of the categories, properties, and subproperties in this study.

#### **Property 1: Family Characteristics and Environment**

This property reflects the perceptions of the professional school counselors in regards to the way they see low-income families and these families' environments. It includes the professional school counselors' perceptions that low-income families lack the knowledge to help their children succeed, live in negative environmental conditions, lack parenting skills, and are unmotivated. Despite the significant support for the findings associated with this property, it merits noting that four participants shared their beliefs that not all low-income families share the same characteristics or environments.

**Subproperty 1: Lack the knowledge to help their child succeed.**

Seven participants stated that families lack the knowledge to help their children be academically successful. The participants perceived the low-income families in their schools as lacking experiences and awareness about opportunities for their children. Overall, the low-income families were perceived to lack knowledge about resources and opportunities that would be helpful to the child to achieve to his or her potential in school.

P1	<p>I would also like to say, for low-income families, that a lot of them don't know any better. So when you don't know you can't teach your children any different.</p> <p>Lower income families generally aren't as knowledgeable about options and things like that.</p>
P2	<p>I think they want what's best for their child, they just don't, maybe don't know how to provide it, or they can't, they feel like they can't provide it.</p> <p>I don't think they're comfortable, they're intimidated, they just don't know how to help and so then they just turn their back to it, I think.</p>
P3	<p>I think maybe less education may so be a factor as far as being comfortable communicating or articulating frequently. And maybe knowing what to ask for or how to ask for it.</p> <p>I think it should happen and I believe that some parents are doing it the best that they can, again within the confines of their knowledge of it.</p>
P4	<p>So if they're coming from a lower income, the majority of the times, some parents are not aware of the opportunities that their child could possibly have.</p>
P5	<p>So they don't know the resources and they don't know how to ask for help or where to look for help.</p>
P7	<p>With low-income families a lot of times they don't know what their resources are, they don't know what their options are.</p>
P8	<p>I think that some of them might not have the educational background to know what to, to know what they should be doing. But I think they all want the best for their children.</p>

	<p>Again I go back to I want to say the knowledge base. I think that the knowledge base in terms of advising based on what they know or what their background is sometimes can hinder the children so they really rely on us.</p> <p>In a low-income environment I think you hear less of, or encouragement about going on to college and taking more years of math, I don't think you hear as much of that as you would in an upper income family. And I think that has to do with knowledge more than want.</p>
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**Subproperty 2: Negative environmental conditions.**

Eight of the participants described the low-income families as having negative environmental conditions for their children. These conditions include often dangerous circumstances or a lack of stability.

P1	<p>Because I think that in order for kids to do well here, we need to make sure that the home life is at least healthy.</p> <p>And so if you live in a house, and I'm just going to the other side, 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 been in and out of jail and that's all you see at your house...</p> <p>But the lower ones, the lower income ones, especially when they have a lot going on in the families, we lose them at some point. Or they end up pregnant, getting a GED or whatever.</p> <p>And we started talking about finances and she told me that her mom isn't working so she gets a social security check, I think probably because her father's deceased, and she pays the bills in the house. So she started talking to me about "I pay this, 60 this..." I guess she was like kind of doing the calculation aloud and so I was like, what can I say? When I say "You need \$75 to pay for this NOVA net class," she has responsibilities and she does have a child. So where does that put her and where does that put the importance of this class?</p> <p>I tell them "you don't like your home life or you don't like where you live, the only thing that's going to get you out of that situation is an education.</p> <p>If you know what you have, you have to do much better, you have to get</p>
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	<p>out of the situation. So I just tell them that.</p> <p>So until you get that home life healthy, I mean, all we can do is give them coping skills. And just try to tell them to think positive, get a good education, so when you turn 18, in which a lot of the parents are going to put them out at 18 anyways.</p>
P2	<p>They're in there trying to teach a particular subject and they forget that this kid probably has no electricity at home or he might not even have a home. He may be bouncing around from house to house and have no place to call home. It's just sad. Really sad.</p> <p>We had a 9<sup>th</sup> grader at the beginning of the year who was pregnant, nine months pregnant, starting 9<sup>th</sup> grade, nine months pregnant, with mom's boyfriend's baby.</p> <p>But, it is unfair that the kids are in those situations. They are born into these settings. They didn't ask for that. They didn't sign up for that. So I always feel bad for the kids.</p> <p>You know, respect them, be kind to them, let them know that you care and you know you are trying to help them do something with their lives so that they're not in that situation when they're older.</p> <p>Yet they have them in these environments that just are not conducive to promoting education.</p>
P3	<p>So seeing the lifestyle of their parents and what their parents have had to go through, maybe that's enough to get them thinking "Well what can I do to avoid this?"</p>
P4	<p>I know for myself living in environments where kids may not have lights, they may not have food, can be stressful on the parents and definitely stressful on the students and can negatively impact the students' performance. Sometimes Johnny could be coming to school upset it may not be that Johnny is just having anger problems it could be some underlying issues at home that's causing him to act that way.</p>
P5	<p>Um, a lot of times we expect our children to be successful when they come into the school building but we don't know if they have clean clothes when they came in this morning, did they have breakfast, did they have to walk to school because they missed the bus and there was no other transportation.</p> <p>And it's like if you know the demographics from where your kids are</p>

	being pulled from, then you'll know, within yourself, some of the issues you're going to face and you'll have some resources in place to address those issues before they even pop up.
P7	We may not understand...why their student was up until ten or eleven o'clock at night the night before. Um, why Johnny can't sleep because there is so much noise in the house at a certain time or whatever.
P8	I think they have a lot more issues across the socioeconomic lines. Um, dealing with moving from place to place, dealing with living in an environment where you may hear gunshots all the time. So it's different in terms of the challenges they deal with than where I live. Living where I live and living down here, the challenges are completely different.  Like I said when they come to school we want them to focus on do homework because when they get home you don't know if more emphasis is on staying warm if more emphasis is on eating, staying safe, are there gun shots in the neighborhood?
P0	So, sometimes part of my job will be to try to find ways to try to get the child to succeed academically despite the fact that they are not in an environment at home that really appreciates that or values that.

### **Subproperty 3: Families lack parenting skills.**

Seven of the professional school counselors perceived the low-income families in their schools as lacking parenting skills, which included aspects such as: an inability to discipline, to hold children to certain standards, and/or to provide a positive role model for the student. The participants explained that this lack of parenting skills prevents the child from achieving in school as they likewise lack the discipline to succeed.

P1	Sometimes it's almost like you have to teach them how to parent or tell them what to do because they really don't know what to do. Especially how to deal with the kids, um, and their problems and deal with them, um, in the proper manner.  But when there's an issue in the house between her and her mom, like mom and daughter might argue, or whatever, and then somebody get put on punishment, her and her mom go outside in the yard and fistfight.
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	<p>Sometimes, some of those kids, we're their only positive thing that they have. Mom is beating them down or don't have any time for them.</p> <p>Um, but I think [the families] mean well. But they just don't know what to do. They don't know what's proper and what isn't.</p> <p>And nobody is driven and has aspirations and goals.</p>
P2	<p>I do feel bad for the parents that they're in that situation but you have some that help themselves a little better than they are.</p> <p>Sometimes I get frustrated because – “get off your butt and get a job, you know, you can get A job, you know, I'm sorry, you can get A job. Um, do something and try to help. 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.</p>
P3	<p>But yet we're asking them to close the Gap. We're asking them to pass the SOLs. This is what we're asking them to do. Some SOME can do it and then you have the majority that just, give up because the reason that I say give up are not disciplined.</p> <p>Lack of discipline themselves, the parents, lack of discipline 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. Where the child comes in, who may not be stable. Who may have a difficult time controlling anger or emotions. Or an inconsistent way of doing work or turning in work, or have a value system of the importance of academics.</p> <p>Not allowing children to watch TV for hours on end but set guidelines in the home. Model discipline by going to work everyday and not calling in and um, just sitting around but modeling responsibility can definitely influence children to succeed.</p> <p>So yes, I do try to bring to the child and to the parent's attention that the natural consequence will be this. The parent understands this, the child understands this, but when it requires change of a habit, it's difficult. And change of habits is difficult even in the areas of studying, kind of pulling yourself away from TV, the Wii, the texting, those things are, have been a challenge for parents. And oftentimes parents use that to appease while they work the long hours. And so just trying to help them see that in their</p>



	<p>role you're not there as a friend, you're there to discipline to do what you have to do and it's not a popular situation, it's a challenge for parents to buy into. It is a challenge for parents to buy into.</p> <p>One of the things that I'm finding that even though there's concern and accessibility, the plan of action on the home side is not being implemented because I believe it requires, like anything else, a change, a discipline change that will affect the whole family to ensure success for the student that is in concern, that I'm working with.</p>
P4	<p>The thing is that some parents lack that parental, uh, I don't want to say they don't have parenting skills but a lot of parents lack parenting skills. I think that's very important especially when you're going to be dealing with students here. So I would say lack of parenting skills.</p>
P6	<p>And so when I got back in the car I'm like -no wonder he comes to school and behaves the way that he does sometimes because even with me, I guess there, she's yelling and fussing, I heard some cursing, so it gave me another perspective I guess, it gave me something that kind of made sense, that helped his behavior make sense.</p>
P8	<p>It would be because I've seen some where the parents, um, may have limited goals. You know because this is how far they've went. And they're thinking all you're going to do is go to work and do that or not knowing.</p>
P9	<p>The child was the one who advocated to get food, to get the lights, to get the rent, to get this, and the mother allowed the child to be the parent is what I mean. She just didn't know how to parent, didn't know how to access the system, and so the child is learning how to manipulate the system, and doing a good job.</p>

**Subproperty 4: Not all low-income families are the same.**

As they reflected on these negative perceptions of the low-income families, four of the participants pointed out that they perceived the low-income families not to be the same, but each has their own unique characteristics and needs. These statement reveal the participants' desire that not all low-income families be grouped into the same category or be stereotyped, but that the differences between the families are dutifully recognized.

P2	<p>I mean, I hate to generalize really because they're all different and to say that they're apathetic, every one of them is not.</p> <p>So I hate to generalize "All low-income family parents don't care."</p>
P4	<p>Like I said 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.</p>
P7	<p>Um, I think with most of my families here, I think every pocket of low-income families is different.</p> <p>Middle class, upper class, low-income, I just think they have different needs. That's all.</p>
P0	<p>I mean it really depends on, it's so much depends on the family. I mean, each family is unique, even within that bracket. It's all so different.</p> <p>You have to remind yourself that each family unit is going to be different.</p> <p>I hate giving a label to one group of people because I know for a fact that it's not going to be true for all of them. And I've learned that. And I guess it's— you do have outliers.</p>

## **Property 2: Family Attitudes and Actions Regarding Education**

This property reflects the perceptions of the professional school counselors in regards to how they experienced family attitudes and actions regarding education.

Overall, the participants did not believe that families make education a priority, for a variety of reasons. They also saw the low-income families as being apathetic towards education and undermining the work that they do with students at school. Overall, the participants viewed low-income families as difficult to engage in their children's educational experience.

### **Subproperty 1: Education is not a priority.**

Eight of the participants perceived that the low-income families do not make their children's education a priority for a variety of reasons related to their personal choices or behaviors or socioeconomic struggles. Four of these participants perceived the families to be in survival mode as they make their struggle meet their everyday basic needs such as food, shelter, safety, or clothing a priority over their children's education.

P1	<p>It's just, it's different and I know, and sometimes I even feel like some of the parents just don't care. But I just don't think that they know, that they don't look at the big picture of it all. That education is really important. And if you don't do this, you don't do that, then life is going to be so much more challenging later on in life. I don't think they really think about that and I really don't think they instill that belief in their kids as much. I think they know that, just I think that sometimes life gets in the way of them just being the parents that I think they should be.</p> <p>Because I think they are always in survival mode.</p>
P2	<p>She would have to get off the bus at Dairy Queen and walk two miles to the school. That ain't happenin.</p>
P3	<p>They may, or I may be speculating, but parents may trust or leave more of the educational piece to the educators and not necessarily come in.</p> <p>They're in survival mode whether its low income we're talking about, we're at the survival level of the Maslow's Hierarchy of needs.</p>
P4	<p>Like I said- 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. And that's where we're challenged in education- the priorities of parents.</p> <p>I think also the setback can be the mindset, the priorities level, and the background of their educational experience.</p>
P7	<p>Kind of the way they do things might be different from the way we do things or we may not understand their priorities or why their student was</p>

	<p>up until ten or eleven o'clock at night the night before. Um, why Johnny can't sleep because there is so much noise in the house at a certain time or whatever. Um, I mean we may not understand some of the things they do so it's challenging and it's also challenging to get the teachers to understand that there are other viewpoints and other ways to see things and to kind of learn how to work with our families.</p> <p>I meet with the student, come to find out that mom has a new boyfriend, a new truck-driving boyfriend, so mom has decided that she is going to spend her time with her new boyfriend and she's going to go with him and he is driving cross country on his truck and she's a single mom, so now her son is here without her and he's being shoveled throughout family members homes and she's home every couple weeks she's home for a few days before she goes back out. And she's not responding to our messages, things are going home that aren't getting signed, um, and then here recently here and her boyfriend broke up so now she's popping back up at the school again. So to me it's like whatever is topping your priority list at the time, is what works for you. So last year when you didn't have a boyfriend you focused on your son. First part of this year, you had a boyfriend so your son was maybe, it seemed to us, less important and his education, and now that your boyfriend is out of the picture you can put some more energy and focus on your son. Meanwhile, because she was always absent from work she lost her job and now they're about to lose, they're being evicted from their apartment. So now the kid is extra stressed because they have no where to stay. So priorities.</p> <p>Families with um, the values of low-income, tend to not always put the value on education and sometimes they have other priorities like "And I going to eat?" "Where am I going to sleep?"</p>
P8	<p>I think they have a lot more issues across the socioeconomic lines. Um, dealing with moving from place to place, dealing with living in an environment where you may hear gunshots all the time.</p> <p>Its more about surviving til tomorrow than it is two, three years from now. So that's been our biggest challenge.</p>
P9	<p>I just don't see the emphasis on education that you see in other families- the middle income or higher income people. It's all about athletics is their way out of poverty...</p> <p>Well just like last night we had a thing, and they had pizza and soda and we were talkin about high school and we had the [career inventory] set up and a lot of the parents truly, it shouldn't have been surprising, but well a</p>

	<p>lot of the parents came in and ate pizza and soda which was free and the library had a BINGO game going on where you could win book fair stuff, and a lot of the parents like slowly slipped out of the meetings and went down to the library and the library was packed. Playing BINGO, eatin pizza, and drinking their sodas. So what does that tell you? You know. It was all about the freebies and the glitz, not about education.</p> <p>Yes very frustrating. Now we're all, I think over half the population here is lower income, I mean that's an assumption, I don't have proof, but it's an assumption. The ones playing BINGO and the ones eating pizza and left after are probably the low-income families. Free meal.</p> <p>Less involved I think because they're busier trying to make a living or there are other issues, other-they're incarcerated or you know they're out partying and they leave these kids to deal with the kids at home, I see that too.</p> <p>I think [the parents] get so caught up in trying to make a living or their own lives that their kids kind of get left out.</p> <p>You know Maslow's Hierarchy of needs? It's true, we've got to survive. You know education is secondary, it really is.</p> <p>And I'm hoping we're affecting the lower income kids more and more like that but it's hard because when you sit without lights or heat or food, who cares about school?</p> <p>The support's not there. It's sad, and you're like "Don't stereotype, don't stereotype," but the main thing I think when you don't have money is survival. It's like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. You've got to meet those needs. Who cares what else follows. And so that's how I see what the parents are trying to do.</p>
P0	<p>Um, I'd say it can be very challenging because sometimes priorities are very different within families. Sometimes you have to consider that with low-income families education may not be their top priority and being in a school setting, a lot of students will come to me with academic problems or behavioral concerns but the teachers, their teachers main focus is to get them to learn in school, for obvious reasons.</p> <p>If their needs are not being met, then they're not going to be focusing on education. They're focusing on how they can take care of other things that are more important and that time. And sometimes even, you'll be surprised because you'll hear a student who doesn't really, who's on free or reduced lunch and then you find out that, they have like expensive toys, or games, or things like that. One thing that I've learned is that a lot of</p>

individuals with, that come from socioeconomic families, actually, one of their top priorities is entertainment. They might not have, um, certain things, they might not have the priority of schooling but they, um, their families focus on entertainment, on humor, humor's a big aspect. That's not something that costs money and they entertain each other with humor. So some of those kids are like the classroom clowns but the reason is humor is a huge priority in their family. That's something that they value a lot and they value it more because that's how they entertain each other. So things like that that I've seen, that I think it makes it hard but you do look at the priorities of the families, and oh gosh, it is so different and we see differences anyway but it is a greater difference when you look at the different economic statuses.

Um, again it comes down to sometimes education is not the top priority and what we see a lot of is when education is not a top priority with the family or is not something that's valued in the family, then the kids come to school and they don't value it as much. Um sometimes again they'll put money into a video game or something like that because they really want that entertainment, something to do, in their free time, whereas it's not being put into buying an agenda for school or um, buying their school supplies or that sort of thing.

But I have to remember that a lot of times those students, they're coming from a family where their parents' main concern may be to get food on the table or to make sure that they have clothes...

Or even somebody who will sit down and do the work with them, because their parents have other things that top the list right now, with good reason.

A lot of times they're focusing so much on taking care of other needs that education doesn't necessarily always come as the number one thing.

So trying to work with them and let them know, trying to work with them so they can understand that they can still do well, trying to find ways to motivate them here at school since they might not be getting that at home.

**Subproperty 2: Families undo work that professional school counselors do at school.**

Seven of the participants perceived that the families' negative influence on their children counters the positive work done with students at school. Either the families do not support the changes in the student or they are unable to make changes themselves. Also, the participants perceived the families to be sending negative messages to the students while the professional school counselors work to send positive messages to the students.

P1	<p>And then you come to school and even when you have a teacher or a school counselor who is encouraging and seeing the great hope in you and the possibilities, all that negativity overshadows the short time that they're here and only a few can really see past that.</p> <p>But if you have someone at home telling them all the time that they won't be something</p> <p>See that's what we're up against.</p>
P2	<p>But then they leave your office and they're back in their environment and they don't, they can't, get out of it. It's just frustrating for counselors that are, you'll see the light bulbs come on and you know that they have the ability intellectually but...</p>
P3	<p>Right, it's a challenge. And that's something that we don't hear a lot of families sticking with, the new change. They will try it, it's exciting, but when it requires the whole family, not just the child, to make changes, it makes it difficult.</p> <p>When I come to school, I might get yelled at by the teacher or have to see the counselor about making strategies but when I come home from school I'm going right back in my environment and so that's what the challenges can be.</p> <p>And it's just like I heard one counselor say before years ago. We address the child but it's like a cake. You take out that ingredient and you have the rest of the cake that's left to bake but you're working on this one ingredient but the rest of the cake is being baked with what is left, what they're usually working with. But you're taking out this one ingredient, and trying to better one ingredient, but the rest of the cake is being baked with the rest of the stuff that has already been used to</p>

	<p>bake it. So in other words, 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.</p> <p>We need this to follow over into the home setting that it's a challenge there because the home setting has already been established the way it is. So the child has to go between two different worlds. Even with the parents agreeing that there needs to be a support change and they'll do what they can- I'm not finding that to be the consistent thing.</p>
P5	<p>And a lot of their children feel like "Well my mom is on the system and it works. She gets her food stamps and Medicaid and you know on the first of the month we're going to get a check and we'll be able to go shopping. Um, a lot of times I see kids feel like- that's how I'm gonna be when I grow up and to them it's like being successful...</p> <p>So I think that's the biggest thing, um, getting the parents to realize that I realize you're struggling but let's not make Johnny feel like he has to struggle. Johnny can have more, let's not steal his dreams of being a vet, let's not steal his dreams of being a lawyer, let's get him involved in the debate team.</p>
P7	<p>So you have that 'crab in a bucket' thing going on in their communities where they don't seek to raise each other up, they kind of bring each other down.</p>
P9	<p>When you're out of school for the day, you're out of school. School doesn't carry over into the home.</p>
P0	<p>Some kids you can push and push and push and do whatever you can, but they've got those values at home that they have been instilled with too. So some kids that makes it even harder because you want them to want to succeed. Some of them don't want to.</p>

### **Subproperty 3: Low-income families are difficult to engage.**

All of the participants perceived families as being challenging to engage.

Communication was one of the biggest challenges cited in working with low-income



families. The professional school counselors also reported that involving the low-income families in school activities, programs, or conferences was a considerable challenge as well.

P1	<p>You can send a note home and they've moved and they've not contacted you at all of an address change, of um, a telephone number change, or anything like that. So it's hard to communicate with them and it's hard to get them to motivate their children</p> <p>You have to also, sometimes follow up a little more with them and explain things several times and instead of parents coming in you sometimes have to send things home via mail or through the kid and wait for it to come back. Also sometimes if I make a phone call, I'm thinkin' that the parent's going to call me that day or the next day but it may take three or four days and it may be something as important as getting some paperwork signed, something really important and I'll leave a detailed message that I need the signature, so we can get some things going, we can start some things, and they still might not call me back or they might call me back days later.</p>
P2	<p>No answer, no machine, nothing. We're asking the girl- where does [the mother] work. Well, she works at 7-11. Do you know which 7-11? It's by the bus station, or by the bus, where the bus drops. Ooook, how many places does the bus drop off in [city where school is located]?</p> <p>If they know that there's no communication, oftentimes the school can't even get in touch with the parent. You know like I had a situation today where one of my counselors was trying to call a ninth, shouldn't be a ninth grader, an overage ninth grader. She was trying to call to see where he was because he wasn't in school, hadn't been there for awhile. Every phone number that she went through that we had- either not working or they were not at that number. And that's the most frustrating part- you try to get in touch with them and you try to involve them and you can't.</p> <p>I don't know, I struggle, I was thinking the other day, like we offered a financial aid workshop last week, last Thursday night. Maybe 30 families were there. Now we have 400 some seniors. You would think in this economy, in this day and age, people would want to know about financial aid. They didn't come. I don't know if it's not important to them, they don't have the time, obviously transportation is an issue for some. I don't know what it is. I was racking my brain-</p>

	<p>what could we do differently?</p> <p>Last night with the PSAT workshop we literally, we might have had 60 people there but that's for all five high schools. Every junior in [city] took the PSAT. A lot of ninth and tenth graders paid to take it. You would think they would want to come to a workshop to learn how to read the score report. 60. And so its, that's where it gets discouraging because you put so much time and energy into planning something like that and then you have a turnout that you feel like, "is it worth it? Do we continue to do this?"</p> <p>So it was, it was crazy. I mean you're working for almost 2 hours and you can't get in touch with anybody to let them know what's going on, um, we can't just let her go home on the bus, um, so he's going to drive her home, so he, someone else was doing to drive with them and explain what's happening and tell mom and grandma what she's saying and what the issues are.</p> <p>But the low-income ones they definitely just aren't involved. That's how it appears as a counselor- it doesn't appear that they're involved.</p>
P3	<p>Now, I don't know if our vehicle of informing parents may not be ideal and we're always wrestling with how we can get them out. We attach programs to our programs to get a boarder audience.</p> <p>Well the program is usually held with a small cluster of parents. It could be five parents. Or we'll run the show as if it were 100. Because we take a, we have resolved not to focus on numbers but more so focus on who is there.</p>
P4	<p>Some parents don't have, uh, some parents 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. So you know what I mean?</p> <p>And that's when you go "Oh man, wow, your school's calling about your child, why aren't you answering?" and then they come up with some lame excuse. "Oh I was sick"...</p> <p>I know for a fact my first year as a school counselor I threw a Homework with Your Children help workshop and I had like 70 sign up and only three attended and I was disappointed. But I learned from that, it was the wrong time to give that workshop because it was right when they got paid</p> <p>You see a lot of moms, a lot of grandmothers. I'm not going to say I</p>

	<p>see a lot of fathers, because I don't. I see some, and the ones that I see are very dependable, but we need more male involvement.</p>
P5	<p>So it was a huge challenge trying to get the parents to participate in the academic process. Um, when you called to applaud their son or daughter for doing something and asked them to come in for an honor roll reception or citizen of the month, it was very seldom that they would even show up. Which made the child feel like "They don't care."</p>
P6	<p>But um, so if I had to find a couple of words to sum up the population or the parents I would say um, the appearance of being unavailable.</p> <p>So I think no, the response from the parents, from the families hasn't been overwhelming, but I feel like if we continue to offer things, it's a start.</p>
P7	<p>We have parents who will give us numbers that are the wrong numbers on purpose. We'll ask the kid and get a totally different number. We'll have parents who will refuse to return phone calls, will get angry if we show up at their house, don't want anything to do with the school, you send something home they refuse to sign it. I think that sends a message to the student that 1. You don't care about school and 2. It's not important.</p> <p>You know our PTA involvement is very low; our PTA membership is very low. We're getting more parents involved in volunteering and so forth but in the past that's been almost non-existent so we're growing.</p>
P8	<p>I think that's one of the things in terms of getting more support, well not support, but getting them to come out to events that you have</p> <p>I think the biggest challenge is getting them to the school.</p> <p>You try several different things. I think you try the internet, you try, uh, you try to, I found the beginning of the year's the best time to get them, especially the new parents because they're so eager and they'll come to anything...</p> <p>We average when we have events we might average from 15-25 parents, that's a good thing.</p>
P9	<p>Um, lots of times though, you don't hear from the parents, the parents just aren't- it's the kids where you find everything about so.</p> <p>You just grin and bear it, what can you do. Well at least they had somewhere to come and eat. And they will do that. They come and then right before the presentation was supposed to start- a mass</p>

	exodus of folks. It's like ok...so, but you know food is usually the ticket to get people in but sometimes it won't keep people here.
P0	<p>I think too, um, getting parents in for conferences, that sort of thing. The schedules can be very difficult.</p> <p>But I have noticed that it doesn't seem to be a lot of low-income families that are coming, even though we provide childcare and that sort of thing.</p> <p>I'll have to kind of call them a couple times to finally get a hold of them and they may not call me back but I'll call them back and say "I'm not calling for anything other than to check on you guys and see how things are going. I wanted to check in." Something like that where it gives them the opportunity. It's more of you reaching out to them.</p> <p>There's always typically about 30, 30 or more that will sign up and then a portion of those people won't come. Um, so, and if you consider that typically the people that come have multiple kids in the school, it's not that bad, we're at least reaching some people.</p> <p>But I don't have a lot of contact with the parents, and if I do, it's usually for a crisis, for a crisis situation only, and then they move on.</p>

**Property 3: Participant Awareness that Low-Income Families Experience Obstacles and Challenges that Make it Difficult to Become Involved at the School.**

This property reflects the perceptions of the professional school counselors that low-income families experience barriers to becoming involved in their children's education. The professional school counselors speak of the families' past negative experiences in schools or with schools as well as logistical barriers to coming to the school such as transportation, childcare, and work responsibilities.

**Subproperty 1: Understanding of families' previous negative experiences with education.**

Five of the participants expressed their belief that low-income families' past negative experiences with schools was a barrier to their current involvement in their children's education. They perceived that parents may not feel comfortable becoming involved in their children's education or may have misconceptions about their roles based on what they have been told or have experienced in the past. This level of discomfort and these misconceptions understandably decrease the families' willingness or desire to collaborate with educators.

P2	I feel like they I think they probably have the mentality that people are not going to necessarily help their child, you know, that I think when you're dealing with low-income families the school is the negative thing in their lives and they associate bad things with school, and so you know, they can't possibly have a positive experience at school...
P3	Often times parents who do not see the entire picture may have the tendency to side with the child maybe due to the parent's history with school or maybe the child's history with school and the parent's involvement. Perhaps maybe negative. I may hear a defensive type of parent through conversation but usually when you learn about why as a counselor you don't take it personal. You just try to understand why. To try to get to the bottom of it.
P4	Past experience, from how you were brought up, how you felt, how school was when you went to school, how teachers were when you went to school, how you, how easy or hard school was for the parent. I think it makes a difference.
P6	So that's how I try to switch I guess the parents' perception of the school, because even if we don't intend to be um, to isolate the parents, I wonder if we're welcoming enough.
P7	Maybe because like I said they had a bad experience with education before. Maybe when they were in school it wasn't a happy place for them.  And sometimes the parents have had lots of bad experiences with

	<p>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.</p> <p>They're expecting the worst maybe because they've had a bad experience when they were in school so that's the challenging part of it- kind of getting them to see us as partners with them.</p> <p>Um, sometimes it makes it harder because sometimes their attitudes are very negative. Especially towards, the see school as a system as a bad, bad system. So sometimes their attitudes are kind of negative so you have to, it's sort of like you don't walk in with them just assuming that you're there to help, you kind of have to prove yourself. So that makes it more challenging and um, yeah. So it just makes it more challenging.</p>
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**Subproperty 2: Participants' Perceptions that Families Do Care about their Children but May be Hindered by Challenges in their Lives**

Eight of the participants noted that low-income families do care about their children, but also cited reasons in which this care may not be noticeable or may be hindered by other pressing issues in their lives.

P1	<p>They still care but they may not have the same amount of time and money and resources to support them.</p> <p>So I know that they care, but I guess when you're in it, you're living it, it's different.</p>
P2	<p>I think that clearly they all care, they don't know what to do, they don't know how to help.</p>
P3	<p>Parents that care. But just really don't have a plan.</p> <p>I know every parent cares for their child but it could be the educational component.</p>

P4	I think all parents here do want their children to be successful and I guess the limitations vary for certain reasons.
P5	I believe all families, whether they're from low-income or high income, want the best for their children. And I just think the flaw or the setback is the resources, lack of resources.
P7	<p>I think they care about their kids for the most part. I think sometimes that doesn't always come across based on what we see. And kind of how they are.</p> <p>What I've seen is that they truly do care about their kids. They may not know what's the best thing all the time but they care about their child.</p>
P8	<p>When you talk to them the first thing they say is "Don't think because I live here I don't care about my..." I think they all care and I think they all want the best, but I think it's just a different type of challenges they deal with that limits the involvement they have.</p> <p>And when you sit down with them and hear their stories, they really care, but it's a lot of, they deal with a lot of issues.</p>
P9	I don't believe that the parents don't care about them, but I think they get so caught up in trying to make a living or their own lives that their kids kind of get left out.

### **Subproperty 3: Recognizing logistical barriers to family involvement.**

All of the participants mentioned transportation, childcare, or working long or untraditional hours as obstacles to families becoming involved in their children's education. They were aware of how these factors prevented families from being able to come to the school for programs, conferences, and other activities. Some participants offered solutions for overcoming these barriers while other participants wrestled with how to build successful partnerships with families, despite the logistical challenges.

P1	<p>They can't come in as much or they don't come in like the family workshops that we often, um, sometimes it's hard to communicate with them because they move a lot, a lot of them, so it takes on, in the form of, it appears like, they're not supportive, but it's because they have to work sometimes, they have to move a lot, the telephone numbers change, all the time, um, a lot of them live with aunts and uncles and grandparents and things like that.</p>
P2	<p>I think transportation is an issue, especially with our school not having a bus stop.</p>
P3	<p>Dinners, providing daycare...um, to get at least a little bit more of parent participation.</p>
P4	<p>It could be that parents work and it's hard for them to get off.</p>
P5	<p>The one thing that I do wish was available to more low-income families was transportation. Because a lot of times I think the families do want to stick together and support the siblings and the children in the household but I think a lot of the problem is transportation and being able to get there to offer the support if it's something so simple as an honor roll celebration at the school or something so simple as my child is citizen of the month to day and they're having a luncheon. So I wish there was more transportation offered so they could attend their child's celebrations but also so they can go out into the community and get the resources that would help benefit the household.</p> <p>But if you want your parents to come out, have a spaghetti dinner. Have pizza for the kids. Offer babysitting services so if they do have younger siblings, they can bring the younger siblings.</p>
P6	<p>I think that's an important quality for a school counselor to have when it comes to low-income families, recognizing you might have to go to their home to meet with them or understanding that there may be some times when the hours are a little weird but that's because that's their schedule and if that's when they can meet, then that's when you meet.</p> <p>We're offering more evening workshops to the parents so I feel we're</p>



	<p>on the road to doing what needs to be done to get families who for us, they typically are low-income families, to get them into the school.</p> <p>We may want you to come to school and be involved but realizing that you have to provide for your family. These parents have to provide for their families. I understand that but I would say it's something that could keep us from doing more with the families or getting the families more involved.</p>
P7	<p>Like for example we have to keep in mind that when it's conference time, we just can't schedule conferences and then expect parents to just show up. They may need transportation. Sometimes they won't show up for your conference and it's not because they don't care or don't want to come, it's maybe because they can't get there.</p> <p>We also have to take into consideration transportation, things like that.</p> <p>And they may not have a sitter, so sometimes you may be sitting in a conference and there's three little ones who aren't school aged, you know, in the room with you.</p> <p>Because a lot of parents need to bring their small children and they may not have a family member to watch them.</p> <p>We have a lot of working parents so they don't have hours of their day to spend tutoring their kids or going over homework, they need it to be kept simple for them, and so on and so forth.</p>
P8	<p>The other is transportation...</p> <p>I don't know if its most of them have to work, but I think that's one of the things in terms of getting more support, well not support, but getting them to come out to events that you have. At school, evening events and that type of thing.</p>
P9	<p>Lots of time you just don't have the things at home that your middle and upper income have for, you know they don't have the reading materials at home, they don't have internet, they don't have access to a lot of things, they may not have access to transportation to take them to the library so it's kind of like education takes a back seat to their</p>

	<p>needs, that's what I see.</p> <p>The parents are at work...</p>
P0	<p>We could have parents that don't have transportation, so they're going to have to walk to school or find a way to get to school.</p> <p>And that's why, when we do parent workshops and like information nights and things like that I always have childcare available because not everyone can afford to send their kid somewhere and not everyone can, not everybody has family or anybody that they can leave their kids with.</p> <p>Maybe they're not going to have the time to focus on their child's education and help them out at home.</p>

**Category II: Effects of Professional School Counselors' Perceptions on their  
Collaboration with Low-Income Families**

Based upon the participants' responses, I organized this *effects* category into the properties of "professional school counselors' struggle with empathizing with low-income families" and "professional school counselors' choice of roles in working with low-income families" in order to give an accurate and comprehensive description of the effects of professional school counselors perceptions on their collaboration with the low-income families in their schools. Each of these two properties is then divided into subproperties that specifically suggest the effects of the professional school counselors' perceptions on their collaboration with families. Each of these subproperties was defined and described according to the participants' responses to the protocol questions.

**Property 1: Professional School Counselors' Struggle with Empathizing with the  
Low-Income Families**

This property reflects the professional school counselors' empathy or struggle with empathy with the low-income families in their schools. This ability or lack of ability to empathize results not only from their perceptions of the low-income families' characteristics, environments, obstacles, and challenges, but also from their negative perceptions of the families' attitudes and actions regarding education. The participants state that there are able to empathize and/or they struggle with empathizing with the low-income families' challenges and obstacles, but seemed to wrestle with the low-income families' attitudes and actions regarding education. Five of the participants stated that they are able to empathize with the low-income families in their schools. Two felt that this empathy stemmed from their own low-income backgrounds as they were able to identify with the needs and struggles of the low-income families. However, eight of the participants, including three out of the five who initially claimed to be empathetic, reported that they struggled with being able to empathize with the low-income families. For several of these participants, this perceived inability to empathize is based on their current socioeconomic status being different from the socioeconomic statuses of the low-income families of their students.

**Subproperty 1. Ability to empathize.**

P1	<p>They really need people who um, someone understand 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. They can see sincerity very quickly.</p> <p>I understand some of that because when you have to work two and three jobs to feed your children you may not have a lot of time to talk to them about what's happening in school.</p> <p>I think that when you know what you're dealing with going in, you're a little more patient. And um, me personally I'm just a little more sympathetic and empathetic. So it doesn't bother me as much as</p>
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	somebody who doesn't understand.
P3	Well I can identify and I can, and I'm very sensitive about judging and summarizing someone so quickly because I know that there's opportunity for everyone, it's just a matter of choice. And I know if I can do it then someone else can do it and so I'll always try to make sure my language with the families that I work with, with the students that I work with, reflect just that. That there's always opportunity to do well.
P4	And I look at it like most people in this world are a paycheck away from poverty anyway. You know what I mean? You miss a paycheck and your life's going to be off. So I can, not saying I'm not in their shoes but I can relate to that.
P5	<p>And I think it makes me a better person because I think sometimes people stereotype and I think 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 their 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.</p> <p>And I guess that's just the part that motivates me to tell that I am a product and I do realize that they deserve just as much as anyone else and I guess that's the biggest piece for me. And a lot of times if you really listen to their story, it's a pattern it's like their mother or father was on welfare or they grew up in low-income housing or no one in their family graduated from college or they were always told that they would amount to nothing. And to have someone say that you can, really changes your viewpoint.</p> <p>If you haven't walked in their shoes, you really can't connect because you really don't know what it's like not to have lights, not to have heat. You may have read about it, you may have studied it, but if you haven't walked in those steps, you really don't understand the struggles. And I've walked them, I could walk them again tomorrow. I mean none of us are guaranteed anything.</p>
P6	<p>Um, I feel like I can relate to those families, um, not so much because of how I was raised but because of the cultural similarities.</p> <p>It is race but it's also, there's a component of low income. I was raised mainly middle class but for nine years when my father was in prison, it was just my mom. So on a teacher's salary that's not a lot of money. Um, so I understand sacrifice and missing these things and just having to re-prioritize I guess. So in that aspect I can relate...</p>

	<p>I think I have an understanding, um, there's deeper empathy I would say. I understand having to make a choice between, if it comes to field trip and a child really wants to go, well right now with the bills, this is a priority not necessarily your academic enrichment...</p>
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**Subproperty 2: Inability to empathize.**

P1	<p>I cannot imagine living like that. I cannot imagine what that's like.</p> <p>And it just bothered me that he was just excited about this game system and here it is my daughter who just turned 6 on Sunday has a Wii, has a DSI, and here it is a kid in high school who is just overjoyed to have a game system. And that's one of the things that bothers me a little bit about lower income families and the children—they just don't have the opportunities, the things that other kids have.</p> <p>So, I just needed to say it just, the worlds are just so different, you know.</p> <p>You know because I leave here generally at 3:00, but I can leave at 2:15, but most of them are still working and they do get home at 6:00, 7:00 and I'm not here.</p>
P2	<p>I can't imagine, I can't imagine what it is like.</p> <p>But, overall, it's a different world, different lifestyle. Not one I want to know. Or experience.</p>
P3	<p>It's a different world.</p>
P4	<p>And I always say that goes back to mindset. The income piece, I just don't agree with that. Because my grandfather and grandmother didn't make a lot of money, but they had nine children and they had high expectations. So I can't really say income.</p>
P7	<p>It's difficult to try to understand where they're coming from.</p>
P8	<p>Because I think when we advise as counselors, we advise on where we come from. And sometimes we're like "Why can't you do it?" But I slept at night. This kid hasn't slept at night. I think my assumption a lot of times is I based on what I'm used to.</p>

	<p>It's very hard, because we don't live in that situation; we're not in their shoes. I advise based on my background, where I've come from. I haven't really come from a background where I can say I really lived in a low-income environment. The challenges are different.</p> <p>I don't understand because I don't live it every day. I try to, but it's hard to understand.</p> <p>I was just thinking the other day- What if my daughter had to worry about whether she would be able to go back to school or whether she had to eat today- that's the least of our worries. You know that is a worry because we're all one paycheck away but right now we're doing ok.</p>
P9	<p>I'm from a poor family, raised by a single parent, waitress, you know, as poor as they could be, yet I have an education, because my mom saw the value in it and know it was the only way out.</p> <p>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 the challenges. So yes, I have had that experience and I've worked with families like that.</p> <p>I think it makes me more caring of them because I've been there so, but on the other hand it sometimes makes me less tolerant because I'm like “Wait a minute, don't use these as excuses, use these as, you go over the hurdles. You don't go around them” and I just hate when they make excuses about why they don't come to school or why they didn't this. There's just no excuse. It's a decision you make. And just like being poor. I just think it's like a decision you make. There's too many ways and too many things the school system's doing to help kids these days that I put it back on the family. It's their attitude about education.</p>
P0	<p>And that I'm not going to understand everything. Like I can't possibly understand everything. Because I haven't experienced it.</p>

**Property 2: Professional School Counselors' Choice of Roles in Working with Low-Income Families**

This property reflects the participants' choice and description of roles in working with low-income families based on their perceptions of the low-income families' characteristics and environments, attitudes and actions regarding education, and their awareness of the families' obstacles and challenges. These roles included providing resources to low-income families; trying to meet students' needs that are not being met by their families; and treating everyone equally, despite socioeconomic status.

**Subproperty 1: Provider of resources and support.**

Eight of the participants stated that it is their role to provide support and/or resources for low-income families. This takes a variety of forms including helping families access food, money, transportation, finding a job, and any other resources to help them and their children succeed.

P1	You just have to, the lower income families, you have to give them much more support.
P3	My role is to provide resources that is needed for the family or for the student that again will help put the student on the right track for academic success.  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.
P4	...just sharing resources with them, opportunities for jobs and things of that nature.  We try to make sure our parents and students are supported. Just makes sure we are helping all of them reach their zenith in academic, personal, and social.
P5	The biggest school role is making sure if there is a need that we're providing them with the resources.  The school counselor's role is to lot of times do the research to find out what resources are available to meet their needs.  I guess the biggest thing that has affected my attitude when working with families is the desire to learn more about what is offered in the

	<p>community as well as in the school system. I'm constantly trying to educate myself on what I can do to help. Like my teacher best stated, we're lifelong learners. And just constantly trying to educate myself so I am aware of the programs that are out there or new resources that are out there so I can make sure that I can share them with my parents.</p> <p>Um, the staff here at [school's name] made donations and we were able to touch ten families that were in need.</p> <p>So the biggest part is partnering with people in the community to help meet their needs.</p> <p>I think it has made me a stronger person in the sense that I work twice as hard to make sure that I'm aware of resources that are available in that I go over and beyond to make sure that they can receive those resources.</p>
P6	<p>So that child might not be included but the staff also recognizes some of those concerns so we generate emails, we're communicating as a staff about if this event is coming up and you know there are students that can't afford it, we all come together and pitch in. When we have families in crisis we come together and pitch in. That I can say is something that I admire about our staff because when it comes to something that really counts, we can work well collaboratively.</p> <p>Um, and so that's part of, one of my purposes is empowerment and knowledge sharing and so doing my best, although there is a lot of work for me to do, in keeping the families informed and having these opportunities, these specific counseling-related opportunities to get them in and get them involved.</p> <p>But I mentioned in the message, because I was aware that there was transportation issues in my conversation with mom from before, so I said "If you need a ride up here I'll be glad to come and get you." So making myself available in that way.</p> <p>Yeah, 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."</p>
P7	<p>It's to advocate for them, to assist them in anyway, to provide them with resources, to work with their students, um, provide them with workshops but things that are tailored to their needs.</p> <p>But I think when you're working with this population you just have to</p>



	sometimes be willing to go above and beyond.
P8	I think it's a school counselor's job, I think it's our job to provide as much information as we can to the children and their families.
P9	<p>My role as a counselor. When it's brought to my attention that there's needs, you know trying to provide resources to them. I see that as my role. Like I said I've done the groceries, I've contacted churches to help get lights on and pay rent.</p> <p>So we hooked them up with the church who helped pay their bills so they wouldn't lose their apartment and then we got them hooked up with somebody, even though they had a case worker and all, one of the school social workers who just would go by and check on them and she was able to get more resources for them.</p>
P0	<p>Something so simple as at the beginning of the school year making sure we're distributing the free-to-reduced lunch applications. Um, in the beginning of the school year sending out letters to let parents know that these are the school supply list- however- these are some community-based projects that are giving away free school supplies.</p> <p>Like I said before they're not going to have the same resources or the same support systems and we at the school can really build up the support system for those families.</p> <p>A lot of times the middle or upper class families will know what resources are available to them and they have the support systems, whereas some of the lower class, the lower income families don't have those support systems available to them. So you kind of act like that support system too.</p> <p>Um, I do a lot of referrals, so might have to refer out to shelters, that sort of thing. There have been days that I've sat in my office with a family, or with a parent, and we've made phone calls trying to find a place for them to stay, or trying to find bus tickets for them. Trying to find any resource they need. A lot of times it's easier if I sit down and do it with them. Um, and call for them and then have them sit down and talk to someone seems to work out better that way.</p> <p>Those are the parents where I'll sit down and help them find housing. Or you know, help them with um, they might need more help finding a job because they don't know the resources that are available to them.</p> <p>Right. I think that's part of the job. I mean I look at it as part of the</p>

	job. You have to do that extra work.
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**Subproperty 2: Trying to meet students' needs that are not met by families.**

Eight of the participants shared that they try to meet the needs of students that are not being met by their families. These needs may be academic, emotional, and/or physical as the participants see it as their responsibility to compensate for the low-income families' needs or lack of resources.

P1	It sometimes makes my job more difficult because again I have to do so much more to reel the kids in. If you're talking about seniors, I have to constantly make phone calls and I think that if the parents push the kids a bit more than I wouldn't have to talk to them so much about their attendance issues and doing their work, the importance of getting a diploma, and things like that.
P2	It's almost like you are trying as hard as you can and you are working with these kids and then when they walk out of your office they have no support anywhere else.
P3	And I have some kids who are very needy and want to see me on a regular basis and I want to help them, I do, but they're trying to fill that void of what is not going on at home.  Some parents will buy into it, we'll see an increase, and then you'll have those who will leave it up to the school to take care of the kids when it comes to education.
P5	It's frustrating to some points because I realize that I can't save the world and do everything for everyone but I also know that if I don't overextend myself sometimes that that child may go without. So I do, I do overextend myself sometimes.
P7	Cause there's nothing we can do for the kid on our end other than give him a safe space when he comes to us every day.
P8	I feel we have to put in more with those kids and get more information to them because I don't think they're going to necessarily seek it out

	or have access at home.
P9	<p>Yeah, that's what I might have to do because uh, the low income families, those kids are just usually very, very needy. Um, a lot of the kids that are low income, um, they come to me for supplies, they come to me for, even if they have breakfast they want to see if you have anything 'extra' for um, they, um, needy monetarily and attention wise is what I see.</p> <p>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.</p>
P0	<p>So trying to work with them and let them know, trying to work with them so they can understand that they can still do well, trying to find ways to motivate them here at school since they might not be getting that at home.</p> <p>So you might have to try to find more in-school strategies because you know that maybe they're not going to have enough time at home because they're worrying about so many other things. Maybe they're not going to have the time to focus on their child's education and help them out at home. So maybe we'll try to come up with some strategies that we can do at school, which we do anyway, but we don't depend as much on those home strategies as we would if there was a parent who could do those things at home with that child.</p> <p>We try to work harder. I mean usually we're putting in as much as we can anyway but you do your best to overcome what they're not going to get elsewhere. I mean, because they whole purpose is to get that child to learn. So you do, you get um, you do what you can to make sure that child's going to get it even though you know that you've asked the parent to review certain things at home, you know that's not necessarily going to happen so you've got to find out how to make sure they're understanding this.</p> <p>Their parents might not be as involved in education but we can still try our best to kind of instill that motivation in [the students] to do, to do, you know, the academic side of things.</p> <p>There are certain students you're going to have to work harder with because they're not getting the support- the support has to come from somewhere.</p> <p>Whereas I like to think that if they're not getting it at home then they have to get that support from somewhere. So we kind of need to bump</p>

	it up a notch.
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### **Subproperty 3: Treating families equally.**

Five of the participants stated that they did not treat low-income families any differently than middle or upper class families. The professional school counselors emphasized that they were committed to offering the same services to all families without focusing on their income bracket.

P2	It's just as important as working with a high income family to me. When I look at my students I don't really see them as low-income/high income, they're students and I treat them all the same.
P3	I try to make sure that it is systematic across the board and that is to be available to all. To service all, to be the best professional that I can in addressing the needs of every family at the level that I can.
P5	But I offer the same across the board regardless of what income bracket they fall into, if I think the family knows it or not I still share the information. Of course, some families already have the tools and the resources and information, when I tell them about programs and stuff they're already aware of them. But regardless as to what bracket they fall into I offer them all of the same tools.
P8	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.
P9	I don't know I just believe that, I just see everybody as equal. I really do.

### **Category III: School Counselors' Personal Feelings and Reflections in Response to their Experiences with Low-Income Families in their Schools**

This category reflects the participants' feelings and self-reflection in their work with low-income families. The participants feel frustrated, yet needed, appreciated,

and/or rewarded. They also recognize the need for self-awareness in order to combat possible bias or stereotyping of low-income families. I organized this *feelings and reflections* category into the properties of “negative: feeling frustrated,” “positive: feeling needed, appreciated, and rewarded,” and “need for self-awareness regarding biases and stereotypes” in order to give an accurate and comprehensive description of how the participants responded to their experiences of working with low-income families. Each of these properties is defined and described according to the professional school counselors’ responses.

### **Property 1: Negative: Feeling Frustrated**

Six of the participants stated that they have become frustrated in working with low-income families. This frustration comes from the extra work involved in working with the families or the lack of response from the families in regards to their children’s academic success.

P2	<p>It 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.</p> <p>So it’s very frustrating and sometimes as counselors it can be, um, almost depressing and discouraging because it’s almost like you are trying as hard as you can and you are working with these kids and then when they walk out of your office they have no support anywhere else. And its, I’ve seen a lot of counselors burn out, be discouraged, be negative, it happens easily.</p> <p>And so its, that’s where it gets discouraging because you put so much time and energy into planning something like that and then you have a turnout that you feel like, “is it worth it? Do we continue to do this?”</p>
P4	<p>But that can be frustrating sometimes when you have workshops to help the parents and then they don’t attend. That can be challenging.</p> <p>So I just try to do my best. And I realize I can’t save the world.</p>

P5	It's frustrating to some points because I realize that I can't save the world and do everything for everyone.
P7	It's frustrating, because it's extra work. But I think when you're working with this population you just have to sometimes be willing to go above and beyond.
P8	The work is hard, it's frustrating sometimes. You just want them to be like you are.  It's tough on one end, and it's frustrating...
P0	So the teacher has to kind of put more of an effort in helping a child because they know they're not going to get that at home. And that can be very frustrating. That, and I think too, um, getting parents in for conferences, that sort of thing. The schedules can be very difficult.

### **Property 2: Positive Feelings: Needed, Appreciated, Rewarded**

Nine of the ten participants reported positive feelings associated with their work with low-income families. These feelings included feeling appreciated, needed, and rewarded. These feelings were reported as serving as the professional school counselors' motivation in their work with the low-income families as they saw themselves as "making a difference" in the lives of the low-income students and families in their schools.

P1	Um, a lot of times they are very appreciative. Although they may not do what you ask them to do, I think all in all they appreciate you caring about them and helping them and believing in them.
P2	They're probably my favorite to work with because they are needy. They need you. You've got the needy ones up at the top but they're needy just because they want to be needy but typically the low-income, they, you see where the needs are and you do the best you can to help them and they are appreciative.  Um, when you're talking about low-income families, the "have-nots" I think that they are always much more appreciative of anything that you do to help them. You know it could be the slightest thing, you

	<p>know, maybe you change their schedule or you spoke to their child in the hall that day or something, they're just, if they ever get to talk to you, they're very appreciative of anything that you've done to help them.</p> <p>Um, you always feel good helping somebody who needs help and you have a student that comes from a low-income family and it could be something as small as um, here let me give you this notebook so you have something to write on when you go to class. They are usually so grateful and they're never going to come ask you for anything. That's just never going to happen but if you can just take a minute to step back and say "Paper and pencil?" That might be a true commodity for this family.</p>
P3	<p>I'd like to say that the population that we have in regards to the low-income students that we're working with, I must say that the families have been receptive. I have not run across one just yet that has been resistant or not one that I could not reach.</p>
P4	<p>I mean, I love it; I wouldn't be in any other place. I just feel like I'm needed here</p> <p>So I like working with students, helping them become successful. Trying to show them the right way.</p>
P5	<p>That makes me feel rewarded, even if they never say thank you. Just to see that the child is doing better makes it rewarding in itself.</p>
P7	<p>I do enjoy that part of it, you know, advocating for them and helping them.</p> <p>And 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.</p>
P8	<p>You feel like you're really having an impact on the family by helping the kids because they really, they don't know the procedures and what it takes to apply and that time of thing.</p> <p>Here is more, you feel more appreciated.</p>

	That's why it makes the job, that's why it makes you feel like you've accomplished something because they really appreciate what you do.
P9	The low income families, those kids are just usually very, very needy. Um, a lot of the kids that are low income, um, they come to me for supplies, they come to me for, even if they have breakfast they want to see if you have anything 'extra' for um, they, um, needy monetarily and attention wise is what I see.
P0	I like, they're very appreciative anytime you can help them with anything they're so appreciative. Um, most families are very appreciative anytime you can do something for them.  Sometimes it's just the best feeling to come in and help somebody find shelter or find a job or even just to sit down and have them talk to someone because they might be a single parent who doesn't have a job, doesn't have anybody to talk to.

### **Property 3: Need for Self-Awareness Regarding Biases and Stereotypes**

Six of the participants reported their need or ability to be self-aware in regards to possible biases and stereotypes when working with low-income families, whose values and worldviews may be different from the participants' based on the difference in socioeconomic status. Another aspect of self-awareness was reported as recognizing one's limitations and boundaries as a professional school counselor.

P4	I just think my experiences have taught me to appreciate things, appreciate people, appreciate the good in people. There's always something good to say about a person. You can always find negative things in anything. I just think that my life experiences have taught me, grounded me to be that optimistic individual that sees the good in people. And I try not to notice the negative. Even if I may see it I try to bring the good out in most people.  You got to speak to yourself internally. You have to really have a strong mind. I truly think you have to be sincere in, you definitely have to have a strong mind. Just tell yourself I'm going to do my best regardless of what anyone thinks about the student or what anyone thinks about their parents and look at that child whose needs are going
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	<p>to be met to the best of your abilities. So, you just have to speak to yourself and just know your purpose.</p>
P6	<p>We see things differently and I try my best not to assume, so if I see a parent that's not involved I'm thinking about the other factors that might have led to that. Um, so I try to I try to consider my perspective as well as theirs and not reach quick, automatic assumptions.</p> <p>Understanding their worldview because, not only because of my background but just knowledge of theirs.</p>
P7	<p>So their value system may be different than mine or the things that I just assume may not be things that they just simply assume or that the system as a whole assumes.</p> <p>I feel like you have to work harder because there's especially a lot of things that you may not understand and so I feel like there's some things that you have to come out of your own comfort zone with and um, you have to kind of understand "Why didn't so and so do their homework with their child last night?" or "Why won't they show up for an attendance meeting?" or "Why when they do show up for an attendance meeting, why are they so belligerent?" It's challenging.</p> <p>I think that if you see them, and what I've seen in my school, I think if you see them as assets to their children and if you see the family as important and vital and that they want the best for their kids, and if you have a positive outlook on that, then you work better with the family. You want to include them. You are patient with them. You are open to what they have to say about their child.</p> <p>Like, uh, sometimes parents will come to school yelling at you about something ridiculous and you've just got to think what they're doing is they're sticking up for their kid in the best way that they can and that's ultimately what every parent strives to do- is to give their child the best. So they go about it maybe in a different way than you would choose to go about it but it doesn't make their love for their kid any less genuine. So you just gotta focus on the positive.</p>
P8	<p>Sometimes you catch yourself when a person comes in a certain way you stereotype them and say "They're coming in here hood, they're coming from the hood," but you can't stereotype everyone because you've got all people, all people want better. But then depending on a situation, a particular situation, so you can't judge them based on the situation they're in. I just respond to them the way they respond to me and I try to treat everyone fairly.</p> <p>I guess to be politically correct, you want to be very careful when you respond, when you start talking about income, and you don't want to</p>

	<p>stereotype or be prejudice about people because of their income, but they do come with certain norms, they do come with certain stereotypes that you can say because of that but then again you deal with parents, you talk with parents from a low-income family, like I had a parent in here the other day who said “[participant’s name], I want the same thing every parent wants for their child. No I didn’t finish school, I didn’t go on, but I have the same wants and desires that everyone else has.” So it’s hard to just because I know a lot of those parents have the same wants but because of where they live it’s hard to do. But its challenging, it is.</p>
P9	<p>It’s sad, and you’re like “Don’t stereotype, don’t stereotype,” but the main thing I think when you don’t have money is survival.</p>
P0	<p>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.</p> <p>So I think when we go into a meeting of into working with a student you might have that preconception that this is what’s going on when in actuality it might be a totally different situation at home. Um, especially nowadays with the economy being what it is you’ve got students that their parents are faced with financial concerns and that kind of thing. And, it’s a little bit different. You’re not always going to have the parents and the families that don’t focus on education. You’re not always going to have that. And I think when you go into a meeting or go into working with a student you have to remember “Ok, now not everybody’s going to be this way.” You have to remember that it’s possible, and you might have to change the way you work with them, but you can’t go in there, it’s hard because you can go in there thinking “Oh, this is gonna be pointless” or “Oh this is going to be more difficult than it needs to be. I’m really going to have to push these parents to understand that this is important.”</p> <p>And sometimes I guess part of it is understanding that you’re not a miracle worker. You can’t fix everything. But it’s also you know knowing that if you put as much out there as you can then hopefully you’re helping somebody.</p>

### Interview Summary

Professional school counselors' perceptions of low-income families include perceptions about the family characteristics and environment, attitudes and actions regarding education, and the obstacles and challenges the families face. Effects of professional school counselors' perceptions include their choices about empathic responses to families and their choices of roles in working with low-income families. Overall, the participants demonstrate both positive and negative feelings in response to their experiences working with low-income families and recognize the importance of self-awareness and reflection in order to avoid biases and stereotypes. Each of these properties was formed after analysis of the first round of interviews and was confirmed by the second round of interviews and the follow-up reflective questions. The interview protocol for the second round of interviews as well as the emailed follow-up questions reflected the themes and patterns that emerged from the first round of interviews.

### **Conclusion Drawing and Verification Procedures**

This chapter offered a detailed outline of the study's data analysis and findings. The data collection and analysis were presented as were the coding procedures. This coding led to the emergence of three major categories and eight properties with subproperties. The essence of the participants' experiences is present not only in the participants' perceptions of family characteristics, attitudes, actions, but also in their awareness of the obstacles and challenges that families face. These perceptions, coupled with different levels of awareness, led to both a feeling of empathy as well as a feeling of being unable to empathize. The professional school counselors' perceptions likewise appear to affect their choices of roles in working with families. Another important aspect of the essence of the participants' experience is their personal feelings, both positive and

negative, and self-reflections in response to their experiences working with low-income families.

### **Rival explanations.**

Throughout the data analysis process, rival explanations were sought for each theme and category that emerged. Rival explanations are defined as other causes and effects of the study's results (Johnson, 1997). The emerging themes and categories were compared to previous studies outlined in chapter two that explored perceptions and the ways in which they affect actions. I also discussed the emerging findings and possible alternative explanations with my research team and outside auditor. The seemingly contradictory data throughout the study was examined, analyzed, and explored by the primary researcher and along with the research team. For example, some of the participants stated that they did not want to make generalizations about all families with low-income, even though their negative perceptions such as families lacking the knowledge to help their child succeed, living in negative environmental conditions, and the lacking parenting skills could be characterized as generalizations. Another apparent contradiction is the participants' struggle with being able or unable to empathize. Also, the participants report both negative and positive feelings in working with low-income families. They likewise report the need for self-awareness, but seem to show a lack of such self-awareness in the generalizations they make about low-income families. These contradictions contribute to the exploration and presentation of the essence of the participants' experiences and are thoroughly analyzed in the findings section of this study.

### **Research team.**

In addition to seeking rival explanations for each emerging theme and category, I used a research team to assist in formulating and articulating themes and patterns that emerged from the data. Together, we processed and discussed ways in which to fairly and accurately portray the perceptions of the participants. My external auditor added an additional perspective and means of confirming the data analysis as he performed a summative overview of the results and verified the research process.

### **Member checks.**

Member checks were performed throughout the data collection and analysis steps of this study. I foremost asked the participants to review and confirm the transcriptions for each of their interviews. I also summarized the preliminary emerging themes and codes with each participant before interviewing them for the second time. Each participant confirmed the accuracy of my representation and presentation of their perceptions of low-income families in their schools.

### **Summary**

This chapter gave a detailed outline of the study's data analysis as well as this phenomenological study's results. After coding procedures, three general categories emerged: (a): Category I: Urban School Counselors' Perceptions of the Low-Income Families in their Schools, (b): Category II: Effects of Professional School Counselors' Perceptions on their Collaboration with Low-Income Families, and (c): Category III: School Counselors' Personal Feelings and Reflections in Response to their Experiences with Low-Income Families. Each of these categories, properties, and subproperties were explored in narrative form.

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter commences with a presentation of the purpose of this study and an overview of the methodology and results, which are organized by the previously established themes. Next, the professional school counselors' perceptions and the ways in which these perceptions may influence their collaboration with low-income families are discussed. Limitations of this study are subsequently presented followed by an exploration of implications of the study for counselor educators, professional school counseling students, school counseling district supervisors, school counseling professional associations, and professional school counselors currently practicing in the field. Finally, suggestions for future research are delineated.

#### **Methodology**

This investigation was guided by the phenomenological tradition in qualitative inquiry which seeks to explore the participants' meaning making experience and how they translate this experience into their consciousness (Patton, 2002). Ten urban professional school counselors from two urban school districts in a mid-Atlantic state were interviewed over the course of twelve weeks in order to explore their perceptions of the low-income families of their students. Each professional school counselor was interviewed twice in a place of his or her own choosing and was then sent an email with follow-up questions. In each interview, questions were asked relating to the perceptions that the professional school counselors have of the low-income families and the effect this may have on the services they provide these families. The interview questions were

open-ended and follow up probing questions were asked in order to solicit additional information. The follow-up email consisted of process questions related to the interview experience. The data was triangulated by means of member checking, the use of a research team and external auditor, and the researcher's continued self-examination and reflection.

## **Results**

Professional school counselors' perceptions of low-income families included perceptions about the family characteristics and environment, attitudes and actions regarding education, and the obstacles and challenges the families face. Effects of professional school counselors' perceptions included empathic responses and/or a struggle to respond empathically to these families and their choices of roles in working with low-income families. Finally, in response to their work with low-income families, the participants experienced both negative and positive feelings. Some also recognized the need for continued self-awareness and reflection in order to combat biased thinking and the tendency to stereotype.

## **Summary of Findings**

Currently, there is a lack of research on the topic of professional school counselors and their perceptions of families. While research has been published on the nature and definitions of collaboration in general (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Cobert; 1996; Holcomb-McCoy, 2006; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000), there are few qualitative or quantitative studies exploring the nature or effects of professional school counselors' work with low-income families. Previous research, instead, has sought to

define and give a rationale for school-family partnerships (Bemak, 2000; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

This investigation expanded on these approaches by qualitatively exploring urban professional school counselors' perceptions in relation to building school-family partnerships, as none of the research has qualitatively explored these perceptions in the past. This study, therefore, provided a forum for discussion of the professional school counselors' thoughts, feelings, and worldviews. These domains are important, as noted by cognitive-behavioral counseling theory, which asserts that thoughts affect behavior (Capuzzi & Gross, 2007). Professional school counselors' perceptions may therefore influence their practice with the students and families in their schools.

Findings from this study are organized into the themes that emerged from the data: urban professional school counselors' perceptions of the low-income families in their schools and also the effects of professional school counselors' perceptions on their collaboration with low-income families. The participants' perceptions, both positive and negative, seemed to affect how they approach their job. Some of these approaches were having empathy, their desire to provide resources, and their efforts to help students who may be lacking support at home. However, the participants also reported negative perceptions about home environments and family attitudes and actions, coupled with the frustration that the participants described in their work with low-income families. In addition, most shared positive feelings of feeling rewarded in their work with low-income families. As the participants engaged in self-reflection, they wrestled with these mixed feelings, the ways in which these feelings drive their everyday work with their students' families, and their desire to be aware of their own biases with regards to this population.



## **Urban professional school counselors' perceptions of low-income families.**

### ***Family characteristics and environment.***

Each of the ten professional school counselors reported having negative perceptions of low-income families, their environments, and the effects these had on their children's academic growth and success. These negative perceptions are similar to those reported in a quantitative study that found professional school counselors to have negative perceptions of students from families with low-income (Auwarter & Arugete, 2008). Seven of the participants, for example, perceived that low-income families lack the knowledge to help their children succeed. For example, one professional 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, sees 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 dropout, teenage pregnancy, and incarceration.

In addition, seven of the professional school counselor participants perceived families to lack 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.

In the midst of these negative perceptions, four out of the ten of the participants pointed out that not all low-income families are the same in an attempt to prevent themselves from generalizing or stereotyping, even though all of these four participants had engaged in generalizing as part of their responses. This recognition that low-income families should not be stereotyped is noted as multiculturally competent in the literature, which appears to endorse an understanding that each individual is unique and that school counselors 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.

Because of these negative perceptions, school counselors are advised 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). 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. The literature confirms that this self-awareness is considered a foundation for multiculturally responsive interventions (McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Wininger, 2008; Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006). Quality time in the classroom as well in supervision might be spent exploring the counseling students' perceptions as they relate to a client's socioeconomic status.

***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: not showing concern for their child's education, going against the work and mission of the school, inaccessibility, and resistance to becoming a part of the school community. These negative perceptions contradict the literature's assertion that professional school counselors understand and accept their students and families' cultural norms and practices (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Pedersen, 2003) and take on the mindset of an advocate (McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Wininger, 2008). The literature likewise calls professional school counselors to operate under the assumption that families care for their children and want them to reach their full potential (Lewis & Forman, 2002).

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. And that's where we're challenged in education- the priorities of parents.

Another participant described how a mother makes her relationship with her boyfriend a priority over caring for her son.

I meet with the student, come to find out that mom has a new boyfriend, a new truck-driving boyfriend, so mom has decided that she is going to spend her time with her new boyfriend and she's going to go with him and he is driving cross country on his truck and she's a single mom, so now her son is here without her and he's being shoveled throughout family members homes and she's home every couple weeks she's home for a few days before she goes back out. And she's not responding to our messages, things are going home that aren't getting signed.

In the midst of these negative perceptions of the low-income families' priorities, most of the professional 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. This understanding shows cultural competence as the participants are knowledgeable about the factors and challenges affecting families (Pedersen, 2003). 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 professional school counselors do with students at school. This perception contradicts the practice of seeing families as partners in a reciprocal relationship in their children's education (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Schmidt, 2003). While each of the participants did mention positive feelings associated with working with low-income families, including feeling needed, appreciated, and rewarded, some of the participants also seemed frustrated or detached from partnering with families. For example, similar to the analogy about the fruit and the root, one participant used a cake analogy to describe this perceived phenomenon.

We address the child but it's like a cake. You take out that ingredient and you have the rest of the cake that's left to bake but you're working on this one ingredient but the rest of the cake is being baked with what is left, what they're usually working with. But you're taking out this one ingredient, and trying to better one ingredient, but the rest of the cake is being baked with the rest of the stuff that has already been used to bake it. So in other words, 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 professional school counselors 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 to attending school counseling programs and functions. One participant, for example, expressed his 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.

This perception of families' resistance to education shows an assumption that families do not want the best for their children, whereas the literature calls for culturally competent professional school counselors to assume that all families care for and desire academic success for their children (Lewis & Forman, 2002).

Professional school counselors additionally are therefore advised to consult the literature for best practices in collaborating with low-income families as well as ways in which to utilize families' strengths to increase students' academic success. This relationship-building and collaboration between families and schools is especially important in urban schools where students often struggle (Barton & Coley, 2009). Current studies indicate that if there is a separation between families and the school, the

student will be less likely to succeed than if the two are somehow linked (Epstein, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The professional school counselor, therefore, serves as an advocate, leader, facilitator, initiator in the process of collaborating with parents (Amatea & West-Olaunji, 2007; Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000). The professional school counselor likewise challenges the faculty, staff, and administration to become advocates and collaborators with families, challenging any negative attitudes or stereotypes that may exist in the school (Bemak & Chung, 2005). In this advocacy and collaboration, the professional school counselor removes barriers to school/family partnerships such as negative past experiences with schools and logistical issues such as childcare, transportation, and work during traditional school hours (Amatea & West-Olatunji; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

*Awareness of obstacles and challenges for families.*

While the professional school counselors negatively perceived certain controllable aspects of low-income families, they also recognized the uncontrollable 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 of "cultural baggage" suggests the professional school counselors' ability to recognize the 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 defines "past experience" as "how you were brought up, how you felt, how school was when you went to school, how teachers were when you went to school, how you, how easy or hard school was for the parent." Another 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 professional 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' increased involvement in their children's education. These same obstacles are emphasized in the literature as well. Several writers challenge professional school counselors to creatively work to overcome such logistical obstacles in collaborating with families (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Erford, 2007; 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; Holcomb-



McCoy, 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 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.

In addition to professional school counselors consulting the literature for best practices in partnering with families, it is recommended that counselor educators continue to teach students the importance of school-family partnerships and the value of involving families in education, as the participants in this study seemed to lack the knowledge of best practices in forming relationships with low-income families (Alliman-Brissett, Turner, & Skovholt, 2004; Erford, 2007). I strongly believe that if students are aware of the benefits of having families play a great role in the school and school counseling program, they may be more likely to seek out familial support in a variety of creative ways and to hurdle barriers and obstacles that low-income families face in becoming involved in their children's education. Counselor educators might partner with school counselors in the field who are implementing school-family-community partnerships in order to expose students to effective practices and give them the opportunity to participate (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Counselor educators also are recommended to teach the importance of self-care in working with low-income families and as well as practical ways in which to prevent burnout in the field (Ivey & Ivey, 2007; Lambie, 2003).

School counseling students might challenge themselves to become more self-aware and to discover their perceptions of low-income families and to consider how these

perceptions may influence their future practice (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hays, 2007; McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Winiger, 2008). Research on ways to increase and facilitate family involvement as well as professional development opportunities are practical methods to overcoming the challenges reported in this study (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hays, 2007). Also, students might begin to implement school-family partnerships in their internships in order to work through the challenges that the professional school counselors in this study reported facing (Bryan & Henry, 2008). They might engage in other experiential learning activities such as cultural immersion projects in surrounding communities (Scarborough & Luke, 2008). Finally, professional school counseling students should utilize individual and group supervision as a means of support in overcoming challenges as well as a means of exploring any negative perceptions that may surface during their work in the schools (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009).

**Effects of professional school counselors' perceptions on their collaboration with low-income families.**

***Professional 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, which is not a requirement of 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 five these 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. This struggle may be an output of the mix of both negative perceptions combined with an understanding of the struggles and hardships of the families. 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 the 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."

A possible implication for professional school counselors in the area of empathy is the need for counseling as working with low-income families may bring up a lot of their own personal issues stemming from their childhood and adolescent years. As a result, professional school counselors may become more aware of possible transference issues or the need to go above and beyond in their work in order to refrain from becoming enmeshed in the low-income families' struggles (Fouad, 1990). Also, being actively involved in the community in which the school is located (Virginia School Counseling Association, 2008) may help in facilitating relationships and collaboration.

***Professional school counselors' choices of roles in working with low-income families.***

This empathy, or struggle to empathize, may affect the professional school counselors' choices of roles in working with low-income families. For example, eight of the professional school counselors 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 professional 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 are not met by their families. For example, one participant described her experience with a low-income student.

I have this little boy, there are there 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.

While this desire to help students is commendable, it may also put the professional school counselor at risk for burn-out, as she or he may go above-and-beyond the role of a professional 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 work to fill this void that they perceive to be in the students’ lives as a result of the apathy of the parents.

In another role, five 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 professional school counselors’ awareness of the obstacles and challenges that families face. Perhaps they are trying to counteract the families past struggles and negative experiences with the school system and with school personnel.

While this commitment to equality is admirable, it can have a detrimental effect if it neglects the importance of equity, which refers to assisting low-income families in ways that they may be lacking- a concept supported in the professional literature (Cox & Lee, 2007; Erford, House, & Martin, 2007; Grant & Gillette, 2006; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). By contrast, equal treatment refers to holding the same high expectations of all families, despite their differences (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). From my perspective as a researcher, some of the participants seemed to demonstrate equity in their work, but did not utilize the terminology. For example, one participant states that “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.” Perhaps this participant does mean “equity” instead of treating everyone “the same” as he seems concerned with meeting the needs of everyone, which may be different based on income level.

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, 2005a; Bemak & Chung, 2005; Cox & Lee, 2007; Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hays, 2007; Schaeffer, Akos, & Barrown, 2010, Stone & Dahir, 2006). Perhaps none of the participants have yet made the association of their work with low-income families as an act of advocacy. The lack of a mentioning equity, in addition

to advocacy and social justice, suggests a lack of understanding of the ways in which professional school counselors can be leaders in the educational field. The professional literature, on the other hand, contradicts this attitude as it challenges professional school counselors to be leaders and advocates for and collaborators with low-income families (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000).

Counselor educators are called to train future professional school counselors in the use of such terminology as “equity” and “advocacy” and to teach the American School Counseling Association’s National Model, which challenges the professional school counselor to utilize data, to show leadership, to collaborate, to act as an advocate, and to work towards systemic change in the school system (ASCA, 2005a). This training will therefore inspire professional school counseling students to become self-aware and culturally competent in their work with low-income families.

It is likewise recommended that counselor educators instill the importance of advocacy in their students (Schaeffer, Akos, & Barrow, 2010), especially those who will work with low-income families in urban schools. These schools often bring unique challenges that must be met with high levels of multicultural competence developed in counselor educator preparation programs (Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008). Experiential assignments such as service learning may additionally instill a sense of responsibility to the community in the student that may motivate him or her to collaborate and to develop educational partnerships with families and other community members in the future (Wilzenski & Schumacher, 2008).

**Professional 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 professional school counselors 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, if they were able to be quantitatively measured. The positive feelings may also serve as their motivation to work in an urban school rather than a school with a majority of middle or upper class families. This admirable 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 professional school counselors' resiliency and perseverance in the midst of challenges.

Six of the participants, finally, 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; Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006). 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 professional school counselor's practice. This self-aware participant appears to have enhanced ability to screen her own thoughts in regards to the low-income families in her school. This self-screening may prove pivotal in preventing her own values from infiltrating her views of low-income families in her school.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study are discussed in the following section. Limitations included (a) researcher's bias, (b) researcher's lack of research experience, (c) participant selection, and (d) data collection.

**Researcher's bias.**

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection. It was therefore imperative that my research team and I be aware of our own biases throughout the study. Before beginning my research, I stated and explored this risk for biases as I planned ways to reduce the influence my inherent biases on the study and the research team discussed our biases openly with each other. I kept a reflective journal to record my thoughts and feelings, consulting with a research team to analyze and confirm emerging themes and patterns, and utilizing member checking as I verified the transcripts with the professional 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 would be 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.

**Researcher's lack of experience.**

My lack of experience as a qualitative researcher serves as another limitation of this study as this phenomenological exploration was my first expansive qualitative study. It limited the quality of my interviewing abilities as I did not always feel confident in asking effective probing questions beyond what was planned and outlined in my interview protocol. Throughout the research process, being aware of my limitations as an

inexperienced researcher, I utilized a reflective journal in order to enhance my report of the data collection and analysis. This journal assisted with my reflection process as I recorded and examined any bias thoughts or reactions that arose throughout the data collection and analysis processes. I also used a research team to assist in formulating and articulating themes and patterns that emerged from the data. Together, we processed and discussed ways in which to fairly and accurately portray the perceptions of the participants. My external auditor finally added an additional perspective and means of confirming the data analysis as he performed a summative overview of the findings. He reviewed the themes and codes and confirmed their emergence from the data.

#### **Participant selection.**

Selection of participants was limited to professional school counselors in two urban school districts in a mid-Atlantic state. The sample size was small and was not representative of professional school counselors as a whole nationally or internationally. 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). Three of the participants were White while seven of the participants were African-American. While seeming racially unbalanced, this proportion mirrors the racial proportions of the two school districts from which the participants were selected. Ultimately, these limitations related to the participants' characteristics may limit the transferability of the study's findings.

#### **Data collection.**

One 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 by asking follow-up questions or 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**

Various constituents involved in school counseling can enhance awareness, action, and advocacy for and with families with low-income to promote success for the students from these families. The participants' responses from this study, especially their negative perceptions and challenges with working with low-income families, inform the following implications for counselor educators, professional school counseling students, practicing professional school counselors, school counseling district supervisors, and professional school counseling organizations.

#### **Counselor educators.**

Because of the negative perceptions reported in this study by each of the participants, 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. The literature confirms that this self-awareness is considered a foundation for multiculturally responsive interventions (McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Wininger, 2008; Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006).

Quality time in the classroom as well in supervision might be spent exploring the counseling students' perceptions as they relate to a client's socioeconomic status.

It is also recommended that counselor educators continue to teach students the importance of school-family partnerships and the value of involving families in education, as the participants in this study seemed to lack the knowledge of best practices in forming relationships with low-income families (Alliman-Brissett, Turner, & Skovholt, 2004; Erford, 2007). I strongly believe that if students are aware of the benefits of having families play a great role in the school and school counseling program, they may be more likely to seek out familial support in a variety of creative ways and to hurdle barriers and obstacles that low-income families face in becoming involved in their children's education. Counselor educators might partner with school counselors in the field who are implementing school-family-community partnerships in order to expose students to effective practices and give them the opportunity to participate (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Counselor educators also are recommended to teach the importance of self-care in working with low-income families and as well as practical ways in which to prevent burnout in the field (Ivey & Ivey, 2007; Lambie, 2003).

It is critical for school counselor educators to continue research on "best practices" of working with low-income families and collaborating with them for their children's academic success. New ideas, examples, and data-driven research, perhaps presented in professional development seminars and at school counseling conferences, would tremendously benefit the field in this area. Continued research may additionally reduce frustration amongst practicing professional school counselors, who would be able

to design their family outreach and programs based on what has already been shown to be successful in the field.

Counselor educators likewise are called to train future professional school counselors to design and implement a data-driven, culturally responsive, comprehensive school counseling program, one which challenges the professional school counselor to utilize data- both aggregated and disaggregated, to show leadership, to collaborate, to act as an advocate, and to work towards systemic change in the school system (ASCA, 2005a). This training will hopefully inspire professional school counseling students to become self-aware and culturally competent in their work with low-income families.

Finally, it is recommended that counselor educators instill the importance of advocacy (Schaeffer, Akos, & Barrow, 2010) and systemic change in their students, especially those who will work with low-income families in urban schools (Stone & Dahir, 2006). Urban schools often bring unique challenges that must be met with high levels of multicultural competence developed in counselor educator preparation programs (Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008). Experiential assignments such as service learning may additionally instill a sense of responsibility to the community in the student that may motivate him or her to collaborate and to develop educational partnerships with families and other community members in the future (Wilzenski & Schumacher, 2008).

#### **Professional school counseling students.**

School counseling students might challenge themselves to become more self-aware and to discover their perceptions of low-income families and to consider how these perceptions may influence their future practice (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hays, 2007; McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Winiger, 2008). They can research ways to increase and

facilitate family involvement as well as taking advantage of professional development opportunities covering practical methods to overcoming the challenges reported in this study (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hays, 2007).

Also, students might begin to implement school-family partnerships in their internships in order to work through the challenges that the professional school counselors in this study reported facing (Bryan & Henry, 2008). They might engage in other experiential learning activities such as cultural immersion projects in surrounding communities (Scarborough & Luke, 2008). Professional school counseling students should utilize individual and group supervision as a means of support in overcoming challenges as well as a means of exploring any negative perceptions that may surface during their work in the schools (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009) and seek mentors to enhance their skills in this area. Finally, students are called to develop an identity as an advocate that they will take into their future practice, especially in regards to their work with families (Amatea & West-Olaunji, 2007; Erford, 2007; & Stone & Dahir, 2006).

#### **Practicing professional school counselors.**

Practicing professional 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). Peer

supervision may be another useful method of consulting with other professional school counselors about their successes and challenges in working with low-income families (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Supervision may also help to screen for and prevent potential burnout when facing challenges in daily work with low-income families (Bernard & Goodyear; Lambie, 2003; Sheffield & Baker, 2005).

Practicing professional school counselors might also work to involve low-income families in their children's education as an act of advocacy as well as a means of overcoming students' academic barriers and obstacles (Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006; Thompson, 2002). This advocacy may lead to systemic change as far as biases and negative assumptions within the school or school district (Stone & Dahir, 2006). School-family partnerships, where schools collaborate with family and community members in order to increase efforts to help students become academically successful, are one way of doing so as is utilizing community resources and other stakeholders to meet the needs of families. (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). One example of a school-family partnership might be developing a program for male family members to eat breakfast monthly with their child at school or a parent-involvement committee (Bryan & Henry, 2008). Parent education programs are an additional means of connecting with families (Erford, 2007).

Professional school counselors additionally are advised to consult the literature for best practices in collaborating with low-income families as well as ways in which to utilize families to increase students' academic success. This relationship-building and collaboration between families and schools is especially important in urban schools where students often struggle (Barton & Coley, 2009). Current studies indicate that if



there is a separation between families and the school, the student will be less likely to succeed than if the two are somehow linked (Epstein, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The professional school counselor, therefore, serves as a an advocate, leader, facilitator, initiator in the process of collaborating with parents (Amatea & West-Olaunji, 2007; Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000). The professional school counselor likewise challenges the faculty, staff, and administration to become advocates and collaborators with families, challenging any negative attitudes or stereotypes that may exist in the school (Bemak & Chung, 2005). In this advocacy and collaboration, the professional school counselor removes barriers to school/family partnerships such as negative past experiences with schools and logistical issues such as childcare, transportation, and work during traditional school hours (Amatea & West-Olatunji; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Another possible implication for professional school counselors is a possible need for counseling as working with low-income families may bring up a lot of their own personal issues stemming from their childhood and adolescent years. As a result, professional school counselors may become more aware of possible transference issues or the need to go above and beyond in their work in order to refrain from becoming enmeshed in the low-income families' struggles (Fouad, 1990). Also, being actively involved in the community in which the school is located (Virginia School Counseling Association, 2008) may help in facilitating relationships and collaboration.

#### **School counseling district supervisors.**

Because receiving supervision is not a regular practice in school counseling (Luke & Bernard, 2006; Page, Pietrzak, & Sutton, 2001), school counseling district supervisors

might consider the possibility of introducing regular supervision for the professional school counselors in their district, as supervision may increase self-awareness and multicultural competence (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Another implication for distinct supervisors may be the need for increased professional development opportunities in regards to increasing self-awareness as well as sharing information about best practices in working with low-income families. As professional school counselors become more self-aware and become more familiar with ways to work with low-income families, the quality and quantity of their work may improve (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hays, 2007).

#### **Professional school counseling organizations.**

Professional school counseling organizations are advised to provide professional development opportunities for professional school counselors in relation to multicultural self-awareness as well as proven methods for working with low-income families. National, state, and local school counseling conferences are challenged to host presentations that relate to multicultural issues as well as work with diverse families. Conference themes, foci, and keynote speakers would increase awareness in the areas of advocacy and social justice for low-income families as well as other underrepresented populations in the school systems (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hays, 2007). Professional school counseling organizations are called to lobby for public and political support for both the professional school counseling profession and for resources for families with low income, giving professional school counselors the security, opportunity, and resources to serve the low-income families and students in their schools and the families the resources needed to help their children be successful.

#### **Future Research**

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; Bryan, 2005; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1997; Lawson, 2003; Morris, 2005; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Warren, 2002; Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007). Currently, there is little in the professional literature related to this topic. Further research, especially qualitative studies, might extend this study to include school counselors in additional school districts across the United States. An expanded study may also include a more diverse ethnic and racial sample of professional school counselors as well as a sample that includes more male participants.

In order to gain knowledge of the low-income families' perspectives of school counseling and professional school counselors, qualitative research might explore the perceptions of low-income families of school counseling services and professional school counselors. Then, the school counseling field would be more aware of the needs of the families and how currently these needs may or may not be met by professional school counselors. Also, with an understanding of the families' perceptions, professional school counselors can better understand how negative past experiences, which were mentioned in this study, affect the ways that low-income families conceptualize the educational experience for their children. An increased knowledge of the families' struggles might also increase professional school counselors' ability to empathize with families.

Future mixed methods research might explore the relationship between professional school counselors' perceptions of low-income families and the quantity of their work with this population. Perhaps professional school counselors who perceive

families negatively, as determined through qualitative data-collection, may have less interaction with low-income families in their daily work, as determined through quantitative data collection. Therefore, this type of mixed-methods study might further re-confirm the notion that perceptions affect practice and may support continued exploration of perceptions in regards to diverse populations.

Another future qualitative or quantitative study might explore the effect of supervision on professional school counselors' perceptions of diverse populations. Perhaps professional school counselors who are regularly and consistently supervised will be more likely to explore their perceptions in relation to cultural issues with a supervisor. This exploration may improve practice as professional school counselors become aware of how their perceptions influence their daily practice with diverse families in their school.

Future research could likewise explore professional school counselors' conceptualizations of empathy. The participants in this study seemed to believe that they were more able to empathize with low-income families if they had experienced a low-income lifestyle. However, this definition of empathy does not align with the literature which confirms the ability of each counselor to genuinely empathize with any client, despite any differences in income, past or present (Greason & Cashwell, 2009). This research lends itself to school counselor educators, who are charged with teaching their students the definition and practice of empathy, an essential counseling skill.

Finally, future research might expand on "best practices" of school counseling work with low-income families in order to help professional school counselors overcome the challenges they face when working with this population. Often, the participants in this

study seemed to lack the knowledge as to what to do with the families since their current efforts seemed to be failing. Therefore, models of “best practice” will provide practicing school counselors with proven examples of what works with low-income families to implement in their own comprehensive school counseling programs.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine how professional school counselors perceive low-income families in their schools and how these perceptions may affect practice. Using a phenomenological approach, this study invited the professional school counselors to share the essence of their experiences of working with low-income families in their schools. This essence consisted of their complex thoughts, feelings, and reflections in their work and experiences with low-income families.

Before completing this study, I assumed that professional school counselors may perceive low-income families negatively and these negative perceptions would severely hinder their work with low-income families. However, this study illuminates the mostly positive ways in which the professional school counselors work to help meet the families’ needs, despite their often negative perceptions of them. On the whole, the participants’ resilience and persistence in working with the low-income families in their schools is commendable.

Overall, the professional school counselors 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 professional school

counselors were aware of the families' hardships and challenges in regards to other responsibilities and pressing issues besides education. This cognitive awareness may or may not lead to the participants' ability to empathize, which seems to be either sparked by a knowledge of the hardships that low-income families face or bridled by the participants' strong feelings of frustration or inability to identify with the families' plights.

These contradictory positive and negative feelings reveal the professional 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 practicing professional school counselors. Ultimately, if perceptions influence practice, then let us continue to practice what we preach: self-exploration and awareness, equity, opportunity, and systemic change.

**CHAPTER VI**  
**MANUSCRIPT**

A Phenomenological Study of Urban School Counselors'

Perceptions of Low-Income Families

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### Abstract

This qualitative, phenomenological study explores urban professional school counselors' perceptions of low-income families in their schools. Ten professional 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 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. Implications for school counselors, supervisors, school counseling district supervisors, school counseling professional organizations, and counselor educators are discussed.



## **A Phenomenological Study of Urban School Counselors' Perceptions of Low-Income Families**

### **Low-Income Families and Education**

Children living in low-income families are common throughout the country and the public schools. 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 (The Education Trust, 2009a) and 46% of children in urban areas belong to families with low-income. The number of children to who live in families with low incomes is increasing. Between 2000 and 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; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Giles, 2005).

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 that earn 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). 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). 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).

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; Van Velsor & Orozco). Families may feel uncertain about how they should become involved or how they can help their child to succeed academically (Thompson, 2002).

### **Role of Professional School Counselor and Low-Income Families**

Professional school counselors are challenged to play an important role in assisting low-income families with these challenges that have a deleterious effect on their children's performance at school (Lee, 2005). Professional school counselors are in an important position to help families because of these reasons: their position in the school, their training in human growth and development, and their counseling training (Sink, 2005). Therefore, they are called to actively pursue relationships and partnerships with

parents and guardians (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000) and invite them to become a part of the school community (Erford). As leaders in the school system, professional school counselors are invited to “take responsibility for helping each student understand himself or herself as a unique, competent, and valued member of a diverse cultural community rather than a deprived minority in a dominant culture” (Lindsey, Roberts, & CampbellJones, 2005, p. 44).

Practical ways professional school counselors can extend this invitation are by increasing their visibility inside and outside of the school building, being accessible for phone calls and meetings, and creating flexibility in their schedules (Davis, 2005). Other strategies include providing childcare and transportation for families to attend school functions as well as having social events for families and school personnel to break down any negative perceptions or feelings that may exist (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Providing refreshments and nametags at meetings (Erford), home visits, positive phone calls, use of church or community centers for meetings and conferences, meeting outside of school hours, and use of translators are additional strategies for building positive connections with families (Erford; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Thompson, 2002). As family members feel welcomed into the school, they may be more likely to make the decision to become involved in their child’s education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

### **Perceptions and Practice**

By implementing the ASCA National Model and acting on a commitment to social justice and equity, the professional school counselor can offer support, resources, and collaboration, in addition to advocating for and with low-income families. Despite its nobility, one might wonder if this ideal role outlined in the ASCA National Model is

being fulfilled in everyday school counseling practice. “The suggestion that school counselors should be involved in leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and liaison roles in partnerships among schools, families, and communities does not guarantee that school counselors routinely enact such partnership roles” (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 443).

Negative perceptions may be a hindrance for fulfilling the role of professional school counselors working with low-income families as prescribed by ASCA. Unfortunately, previous studies suggest that educators have negatively biased perceptions towards low-income families (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Bryan, 2005; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1997; Lawson, 2003; Morris, 2005; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Warren, 2002; Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007). Currently, there is little in the literature examining the perceptions of urban professional school counselors of families, in particular those with low-incomes. These perceptions may affect the quality of a professional school counselor’s performance in working with low-income families. This emergent and flexible qualitative study of perceptions therefore provides the opportunity to unveil the meaning making of urban professional school counselors regarding the low-income families they serve (Creswell, 2007).

## **Method**

### **Research Team**

A research team and an independent auditor were assembled in order to gain multiple perspectives throughout the research study. Each research member has been trained in qualitative research and multicultural counseling through Counseling Master’s and Ph.D. programs. One research team member was a white, 29-year-old female

Counseling Ph.D. student with a background in mental health counseling who reported that her biases in the research process may come as a result of her strong beliefs in social justice and equity. Another research team member was a white, 25-year-old female Counseling Ph.D. student with a background in mental health counseling who stated that her biases in analyzing the data may result from her belief in advocacy for underrepresented populations. The auditor was a white, 52-year-old male counselor educator with a Ph.D. in Counseling. Because the research team members were the same race, their perspectives may have been limited when reviewing the data.

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were ten urban elementary, middle, and high school professional school counselors in two urban school districts. Eight of the participants were female and two were male. Eight of the participants were African-American while two 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 meeting the study's criteria from the originally selected participants (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2003).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

After gaining exempt status for the study from the College of Education Human Subjects Committee, the researcher contacted the school counseling directors of two urban school districts, informed them of the nature of the study, and asked for permission to contact the school counselors in their district. Professional school counselors who were referred by the researcher's contacts in the school districts were contacted individually

and subsequently were selected based on their willingness and availability to be interviewed twice over the course of twelve weeks.

Before being interviewed, each of the professional school counselors was asked to read and to sign an informed consent document explaining to them the purpose of the study as well as the confidentiality parameters. They were also given a participant demographic sheet which asked about their work setting, years of experience as an urban professional school counselor, age, and race. After the two interviews, 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.

Each participant was interviewed twice by means of a semi-structured, open-ended 30-50 minute audio recorded interview (Patton, 2002). The interviews were then transcribed by the primary researcher who developed a preliminary codebook. The transcriptions were then sent to the research team to be coded. The research team subsequently met to agree on emerging themes and patterns and the primary researcher revised the codebook based on the research team's consensus, which was decided on after a discussion of the similarities and differences between each person's findings and an explanation of each research team member's choice of codes (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 from the interviews and the responses to the follow-up emails. The final codes, themes, and patterns were sent to the

auditor, who reviewed and confirmed the transcriptions and the findings of the research team.

## **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 professional school counselors reported negative perceptions of low-income families, their environments, and/or in 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 professional 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, sees 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 dropout, teenage pregnancy, and incarceration.

In addition, seven of the professional school counselor participants perceived families to lack 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." It's like almost, you're an advocate, but they still need a physical person to go with the step-by-step to complete the process.

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 in meeting their basic needs.



In the midst of these negative perceptions, four out of the ten of the participants pointed out that not all low-income families are the same in an attempt to prevent generalizing or stereotyping. This multiculturally competent attitude is noted in the literature, which states that professional 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: 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. And that’s where we’re challenged in education- the priorities of parents.

However, in the midst of these negative perceptions of the low-income families’ priorities, most of the professional 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 professional 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, similar to the analogy about the fruit and the root, one participant used a cake analogy to describe this perceived phenomenon.

We address the child but it's like a cake. You take out that ingredient and you have the rest of the cake that's left to bake but you're working on this one ingredient but the rest of the cake is being baked with what is left, what they're usually working with. But you're taking out this one ingredient, and trying to better one ingredient, but the rest of the cake is being baked with the rest of the stuff that has already been used to bake it. So in other words, 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 professional school counselors 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 to attending school counseling programs and functions. One participant, for example, expressed his 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.

The professional school counselors also implied that they often focus on the families who are coming to programs and other school functions, ignoring or excusing those who have other priorities. "It could be five parents. Or we'll run the show as if it were 100. Because

we take a, we have resolved not to focus on numbers but more so focus on who is there.” This 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, contradicts best practices of professional school counselors in the literature, which recommends that professional school counselors actively pursue relationships and partnerships with parents and guardians who may not be present in the school for a variety of reasons (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000) and invite them to become a part of the school community (Erford).

### **Theme 3: Awareness of obstacles and challenges for families**

While the professional school counselors negatively perceived certain controllable aspects of low-income families, they also recognized the uncontrollable 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 of “cultural baggage” suggests the professional 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 defines “past experience” as “how you were brought up, how you felt, how school was when you went to school, how teachers were when you went to school, how you, how easy or hard school was for the parent.” Another 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 professional 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 uncontrollable and formidable barriers to the families' increased involvement in their children's education. These same obstacles are emphasized in the literature as well, which challenges professional 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; Holcomb-McCoy, 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 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: Professional 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, which is not a requirement of 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 five these 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. This struggle may be an output of the mix of both negative perceptions combined with an understanding of the struggles and hardships of the families. 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 the 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: Professional school counselors’ choices of roles in working with low-income families**

This empathy, or struggle to empathize, may affect the professional school counselors’ choices of roles in working with low-income families. For example, eight of the professional school counselors 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 professional 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 are neglected by the families. For example, one participant described her experience with a low-income student.

I have this little boy, there are there 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.

While this desire to help students is commendable, it may also put the professional school counselor at risk for burn-out, as she or he may go above-and-beyond the role of a professional 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 work to fill this void that they perceive to be in the students' lives as a result of the apathy of the parents.



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 professional school counselors’ awareness of the obstacles and challenges that families face. Perhaps they are trying to counteract the families past struggles and negative experiences with the school system and with school personnel.

While this commitment to equality is admirable, it can have a detrimental effect if it neglects the importance of equity, which refers to assisting low-income families in ways that they may be lacking. On the other hand, equal treatment refers to holding the same high expectations of all families, despite their differences (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). From my perspective as a researcher, some of the participants seemed to demonstrate equity in their work, but did not utilize the terminology. For example, one participant states that “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.” Perhaps this participant does mean “equity” instead of treating everyone “the same” as he seems concerned with meeting the needs of everyone, which may be different based on income level.

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, 2005a; Bemak & Chung, 2005; Cox & Lee, 2007; Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hays, 2007; Schaeffer, Akos, & Barrown, 2010; Stone & Dahir,

2006). Perhaps none of the participants have yet made the association of their work with low-income families as an act of advocacy. The lack of a mentioning equity, in addition to advocacy and social justice, suggests a lack of understanding of the ways in which professional school counselors can be leaders in the educational field. The professional literature, on the other hand, contradicts this attitude as it challenges professional school counselors to be leaders and advocates for and collaborators with low-income families (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000).

**Theme 6: Professional 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 professional school counselors 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, if they were able to be quantitatively measured. The positive feelings may also serve as their motivation to work in an urban school rather than a school with a majority of middle or upper class families. This admirable 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 professional school counselors' resiliency and perseverance in the midst of challenges.

Six of the participants, finally, 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; Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006). 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 professional school counselor's practice. This self-aware participant is able to screen her own thoughts in regards to the low-income families in her school. This self-screening may prove pivotal in preventing her own values from infiltrating her views of low-income families in her school.

### **Discussion**

In this study the professional 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 (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Bryan, 2005; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1997; Lawson, 2003; Morris, 2005; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Warren, 2002; Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007).

In the midst of their negative perceptions, the professional 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, & 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. Low-income families likewise may not have transportation, childcare, or the time off from work to come to the school's programs, their children's conferences, or to spend time helping their children with homework or other related tasks. These logistical barriers are cited in the literature as well as obstacles to parental involvement in the schools (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Erford, 2007).

Effects of the urban professional school counselors' perceptions on their collaboration with low-income families include their choices about empathic responses, choice of roles in working with low-income families, and personal feelings and reflections in response to their experiences with low-income families. Participants reported that they were able to empathize and/or that they struggled with feeling unable to empathize, giving an overall mixed message about their reaction to the low-income families in their schools. Overall, the participants' perceptions seemed to affect their choice of roles in working with low-income families. As an output of their perceptions, the participants' reported roles included providing resources, trying to meet students' needs that are neglected by families, and treating each family equally, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

As far as personal feelings, the professional school counselors reported feeling frustrated in their work with low-income families. However, they also described their positive feelings such as feeling need by the families, feeling appreciated for their work with low-income families, and feeling rewarded. Finally, the participants cited the need

for self-awareness and reflection in regards to bias and stereotypes in their work with low-income families.

### **Limitations**

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection. It was therefore imperative that the primary researcher be aware of her own biases throughout the study. 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 professional 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 be 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 professional school counselors in two urban school districts in a mid-Atlantic state. The sample size was small and was not representative of professional school counselors as a whole nationally or internationally. 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 by asking follow-up questions or 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. The literature confirms that this self-awareness is considered a foundation for multiculturally responsive interventions (McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Wininger, 2008; Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006). Quality time in the classroom as well in supervision might be spent exploring the counseling students' perceptions as they relate to a client's socioeconomic status.

It is also recommended that counselor educators continue to teach students the importance of school-family partnerships and the value of involving families in education (Alliman-Brissett, Turner, & Skovholt, 2004; Erford, 2007). I strongly believe that if

students are aware of the benefits of having families play a great role in the school and school counseling program, they may be more likely to seek out familial support in a variety of creative ways and to hurdle barriers and obstacles that low-income families face in becoming involved in their children's education. Counselor educators might partner with school counselors in the field who are implementing school-family-community partnerships in order to expose students to effective practices and give them the opportunity to participate (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Counselor educators also are recommended to teach the importance of self-care in working with low-income families and as well as practical ways in which to prevent burnout in the field (Ivey & Ivey, 2007; Lambie, 2003).

It is critical for school counselor educators to continue research on "best practices" of working with low-income families and collaborating with them for their children's academic success. New ideas, examples, and data-driven research, perhaps presented in professional development seminars and at school counseling conferences, would tremendously benefit the field in this area. Continued research may additionally reduce frustration amongst practicing professional school counselors, who would be able to design their family outreach and programs based on what has already been shown to be successful in the field.

Counselor educators likewise are called to train future professional school counselors according to the American School Counseling Association's National Model, which challenges the professional school counselor to utilize data, to show leadership, to collaborate, to act as an advocate, and to work towards systemic change in the school system (ASCA, 2005a). This training will therefore inspire professional school



counseling students to become self-aware and culturally competent in their work with low-income families.

Finally, it is recommended that counselor educators instill the importance of advocacy in their students (Schaeffer, Akos, & Barrow, 2010), especially those who will work with low-income families in urban schools. These schools often bring unique challenges that must be met with high levels of multicultural competence developed in counselor educator preparation programs (Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008). Experiential assignments such as service learning may additionally instill a sense of responsibility to the community in the student that may motivate him or her to collaborate and to develop educational partnerships with families and other community members in the future (Wilzenski & Schumacher, 2008).

School counseling students might challenge themselves to become more self-aware and to discover their perceptions of low-income families and to consider how these perceptions may influence their future practice (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hays, 2007; McAuliffe, Grothaus, Pare, & Winiger, 2008). Research on ways to increase and facilitate family involvement as well as professional development opportunities are practical methods to overcoming the challenges reported in this study (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hays, 2007). Also, students might begin to implement school-family partnerships in their internships in order to work through the challenges that the professional school counselors in this study reported facing (Bryan & Henry, 2008). They might engage in other experiential learning activities such as cultural immersion projects in surrounding communities (Scarborough & Luke, 2008). Finally, professional school counseling students should utilize individual and group supervision as a means of support

in overcoming challenges as well as a means of exploring any negative perceptions that may surface during their work in the schools (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009).

Like school counseling students, practicing professional 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). Peer supervision may be another useful method of consulting with other professional school counselors about their successes and challenges in working with low-income families (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Supervision may also help to screen for and prevent potential burnout when facing challenges in daily work with low-income families (Bernard & Goodyear; Lambie, 2003; Sheffield & Baker, 2005).

Practicing professional school counselors might also work to involve low-income families in their children’s education as an act of advocacy as well as a means of overcoming students’ academic barriers and obstacles (Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006; Thompson, 2002). School-family partnerships, where schools collaborate with family and community members in order to increase efforts to help students become academically successful, are one way of doing so as is utilizing community resources and other stakeholders to meet the needs of families.

(Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). One example of a school-family partnership might be developing a program for male family members to eat breakfast monthly with their child at school or a parent-involvement committee (Bryan & Henry, 2008). Parent education programs are an additional means of connecting with families (Erford, 2007).

Professional school counselors additionally are advised to consult the literature for best practices in collaborating with low-income families as well as ways in which to utilize families to increase students' academic success. This relationship-building and collaboration between families and schools is especially important in urban schools where students often struggle (Barton & Coley, 2009). Current studies indicate that if there is a separation between families and the school, the student will be less likely to succeed than if the two are somehow linked (Epstein, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The professional school counselor, therefore, serves as a an advocate, leader, facilitator, initiator in the process of collaborating with parents (Amatea & West-Olaunji, 2007; Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Erford, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Aldeman, 2000). In this active pursuit of collaboration, the professional school counselor removes barriers to school/family partnerships such as negative past experiences with schools and logistical issues such as childcare, transportation, and work during traditional school hours (Amatea & West-Olatunji; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Another possible implication for professional school counselors is a possible need for counseling as working with low-income families may bring up a lot of their own personal issues stemming from their childhood and adolescent years. As a result,

professional school counselors may become more aware of possible transference issues or the need to go above and beyond in their work in order to refrain from becoming enmeshed in the low-income families' struggles (Fouad, 1990).

Because receiving supervision is not a regular practice in school counseling (Luke & Bernard, 2006; Page, Pietrzak, & Sutton, 2001), school counseling district supervisors might consider the possibility of introducing regular supervision for the professional school counselors in their district, as supervision may increase self-awareness and multicultural competence (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Another implication for distinct supervisors may be the need for increased professional development opportunities in regards to increasing self-awareness as well as in best practices in working with low-income families. As professional school counselors become more self-aware and become more familiar with ways to work with low-income families, the quality and quantity of their work may improve (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hays, 2007).

Professional school counseling organizations are advised to provide professional development opportunities for professional school counselors in relation to multicultural self-awareness as well as proven methods for working with low-income families. National, state, and local school counseling conferences are challenged to host presentations that relate to multicultural issues as well as work with diverse families. Conference themes, foci, and keynote speakers would increase awareness in the areas of advocacy and social justice for low-income families as well as other underrepresented populations in the school systems (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hays, 2007). Professional school counseling organizations are called to lobby for public and political support for the professional school counseling profession, giving professional school counselors the

security, opportunity, and resources to serve the low-income families and students in their schools.

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; Bryan, 2005; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1997; Lawson, 2003; Morris, 2005; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Warren, 2002; Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007). Currently, there is a paucity in the professional literature related to this topic. 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 professional school counselors as well as a sample that includes more male participants.

In order to gain knowledge of the low-income families' perspectives of school counseling and professional school counselors, qualitative research might explore the perceptions of low-income families of school counseling services and professional school counselors. Then, the school counseling field would be aware of the needs of the families and how currently these needs may or may not be met by professional school counselors. Also, with an understanding of the families' perceptions, professional school counselors can better understand how negative past experiences, which were mentioned in this study, affect the ways that low-income families conceptualize the educational experience for their children. An increased knowledge of the families' struggles might also increase professional school counselors' ability to empathize with families.

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

Another future qualitative or quantitative study might explore the effect of supervision on professional school counselors' perceptions of diverse populations. Perhaps professional school counselors who are regularly and consistently supervised will be more likely to explore their perceptions in relation to cultural issues with a supervisor. This exploration may improve practice as professional school counselors become aware of how their perceptions influence their daily practice with diverse families in their school.

Future research could likewise explore professional school counselors' conceptualizations of empathy. The participants in this study seemed to believe that they were more able to empathize with low-income families if they had experienced a low-income lifestyle. However, this definition of empathy does not align with the literature which confirms the ability of each counselor to genuinely empathize with any client, despite any differences in income, past or present (Greason & Cashwell, 2009). This research lends itself to school counselor educators, who are charged with teaching their students the definition and practice of empathy, an essential counseling skill.

Finally, future research might expand on “best practices” of school counseling work with low-income families in order to help professional school counselors overcome the challenges they face when working with this population. Often, the participants in this study seemed to lack the knowledge as to what to do with the families since their current efforts seemed to be failing. Therefore, models of “best practice” will provide practicing school counselors with proven examples of what works with low-income families to implement in their own comprehensive school counseling programs.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this study, as I wrote in my reflective journal, I learned a lot about myself as a researcher, as a counselor, and as a future school counselor. While talking to the participants, I wrestled with the notion of school counselors imposing their values on students and families in schools, especially students and families who do not hold the middle-class value of excelling academically and moving on to a higher educational level. Ultimately, I believe that schools need to recognize their middle-class values and the ways in which they can work with families without forcing them to adhere to their systemic standards. Perhaps the school can take their “school culture” into the community, facilitating educational programs in recreation centers or in the neighborhood center, showing families that they are willing to meet them where they live, work, and play. I believe awareness is the first step for educators and that professional school counselors should act as leaders and advocates for school personnel to become more aware of their own values and how they may be daily imposing these values on families.

Overall in this study, the professional school counselors 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 professional school counselors were aware of the families' uncontrollable hardships and challenges in regards to other responsibilities and pressing issues besides education. This cognitive awareness may or may not lead to the participants' ability to empathize, which seems to be either sparked by a knowledge of the hardships that low-income families face or bridled by the participants' strong feelings of frustration or inability to identify with the families' plights.

These contradictory positive and negative feelings reveal the professional 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 practicing professional school counselors. Ultimately, if perceptions influence practice, then let us continue to practice what we preach: self-exploration and awareness, equity, opportunity, and systemic change.



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**APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX A**

**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

## Interview Protocol

### First Session:

1. What are the families like in your school? What do you appreciate about working with families in your school?
2. What is the most challenging aspect of working with families of your students?
3. What is your current role in working with families?
4. How would you describe an ideal role for you in working with families?
5. How would you describe low-income families in your school? In your opinion, what criteria are needed for a family to be considered “low-income?”
6. Can you describe how low-income families influence or affect their children’s education? How did you come to this conclusion?
7. In your opinion, what is the school’s role in working with or interacting with families with low income?
8. What is your role, as a school counselor, in working with or interacting with families with low income?

### Second Session:

1. [Researcher gives summary of last session] Is there anything from our last session that you would like to add to or clarify?

2. How, if at all, might low-income families differ from middle- and upper class families when it comes to their children's education?
3. Would you please describe your own interactions with low-income families?  
Would you share an example or two to illustrate your experiences?
4. How, if at all, is the amount or type of work you do with low-income families different from the work you do with middle and upper class families?
5. How, if at all, do the family members' attitudes or behaviors affect your work with low income families?
6. Do you have personal experience with either being a member of a family with low income or being very close and connected to a family or families with low income? How do you believe your experience contributes to your views about families with low income and the ways you interact with these families?
7. How might your views and experiences with low-income families in your school affect how you work with them?
8. What are your beliefs about working with low-income families? How important is it for you? How did you come to this conclusion?

Emailed Follow-up Questions:

1. [Researcher gives summary of last session] Is there anything from our last two sessions that you would like to add to or clarify?
2. What was it like for you to participate in the interviews?

3. Please describe how this interview process may affect the way you view or practice school counseling, if it was affected at all.

**APPENDIX B**

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET

## Participant Demographic Information Sheet

Please fill in the following information which will remain confidential. You are under no obligation to answer any questions.

1. Years as a school counselor in an urban school \_\_\_\_\_
2. Years as a professional school counselor \_\_\_\_\_
3. Current work setting:  
     \_\_\_ High School      \_\_\_ Middle School      \_\_\_ Elementary School
4. Full time \_\_\_\_\_ Part time \_\_\_\_\_
5. Percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch in your school \_\_\_\_\_
6. Age \_\_\_\_\_
7. Gender \_\_\_\_\_
8. Race/Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_
9. Please check all applicable degrees or certifications that you currently hold:  
     M.S. \_\_\_\_\_ LPC \_\_\_\_\_ NCC \_\_\_\_\_ Cert. of Advanced Study \_\_\_\_\_  
     Ph.D. \_\_\_\_\_ Other (please list) \_\_\_\_\_

10. Please list any services that you provide to families

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**APPENDIX C**

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE**

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

“Urban School Counselors’ Perceptions of the Low-Income Families in their Schools”

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (print participant’s name) agree to participate in the research project that Rebekah Fariss Cole, a doctoral candidate in the Counseling Department at Old Dominion University working under the supervision of Dr. Tim Grothaus, assistant professor of Counseling and Human Services, is conducting for her dissertation. This study will explore the experiences of professional school counselors working with families in urban schools.

I understand that I will be asked to respond to interview questions, which will take approximately 30-50 minutes to answer. I consent to be interviewed twice as well as to answer emailed follow-up questions.

The interview sessions will be recorded. I also understand that a verbatim transcript of the tape will be shared with my research team and that no identifying information will be included in the transcript or anywhere else in the study. The tape of the interview will be destroyed after it has been transcribed. Any additional information collected will be kept confidential.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and that I may refuse to answer any question that is asked. I know that I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. I also understand that a copy of the results of this study will be emailed to me upon request. I am aware that I may report any concerns with any aspect of this research project to the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, Dr. George Maihafer (757) 683-4520.

### Confidentiality Statement

As a participant in this study, I am aware that all records will be kept confidential and my name will not be associated with any of the results of this study. I fully understand the above statements, and do hereby consent to participate in this study.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

(participant)

(date)

**APPENDIX D**

INTRODUCTION LETTER

## Introduction Letter

Dear Professional School Counselor,

I am writing to request your participation in my dissertation research study that I hope will prove beneficial to the professional school counseling field as well as students and their families in the future. I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Counseling and Human Services at Old Dominion University. My dissertation looks to explore how urban school counselors perceive the low-income families in their schools. Not much research has been done in this area so I hope that my study will contribute useful insights to the profession and will be enlightening to both professional school counselors and school counselor educators. I am planning on interviewing elementary, middle, and high school counselors twice each along with a follow-up email with questions about the interview experience.

If you agree to participate in this study, the time commitment required will be approximately 1.5 total hours of interviewing time for both interviews along with approximately 0.5 hours to answer follow-up questions via email. The confidential interviews will be conducted at a location and time of your choosing. While I do not foresee any harm for you as a result of your participation in this study, there is some possibility that you may be subject to presently unidentified risks, such as recalling unpleasant past experiences.

If you are willing to take part in this study, please contact me at [rfariss@odu.edu](mailto:rfariss@odu.edu) or 757-753-7413 to schedule your first interview. After the initial interview you will receive an additional informed consent document that must be signed prior to participating in the second interview. At any point in time you may refuse to continue on with the interview or you may choose not to answer any of the interview questions. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you for your consideration,

Rebekah Fariss Cole, M.Ed

Doctoral Candidate

Old Dominion University

(757) 753-7413

[rfariss@odu.edu](mailto:rfariss@odu.edu)

Tim Grothaus, Ph.D., NCC, NCSC, ACS

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**APPENDIX E**

**HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER**



DARDEN COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
OFFICE OF THE DEAN  
NORFOLK, VIRGINIA 23529-0156  
PHONE: (757) 683-3938  
FAX: (757) 683-5083

October 27, 2009

Dr. Grothaus:

Your proposal submission titled, "**Urban Professional School Counselors' Perceptions of the Low-income Families in their Schools**" has been deemed EXEMPT by the Human Subjects Review Committee of the Darden College of Education. If any changes occur, especially methodological, notify the Chair of the DCOE HSRC, and supply any required addenda requested of you by the Chair. You may begin your research.

**PRIOR TO THE START OF YOUR STUDY, you must send a signed and dated hardcopy of your exemption application submission to the address below.**  
Thank you.

Edwin Gómez, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee, DCOE  
Human Movement Studies Department  
Old Dominion University  
2010 Student Recreation Center  
Norfolk, VA 23529-0196  
757-683-6309 (ph)  
757-683-4270 (fx)

**APPENDIX F****TABLE OF CATEGORIES, PROPERTIES, AND SUBPROPERTIES**

**Category I. Urban Professional School Counselors' Perceptions of the Low-Income Families**

**Property 1: Family Characteristics and Environment**

**Subproperty 1:** Lack the knowledge to help their child succeed

**Subproperty 2:** Negative environmental conditions

**Subproperty 3:** Families lack parenting skills

**Subproperty 4:** Remembering that not all low-income families are the same

**Property 2: Family Attitudes and Actions Regarding Education**

**Subproperty 1:** Education is not a priority

**Subproperty 2:** Families undo work that PSCs do at school

**Subproperty 3:** Families hard to engage

**Property 3: Awareness of Obstacles and Challenges for Families**

**Subproperty 1:** Understanding of families' past struggles, negative experiences

**Subproperty 2:** Perceptions that families care, but may be hindered by challenges in their lives

**Subproperty 3:** Logistical barriers

**Category II. Effects of Professional School Counselors' Perceptions on their Collaboration with Low-Income Families**

**Property 1: School counselors' struggle with empathizing with low-income families**

**Subproperty 1:** Ability to empathize

**Subproperty 2:** Feeling unable to empathize

**Property 2: School counselors' choice of roles in working with low-income families**

**Subproperty 1:** Provider of resources

**Subproperty 2:** Trying to meet students' needs that are neglected by families

**Subproperty 3:** Treating everyone equally

**Category III. School Counselors' Personal Feelings and Reflections in Response to their Experiences with Low-Income Families**

**Property 1:** Negative: Feeling frustrated

**Property 2:** Positive: Feeling needed, appreciated, rewarded

**Property 3:** Need for self-awareness regarding biases and stereotypes



## VITA

Rebekah F. Cole earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a minor in Hispanic Studies in 2005 from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA. She earned her master's degree in school counseling in 2008 from the College of William and Mary as well. She is a National Certified Counselor.

Rebekah has worked as a graduate assistant for the Office of Educational Partnerships at Old Dominion University for the past two years, where she collaborated with professional school counselors in a nearby urban school district to develop data-driven school counseling programs. Prior to this research position she was a graduate assistant in a high school counseling office. She also worked for a social services office as a summer counselor, developing and implementing programs for children and adolescents from low-income families.

Rebekah is a member of the Delta Omega chapter of Chi Sigma Iota at Old Dominion University, an academic honor society for the counseling profession. Additional professional affiliations include the American Counseling Association and the American School Counselors Association.