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## Perceptions of High School Counselors regarding Achievement Gap and Practice Barriers

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**Perceptions of High School Counselors regarding Achievement Gap  
and Practice Barriers**

by

Elijah Wood

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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Thesis Committee:  
Sara Devos, Chairperson  
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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives of high-school counselors regarding their experiences with role confusion, caseload, and a lack of funding that in turn creates stress. This study also investigates the perceptions of high-school counselors with regards to how their work closes the achievement gap and their personal experiences that exemplify assisting students with their academics. The study used qualitative, semi-structured interviews to investigate the perceptions of high school counselors. Three counselors participated in the study through virtual technology. Their personal perceptions of how their caseloads as well as their experience with role confusion caused them stress in their work are presented. This study shows that all three counselors experienced stress due to caseload, and role confusion and also confirmed that these concepts are barriers that interfere with assisting students. This study also shows that all the counselors had examples and beliefs that they contribute to closing the achievement gap in which lack of funding contributes as a barrier for the work of counselors. This study suggests that additional research is necessary to better understand the issues of oversized caseloads and role confusion in the human services community and also suggests similar studies be done with social workers.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Addressed Problem**

High school staff while an excellent resource to their students, are understaffed and do not get the credit they deserve when it comes to how they support their students. With issues such as role confusion, a demanding caseload, and lack of funding to be able to assist an entire school, stress as well as decreased job satisfaction has become a struggle for the counselors which in turn effect the students (Knudsen, Ducharme, and Roman, 2008). There are multiple factors that relate to this issue which will be discussed throughout this paper as well as addressing how counseling can assist students with their academics.

The pressure on the shoulders of counselors can be immense and with the recent activity of school shootings, school counselors should be utilized in hopes to reduce and prevent such things from happening. In fact, most school officials, including counselors, have to take legal action when students pose a threat to themselves or other students (Bailey, 2001). The tragedy about these incidents, is that school officials and counselors have been held liable in the past for failing to protect students from harm that could arguably be predicted (e.g., *Eisel v. Bd. of Educ.*, 1991; *Maynard v. Bd. of Educ.*, 1997). This can also be supported with student threats leading to future violence (Fitzgerald, 2001). It is possible that this could be due to caseload stress as well as role confusion with counselors. With there being numerous students assigned to the counselors, it may be difficult for them to assess the students properly.

### **Benefits of Counseling for Students**

An important resource to assist such students has been implemented in the school system and continues to be a necessity. The purpose of school counseling was a social justice approach



in order to assist students by closing the achievement gap as well as assisting students with the various social problems they experience throughout their youth (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The achievement gap describes the disparity between students with regards to academic performance. Not only is there evidence that counseling helps students with specific behavioral problems but there is some evidence that suggest that academics seem to improve with the utilization of the services (Brigman & Campbell, 2003). Having a resource that can benefit the quality school experience for students is something counselors can assure with their practices.

Academic success can be defined in numerous aspects including passing grades, high GPA, or the amount of credit completion. With colleges specifically, there is evidence that students seem to thrive when utilizing the counseling services in their locations. For example, there is research that supports that specific counseling services seems to have the most benefit for students. Draper, Jennings, Baron, Erdur, and Shankar (2002) conducted a study showing evidence that brief encounters with counselors seem to have more of a positive effect with academia than long therapeutic sessions. Another interesting article shows that the use of counseling services has a positive impact on GPA (Schwitzer, Moss, Pribesh, John, Burnett, Thompson, & Foss, 2018). Although these studies show the benefits of counseling services, more research is needed to replicate the data to determine if patterns exist between the use of counseling and academic performance.

GPA improvement is not the only example of how counseling can assist students. Lee, Olson, Locke, Michelson, and Odes (2009) conducted a study that measured retention in academics before and after the utilization of counseling services. Specifically, the authors wanted to see if there was any form of improvement with retention after the use of counseling services.

The results of this study showed a positive impact on retention in students who utilized the counseling services at their university. Another study (Schwitzer, Moss, Pribesh, John and Burnett (2018) found correlations between the improvement of GPA and a positive impact on graduation rates for students who utilized the counseling services.

This is not the only study that has shown improvement in retention with regards to counseling services. Wilson, Mason, and Ewing (1997) conducted a similar study where the measurement of retention after the utilization of counseling services. The results were similar in which a positive impact on retention were observed for those who were using the counseling services. However, there was an interesting extra component with this article. There were students who requested and did not request the services and the authors concluded that the retention was higher for those who received counseling after requesting it.

Enrollment seems to also have significance for those who utilize counseling services. A study conducted by, Turner, and Berry (2000) found interesting results about college students and their enrollment. There was also a positive impact on enrollment rates in semesters were higher for students who received counseling before classes started. Not only does there seem to be improvement with academics as a result of counseling, but motivations to start college as well as stay in college seem to also show positive results. Further, the authors found that 70% of the participants admitted that their personal problems have made it difficult to excel. (Turner & Berry 2000). However, these studies are only specific to college students and it would be grander if similar results resonated with students in high school, middle school, and elementary school. Of note, specific forms of therapy in counseling seems to have positive outcomes for students.

Draper, Jennings, Baaron, Erdur, Shankar (2002) sought to see if psychotherapy with college students would help them succeed academically.

While academic improvements can be seen by the increase of grades as well as GPA, one could argue that college students specifically struggle with issues including dropout and motivation. It is possible however that counseling can help students maintain motivations to academically succeed as well as reduce dropout rates. In a study conducted by Bishop and Brenneman (1986) 86% of students who were considering dropping out or transferring continued their college education for at least one semester. This was another example of positively impacting retention. While this article may be a little outdated along with no guarantees that every student continued school, it does that indicate that guidance may assist with reducing dropout rates.

A similar study was done a decade later. Boyd, Friesen, Hunt, Hunt, Magoon, and Van Brunt (1996) conducted a similar study. Students were subjected to counseling programs that were meant to specifically improve academic performance as well as retention. In this study, 64% of the students stayed enrolled for four semesters. It would seem that counseling services can be useful not only for academic improvement, but also for reducing dropout rates and increasing the students' persistence.

### **School Counselor Stressors**

School counselors deal with a multitude of stressors which include role confusion, burnout, large caseload, and most likely feel overworked (Kruger, Botman, & Goodenow, 1991; Mills & Huebner, 1998). This could easily be discouraging to newly staffed counselors and with the caseload being as large as it is, they most likely will have similar issues with burnout and

large caseloads. Burnout tends to also be associated with non-counseling duties as well as yearly progress tests and caseload (Bardhoshi, Schweinle, & Duncan, 2014). Another factor contributing to the problem is that the caseloads that school counselors work on most likely are as big as they are due to lack of staffing as well as overpopulated schools.

High school counselors themselves deal with high stress with their work in which claims of role ambiguity, role conflict, and work overload tend to be what make their jobs most difficult (Falls & Nichter, 2007). However, it is possible that the work efficiency of school counselors would be increased if they did not have such stressors in their field. When factors such as caseload being reduced and social support being increased, the burnout with school counselors is reduced and they also have an improved sense of self-efficacy (Gunduz, 2012). With this being the case, it would seem that when there is a lack of counselors, not only do the students suffer if they are not able to get their needs met, but counselors as well suffer backlash from the caseload being unmanageable due to the large size.

The role confusion can also be a stressor for counselors because there is not always a clear-cut understanding about their job descriptions. Many counselors report that they feel extreme stress because of not fully understanding their identity in which other jobs such as social work seem to also relate (Knudsen, Ducharme, and Roman, 2008). Counselors having the stress of not knowing where and how they are supposed to assist their clients will more than likely effect the clients. Counselors and social workers need to have the confidence that can be observable by clients whether they are students or adults.

As could be speculated, the opposite can have numerous benefits when it comes to a role identity. When anyone, regardless if they are a counselor or not, has a positive self-concept, role

clarity, and job satisfaction, they achieve a sense of wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). While counselors should try hard to find ways to achieve these ideals, it can be difficult if the role confusion comes from the job itself. Work from both counselors as well as supervisory staff should collaborate in understanding the struggles. However, such struggles would likely happen less if more counselors and social workers were hired for the profession, they were academically prepared.

This likely would not happen to counselors if more funding was put into their program. Schools likely struggle with hiring a multitude of counselors, social workers, and psychologists simultaneously which may be why there is role confusion for counselors. This likely would not happen if schools had the funding to hire more counselors and other human services workers. While the No Child Left Behind policy has shown numerous examples on how its methods hinder academics, there is evidence that counseling can benefit academics. While subjects like math, reading and science are important, putting resources in human services to maintain the mental health of students is just as crucial in academic success (Bishop & Brenneman, 1986).

### **Factors from Student Issues**

When it comes to academic success, creating environments that best support the students should be implemented in schools to the best of the district's ability. However, there are numerous issues that students face that can easily affect their progress in school. For example, Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, and Coulter (2012) conducted a study about cyberbullying in schools and found that the victims reported lower school performance as well as lower attachment to schools. Bullying has had a large impact on students and adolescents specifically, have a higher chance of either being involved with bullying, being a victim, a perpetrator or both

(Craig, Harel-Fisch, Fogel-Grinvald, Dostaler, & Hetland, 2009). The issue of bullying may not appear directly related to student experiences, it does relate a great deal when it comes to students' educational engagement and academic performance. Adolescents who are bullied tend to miss more school, show poorer school achievement, as well as suicidal risk (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007).

Bullying is not the only stressor with children and young adults. While bullying is a struggle that many students deal with during the school hours, there are issues in the home environment that can also affect a student's academic success. When children enter the age of adolescence, and also experience some sort of violence in their home environment, they are more likely to experience issues in school involving academia, peer relationships, and relationships with teachers (Dawud-Noursi, Lamb, & Sternberg, 1998). These challenges also influence the other students as well. The students who struggle with troubled families tend to have lower test scores which ultimately affect the scores of their peers with decreased overall scores as well as increase misbehavior in classrooms (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2010). While blame should not necessarily be put on these students, it is clear that issues that students face in their home and school environment affect their academics.

Violence is not the only thing that can hinder student achievement. Neglect can also have a detrimental impact when it comes to academic success. When there is parental involvement with students during their time in high school, there are improvements in academics as well as emotional functioning while students who do not have much parental involvement tend to struggle (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). There is also evidence that some sort of engagement,

whether it is from parents or other trusted peers, tends to also have a positive impact on academic success as well as mental health (Li & Lerner, 2011; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). This indicates that some sort of support may be needed in order for students to do the best they can do with regards to academia.

Sometimes teenagers struggle with issues that are not related to bullying or abuse. When it comes to mental health, there are numerous sources for where it can stem from. For example, students that struggle with problematic acne are associated with depressive and anxiety driven symptoms as well as suicidal tendencies (Purvis, Robinson, Merry, & Watson, 2006). The conclusions of this article also stated that more attention should be paid to students and their mental health. The best people who can do this are the counselors in the schools as well as other trusted adults.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this paper is to focus the perceptions high school counselors have with regards to how their work impacts student academic achievement and their perceptions on what stressors interfere with their work. The second focus is how counselors perceive their stressors and how a lack of funding can be a barrier for closing the achievement gap. Counselor's perceptions on caseload and role confusion will also be involved with this paper. The main goal is to see if the perception match with previous studies regarding the same issues.

There is plenty of evidence that shows how counseling can help college students with their academics, however there is a lack of research in similar studies for high school students. In the current study, interviews will be conducted with local school counselors. This will be done with qualitative interviewing relating to discussions such as stressors, and experiences where

they were successful with their assistance to the students. Factors such as grade improvement, GPA improvement and behavioral differences will also be a part of the qualitative questions. All questions will be open ended. There will be questions that will be asked with regard to what specific factors are causing possible stressors as well as personal feelings about the work.

Requesting interviews with local counselors creates a convenient sample for this study and as many counselors as possible will be contacted during the study's timeframe. By interviewing counselors about their experiences, more insight about their work as well as their experiences with youth academic improvement will be obtained. Another outcome may be encouraging more research on this topic. The reason for gathering this much information is because this paper will also address the lack of funding that counselors have through their work. While the work of counselors may assist with students in their academics, the stress and role confusion may put the counselors in a significant disadvantage

With the interview putting the counselors in a position to critique their career as well as their experiences, it is possible that sensitive subject matter will come into play with the interviews. In order to address the possible sensitive personal subject matter as well as well as unsettling feelings, the recruitment email will give a short summary of what will be studied, and more information will be included with the consent form. This will allow the counselors to decline the request. Confidentiality will be addressed in by informing the counselors that their personal information will not be shared through or after the interview process. The counselors will also be able to decline questions or choose to not proceed with the interview if they believe that they are not able to do so.



## **Relation to Social Work**

The reason the researcher decided to do a project involving School counseling primarily relates to the researcher's interest in the occupation as well as the effectiveness of the practice. What has also expanded the researcher's curiosity about the topic was information from peers as well as superiors that school counselors as well as school social workers tend to not get paid enough for the work they do. It has been brought to the attention of the researcher that case load as well as the confusion of roles has become a significant issue for counselors and social workers regardless if they work in the school or not. This paper is an attempt to bring the issue into discussion as well as provide possible solutions.

There has been research on the benefits of counseling services for college students as well as the positive outcomes that have related to academic success and improvement. However, there is a lack of research of the impact high school counselors can have on student academic performance which needs to be further examined. With the increased school shootings, multiple accounts of mental health issues, and academic difficulties due to policies such as the No Child Left Behind, school counselors may be the force that can effectively assess these situations as well as provide solutions.

While school counselors are not the only human service workers that deal with oversized caseload, social workers likely can relate to the stress of the overload of clients. Social workers also assist clients with mental health issues as well as provide resources similar to school counselors. Both roles provide for the therapeutic needs of students as well as advocate for students dealing with certain psychosocial insecurities. While both occupations require different

degrees, there is overlap with the duties of the workers and it is likely that both can relate to various experiences.

Advocating for those who need assistance is also a component that relates to both social work and counseling. Whether it is a school counselor who is assisting a student that is struggling with abuse, or a child protective services worker providing the same assistance, both have a duty to advocate. This essay is meant to support that advocacy as well as provide the argument that these workers are under-appreciated for the amount of work that is put in to helping others.

If more research is conducted to show that the work done by school social workers and school counselors is essential for assessing and managing mental health, perhaps more funding and efforts can be put into programs that not only support the clients, but the workers as well. Mental health support as well as the quality of life is just as deserving to human service workers as it is the clients. However, when it comes to the relationship between worker and client, an issue with one affects the other. A human service worker cannot properly do their job when they work with substantially high caseloads and have a lack of support. When the worker cannot properly do their job as efficiently as possible, it affects the clients. Perhaps more research shows that improvements can be made for both ends of the relationship, or support can be implemented into the practice.

The focus of this paper will stay within the practices of high school counselors. The findings of this paper may provide insight that high school counselors need to be given more resources and support to do their job effectively. Putting time, effort, and resources into the places that lead to academic success as well as proper assessment to mental health will ultimately

create positive outcomes for high school students and society as a whole. In order to properly articulate an argument that school counselors need more funding, this current study will explore the following questions- What are the perceptions of high school counselor's with regards to the achievement gap and do high school students struggle when issues such as funding, caseload, and role confusion become an obstacle for the practice?

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

With examining the reasoning of these questions, research on counselor's stressors will be examined in this chapter as well as the gaps and patterns in the literature. The hypothesis of the study will be that all of the counselor's experience job stress from role confusion, oversized caseload, Review on the reasoning on why there may be a lack of funding for counseling services will also be reviewed. Further, there will be discussion about what criteria is involved with regards to funding in various schools including laws such as the "No Child Left Behind Policy."

### **Impact on Crises and Interventions**

In order to advocate and support the work of school counselors, it is important to understand why student's need their assistance. Students consistently need help from their counselors for dealing with a multitude of issues. For example, crisis such as abuse can create serious behavioral issues that impact children in their environments including anxiety, depression, and conduct disorders (BoneyMcCoy & Finkelhor, 1995; Malinosky-Rummell & Hansen, 1993). This section will review the multitude of crises' that student's deal with as well as the ways counselors have assisted them.

Crises that occur involving children that affect school communities include factors such as violence, natural disasters, and abuse (Brock, Sandoval, & Lewis, 2001). Many of these types of experiences could easily hinder students to excel in their academics and become the focus in their life. Not only do behaviors become influenced from such trauma, but disasters whether they are natural or not can negatively influence a child's development (Boothby, Strang, & Wessels,

2006). When families cannot turn to therapeutic resources outside of the home, a school should be a resource for children and young adults to turn to when they have significant struggles.

Interventions have already been attempted to assist students and children. A study from Allen, Burt, Bryan, Carter, Orsi, & Durkan (2002) examined if newly graduated students who studied School Counseling had any sort of intervention training during their education. While approximately 10 percent of the 236 individuals reported that they had a class devoted to intervention techniques, 64 percent reported having some sort of exposure to intervention techniques at some point during their time in college. This statistic demonstrates that work is being done to teach school counselors about intervention techniques.

The efficiency of these interventions also must be evaluated in order to argue its need in school environments. Self-efficiency as well as stability are measurable factors that can make a valid argument for assessing crisis intervention strategies/programs. On the topic of school shootings, schools have made attempts to help intervene with such acts. For example, the school shooting in Cleveland, also known as the Stockton school shooting, had drills before the shooting incident on playground equipment. This intervention resulted in saved lives when the shooting occurred (Poland, 1994). Intervention techniques as well as follow-up techniques have significant impact when it comes to a counselor's job. It is said in the American School Counselor Association that the professional school counselor's primary role is to provide direct counseling service during and after the incident (Bowers & Hatch, 2005). The support that is needed from school counselors comes directly from their job description.

## **Funding in Schools**

One of the aspects this paper will address is the lack of funding that counselors have that could assist them in their work as well as their students. This section will address what literature has to offer with information about funding into schools. There will be topics addressing budget cuts as well as policies that have interfered with school funding as well as where the priority lies with regards to how the government pays their schools.

Unfortunately, it is not the success of intervention as well as the success in other forms of mental health services that gives schools the funding they need. Consequently, when it comes to rural schools, principals may not be as supportive in the importance of supervision with regard to school counselors (Bardhoshi & Duncan, 2009). This lack of supervision also can have a hindering aspect to the work school counselors have because a high-quality relationship with a supervisor as well as the support from other staff have shown to have a buffer effect on emotional exhaustion when issues like caseload become stressors (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005).

In fact, when budget cuts are needed in schools, school counselors are one of the many that seem to suffer from the cuts. A study from Freelon, Bertrand, & Rogers, (2012) showed that after principals all over the state of California were surveyed about economic budget cuts, counselors were laid off due to lack of funding. Regardless if the counselors had done well in their career, they suffered immensely due to money being the primary issue.

There have been dramatic shifts through the history of education. Competition became a national issue between the United States and Russia during The Cold War era, but also with other countries with a numerous plethora of categories. One of those categories became

education. Throughout the 90s and early 2000s, the United States was not meeting as high of standards compared to some other countries in which the federal government decided to make a policy to motivate schools and teachers to strive higher so that the reputation of the United States in regard to education would also increase (DeSilver, 2017). The alleged problem of the United States not living up to education standards became widespread enough for elected officials to believe that the entire nation was needing some sort of education reform.

In order to understand why, on a state level funding can be significantly reduced, one must look at some past policies. The No Child Left Behind Act was established in 2002 and had many goals to reform education. The overall goal of this act was to use standardized testing as a means to close student achievement gaps as well as bring schools to a certain standard with regards to reading and Mathematics. All students throughout the United States were expected to meet the standards that were in place with the No Child Left Behind policy by 2014 (Klein, 2018). This act also affected the funding for schools in which the schools that were meeting the standards set in place by the federal government were given more funding while schools that were not meeting the expectations had less funding. The bill for this act had gone through the Congress in 2001 and was signed by President George Bush in 2002.

The reasoning for this act was due to competitiveness against other countries. However, when certain schools don't meet the criteria when it comes to test scores, they can be seriously underfunded and if the school is not able to meet standards after so many years, they can be closed altogether which could lead to job loss (Thompson, 2018). If grants become difficult for schools to obtain due to test scores, it most likely the school's top priority to focus on putting funding in areas such as math, English, and science. However, there is evidence that the

utilization of counseling services seems to assist with student academia. Not only would this influence funding to be put into mental health services but it would also benefit students as well as counseling staff.

### **Critiques on Counselor Research**

While there is plenty of literature on how counseling services can be beneficial for those who are struggling, there is little literature that mentions the added benefits counselors have on student academics. While school counselors must keep records and report concerns about students, they likely do not get the long-term feedback that they need in order to understand how they are specifically helping their students. When counselors have caseload stress as well as role confusion, it is likely difficult for them to know if their services are helping the students academically. It is also likely that counseling services in schools are not directly improving student's grades, but rather assisting students with their social problems during their grade school years. More importantly, if additional evidence can show that the work from counselors and school psychologists has a positive influence on academics, perhaps the stigma of needing counseling will reduce.

Falls and Nichter (2007) specifically conducted work involving interviews with numerous counselors about their stress. Their experiment was to observe the stressors that school counselors from a high school setting experience throughout their day. The way they conducted their interviews came from a purposeful sampling perspective in which sampling was easy to obtain. All of the individuals who participated in the study were from a Southern city and the authors attempted to gather a diverse sample. They interviewed clients that were men, women,



new employees and veteran employees, and from multiple ethnic groups/backgrounds. The interviews were then conducted with a face to face perspective in the offices of the counselors.

Even though this is a similar style I would like to conduct with this thesis, it is important to point out limitations of gathering a sample in this format. It is more efficient to get a sample that is random and wider range. A random sample of counselors from multiple regions could provide more efficient results in the possible patterns that might occur with the interviews. It may be possible that the patterns in the works of Falls and Nicher (2007) may only apply to their specific location rather than all counselor's stress. There is convenience of using a sample in close proximity with connections to the method of this experiment. There's likely less time taken in conducting interviews as well as obtaining sample size.

There is also an issue with only interviewing counselors that are directly related to the phenomenon of stress. While the authors are attempting to better understand the reasoning for counselor stress, it is also important to see the impact the possible stress can have on all counselors. These authors only interviewed counselors that fit the criteria of job stress. This can greatly affect the results if the authors were attempting to see how many counselors deal with such stress. If the authors were able to interview a random sample of counselors overall, they would not only be able to see the quality of the problem but also the quantity.

One specific quality that I believe this article articulated well is utilizing open-ended questions. This allows the counselors being interviewed to provide examples as well as specifics information related to their experiences. While it can be beneficial to also have close-ended questions in order to see patterns, it also has the potential to run into the issue of generalization. Open-ended interviews contribute to quality research by showing individual significance. There

may be multiple reasons why counselors feel certain stress which can be found better with open-ended compared to closed-ended questions.

With this paper, I hope to conduct a similar method of gathering information. Interviewing counselors who work with students will provide necessary information to gain more insight in to counseling and how it can positively impact students and their academic performance. More will be discussed in the next chapter on the specific methods. As previously discussed, there is plenty of research about college students related to counseling and academic improvements. However, there could be more research on how counseling for high school students effects their academics. Similar to the study Falls and Nichter (2007) conducted, I will be interviewing school counselors as well as possibly youth counselors and learn what they have experienced when working with students who struggle in their academics.

### **Qualitative Interviewing**

There are many benefits to qualitative research have to do with the concept of personal experience. Due to the lack of materials and time to conduct a quantitative study, a qualitative interview was more appealing because it would focus on the personal experiences of the local counselors and then there could be a comparison from their personal experience to the already conducted research on other counselors. To gather such information, utilizing open-ended interviews to obtain personal stories is a great way to understand personal experiences (Seidman, 2012).

There is also the concept of subject when it comes to using qualitative interviewing. When it comes to science and research, there is a major difference in studying natural sciences and social sciences. It can be argued that because the focus on this study involves counselors and

their work that this study revolves around social sciences. Because of the subject in this study, qualitative interviewing would be efficient considering there are people able to tell their stories compared to natural sciences in which objects cannot have explanatory dialogue. Utilizing the ability to learn from personal stories can also be an advantage in understanding the experience from the interviews as well as reduce the possibility in generalizing ideas that may have significant individualistic attributes.

There are many types of interviews that can benefit in understanding personal experience. There are structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews that are used for a multitude of reasons that benefit the research. While structured interviews assist in organizing and pre-planning so that the format is tightly focused, it lacks the ability to create in-depth data (Alsaawi, 2014). While this type of research assist researchers in gather the information they are specifically looking for, it lacks the ability for individualistic attributes for the interviewees which can be helpful in learning unanticipated patterns (Alsaawi, 2014). Elaboration is difficult as well when there is too much control form the researcher.

Unstructured interviews have the opposite affect that structured interviews have. Throughout the interview, the outcomes are unpredictable in which the elaboration leads to a multitude of directions. These interviews tend to have a relaxed atmosphere which can have some negative outcomes such as interruptions, off topic conversations, and unpredictability on elaboration (Dornyei, 2007). While this can assist researchers specifically studying phenomenon, it also arguable makes the research too broad.

The semi-structured method of interviewing has aspects of both structured and unstructured forms of interviewing. This method is arguably the best for interviewing social

sciences because it has structural aspects for staying on a general topic while also giving interviewees the opportunity to elaborate about the topic (Bryman, 2008). The open-ended questions have been efficient in not only observing phenomenon but also to narrow the subject matter so that the interviewees can stay on topic while also being able to share their personal stories. This will be the form of interviewing that will be used and be more described in the methods section of chapter three.

## **Chapter 3 Methods**

### **Goals and Purpose**

The current study will examine the perceptions of high school counselors with regards to connecting their work to academic achievement and it will also explore counselor perceptions job stress that effects the practice of school counseling. This chapter will focus on the specifics of how the study will be carried out with details including limitations and population. There will also be sections that will include: study design, interview questions, sampling, data collection, procedures, and protection of the human subjects. The purpose of this study is explore the perceptions of school counselors and how they believe contribute to academic success of students as well as analyzing the barriers the interfere with their practice.

While there is evidence that school counselors can assist students with their academics, numerous issues and barriers interfere with their practice as addressed in chapter one and two. With issues such as role confusion and oversized caseloads creating a strain with the work of school counselors, assisting students becomes more of a challenge for the counselors which should be avoided for the benefit of the students. With the use of qualitative interviews, counselors share their experiences in which their responses will be compared to the past research.

### **Study Design**

The purpose of this study is to explore academic success after students have utilized their high school counseling services as well as exploring the obstacles that interfere with the work of school counselors. Due to the limited amount of time and research concerning high school counselors, this current study will be exploratory. Using a qualitative form of research was

appealing and convenient for this study and with counselors having such busy schedules, creating a simple interview would not only be efficient for the counselor's time, but also efficient for the researcher to not rely on digital responses from the counselors. There are also strengths of using a quantitative research approach such as quickly gathering data and using statistical analysis. The exploratory methods will also be more convenient for this study and will possibly add some depth with the personal experiences shared by the counselors. The hope for this study is to obtain evidence that counseling assists with academic achievement and that more funding should be put into counseling services in schools to better assist students.

The limitations in this study will be involved in the sampling. With the limited time and money for this study, the participants will be from a convenient sample of 10 local counselors in the area of St. Cloud MN. A better sample would be a random sample in a larger geographic radius as many extraneous factors could interfere with interviewing people who work in the same environment and location. Another limitation to this approach is interviewing counselors only involved in school settings. While narrowing down the type of counselor may be helpful in understanding that specific population, it can be seen as a limitation for general counselor research. While hearing personal experiences from counselors can be a great way to gain insight on perceptions, gathering data can arguably be subjective in which other studies such as a correlational study may be more reliable.

There is also a limitation with speaking to only counselors about the matter of academic achievement. It would be beneficial to not only get the intel from the counselors about their work in relation to academic achievement, but also the students. Interviewing only the counselors will be convenient but the students who have made achievements may have improved due to

extraneous reasons rather than just assistance from the school counselors. To fully understand the phenomenon, it would be beneficial to interview the students as well as the counselors which in turn is a limitation for this study.

There is also the possibility of a limitation involving reports from the counselors. It is possible that the counselors may not want to talk about the struggles they have with their work in which they may under report the severity of their possible strain. Some may feel that they should not say anything negative about their job because they may fear of repercussions from their superiors. It would be difficult to observe if the participants are stretching the truth which may skew the findings.

The researcher also received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to proceed with this data collection. The specific interview questions can be seen in Appendix C. While some researchers might view the questions as leading, they still give the interviewee to give yes or no answers about their experience. For example, the first question asks if the interviewee experience role confusion which gives them the opportunity to deny that they do. Because the questions are set up for counselors to also elaborate on why they have certain perceptions, the leading questions are still requiring personal experience for validation. Kvale (1994) states that leading questions can be described as testing the limits with perceptions. However, the counselors are free to elaborate and agree however they see fit which does not test any sort of limit.

The research questions with this study are as follows, what are the perceptions of high school counselors in caseload, role confusion, and lack of funding, what are the perceptions counselors have regarding their work and closing the achievement gap, and what is the impact on

high school students if the school counselors are facing these types of stressors? Exploring the personal experiences counselors have with students as well as their personal experiences with their work can reveal what is working with the interventions that are used as well as what needs to be improved for the students and counselors.

### **Researcher Role**

The role of the researcher in this study is to facilitate conversations with counselors in order to gain information from their personal experiences. While the researcher is the facilitator, he also is the interviewer and organizer. By connecting with the participants and scheduling meetings, the research has multiple roles that will assist with gaining the information from the participants. The role of the interviewees is to provide information with their consent. Their role is also a feedback position in which they are explaining the pros and cons of their career position.

Regarding personal relationships with the counselors, the researcher does not have any personal relationships with any of the participants. The researcher has not met any of these participants which will assist with reducing any biases as well as any power struggles. No power or any quid pro quo situations will be involved in the interviews. Creating a non-bias relationship will assist with creating appropriate boundaries between the interviewer and the participants.

While there are no personal biases to be aware of when it comes to the relations between the interviewer and the participants, the interviewer does have a significant opinion about those who work as therapists and counselors. The researcher thinks highly of those who help others socially in which the researcher needs to make sure that they do not let those opinions influence the findings of the research. The way the researcher will manage these feelings will be to record



specific quotes and to not speculate feelings and opinions from the participants that are not factual from their own words.

### **Sampling**

A convenient sample will be used for this study made up from at least 3 different high school counselors. The sample will be focused on high school counselors in which, depending on the availability, will include high school counselors willing to partake in the interview. This study will include counselors from all backgrounds including counselors who have been working for a limited number of years as well as counselors who have been in the practice for numerous years. This study while not putting focus on the personal backgrounds of the counselors, is also not searching for specific qualifications other than being employed as a high school counselor.

The way the researcher will obtain the sample will be to contact the counselors through email and phone to ask permission to interview them as well as give them the option to interview face to face or by telephone. The counselors will also be informed in the recruitment email that the researcher will wish to record the conversation for writing purposes only in which a second consent form will need to be filled out. The interview questions as well as the two consent forms will be in the Appendix section of this paper. The counselors then will be able to give consent to the interview giving them the option to not do the interview. The counselors will be from the closest three high school from the researcher's location for convenient reasons in order to get as many participants as possible. The names as well as other private information will be confidential and be excluded from the research in this project. The researcher will inform the participants of the confidentiality guidelines.

## **Data Collection**

This was a Quasi-experimental, qualitative interview that is semi-structured. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all videos were conducted through virtual interviews through the Zoom application. The interview will be given individually to each participant after a brief confidentiality statement before the questions. This will assure that the participant's privacy will be respected. These interviews will be scheduled with the availability of the counselors in which speaking to them on their own time will occur after scheduling with the counselors.

Open-ended questions will be asked with questions that will require examples and others that will not require examples. There will be questions that the participants will either respond with 'yes' or 'no' as well as questions that require elaboration. This specific instrument with the use of interview questions was created by the researcher in which reliability is minimal. While this creates some limitations to this study, there is a convenience with doing so due to the limited time to complete the study.

Participants will be asked to answer questions about the pros and cons with their specific occupation. These questions will relate to the various struggles the counselors deal with as mentioned in chapter two such as role confusion, caseload, and funding. All of the questions will be optional in which the participants can choose not to answer if they so please.

Participants will be asked questions relating to the ways they have assisted their students. These questions will relate specifically with the academic achievement aspect. Open-ended questions will also be involved with this category. Participants will also be asked to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the students they may or may speak about in which personal information is disclosed. As stated previously, the hypothesis is that all the counselors will have

experience role confusion and oversized caseload which has cause them stress. Their perceptions will also demonstrate that they believe that they do assist in closing the achievement gap as well as can provide an example of how they specifically assisted a student in their academics.

### **Procedure**

Using convenience sampling, gathering participants will be done through contacting school counselors via phone and email. The researcher will gather this information by searching school websites and the faculty within the district. This is how the participants will be approached in order to respect their boundaries while waiting for their permission to take part in the study. Prior to the interview, participants will be given brief information about the purpose of the study as well as the option to consent to the interview. Conversations about the interview will be scheduled and approved ahead of time in which each session should require 20-30 minutes of interview time.

For the convenience of gathering information of the interview, participants will be asked if they can be recorded to assist with accurate descriptions and quotes. For the participants who prefer to not be recorded, the researcher will instead write down their answers in order to respect the decisions of the participants. The participants will also be able to decide where and when they would like to be interviewed for their convenience. This will assist in the participants answering in a comfortable setting so they can feel that they can answer honestly.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Protecting the participants as well as ensuring confidentiality for this study is of great importance to the researcher. Identity as well as location of employment will be kept confidential in writing the results of this paper. Names of the participants as well as the names of the people

involved in the experiences of the participants will not be recorded and kept anonymous. Engagement between the researcher and the participants will be completely voluntary which will be explained to the participants before any interview will take place.

As stated previously, the purpose of the study as well as informed consent will be obtained before any interview. The nature of the questions will also be involved with the description and purpose of the study. Participants will be informed that if they choose to opt out anytime in the interview, it will be respected. This will help with communicating to the participants that this study is completely voluntary. At the end of the interview, the participants will also be able to ask any questions or address any concerns they have with the results of the interview as well as how the interview was conducted. This will provide accurate feedback for the researcher and how they can improve their interviewing skills.

### **Data Analysis**

The data will be analyzed with qualitative techniques. No software was used but similar coding techniques were conducted from a chronological aspect which can be beneficial to understanding open-ended responses (Jennings, 2005). Every coded word, description and quote were described in table 1, table 2 and table 3 from the order the questions were asked. Observing patterns as well as outliers to the responses of the counselors will be documented. Such patterns can include if counselors have the same reasoning for their stressors as well as similar personal experiences with assisting students in their academics. The reason this is beneficial is because it will provide insight on the perceptions of counselors with their role as well as how they perceive the barriers that cause them stress.

**Summary**

The study will explore the relationship between academic achievement and the utilization of school counseling services in high schools. The study will analyze the barriers within the practice of counseling in schools with relation to role confusion, funding, and caseload.

Interviews will be used in this study with a convenient sample of the local school counselors in three high schools. After obtaining consent from the counselors to participate in this voluntary interview, questions involving their job as well as their experiences will be obtained with a qualitative approach.

## Chapter 4: Results

### General Findings

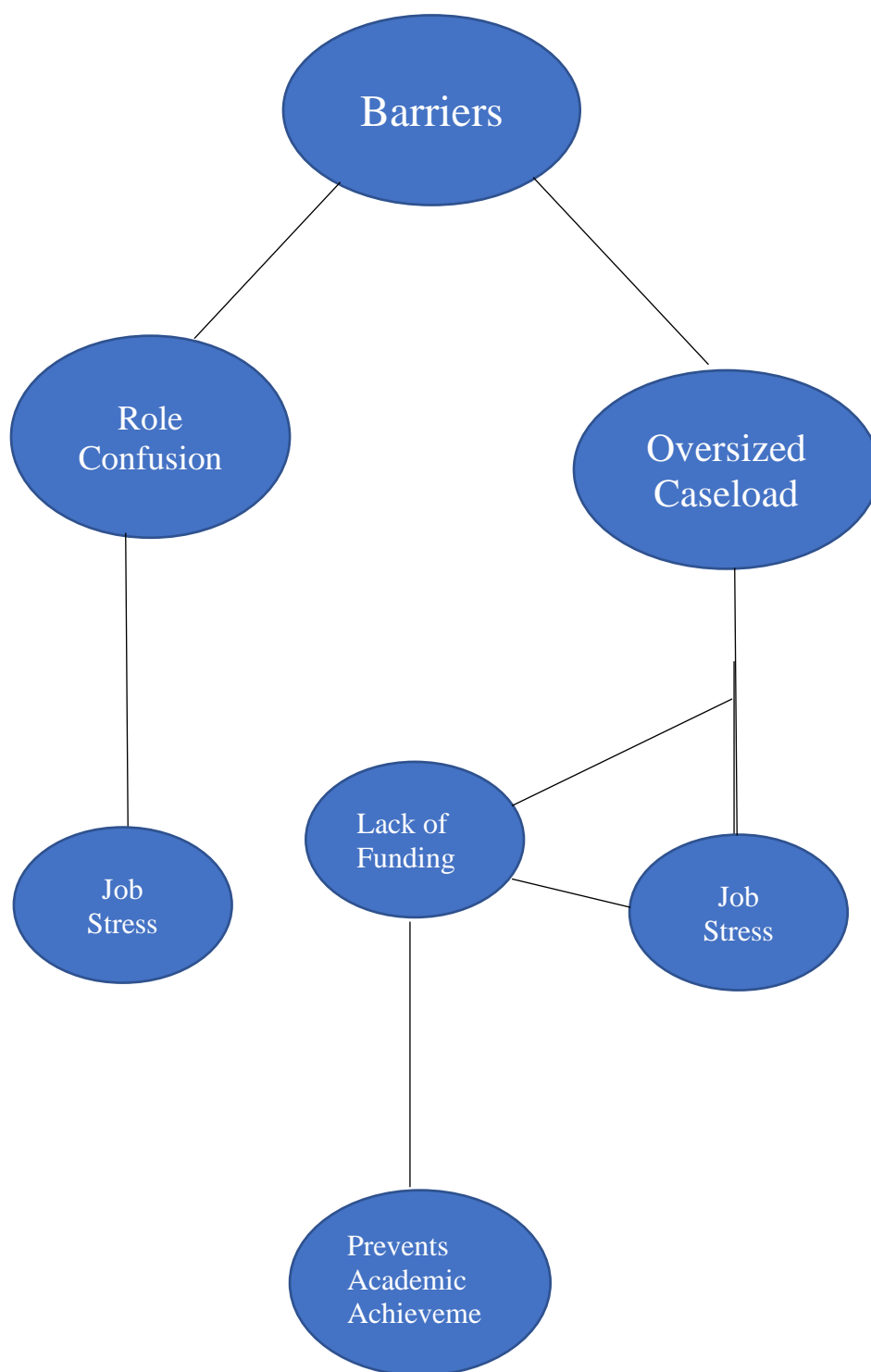
The findings in chapter four are based on three interviews with high school counselors within the local area of St. Cloud, Sauk Rapids, and Sartell, Minnesota. There are seven explanatory themes that relate to job stress, the achievement gap, and barriers to the counseling practice. The seven themes given to all three counselors were: experiencing role confusion; role confusion causes stress; experiencing oversized caseload; more funding; caseload causes stress; counselor's role on the achievement gap; and assisting a student with academic achievement. These themes provide insight about the perceptions high school counselors have about their work as well as their perceptions of the barriers that interfere with their practice.

All of the themes will be explored in this chapter in which chapter five will discuss the meaning in the results as well as what researchers can do next to gain more information about high school counseling. The barriers related to caseload and role confusion can be observed in relation in figure 1 as well as the stress that comes from the barriers and the lack of funding that could assist the system. The figure also demonstrates the connection on how job stress and a lack of funding can interfere with student academic achievement. The framework from the interview was heavily influenced from a study done by a study conducted by Stead, Dobbie, Angus, Purves, Reith, and Macdonald (2016). While the study does not have much to do with counselors, it codes text from individuals and organizes themes that relate to the text that is discussed. The same was done for this study to fully examine the text that is given from the interviewees as well as connecting their experiences to the themes of the paper.

The study used coding to two specific barriers which are role confusion and caseload as well as the effect of how a lack of funding is incorporated with the existence of these barriers. Essentially, the lack of funding results in the caseload being so large for the counselors. Both concepts were related to job stress from the perspective of the counselors. Every counselor was asked questions relating to these concepts and were asked what their opinions were with the concepts in relation to their practice.

### **The Nature of the Interviews**

Each counselor was contacted by the researcher via email using the staff directory from the local high school websites. The counselors that replied were required to complete and sign two forms of consent regarding audio recording as well as participation in the interview. Each counselor was given the opportunity to elaborate on the questions asked and were given as much time as they needed to fully explain their perception of the question. The conversations took place over zoom to accommodate with the Covid-19 pandemic in which the conversation was then audio-recorded with a mobile device. Before any recording and interviewing was completed, the participants signed the consent forms and turned them in to the researcher.

**Figure 1***Barriers and Job Stressors*



## **Interview 1**

The highlights of the first interview can be observed on Table 1. In regard to role confusion, the interviewee confirmed that they believe there is role confusion in their practice. One of the main concepts discussed with this role confusion was administering tests. They also expressed how their stress stems from not having enough time throughout the day to complete their tasks due to having other roles that interfere with their job. The interviewee also explained that administering tests is not part of the Counselor National Model and according to the ASCA, (2012) testing is not a primary focus in the practice of school counseling.

With regards to caseload, this interviewee also stated that they experience an oversized caseload which results in this counselor having a difficult time trying to meet the needs of all of their students. They have expressed how they are not able to meet with every student because there is just not enough time in the day due to the caseload. They have also expressed that they feel stressed due to this issue because they have to focus primarily on seniors graduating as well as testing. With regards to funding, this counselor agreed that more funding would assist their work because it would reduce the caseload and assist with helping students.

With regards to the achievement gap, this counselor agrees that the work that is done by counselors assists with helping students succeed in their academics which in turn, assists with closing the achievement gap. Ideas such as providing access to materials, as well as providing services to parents and children in their home were brought up by the counselor. These ideas are specifically how this counselor sees how their practice benefits students in academia as well as closes the achievement gap. The example of that assistance that was brought up from the counselor involved a student who was struggling to graduate.

**Table 1***Counselor Interview 1*

<b>OVERARCHING THEME</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>SAMPLE OF CODED QUOTE</b>
Experiencing Role confusion	Described how more administrative aspects such as standardized testing.	“The National Model says we should not be spending our time coordinating standardized testing, but we do.”
Role Confusion causes stress	Described stress due to not having enough time when tasks are placed in other areas.	“It is stressful because there is never enough time in the day to get everything done.”
Experiencing Oversized Caseload	Described that caseload is a huge barrier in which getting to every student is too difficult due to the caseload.	“Hugely, we are not getting to every student we need because there is not enough time in the day.”
More Funding	Described that more funding would assist in hiring more counselors to assist with the large number of students.	“There is no doubt that more funding would help, we would love to hire another counselor.”
Caseload causes stress	Described how the caseload issue gets in the way of giving the proper attention to every student.	“I have to pay attention to my seniors right now even though I have those in other grades who are failing and at times I feel I am spinning plates.”
Counselor’s role on the achievement gap.	Described that the role is systematic in which working with them on those separate issues assist with academics.	“We assist with everything from access to materials at home to things that parents, and children struggle at home affects achievement.”

**Table 1 continued***Counselor Interview 1*

Assisting a student with academic achievement	Described a time when a student struggled with being new to the country and struggled with language in which talking with the counselor assisted in helping graduate.	“She worked her tail off and would stop by weekly and we would talk through things and she told me she was thankful for helping her get through school.”
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**Interview 2**

The student was struggling with a new environment and a new language due to immigration and would often meet with the counselor for help. The result of the matter was that the student worked hard and eventually graduated with the help of a counselor who provided the resources they needed to succeed

The second interview can be observed on Table 2. The second interviewee also confirmed that they feel they experience role confusion. This counselor also described that they have tasks involving testing that are not related to the counseling practice. There are also tasks this specific counselor has to do such as approving teacher curriculums. Similar to the first interviewee, the main distinct roles from a counselor tend to be administrative roles that have more to do with testing than counseling.

This interviewee also expressed that this role confusion causes stress for them. With having to spend their time on testing, they have expressed that they are not able to meet the needs of the students they work with. They have expressed that because they are not able to reach out to all of their students, they often feel stressed. Not being able to meet the needs not

only likely causes stress for the counselors but also the students when they are not able to get the assistance they need.

This counselor also has expressed that they deal with oversized caseload. They have described that because they work with a caseload of 400 students, they are only able to work with the students that come to them. This counselor has confessed that because of this caseload issue, they are missing kids. The large number of students is too much to maintain with the short amount of time that the counselor has. Typically, their schedule is already booked, and the counselor's time is too limited to meet the high demand of 400 students.

This counselor has also expressed that the oversized caseload has caused stress for them. When multiple students come to the counselor with issues such as depression and anxiety, the counselor feels that they are not assisting enough. When there is a multitude of students that need specific time and assistance from the counselor.

When asking the counselor's opinion with regard to funding, they agreed that more funding would be beneficial for assisting counselors. They explained that they would love to add another counselor to their team to reduce the caseload. They even explained that the number could be reduced to 300 for each counselor if their school specifically paid another counselor to assist with the caseload. This was also consistent with the first interviewee.

When discussing the achievement gap, this counselor has expressed that they believe counselors contribute a great deal in student's academics. Specifically, this counselor has expressed that they can be a source for students who need a trusted adult in the school. The

**Table 2***Counselor Interview 2*

<b>OVERARCHING THEME</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>SAMPLE OF CODED QUOTE</b>
Experiencing Role confusion	Described administrative tasks such as Running Advanced Placement testing as well as signing off on other curriculums.	“Teachers have to do an audit on their curriculum and an administrator needs to sign off that they are following the curriculum and it does not feel like a counselor role.”
Role Confusion causes stress	Described stress due to not being able to meet the needs of the students due to time and tasks.	“Absolutely, through the recent years, there are kids with increased needs and I am not reaching the kids the way I would like to which puts stress on me.”
Experiencing Oversized Caseload	Described that because of caseload, they are not able to get what they need from the counseling services and also described the difficulty in assisting a large number of students.	“Yes, I have just under 400 students on my caseload. I only see who comes to me and I’m missing kids. I feel that most when I see that more than half of them are failing a class.”
More Funding	Described that more funding would assist in helping hire another counselor to reduce the caseload	“It would be great if we could hire another counselor to assist with the number of students. Just one more would reduce the caseload from 400 to 300.”
Caseload causes stress	Described that they feel they are not doing enough when multiple students are needing counseling services.	“Yeah, I think I feel that most when I have multiple students coming to me with depression and anxiety. I just feel that I am not enough.”

**Table 2 continued***Counselor Interview 2*

Counselor's role on the achievement gap.	Described that a counselor assists with students by providing them the skills and resources they need while also encouraging them and being there for them.	"Having an adult in the building who is on a student's side helps build advocacy skills on as well as assisting with developing skills and providing resources for students."
Assisting a student with academic achievement	Described a student who struggled with grades in which they were failing three classes and gave positive feedback to the counselor saying they assisted with encouraging them to improve their grades while also providing resources.	"I was one of the first people she wanted to come tell. She was failing three classes and by the end of the trimester, she had all As and Bs."

counselor also expressed that they can be a source of encouragement which in turn can motivate students to improve in their academics. Counselors also help in providing resources which contributes to helping student academic achievement according to the counselor.

The counselor told a story about how they assisted a student who was failing three classes. Apparently, the student came to them explaining that they were struggling and met with the counselor to get advice and resources. After some time and effort provided by both parties, the student came to the counselor requesting for the counselor for them to pull up their grades in which they were able to get grades to be As and Bs after assistance from the counselors. They thanked the counselor for all there help and expressed appreciation or assisting them. Bringing a student from failing grades to As and Bs also assisted in helping this student graduate.

### **Interview 3**

The third interview can be observed with table 3. The final interviewee also talked about role confusion in relation to her job. Similar to the other two counselors, the third interviewee agreed that the main role confusion came from administrative aspects. They described that they administer tests and do secretarial tasks that are not necessarily in their job description. They believe that what would help them would be to hire a secretarial staff to take on the tasks that are more related to their work compared to counseling. They described that it can be frustrating that they are performing tasks that are not a part of what they studied and trained for.

When asked if they have experienced stress due to the role confusion, they explained that they do experience stress because they are too busy with other tasks and cannot assist their students. They explained that because the students are stressed, the counselors are stressed because they do not have the time to assist the students when also needing to finish their other tasks. Specifically, they feel that they are not able to juggle the tasks when they know they should be checking in on students. They explained that they cannot check in with all the students they would like to because of how their separate role in administering tests and secretarial duties interfere with their time.

This counselor was also asked if they experience an oversized caseload. Similar to the other counselors, this counselor agreed that they have a caseload that is too large for a single counselor. They experienced a caseload of 450 students and described how that number is too large for any counselor to work with. Often, they feel that they are not enough to meet the needs of all the children in the school. They have also described how there are specific times of the year where there is a huge need for counselors to support the students and that there is not enough of

them to meet their needs. The ratio of students and counselors is uneven to the point where students are left behind in counselor support.

With regards to funding, the third counselor also agreed that more funding would assist the counselors in efficiently providing counseling services to the students. They also mentioned that support services do not always get more funding compared to other departments in schools. Specifically, they say that hiring just one more counselor would be efficient for reducing the caseload as well as distributing the administrative tasks that are assigned to the counselors. However, because counselors tend to not be on the priority list when schools receive their funding, they do not have enough funding to receive more assistance.

The third counselor also confirmed that they also experience stress due to the caseload issue. Not only does the large number of students make it difficult, but the counselor also states that they have a multitude of students who experience mental health issues. The third counselor described the stress to be imminent when there are too many students who need assistance from the counselor. This counselor also described how mental health challenges for students can make their job even more difficult even though the caseload between them and the other counselors are the same. Similar to the other counselors, the third counselor agreed that more funding is needed in order to be able to assist the large number of students.



**Table 3***Counselor Interview 3*

<b>OVERARCHING THEME</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>SAMPLE OF CODED QUOTE</b>
Experiencing Role confusion	Described that there are tasks that would better fit a secretarial staff member such as testing and other paperwork.	“There are things I do that I believe a secretarial staff would be better at doing like paperwork and testing in which I find myself doing tasks that are not what I trained and studied for.”
Role Confusion causes stress	Described stress due to students having stress and not being able to assist them due to a busy schedule.	“Yes, because the kids are stressed and they could use more check-ins which I just can’t juggle and I literally don’t have time.”
Experiencing Oversized Caseload	Described how there are not enough counselors to meet the needs for all the students.	“Yes, because there are tasks and 450 students on my caseload and there are certain times of the year where I feel there are not enough counselors.”
More Funding	Described that depending on the district, support services sometimes don’t get the funding needed in which more would assist students and counselors.	“Yes, we could hire another counselor to assist with the numbers. Sometimes support services do not get the funding they need if they are not on the priority list”.
Caseload causes stress	Described that the number of students has caused stress as well as having a large number of mental health students.	“Yes, even though we all have the same caseload, multiple students with mental health make it even more difficult and stressful.”

**Table 3 continued***Counselor Interview 3*

Counselor's role on the achievement gap.	Described that a counselor can connect with students and develop goals that can lead to success in school.	"Yes, because there are students who need some connection with someone to be successful and sitting down with a child and talking with other teachers, parents, and therapists can assist with creating goals."
Assisting a student with academic achievement	Described a student who was at risk of not graduating due to failing grades. After connecting with a counselor, the student has tried to improve in grades and is now lined up for graduation.	"He worked really hard and got ahead after failing a few classes. He and I worked together and in a groove in which he is now lined up for graduation."

With the concept of the achievement gap, this counselor described that students need some sort of connection with someone at the school to be successful. They say that something as simple as sitting and listening to a student as well as their parents can assist greatly to closing the achievement gap. According to the counselor, some specific ways they can assist in closing the gap involve working on goals and providing needed therapy for the students so that their personal issues do not interfere with their students academics.

The specific scenario where this counselor assisted a student in their academics involves grades and graduation. They worked with a student who was failing a few classes and was not going to be eligible to graduate. This led the student to seek help from this counselor in which they both worked on plans and goals to work on improving their grades so they could graduate. After assisting with the student and providing them with the resources and support they needed,

their grades improved, and they finished off the year with improved grades and eventually graduated.

The interesting patterns that can be observed in these interviews are that they not only agreed to all the questions, they all had similar reasons and answers to every question. They all agreed to feeling they do more administrative work with regard to caseload. They all agreed that counselors can close the achievement gap and that more funding would assist with the oversized caseload they all experience. Every counselor also agreed that they experience stress in their work due to the role confusion and caseload issues. All also assisted with helping students with their academics as well as assisted students to graduate.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

While a larger sample would have been more beneficial for this research, there are connections to the findings presented in previous research. These connections are present with this limited study, more studies from a quantitative perspective would present even more reliable evidence that counselors need more funding to provide the best care for their students. This study was explorative by nature and while the perspective of counselors could greatly assist in the understanding of their work, it can also benefit in understanding what flaws may be in the system they work in.

To summarize, all three counselors experienced similar feelings when prompted with the same questions. All three the counselors experienced job stress due to role confusion, and oversized caseloads. The three counselors also stated that they believe they need more funding in order to assist with these stressors. Interestingly, every counselor experienced similar role confusion which was not anticipated with this study. While it was hypothesized that each counselor would experience some sort of role confusion, the similarities in how each one of them experienced administrative roles was surprising to the researcher. All three counselors also agreed that a high school counselor contributes to closing the achievement gap. Each counselor also provided an example of how they specifically were able to help students with their academics.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The findings in the responses of the three participating counselors were consistent with all the themes that were presented. Not only did every counselor agree to the questions, they also

elaborated without much prompt. This can be a great start to future research because it may be possible that many counselors feel the same and future researchers will be able to replicate and enhance this form of qualitative research. If there is a pattern where a multitude of counselors feel the same with regards to lack of funding, perhaps this is more of a systematic issue that needs to be addressed. Not only can future studies benefit counselors with reducing their stress, but perhaps this paper can lead to also assisting students with their academics and overall well-being.

Even though this research was qualitative, numerous patterns came about even though each counselor was asked to elaborate on their own personal experience. This could possibly inspire other people to examine similar possible patterns with other human services workers such as social workers, psychologists, and sociologists. If similar qualitative research is done that is related to this study and more of the same patterns are found, it can possibly be generalized. This study also could possibly inspire more research on students in high school setting which could also be beneficial for healthy school systems.

While there are patterns that can be seen with the answers that were provided by the counselors, this study design and methods were not ideal with regard to sample size. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has shut down numerous schools within the local area and connecting with the school counselors became a difficult task. For the sake of time, the researcher had to utilize the limited information and resources available when recruiting people to partake in the study. Numerous counselors were sent emails and phone calls from the researcher, but only three were able to participate. There also was a counselor who was going to participate but decided not to because of how busy their schedule was. The researcher

discovered that the spring semester is not the most convenient time for counselors to partake in interviews. At the time of the interviews, the counselors confirmed that assisting seniors to graduate was their top priority.

One limitation that should be addressed is the lack of diversity put into the methods. The researcher did not attempt to find counselors from a variety of ethnic and/or diverse backgrounds to see if there were any cultural associations to the stressors. Utilizing the local counselors is also a limitation in which the methods cannot be generalizable. Ideally, numerous counselors would be interviewed from multiple places around Minnesota to explore patterns that can be observed and potentially more generalizable for the State. There are numerous extraneous factors that may contribute to the results of this study as well. For example, comparing the educational system in St. Cloud, which is considered rural, to a school in a higher-class region would also provide great insight on the perspectives of counselors on a socio-economic level.

Another limitation with this study was the lack of any other perspectives that would also benefit in the understanding of counseling services in schools. Another significant population to interview would be various students who consistently see their school counselors. Understanding their perspectives about how they think counselors affect the achievement gap could be useful research, especially if there is a possibility of similarities of the opinions of both the counselors and the students. This also relates to the limitation of only interviewing counselors in high schools. It would also be effective to observe the opinions of other human services workers that assist students. School social workers and school psychologists likely have a lot of insight about their work with students as well as their collaboration with school counselors.

Perhaps another perspective that would assist in understanding the role that counselors embody in schools could be the school principal. The role of the principal is to hire and delegate their employees and it would be interesting to hear their input on how they view high school counselors. Hearing opinions from the population served as well as the upper administration would be a great way to analyze the general opinions about the counselors. Perhaps even parents could be a beneficial party to also express their feelings because their perspectives of how counselors should help their children could positively impact the practice.

Another limitation of this study involves the methods of qualitative interviewing. Every question gave the counselors opportunities to express their opinions, but the interviews could have used more structure in which more closed-ended questions would be needed. Creating a survey would have also been convenient for the researcher and the counselors because they would be able to answer the questions without any need for a recorded interview. Utilizing a 4-point scale of the phrases of strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree might have shown how strongly the opinions were of the counselors.

One strength that is worth mentioning in this study is that the interview method allowed the counselors to describe their personal experiences freely. While less structured, the descriptions on how they assisted their students with their academics was insightful. Understanding the specifics on where in their work they felt role confusion was also insightful with relation to the source. The researcher was surprised to see that most of the role confusion stemmed from administrative tasks such as testing and advanced placement organizing.

Another strength to make note of is that there was a great opportunity to focus on the human experience with this study. Due to the qualitative exploratory nature of the study, the

counselors had the opportunity to speak about the specific details of their experiences. Because the counselors were free to elaborate on the questions that were asked, they were able to describe the specific attributes that might have been missed if the study was more structured and questions close-ended. Giving the counselors the freedom to elaborate as they please also made patterns more significant due to the questions not leading the participants to the answers.

### **Future Studies**

For future studies, there are multiple ways to study the work that counselors do for students as well as adults. If someone were to replicate the qualitative approach used in this research/study, it would be more efficient if a larger number of participants were recruited for this qualitative research. Perhaps case studies would also be beneficial for counselors. One could follow a group of counselors from the start of their career to five years later. This could possibly demonstrate how a counselor could develop their perceptions about their work through documenting growth in their career.

Some of the future studies could also examine more thoroughly with regard to the funding process with schooling. While understanding the perceptions of counseling can give insight about how the counselors view funding, perhaps more can be done in order to understand the funding process when schools distribute money throughout sections of the school. Perhaps the distribution could explain why there are counselors with large caseloads as well as why counselors are to take on other responsibilities in their work.

There could also be studies that focus on the specific biopsychosocial issues that students are struggling with in their school system. Whether it is home issues such as abuse or neglect, or issues within the school such as bullying, studies that focus on what the specific needs of the



students are could largely benefit students and school human services workers. This benefit can assist with understanding the current issues that counselors need to focus on. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused numerous schools to close transitioning students to online learning and putting them in new environments. Finding ways to assist students access the resources they need could be a potential focus as well. If more studies contribute to focusing on student needs, perhaps more schools can put their focus on what problems need to be addressed for their students.

In terms of replication, there are multiple ways this study could be revamped and improved. There would likely be improvement in simply recruiting counselors when the Covid-19 pandemic is minimized. There could possibly be more interviewees for the study when school counselors are working in their schools again. It also might be beneficial to include some closed-ended questions as well as the open-ended questions to gather more information about how the counselors feel about the barriers in their practice. Putting aspects on a scale such as strongly agree and strongly disagree could add some perspective on how intensely they feel about the questions.

Another improvement could be expanding the sample. While a larger number would greatly assist in generalizing the results, it would be also beneficial to interview counselors throughout a larger geographic radius. Ideally, interviewing counselors all around the country would be great but realistically, it would also be beneficial to simply interview counselors around the state of Minnesota. If patterns are observable through the larger sample, it is possible that the study could provide evidence of a larger problem.

Another way to improve the study would be to explore counseling roles that are not exclusive to high schools. While the three interviewees showed similar patterns in the results, it would be interesting if counselors from middle schools, elementary schools, and private schools would show similar results. It would also be interesting to see if there would be any differences in caseload, role confusion, and perspectives about funding. It would also be interesting to interview counselors who work at Universities. While they likely do not have assigned students, they likely have a demanding caseload due to the large number of students. It would be insightful to compare the stressors of counselors in different environments to see if similar patterns are visible.

### **Relation to Social Work**

Similar studies should be conducted with social workers considering they also face similar stressors as high school counselors. When it comes to clients, childcare social workers also deal with issues regarding caseload (Yamatani, Engel, & Spjeildness, 2009). Sometime school social workers also have a large caseload when they are the only social work employees at one school district. (Jonson-Reid, 2004) The counselors who were interviewed in this paper had caseloads in the 400s and if one social worker is in charge of one school, that number can only be bigger and more difficult to handle. Social workers could also possibly benefit from a qualitative study to see if they share similar perspectives as the counselors.

Role confusions may also be something that social workers deal with as well. Case managers specifically deal with role confusion with their clients. (Gray, & White, 2012) Not only does that affect social workers but also nurse case managers as well. Perhaps this concept can relate to a multitude of human services workers. Social workers similar to counselors

dedicate their life to assisting people with various problems and continuing to study what systematic and environmental aspects are interfering with their success would immensely benefit in positive change. Social workers also deal with the concept of burnout due to stress and if these concepts are contributing to such burnout, more should be done to assist the workers which in turn will assist the clients.

### **Conclusion**

While there are many limitations to this current study, it can lead to other studies that could benefit and advocate for counselors. Even though there were only three participants within a small radius, the results were consistent for all the counselors. Every counselor not only confirmed that they experience role confusion, oversized caseload, they also agree that more funding would assist with reducing some of these barriers. They also have expressed that they experience job stress because of these barriers. With regards to the perspectives of counselors and the achievement gap, all the counselors agree that their work assists with closing the achievement gap. Each of the counselors interviewed were able to provide a story about how they personally have been a part of providing that type of assistance.

Future researchers could benefit from this study by improving the methods as well as further explore how human services in schools can assist in closing the achievement gap. It is clear from the perspectives of the counselors interviewed in this study that they have too much on their plate in order to properly assist every student they are assigned to. This study could possibly lead to other studies that will not only advocate for counselors, but students as well. Perhaps if more studies evaluate the practice of workers in the human services departments, better care can be provided for the recipients as well as the worker

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## Appendix A

### Informed Consent

#### TITLE OF STUDY

Perceptions of High School Counselors regarding Achievement Gap and practice Barriers\_\_\_\_\_

#### PRIMARY RESEARCHER

Name - Elijah Wood  
Department - SCSU Social Work  
Phone - 651-491-8576  
Email - [ebwood@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:ebwood@stcloudstate.edu)  
Advisor-Sara Devos  
Advisor Email-sara.devos@stcloudstate.edu

#### PURPOSE OF STUDY

**The purpose of this study is to investigate the various barriers that high school counselors deal with that interfere with their practice as well as their perceptions of how their work closes the achievement gap with students. This study will consist of interviews with high school counselors in the St. Cloud, Waite Park, Sartell, and Sauk Rapids area in which counselors will be emailed about voluntary interviews about their work in which open ended questions about how their work affects the achievement gap as well as the barriers they face.**

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#### PROCEDURES

**There will be face to face/video interviews that will ask various open-ended questions relating to personal experiences from high school counselors. The study is qualitative and exploratory by nature. The experiences of the counselors will be documented and coded to better understand their perspective.**

#### RISKS

Possible discussion of sensitive topics

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## **BENEFITS**

To research what possibly needs to be re-evaluated with reducing barriers, and funding, and contributions to closing the achievement gap in the perspective of counselors

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents.
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file in the personal possession of the researcher.

## **CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions at any time about this study, or you experience adverse effects as the result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher as well as the advisor whose contact information is provided on the first page.

## **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

## **OBTAINED RESULTS**

In order to obtain such results, the interview will be audio recorded in which the personal information of the participant will be held confidential. Quotes of the participants can be adjusted in which participants can request in which the researcher will send the audio transcripts to the participants after the interview if requested. If participants prefer video interviewing, only audio will be recorded throughout the process. Audio recording will be done on the researcher's mobile device.

**CONSENT**

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

**Participant's Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Audio Consent

#### Release Form for Use of Photograph/Video/Audio Recording

##### [Perceptions of High School Counselors regarding Achievement Gap and Practice Barriers]

[Elijah Wood]

[ebwood@stcloudstate.edu]

[Sara Devos]

[Sara.devos@stcloudstate.edu]

Please Print:

---

Participant Name

---

Legal Representative if Applicable

This form asks for your consent to use media for and from this study. We would like you to indicate how we can use your media. On the next page is a list of media types that we will use. Please initial where you consent for that type of use of your media. Legal representative initials will provide consent when needed.

Regardless of your answers on the next page, you will not be penalized.

We will not use your media in any way you have not initialed.

Questions regarding this form should be directed to the researchers. Additional answers can be found by contacting the IRB Administrator or an IRB Committee Member. Current membership is available at: <https://www.stcloudstate.edu/irb/members.aspx>

A copy of this form will be provided for your records.

RESEARCHER: Please delete any section you do not want to use. You can delete rows in the tables below if they do not pertain to your study.

<b>Audio; no video</b>	
Consent Granted	Type of Release
	Used by research team to record and analyze data
	Played to other participants
	Published or presented in an academic outlet (e.g., journal, conference)
	Played in a classroom to students
	Played at a nonprofessional venue (nonscientific group)

<b>Transcription of audio</b>	
Consent Granted	Type of Release
	Used by research team to record and analyze data
	Read by/to other participants
	Published or presented in an academic outlet (e.g., journal, conference)
	Presented in a classroom to students
	Presented at a nonprofessional venue (nonscientific group)

**I have read the above carefully and give my consent only for those items in which I initialed.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature (if 18 years of age or older)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Name (Printed)

WHEN CONSENT IS NEEDED FROM A LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE, COMPLETE THIS SECTION. UP TO TWO LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE MAY SIGN.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Legal Representative Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Legal Representative Name (Printed)

---

Second Legal Representative Signature

---

Date

---

Second Legal Representative Name (Printed)



## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

#### Interview questions

When it comes to the barriers that may interfere with the practice, do you find that there is role confusion with your position in which you find yourself playing roles that were not initially expected?

- a. If so, could you elaborate on what extraneous roles tend to be included in your position?
- b. Has role confusion created job stress for you? If so, please describe the ways it is stressful.

When it comes to the barriers that may interfere with the practice, do you find that the caseload creates difficulty with your position?

- a. If yes, how is it difficult?
- b. do you think more funding would assist with this difficulty?
- c. Has this issue created job stress for you? If so, please describe the ways it is stressful.

With your experience, do you think that school counselors play a role with student academic achievement?

- a. If yes, could you elaborate?

Do you have any stories on how you helped a student in which the result improved their schooling? (Ex. GPA, truancy/school attendance, extra-curricular involvement, graduation)

- a. If yes, could you elaborate?

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Email

Hello,

My name is Eli Wood and I am an MSW student at St. Cloud State University. As part of my Master of Social Work (MSW) thesis, I am conducting a research study to understand the perspective of High School counselors with regard to how they assist students with improving academic performance and the barriers counselors face that interfere with their efforts to help students.

My purpose for conducting this study is to learn more about the School Counseling profession and to advocate for systems change. I believe your participation in the study will help me to achieve this.

Participation in this study will take 20-30 minutes in a face-to-face or live, video interview format. If you wish to participate, I ask that you please complete the following:

1. Read the attached/enclosed form regarding confidentiality and consent to participate as well as complete and sign the consent form.
2. Read and sign the attached audio recording consent form.
3. Schedule an interview with me to discuss your experiences and feelings about your practice.

All consent forms must be signed before any interviewing will take place. Participation in the research study is voluntary and there are no consequences for choosing to not participate, withdrawing, or refusing to answer any questions.

Any additional questions about the project, or about how the interviews will be conducted can be directed to me at phone (651-491-8576) or email ([ebwood@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:ebwood@stcloudstate.edu)). Thank you in advance for your consideration and support of my research project. I look forward to hearing from you.

Elijah Wood  
MSW Student  
St. Cloud State University