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Professional School Counselor Perceptions of Systemic Barriers Affecting Latino Students: Implications for Socially Just Preparation and Practice

Abstract

Systemic barriers contribute to academic underachievement and oppression among marginalized students, particularly those from Latino descent. Qualitative survey responses from 158 professional school counselors, working in the six U.S. states with the highest populations of Latinos, were analyzed by the constant comparative method. Three overarching themes resulted. Social justice implications for professional school counselors and counselors-in-training that support the academic, personal/social and career development of Latino students are provided.

Author's Notes

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Keywords

systemic barriers, Latino youth, professional school counselors, qualitative, schools

Latino youth represent one of the largest growing ethnic populations of all school-aged children in the United States (Passel, Cohn, & Lopez, 2011; Stromquist, 2011). In 2010, Latino students ages 17 and below comprised 17.1 million children, or 23.1% of this age group nationwide (Passel et al., 2011). Despite the U.S. developing into a more pluralistic society, individuals from minority cultures continue to experience barriers, biases, and prejudice based on group membership (Dovidio, Gluszek, Hohn, Dittmann, & Lagunes, 2010). Systemic barriers affecting Latino students can be conceptualized as inequalities and obstacles that restrict and limit access to educational achievement, such as language and cultural barriers, or citizenship requirements for obtaining federal financial aid for postsecondary education. Many of these systemic barriers may account for the approximately 41% of Latinos aged 20 and over not attaining a high school diploma and only 10% of Latino high school dropouts completing a GED (Fry, 2010).

Academic and school counseling professionals can help advocate for increased educational success for Latinos (Haro, 2004), which constitute a large portion of the U.S. population. Culturally responsive services (Paisley & McMahon, 2001) and comprehensive school counseling programs (Lee, 2001) are needed to meet the diversified needs of traditionally marginalized students, including Latino youth. Additionally, professional school counselors are uniquely positioned to make meaningful changes in their respective schools due to their educational background and training (Griffin & Steen, 2011), and their ability to advocate for systemic change and social justice (Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010) in order to enhance student success and academic achievement. Counselors embracing a social justice perspective have an understanding that systemic issues often result in client struggles (Ratts, Toporek, & Lewis, 2010). Yet, to date, little research illuminates professional school counselors'

perceptions of the systemic barriers and challenges that Latino students experience in the school context. As such, the purpose of this current study expands the literature on the challenges facing Latino students (Storlie, 2012; Storlie, Moreno, & Portman, 2014), by qualitatively examining school counselor perceptions of these barriers in order to inform socially just school counselor preparation and practice.

Barriers Encountered by Latino Youth in the U.S. Education System

Cultural values (e.g., familism, ethnic identity, collectivist orientation) are especially salient for many Latino youth and adults (Arredondo, Gallardo-Cooper, Delgado-Romero, & Zapata, 2014; Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallard-Cooper, 2002; Sue & Sue, 1999). Although deemed important to Latino youths' well being (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012), the cultural practices and beliefs of Latinos are often inconsistent with the dominant practices in U.S. mainstream culture (Stromquist, 2011). This creates challenges and marginalization for Latino students to successfully navigate the individualistic values and practices within the U.S. education system. Furthermore, levels of acculturation and cultural identity have been shown to predict academic functioning in Latino students, such that Latino youth who are less acculturated to U.S. mainstream values tend to have lower academic success (Guyll, Mado, Prieto & Scherr, 2010). Low levels of academic success among Latino students may originate from a variety of sociocultural and ethnic reasons, many of which are still prominent in our diverse and contemporary society, including language barriers, school-family communication barriers, and oppression and discrimination (Stromquist, 2011).

Language barriers

Poor academic achievement among Latino students has been attributed in part to issues of English language proficiency (Arrendondo et al., 2014). Although it is known that Spanish language is a critical component of many Latinos' ethnic and cultural identities (Guyll et al., 2010; Sox, 2009), 31 U.S. states have passed bills identifying English as the official language (U.S. English, 2016). From a social justice perspective, this may make it increasingly difficult for Spanish-speaking students to succeed in an English-speaking classroom (Ratts et al., 2010). In general, U.S. schools and teachers have not been equipped (i.e., employ bilingual personnel) or trained to manage high numbers of Spanish-speaking students (Arrendondo et al., 2014, Sue & Sue, 1999). Thus, Latino students are often labeled language-impaired and are overrepresented in special education classes (Arredondo et al., 2014). Although 14% of Latinos were high school drop outs (Pew Hispanic Center, 2013), Latinos who speak only English at home or speak English "very well" are found to be more likely to have a GED than Latinos with limited English speaking skills (Fry, 2010).

Issues of English proficiency continue to cloud the perception of the significance of bilingual education and student development (Myhill, 2004). The states of California, Arizona and Massachusetts are using one-year English immersion programs due to the repeal of the *Bilingual Education Act* of 1968 (Myhill, 2004; Sox, 2009). Consequently, students with limited English proficiency continue to fall behind in U.S. schools, further contributing to the large achievement gap between Latino students and other racial or ethnic groups. Poor academic success of some Latinos can also be attributed to the disparity between instruction and curriculum for English language learners (ELLs; Myhill, 2004). As a method to improve equity and social justice interventions within schools, Smith-Adcock, Daniels, Lee, Villalba, and

Indelicato (2006) have called on school districts to recruit and train bicultural and bilingual school counselors and teachers to be a part of the leadership team in order to meet the needs of Latino students.

Influence of Family on Academic Achievement

Low academic performance among Latino students has erroneously been blamed on their parents for their role in motivating their children to do well in school (Arrendondo et al., 2014). Low acculturation of parents may contribute to misunderstandings or negative beliefs about the academic lives of Latino youth (Guyll et al., 2010). In general, Latino parents often have high educational expectations for their children (Henry, Plunkett, & Sands, 2011). Parental involvement and family structure are recognized as important in understanding Latino students' academic motivation and perseverance (Henry et al., 2011). The influence of family unity and collectivism is high among Latinos and the family unit strongly shapes Latino students' perception of education (Arredondo et al., 2014). Latino students view parental support as essential, such as assistance with homework and supporting academic motivation (Henry et al., 2011). Longitudinal research has also shown that familial support is a contributing factor to higher math grades among Latino students (Azmitia, Cooper, & Brown, 2009). Further, additional work has found that Latino parents' educational expectations are associated with their own children's expectations over the course of high school (Toomey & Storlie, 2015).

Oppression and Discrimination

Approximately 61% of Latinos identify discrimination as a major problem that prevents future educational success (Lopez, Morin & Taylor, 2010) and nearly 25% of Latino students report that they have experienced bias-based bullying in school related to their ethnicity (Lai & Tov, 2004). Biased-based bullying and racially/ethnically-motivated perceived discrimination

contribute to poor health and academic outcomes among all youth (Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012). Higher levels of perceived ethnicity-related discrimination have been found to contribute to depression (Edwards & Romero, 2008) and anxiety (Arrendondo et al., 2014) in Latino youth, contributing further to the systemic barriers and social injustice facing this population.

Social and psychological research on the prejudice and discrimination of Latinos has been sporadic in comparison to studies conducted among African Americans (Dovidio et al., 2010). Yet, Latinos experience a lower sense of belonging related to their appearance, accent, and skin color when compared to their Caucasian counterparts (Dovidio et al., 2010). Historically, Latinos have a range of skin colors due to their historical roots (Telzer & Garcia, 2009), yet the darker one's skin color, the higher the incidence of mental health and socioeconomic issues in this population (Hall, 1994). Likewise, Latino youth, in particular, encounter discrimination because of the English proficiency, documentation status, and skin color (Edwards & Romero, 2008).

Social justice efforts are being made to improve issues of prejudice and discrimination among Latinos in U.S. education. For example, K-12 schools are incorporating classes on multicultural education to enhance student respect for diversity within the classroom (Stromquist, 2011). Additionally, counseling professionals are reinforcing protective factors such as self-esteem to combat issues of oppression against Latinos (Edwards & Romero, 2008). More can be done to understand and address the barriers experienced by Latino youth within the school system. Although school counselors perceiving negative school climates are more likely to intervene in discrimination or harassment related to Latino ethnicity (Toomey & Storlie, 2015), research has failed to qualitatively examine school counselor perceptions of systemic

barriers facing Latino students to inform socially just school counselor preparation and practice. Hence, exploring issues of discrimination and biased-based bullying from the perspectives of school counselors can inform methods and interventions that can reduce educational inequities.

Professional School Counselors

It is essential to include professional school counselors in studies of Latino students facing systemic barriers, given their prime role in fostering academic, personal/social, and career development among all students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012). Although school counselors are a valuable and significant part of the academic system, the perceptions and experiences of professional school counselors working with marginalized student populations may be overlooked in social action research. Understanding the systemic barriers facing Latino students through the lens of school counselors has critical implications for social justice and advocacy programming that can support increased retention and graduation rates. For the purposes of this study, we aligned our research aims with the goal of social justice to support the chance for all individuals to achieve academic, personal/social and career potential (Ratts et al. 2010). Thus, the purpose of this article was to qualitatively examine school counselor perceptions of challenges and barriers facing Latino youth in order to inform socially just school counselor preparation and practice.

Method

Participants

Through use of purposeful sampling, professional school counselors from the six U.S. states with the highest population of Latino individuals (California, Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois, and Arizona) were recruited online from their respective state and professional school counseling associations. These states were chosen to ensure a higher probability that the

participants would have experiences with Latino youth facing systemic barriers. Of the 206 original respondents, 158 school counselors (Arizona = 20.3%; California = 22.8%; Florida = 12.7%; Illinois = 14.6%; New York = 21.5%; and Texas = 8.2%) elected to respond to qualitative questions examining their perceptions of systemic barriers facing Latino youth. Based on the results of a demographic questionnaire, the average age of participants was 40.60 years old ($SD = 2.60$; Range: 23 – 72 years). The vast majority of participants identified as female (84.2%). The sample was racially/ethnically diverse: 61.2% identified as White, non-Latino, 18.4% as Latino or Hispanic, 9.5% as Black or African American, 5.1% as Asian, 3.2% as multiethnic-racial, 0.6% as Native American, and 1.9% declined to answer the question.

Participants reported an average of 7.10 years ($SD = 7.59$) of professional school counseling experience, and had completed nearly four courses ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 3.88$; Range: 0 – 30) focused on multicultural issues. Participants mostly worked exclusively in high schools (39.2%), elementary schools (19.6%), or middle schools or junior high schools (21.5%), whereas the remaining professional school counselors worked in a combination of grade levels (19.6%). Participants were primarily employed in urban districts (58%), followed by suburban (31.8%) and rural (10.2%) districts.

Researchers as Human Instruments

Traditionally within qualitative methodology, researchers are called to provide transparency in their background when initiating research inquiries (Patton, 2002). The first author is a Mexican American assistant professor/counselor educator who has experience researching how counseling influences the educational opportunities and outcomes of undocumented and documented Latino youth. The second author is an assistant professor, of European American descent, who has research expertise in positive youth development of

marginalized youth populations in the U.S., including a focus on Latino youth. Through combined personal and professional experience, we felt our respective backgrounds and roles heightened the cultural sensitivity in the data collection process and qualitative data analysis in this study. We acknowledged our biases in our passion in advocating for Latino youth, particularly in the school setting. We further acknowledged past experiences that may shape our perceptions of systemic challenges facing Latino youth in the school setting (e.g., lack of bilingual counselors, language barriers, etc.) for the purposes of transparency.

Data Collection

Upon approval from the institutional review board, participants were directed to a Qualtrics web-hosted survey consisting of both quantitative and qualitative measures. The qualitative measure included 10 open-ended questions that inquired about professional school counselor experiences in dealing with systemic barriers that affect Latino youth at their respective schools. We administered an online survey to collect qualitative data because it increased the likelihood of participant anonymity, allowed for time and cost effectiveness, and assisted with flexibility in responding (Duffy, Smith, Terhanian, & Bremer, 2005). Due to the academic schedule, the authors chose to leave the survey open during the 2014 spring semester to provide flexibility for participants to respond at a convenient time. The authors offered follow-up interviews to provide an opportunity for participants to expand on their narratives after the completion of the online survey; however, no participant elected to engage in these follow-up interviews.

Data Analysis

We used an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as a framework to understand the perceptions of professional school counselors working with Latino youth facing systemic barriers. Ecological frameworks are helpful in comprehending the impact of the social environment and its subsystems (Schriver, 2011), in this case from the lens of the professional school counselor. We chose a modified grounded theory approach, with an ecological framework, to analyze the data. Our purpose in using a modified grounded theory was to use a systematic and rigorous methodology to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory methodology centers on uncovering relevant conditions and how individuals actively respond to those conditions and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, researchers used open coding to identify properties and dimensions discovered within the data collected from the open-ended questions. Next, we explored the relationship of categories to subcategories by axial coding, coming to consensus before confirming the axial code. Selective coding was then used to determine overarching themes. In addition, authors examined and analyzed supplementary data using the constant comparative method in which each incident may be challenged by other data to ensure increased precision (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Trustworthiness. To enhance credibility of the data, authors met every two weeks during data collection to discuss the progress of the study and to engage in long-term connection to the data. During these meetings, authors discussed and reviewed samples of the qualitative responses throughout the 2014 spring semester. Despite our focus on confirmability and objectivity (Patton, 2002), we acknowledge that personal biases may have influenced coding procedures due to our own supportive actions and advocacy for Latino youth. Hence, an audit trail was used in order to ensure transparency of data analysis and ensure dependability that other

researchers would make similar observations of the data. In addition, transferability (Patton, 2002) was addressed by providing sufficient detail about the academic settings in which participants encountered Latino youth. An outside peer debriefer (Patton, 2002) trained in qualitative research methods was also utilized during data collection and analysis to enrich objectivity.

Results

Results of this qualitative analysis produced three overarching categories based on professional school counselors' perceptions of Latino student facing systemic barriers: *Perceived Within and Between Culture Conflict*, *Home and School Roadblocks*, and *Advocacy and Taking Initiative*. Furthermore, each overarching category contained two subthemes that helped to clarify and support the collective experiences of this sample of professional school counselors.

Theme 1: Perceived Within and Between Culture Conflict

Most of the qualitative data categorized under this theme included participants' perceptions of conflict experienced by Latino students. Professional school counselors observed that Latino students not only experienced conflict with students from other racial/ethnic groups and from interactions with different cultural attitudes and beliefs (i.e., *intercultural conflict*), but also experienced conflict from within the Latino student community (i.e., *intracultural conflict*). Many participants reported perceived conflict within and between cultures with many reflections focused on biased-based bullying, harassment, or discrimination at their respective schools. Others participants discussed experiences with conflict that occurred between traditional collectivistic practices and the U.S. individualistic system.

Subtheme 1: Intracultural conflict and bias. According to these participants, Latino students experienced intracultural conflict and, in some instances, this conflict was also directed

toward Latino school personnel. One participant reflected on her own experience as a Latina counselor. She reported, “I am not fluent in Spanish, and have experienced prejudice from Hispanic students/families because they view me as *not Mexican enough*, despite my ethnicity.” This sentiment of biased-based bullying, harassment, and discrimination (i.e., defined as the victim of bias that is related to one’s ethnic or racial identity) was also evident in the responses of other participants. One individual related, “I see Latino students insulting other Latino students for not being *Latin* enough, particularly if the student isn’t fluent in Spanish and/or *too White- guero/a and gringo/a*.” Participants further disclosed their perceptions of intracultural conflict by revealing, “I have also seen students who have some Latino heritage not claim their Latino heritage, but rather their White roots.” Another participant further explained their perception of Latino students not achieving academically because: “Trying hard is *acting White*.”

Multiple participants disclosed that intracultural conflict among their Latino students was readily apparent among different Latino subgroups. One individual disclosed, “Latino students have their own hierarchy as to acceptance amongst their own group.” One respondent reported perceived conflict at her school between “Mexican students vs. Central American students.” Moreover, one participant shared her experience, “The new immigrant students and beginner-level ELL students have the most difficulty adjusting to the school setting. Because their behavior often goes unaddressed by teachers that cannot communicate with them, their mal-adaptations have progressed into aggression toward one another.” The majority of professional school counselor respondents perceived biased-based bullying in their respective schools. One participant described her perception that Latino immigrant students were often bullied by second-generation students within her school.

Subtheme 2: Intercultural conflict and bias. In addition to perceived intracultural conflict, the majority of participants reported biased-based bullying and conflict that occurred between Latino students and students from other racial/ethnic groups. One participant reported, “We see bullying between different ethnicities that mostly involves name-calling and derogatory comments about their homeland. There is relational aggression and a supposition by Black students that Latinas won't stand up for themselves.” This was also evident to one participant when she described that non-Latino students perceived Latino students as “dumb” due to differences in language.

Several participants discussed their experiences of Latino students directing their bullying behaviors toward other races and cultures. One participant disclosed, “My school is predominately Latino. Typically the bullying that occurs is aimed at Caucasian students.” Similarly, another school counselor reported, “More often than not, Latino students bully Anglos. However, racism does occur the other way too. The theme would be stereotyping Latinos based on past negative experiences.” Likewise, additional participants disclosed witnessing Latino students using derogatory slurs toward students from other ethnic backgrounds. Professional school counselor participants further discussed their experiences of witnessing biased based bullying within and between cultures at their respective schools. In addition, these participants observed the academic and familial barriers facing Latino students that also influence student success.

Theme 2: School and Home Roadblocks

Professional school counselor participants discussed roadblocks they perceived within the home, school, and communities of Latino youth. One participant elaborated, “The students feel that teachers and counselors do not understand their lives at home, and how it impacts them

when they are in class.” Another participant reported the barriers at her school when asking, “Will teachers be biased against them?” The roadblocks perceived by these professional school counselors appeared to center on a lack of cultural sensitivity within their schools and perceived familial and cultural values that conflict with the educational goals of Latino youth.

Subtheme 1: School Climate. Participants were open about their perceptions of school safety and climate with regards to students from the Latino culture. In particular, there was a strong subtheme across the majority of participants that centered on teachers and school climate. One participant disclosed, “I feel that classroom teachers need more understanding of the culture.” Another school counselor commented, “Students want to see more of their culture in the curriculum in schools.” An additional participant elaborated further about barriers within their school, “I think many teachers assume their issues cannot be helped because of perceived language barriers, which results in Latino/a students not being given the same level of academic support or interventions as students from other races/ethnicities.” Additional participants disclosed that their Latino students did not feel respected in class and that “teachers and other staff members talk down to them.” For this sample of participants, school climate and safety was perceived to greatly involve teachers.

Subtheme 2: Familial and cultural barriers. According to the majority of participants, family relationships and cultural values play a significant role in the academic achievement of Latino students, yet stepping outside of family norms were major obstacles. One participant commented that the biggest hurdle facing their Latino youth was: “Family relationships, getting along with parents, feeling loved and accepted by parents.” Similarly, another participant reported, “My school is nearly 100% Latino. Many of my students’ concerns are related to relationships with family, friends, and how they feel about themselves.”

In order to address some of the familial and cultural barriers that impede Latino student success, some school counselors reported implementing formal and informal mentoring programs, conducting career genograms, and connecting Latino students to Latino adults they admire. Several disclosed that they make efforts to bring in Latino community leaders that are unrelated to their Latino students to provide hope. In addition to the familial and cultural barriers identified by participants, many disclosed how they embedded their own initiatives to enhance Latino student success.

Theme 3: Advocacy and Taking Initiative

Participants in this study reported having advocated for Latino students in their respective schools. With respect to language differences, one participant reported, “The school's stance is that we should *not* wait for someone to ask for a translator, wait until they do not understand, to ask for help.” Through advocacy, school counselors participating in this study provided detail in how they provided socially just counseling services by engaging in and accessing salient resources for Latino youth.

Subtheme 1: Social action via engaging resources. The majority of participants reported that they ensure Latino students receive culturally sensitive resources from their school counseling department, the school system/district, and from within their respective communities. One participant reported, “Common concerns are economic issues. Some want to help their parents while in school. I do many referrals to community agencies if I contact a family that is struggling from emotional, interpersonal or economic issues.” Another respondent shared, “[My] Biggest concern in counseling has been parent deportation and supporting family with loss.” This participant went on to disclose their actions in connecting this family with legal aide to assist with immigration and documentation issues.

Several participants reported their actions in helping Latino students and their families access resources to assist with communication. One individual recounted, “Our school offers a bilingual program that extends beyond the classroom. This program provides support to parents and families, in addition to students who join. Parents have the option of opting their children out of the bilingual program, even if they qualify.”

Several participants discussed the social justice and advocacy programming already in place in their schools and communities to foster the healthy development of Latino students. According to one professional school counselor,

We have [two college/career readiness programs] both of which focus on getting minority students ready for the rigors of college, while providing intensive on campus support. The [X] program requires commitment from parents and heavily involves the parents in the academic success of their students. We also have clubs, such as *folkloria*, which help them embrace more of their culture through dance.

School counselors in this study also reported engaging resources for undocumented Latino youth. “We have many community based organization[s] (CBOs) that support many of our students who are undocumented. These CBOs support our undocumented Latino community by presenting workshops, providing mental health services, [and] after school tutoring.” Multiple participants identified their involvement in advocating for undocumented Latino students on both community and state levels. One participant reported,

I have spoken on their [undocumented Latino students] behalf at a [X] Community College Governing Board meeting expressing my support for granting in-state tuition for DACA-mented, helped research scholarships that accept applications from students

regardless of immigration status, and helped organize the first [State] DREAM Conference.

In addition to this social justice advocacy on individual, community, state and federal levels, professional school counselors in this study further disclosed information about their training which prepared them for working with Latino students.

Subtheme 2: Taking initiative for training and experience. Most participants in this study discussed the ways in which their graduate programs required a class on multiculturalism and its influence in currently working with Latino students. One participant related, “Working with such a high population of Latino students has been a big culture change. My multicultural class gave me the tools to become culturally sensitive and aware of differences.” Another participant shared,

Officially, my graduate program had a strong emphasis on social justice and multiculturalism, which were integrated into every course. However, I do not feel that all of these experiences were genuine, and I'm not sure they did impact my practice.

Similarly, some participants divulged that their school counselor preparation programs did not provide enough training in how to effectively work with Latino students. One participant reported, “I was educated at a mostly White institution, and was aware that cultural sensitivity is important and is an issue - but there was no drill down. I am aware that I am not as well trained as I should be, especially as I work in a highly diverse area.”

The majority of participants in this study reported that their own “on the job” experiences in working Latino students were the best preparation practices. One participant reported, “Nothing can teach us more than the daily work and experiences on the job.” Likewise, another participant disclosed, “The actual experience helps you find your style and teaches you how to

adapt to different cultures, values, and family systems in order to support student success.” Moreover, personal experiences of participants appeared to readily influence their advocacy and action as a school counselor. Being a part of the Latino culture impacted one school counselor when she divulged, “In my opinion being an immigrant (Latina) myself has been my biggest training.”

Professional school counselor participants identified multiple resources in which language barriers were addressed through ELL teachers, translators, and other Spanish-speaking students. These participants also took initiative to seek out knowledge about the Latino culture in order to provide counseling services in culturally sensitive and clear ways. “I have also learned Spanish as a second language so I will communicate with the students to provide information or instructions in Spanish that allow them to begin to successfully integrate into the English-speaking school.” Yet, another participant reported a lack of resources available to support school counselors to better communicate with their Latino students. She reported her quest in professional advocacy by stating, “I have been searching for ways to obtain grants or funding for education in Spanish. I think it would be important to have this opportunity so that I may better serve my students and their families (parents).”

While the majority of professional school counselors identified ways in which their advocacy efforts helped to break down the systemic barriers facing Latino students, two participants did not acknowledge the inequities or systemic barriers experienced by Latino students. One participant reported, “I understand that different cultures have different beliefs and different customs, however, all students are given the same opportunities to be successful and to have fulfilling lives and careers.” When questioned specifically about the citizenship of Latino students in their respective school, one participant disclosed, “I believe it is demeaning and

disrespectful to call our students by labels. If you want a label, try ‘American.’” Although few school counselors appeared to be unaware that not all Latino students have U.S. citizenship, there was clear evidence that the majority of participants embed social justice advocacy for Latino students in their daily work.

Discussion

Our analyses revealed that these professional school counselor participants, located in the most highly Latino populated U.S. states, keenly perceive the multiple levels of systemic barriers that Latino students experience in the school context. Consistent with prior literature (Stromquist, 2011), these systematic barriers ranged from conflict (both intra- and intercultural) to school-family communications and attitudes to issues of language barriers and documentation status. It is important to note that two school counselors demonstrated a significant lack of understanding of the systemic barriers facing Latino youth. One shared, “This issue needs to be reframed. What barriers are the Latino/Hispanic students *bringing* to the classroom? How can *they* more fully embrace studying, preparing assignments, engaging in educational activities, reading etc.? Educators already provide a fertile place to learn.” Yet, the majority of participants discussed the home and school roadblocks that continue to surface as systemic barriers in the academic success for Latino students. Importantly, the participants in the current study recounted several advocacy strategies that they engage in to reduce educational inequities for Latino students, including obtaining more multicultural competence training, learning Spanish as a second language, and building connections and referrals between culturally-competent community providers and Latino students and their families. These interventions parallel recommendations from experts in counseling Latinos (Arrendondo, et al., 2014; Villalba, 2007).

A recurring theme that emerged from participants in this study was that their prior schooling/training was critical to fostering the skills needed to effectively work with Latino students and families. As noted by several participants, hands-on experience was especially beneficial to their current work with Latino students. Yet, counselor educators, charged with cultivating the development of culturally competent professional school counselors, may encounter challenges when educating counseling students. Exposure to ethnically diverse groups, especially during counseling practicum and internship experiences, may be limited in certain areas of the country (i.e., those with low proportions of non-White populations). As population projections and future socio-demographic changes continue to impact the profession of school counseling (Paisley & McMahon, 2001), it is essential that professional school counselors receive professional development opportunities to enhance their multicultural awareness and sensitivity. Findings from this study also have several social justice implications in which school counselors and counselors-in-training can enhance their advocacy for Latino students within comprehensive and culturally responsive school counseling programs.

Social Justice Implications and Suggestions for School Counselor Preparation and Practice

By identifying and comprehensively understanding the perceptions of systemic barriers, professional school counselors can take an active role in social justice programming that supports the academic, personal/social, and career development of Latino students. Despite challenges, scholars have identified multiple interventions that support professional school counselors' social justice movements within the school setting (Dixon, Thicker, & Clark, 2010; Chen, Budianto, & Wong, 2010) and those targeting Latino academic success (Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007). Based on our findings, professional school counselors and counselors-in-training must continue to "learn a variety of components (e.g. values, history, beliefs) of other cultural groups

representing the students and their families with whom they work” (Griffin & Steen, 2011, p. 76). Social justice implications and suggestions for school counselor preparation and practice that support the academic, personal/social and career development of Latino students are outlined below.

Academic Development

Villalba (2007) encouraged counselors to reframe the challenges and barriers experienced by Latinos and focus on the strengths of bilingualism, biculturalism, and strong family ties as a manner in which to foster resiliency and academic achievement. Based on our findings centered on familial and cultural barriers, we further encourage strengths-based approaches to connect with Latino students and their parents/families on a variety of academic issues.

Professional school counselors may also consider developing formal or informal mentoring programs (Storlie & Jach, 2012) to extend current findings on advocacy and initiatives with Latino youth at their schools. Moreover, counselor educators must help prepare future school counselors to identify relationships between individual academic challenges and systemic barriers (Ratts et al., 2014) to assist Latino students with evident academic inequalities. Professional school counselors working with Latino students may consider tutoring or study programs outside of the regular school day or school setting (Storlie & Jach, 2012) as necessary outreach to this marginalized population.

Personal/Social Development

Working with Latino students can create numerous tasks for professional school counselors when considering issues of acculturation, immigration, language, religion and other sociocultural components (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002). Professional school counselors must look at this as an opportunity to work with Latino youth on personal/social issues because of the

familiarity students may have in seeing the school counselor at school every day. Professional school counselors need to be sensitive to both verbal and nonverbal communication among Latinos (Delgado-Romero, 2001) to address issues of intra/intercultural conflict as found within this study.

Through the lens of social justice, racial and ethnic identity models (Delgado-Romero, 2001) may be of assistance when educating school counselors-in-training in how to provide school counseling services to Latino youth to support their personal/social development. The use of an ethnic identity model such as Ruiz (1990) may continue to support the correlation of cultural heritage and positive mental health (Sue & Sue, 1999), helping to break down some of the systemic barriers facing Latino youth. Strong ethnic identities are protective factors for Latinos, particularly as they feel more positive about their ethnicity (Telzer & Garcia, 2009; Toomey & Storlie, 2015). Given participant perspectives about the systemic challenges faced by Latino students involving race/ethnicity, it is imperative that counselor educators prepare future school counselors to conduct needs assessments within their own schools to understand the barriers and strengths of various subpopulations of students. For instance, biased-based bullying and harassment among Latino students may be particularly problematic in some schools, whereas this may be a non-issue in other contexts. The development of anti-bullying crusades and support groups within and outside of the school setting may be of considerable benefit to Latino students on multiple levels (Storlie & Jach, 2012).

Career Development

Although career counseling in the school setting has gone through sporadic influxes of emphasis and importance through the history of school counseling (Schenck, Anctil, Smith, & Dahir, 2012), professional school counselors can advocate for a healthy career development

trajectory for Latino students by addressing external barriers. Professional school counselors have consistently taken a leadership role in promoting career development of each student, despite multiple demands for their time. Career development recommendations for Latinos have included an emphasis on understanding the cultural context of Latinos, being flexible in the career counseling process, choosing appropriate assessment instruments, and providing Latinos with a variety of career information (Fouad, 1995). These recommendations parallel our findings in that school counselors continue to take initiatives and seek out ways in which to connect with Latino youth facing systemic barriers (e.g. use of career genograms). School counselors and counselors-in-training interested in continually supporting and advocating for the healthy career development of Latino students must be willing to explore occupational experiences outside of the office (Storlie & Jach, 2012), in the community and public domain. Collaborating with vested stakeholders within the school and community to develop career fairs that bring in successfully employed Latinos is just one intervention through which systemic change can begin.

Limitations and Conclusions

Although findings of this study contribute to the knowledge base by illuminating the perspectives of school counselors, limitations are present in all research designs. Open ended, self-report questionnaires are subject to issues of social desirability. The use of online data collection presents a limitation in that nonverbal communication was not obtained, which may have provided greater depth and breadth among participant responses. Professional school counselors have the power to reduce the number of negative experiences that marginalize the experiences of Latino youth by advocating for opportunities that support academic, personal/social, and career equality. Future research is needed to reduce the roadblocks and barriers that Latino students encounter in schools, and for effective cultural competence training

of professional school counselors so that they can be effective advocates for social justice in schools for all students.

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