

Chapter 82

Addressing the Impact of Trauma in High Poverty Elementary Schools: An Ecological Model for School Counseling

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ABSTRACT

A positioned-subject qualitative approach was used to uncover multiple perspectives held by elementary school counselors as to how they interpret their work with children affected by trauma in high-poverty schools. As such, school counselors' knowledge of the impact of ecological factors that led to childhood trauma was examined. Findings indicated that complex and systemic trauma were common themes that informed the schools counselors' ability to advocate effectively for mental health programs for children in high poverty schools. This qualitative study also introduces an ecological and social justice (ESJ) school-counseling model for school counseling in high poverty elementary schools that demonstrates how social justice-oriented school counselors seek to meet the needs of their students with mental illness who come from high poverty backgrounds.

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INTRODUCTION

School counselors who work in high poverty schools face two challenges to traditional school counseling service delivery; first, they may discover that students suffer from institutional sources of oppression that may contribute to their problems and secondly, the traditional focus on helping students adapt to the school environment is indefensible when the environment is unjust in the treatment of students (Coyne & Cook, 2004). Many schools in high-poverty areas struggle to cultivate positive environments. Moreover, students who attend schools that are unjust and oppressive are at-risk of experiencing trauma in the forms of bullying, neighborhood gang exposure, or exceedingly harsh punishments from school personnel, (Kira, Lewandowski, Chiodo, & Ibrahim, 2014). Ignoring the dynamics associated with systemic trauma could produce chronic and acute threats to students' social inclusion, belonging, and identity formation (Kira, Lewandowski, Chiodo, & Ibrahim, 2014; Montenegro, & Matz, 2015), which could create harsh and punitive environments, rather than responsive and caring environments. Children educated in high-poverty schools exposed to punitive rather than sensitive and caring school environments are at risk of re-traumatization and increased mental health symptoms (Brown, 2016). The present study advocates the implementation of an ecological model of school counseling to better serve elementary-aged children who face complex, systemic trauma in their high poverty schools.

School counselors may successfully leverage their position as advocates to ensure that the school environment promotes cohesiveness and structure between stakeholders while implementing strategies and interventions for children with mental health disorders in their schools (i.e., teachers, students, and administrators). Such a system ensures the existence of compassionate environments for children with mental illness in high-poverty schools. Moreover, to provide cohesiveness and effective planning, knowledge related to the impact of environmental factors on the emotional health of children is imperative (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Brown, 2016). Ensuring that stakeholders across multiple systems have access to knowledge specific to their unique populations is a vital component to the success of high-poverty schools (Brown, 2016). While school counselors may be the first responders and primary advocates, fostering ecologically sensitive school environments requires the commitment of all school personnel. Additionally, due to the increased need for mental health services for low-SES students and limited access to resources within the community, sustainability requires the collaborative efforts of local, state, and regional stakeholders to identify alternative solutions to meet the emotional needs of students to prepare them to become healthy contributors to the school community.

Very little is known about the dynamics, processes, and functions of school counselors who serve successfully in high-poverty schools where mental health disorders are also prevalent. The American School Counselor Association (2016) recently provided guidelines to counselors seeking to promote positive, systemic change in their schools. Exploring school counselors' depth of knowledge surrounding the influence of ecology on the emotional wellbeing of children and their roles in eliminating structural barriers is essential for identifying how school counselors can best serve students with traumatization in low-SES areas. With this in mind, the following research questions guided the present study:

- What knowledge do elementary school counselors have about the impact of environmental factors affecting students from low-SES families?
- What are the perceived barriers that served to impede counselor leadership while serving students from low-SES families with mental health issues?

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