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## Working With Students from Low Socioeconomic Families: What Can School Counselors do?

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**Working with Students from Low Socioeconomic Families:  
What Can School Counselors do?**

Rachel S. Bluhm

A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Master of Science Degree in  
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CAPSTONE PROJECT

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Working with Students from Low Socioeconomic Families: What Can School Counselors do?

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Rachel S. Bluhm

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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### **Abstract**

Poverty and low socioeconomic status (SES) in America negatively affect students in elementary, middle, and high school as they are still developing. It is crucial that school counselors and other helping professionals are aware of how to best support these students so they can achieve their highest as social support has been shown to be a protective factor for low SES in school. It is essential that school counselors and other staff in schools have effective training surrounding poverty and that they recognize how their social class affects their views and beliefs surrounding poverty and analyze those beliefs and practices. This would result in students who are better supported, succeeding as high as their middle-high SES peers, and staff who are better trained to understand issues faced by students experiencing poverty. This review discusses how school counselors can create equity and build resilience in at-risk students who live in low SES households by providing social support, recognizing privilege, receiving education, acknowledging negative implicit bias, and increasing experiences surrounding poverty.

Keywords: poverty, low SES, school counselors, adolescents, youth, achievement, social support

**Contents**

Introduction.....	4
Review of Literature .....	5
Poverty.....	5
Effects on Children.....	5
Physical/ Environment.....	7
Internalized and Externalized Behavior.....	10
Achievement.....	14
Poverty in a School.....	16
How School Counselors Can Help.....	17
Recognizing Privilege.....	17
Acknowledging Implicit Negative Feelings.....	18
Experience and Education.....	19
Providing Social Support and Social Systems.....	25
Discussion.....	28
References .....	30

## **Working with Students from Low Socioeconomic Families:**

### **What Can School Counselors do?**

Today's elementary, middle, and high school students face various obstacles each day that prevent them from reaching their full potential: inconsistent living conditions, limited academic and essential resources, food insecurity, and fewer opportunities for social and leisure activities, such as extra curriculars (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021). Unfortunately, low socioeconomic status (SES) is one of these barriers. According to the United States Census Bureau (USCB) (2021), the poverty rates for individuals under 18 have increased from 14.4 percent to 16.1 percent within 2019-2020. As school counselors and helping professionals in a school setting, it is a school counselor's duty to ensure that these students do not have obstacles preventing them from achieving as high as their peers from middle to high SES homes (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2022). School counselors should enforce equity and advocate for their students in low SES (ASCA, 2022).

However, many staff members in a school are unaware of how to assist students in low SES households and do not know what they can do to build resilience, which can lead to stress and burnout (Post et al., 2020). Many staff members and school counselors were not raised in poverty or low SES households, which makes it difficult to empathize and prevents staff from understanding all the problems that are faced by these students, in addition to understanding the poverty causes are often externalized rather than internalized reasons (Engler et al., 2020)

## **Review of Literature**

### **Poverty**

Poverty and low SES are more common than we may realize (Save the Children, 2022; United States Census Bureau [USCB], 2021). There were 27.2 million people in poverty in 2020 as reported by the USCB (2021). This is approximately 3.3 million more individuals than in 2019. In 2020, of those in poverty, almost 12 million were children (Save the Children, 2022). Covid-19 effects caused more families to lose incomes and employment, increasing the poverty number today to nearly 13 million children (Save the Children, 2022). Unfortunately, African American and Hispanic kids, along with those living in rural areas, experienced the highest rate of poverty in 2020 (Save the Children, 2022; USCB, 2021).

The official poverty rate in 2020 was 11.4 percent, which is an increase of 1.0 percent from 2019 (USCB, 2021). Interestingly, this is the first time that poverty rates have increased after five successive declines (USCB, 2021). The poverty rates for 2021 and 2022, which have not yet been reported by the USCB, will likely be much higher than those reported for 2020 due to Covid-19 and the unemployment that it resulted in; the poorest households in America were estimated to be twice as likely to have lost a job or wages throughout the pandemic (Save the Children, 2022; USCB, 2021). Covid-19 impacted families living in poverty at a higher rate as many of these families could not afford internet for remote learning, putting them further behind academically in comparison to their peers (Save the Children, 2022). The poverty indicator used by the USCB is the federal poverty line, which has been criticized as being the tool to measure whether a household is reaching poverty as it is a constant and restrictive way to define a highly personalized circumstance (O'Brien & Pedulla, 2010).

Deep poverty is defined as being in the lower half of the poverty level (\$6,244 or less for a single person; \$12,547 or less for a family of four) and it is only one way to measure the depth of poverty experienced (Davis et al., 2020). Deep poverty negatively affects education, work opportunities, physical and mental health, social support, and success and well-being (Marshall et al., 2022). When the overall poverty rate was increasing in the United States, as was the percentage of Americans falling farther below the poverty line, pushing more people into deep poverty (Davis et al., 2020). Sadly, many Americans in poverty are facing extreme poverty, poverty well below the poverty line and these rates keep increasing in comparison to four decades ago when the overall poverty rate was equivalent (Davis et al., 2020).

Children and adolescents in low SES families are at-risk for more negative outcomes in comparison to their peers from middle to high SES households (Evans, 2004). Some of these risk factors include increased exposure to environmental toxins and violence, lower quality homes and neighborhoods, and a greater risk of social isolation and powerlessness (Evans, 2004; Goodman et al., 2013; Hobfoll et al., 2003). These potential risks are greater for younger children and adolescents as poverty can affect their development negatively and adults are past these crucial developmental stages (Evans, 2004; Yoshikawa et al., 2012). However, less is understood regarding the growing economic disparity and the distance between low-income children and their peers, and how this may affect development (Odgers, 2015).

### **Effects on Children**

As mentioned above, the effects of poverty and low SES on school age students are mostly negative (Evans, 2004; Goodman et al., 2013; Hobfoll et al., 2003; Odgers, 2015; Yoshikawa et al., 2012). Living in poverty creates inequities for children and puts them at risk for more family turmoil, disruption, violence, separation from families, instability, and chaotic



households (Evans, 2004). There are significant correlations between poverty and health, including behavioral, mental, and physical health, indicating that children from low SES households may be struggling and unable to receive necessary help (American Psychological Association [APA], 2000; Smith, 2013). As school counselors, it is essential to understand these effects and how they may be present in a child's life (ASCA, 2022). When working with youth, it is crucial to remember that those who are African American and Latino experience these stressors disproportionately in comparison to their white peers (USCB, 2021).

### *Physical/ Environment*

The environment that children from low SES are exposed to increases the risk factors associated with poverty (Evan, 2004). Children living in poverty have decreased social support in comparison to their peers as poor parents tend to be less responsive and more authoritarian in their parenting (Evans, 2004). In comparison to their wealthier peers, low SES children receive less cognitive stimulation and enrichment at home as their parents speak to them less frequently and in a less knowledgeable manner (Evans, 2004). Students living in poverty are not learning as much at home in comparison to their peers (Evans, 2004). They also are less likely than middle to high income parents to participate in literacy activities with their children such as reading out loud or going to the library to encourage reading as there are likely less books and other materials in the home (Evans, 2004).

Justice et al. (2019) sought to find if a relationship exists between parent-child interactions in the first year of life and toddlers' language skills at age 2. Data used in this study is from the Kids in Columbus Study (KICS), a 5-year birth-cohort study of children born into poverty (Justice et al., 2019). The average age of mothers at time of enrollment was 26 years old (range = 18 to 46), with 60% of them being unemployed (Justice et al., 2019). Ethnicity

breakdowns of participating mothers are as followed: 36% identified as White/ Caucasian, 41% as Black/ African American, and 7% as Hispanic/ Latino (Justice et al., 2019). The data was analyzed using path analyses to determine if relationships exist between conditions of poverty, maternal distress/ depression, parent-child dysfunctional interaction, and children's language skills (Justice et al., 2019).

Through this research, Justice et al. (2019) found that poverty conditions are related to a decrease in social interactions between mother and child. These decreased interactions have negative effects on language development in children, which explains why children in lower SES homes display significantly lower language skills in comparison to their peers from more affluent households (Justice et al., 2019). The findings show that parental stress may be a leading factor in negative parent-child relationships, which in turn decreases parent-child interaction quality (Justice et al., 2019).

Additionally, there is a negative correlation between parental involvement in school activities and income level; as parent income level decreases, parents become less involved in what their children are doing in school (Evans, 2004). Baker and Stevenson (1986) found that mothers of eighth grade students who are more educated monitored their student's involvement in school closer in comparison to the less educated mothers. For example, more educated mothers would be more likely to know the name of their child's teacher, understand their child's achievement level academically, and recognize which subjects are their child's most difficult and their easiest (Baker & Stevenson, 1986).

It can be challenging for parents raising their families in poverty to provide a positive environment. Poverty can strain marriages as there are various stressors related to having insufficient funds as previously mentioned (Marshall et al., 2022). According to Evans (2004),

several research studies have found that income is related to marital satisfaction. Therefore, a lack of income would lead to a lower satisfaction rating. If a child living in poverty has parents that are fighting and not satisfied with their marriage, that is another stressor for the child and puts them more at risk (Evans, 2004). More specifically, men who are struggling financially have been found to be less warm and supportive in their marriages (Conger & Elder, 1994). Parents who are not satisfied with their marriages may be less involved with their children too. According to Lewis and Spanier (1979), marital quality is related to poverty and the closeness and involvedness of parents in their children's lives as income is often associated with marriage satisfaction.

The communities and neighborhoods that families in poverty can afford may have negative effects on their children. According to Reife et al. (2020), the communities that families in poverty are living in are often more likely to expose their children to violence, including hearing about violence, as youth living in neighborhoods with poverty report high rates of observing and hearing about violence in addition to victimization. In turn, this puts these youth at-risk for heightened rates of psychological distress (Reife et al., 2020). Psychological distress is not only higher for the youth experiencing poverty but for their parents as well (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021). For example, these parents may be facing such great anxiety or depression that they may be unable to parent their children which could lead to heightened behavioral incidents at home and in school (Burbach et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2015).

Living in poverty may also affect how parents are parenting their children. Research suggests that parents living in poverty are more likely to punish more harshly and punitively (Conger & Elder, 1994; Magnusson & Duncan, 2002; McLoyd, 1998). However, it may also be related to length of time in poverty as Miller and Davis (1997) suggest that there is a correlation

between harsh punishments and length of time in poverty. As a family lives in poverty longer, the parents will become less responsive (Miller & Davis, 1997). Mothers, as compared to fathers, living in low SES are not as likely to provide emotional support to their young children (Dodge et al., 1994). This is interesting as poverty rates have increased for female-headed households in addition to married-couple families, however, male-headed household's rate of poverty has not changed significantly from 2019-2020 (USCB, 2021). This suggests that most families living in poverty have a mother who is present but is less likely to be involved.

Lastly, children living in poverty may be faced with a chaotic household. Brown et al. (2019) measured the cortisol amounts in children living in poverty with hopes to determine how household chaos correlated with their stress hormone levels. The participants of this research were 374 children attending a Head Start program in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania along with their primary caregivers; of the caregivers, 86.9% were biological mothers, 7.6% were biological fathers, and 5.6% biological grandmothers (Brown et al., 2019). Results indicated that the relationship between economic instability and chaos were significantly linked to child cortisol, whereas relations linking income poverty, material hardship, and financial strain to cortisol were not significant (Brown et al., 2019). Interestingly, a significant relationship was determined between economic instability and chaos, proposing that those who live in poverty have more chaotic households and higher levels of cortisol present (Brown et al., 2019). Extra levels of cortisol can lead to anxiety and depression in youth along with other internalized behaviors.

### ***Internalized and Externalized Behavior***

Additionally, the relationship that parents have can affect their child's behavior. Various research studies have indicated that unmarried couples from low-income households are likely to give less support to their children which puts youth at risk to experience negative outcomes such

as aggression, noncompliance, inhibition, negative child-parent relationships, unacceptable social skills, and internalization and externalization of behavioral problems (Floyd et al., 1998; Schoppe et al., 2001; Stright & Neitzel, 2003). A study conducted by Choi et al. (2019), suggests that when unmarried, low SES, parents coparent cohesively, their children are less likely to exhibit behavioral problems at school. However, co-parenting cohesively may provide difficulties as stress may be increased due to hardships induced by anxiety, putting these children at further risk for behavioral problems (Choi et al., 2019). Other externalizing behavioral problems are more apt to be displayed by children from low SES (e.g., opposition, hyperactivity, and aggression) (Letourneau et al., 2013). Behavior problems that reach the clinical threshold are significantly higher for children who are from low SES than those of the general population (Feil et al., 2000; Holtz et al., 2015).

Dubois-Comtois et al. (2021) conducted research on low SES families and how father distress may affect children's behavior. Participants were 81 two-parent households receiving social welfare in metropolitan areas of Quebec, Canada (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021). 47% of the children in the study were boys and 53% girls; on average they were aged 48.36 months old (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021). The fathers of the study were on average 36.75 years old with 1.2% having no diploma, 58% had a high school diploma, 28.4% had a college or vocational diploma, and 12.3% had a university degree (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021). The families had between one and seven children; 8.6% with one child, 32.1% with two children, 35.8% had three, 9.9% had four, 9.9% had five, and 3.7% had six or seven (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021). Of these families, 8.6% had an income under \$8,000, 38.3% had an income between \$8,000 and \$14,999, 37% had an income between \$15,000 and \$21,999, 12.3% had an income between

\$22,000 and \$28,999 and 3.7% earned between \$36,000 and \$42,000 (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021).

The goal of this research was to explore whether a strong father-child relationship in a low SES household mediated the effects of father distress and child behavior problems, in addition to child's internalizing and externalizing problems (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021). Internalized behaviors such as anxiety, depression, somatic symptoms, and withdrawal are likely high for youth living in low-income urban neighborhoods as they are more likely to experience an assortment of stressors that the general population are usually not exposed to (Grant et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2018). Father distress levels were measured using two self-report evaluations while parenting stress was assessed using the Parenting Stress Index-Short form (PSI-SF) (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021). Mothers and fathers completed the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment (ASEBA) a questionnaire which uses a Likert scale to assess both internalized (anxiety, depression, somatic symptoms, and withdrawal) and externalized (attention issues and aggressive behaviors) problematic behaviors present in preschool age children (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021).

The results show significant associations between the number of children in the family and child internalizing problems ( $r = -.18$ ,  $p = .16$ ) and between father education and child externalizing problems ( $r = -.17$ ,  $p = .17$ ) (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021). Lastly, father-child interactions in everyday-like play partially mediated the links between father distress and child externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021). This is significant to research regarding poverty as a father-child relationship with everyday interactive play could be a protective factor against externalized and internalized behaviors of children as well as distress in fathers (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021). Stress in parents living in poverty is likely to be higher

as poverty is a significant predictor of emotional distress and mental illness as families may be struggling to find food, may be homeless, may not have a means of transportation, and may not have different clothing to wear each day (Marshall et al., 2022).

Families living in poverty with a higher number of children may be more at risk of children displaying internalizing behaviors while fathers who have less education, as often a parent might when living in low SES, may be more at risk of children with externalizing behaviors (Marshall et al., 2022). This research suggests that fathers living in low SES who nourish their father-child relationship can build resiliency in their children (Marshall et al., 2022). School counselors could assist in building and fostering this father-child relationship by providing psychoeducation to parents on the importance of their interactive relationship for the sake of the child's internalized and externalized behavior and how it will help to mediate their parental stress as well (Marshall et al., 2022).

Similarly, Rivenbark et al. (2020) sought to study the effects of perceived social status and mental health/ internalized behavior in adolescents. Participants were children enrolled in 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade in North Carolina Public Schools during the 2011-2012 school year; at the time of the survey, students were in grades 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>, as the study was conducted in 2015 (Rivenbark et al., 2020). Most of the students who participated identified as non-Hispanic White (n = 1,011), while those who were Non-Hispanic Black (n = 442) and Hispanic (n = 280) were less represented (Rivenbark et al., 2020). Through their research, Rivenbark et al. (2020), participants from the most economically disadvantaged families ( $r = -.26, p < .001$ ), higher poverty schools ( $r = -.12, p = .028$ ), and lower income neighborhoods ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ) reported lower subjective social status (SSS).

This means that adolescents are aware of their family's social status and how it compares to their peers. Most students ranked themselves as being in the middle (66.7%;  $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = .60$ ), with adolescents from persistently disadvantaged families, on average, placing themselves significantly lower ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) than their peers from families who were never disadvantaged ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .61$ ) (Rivenbark et al., 2020). Participants' subjective social status (SSS) was significantly related to the daily reports adolescents made of conduct problems ( $b = -.05$ ,  $p = .030$ ) (Rivenbark et al., 2020). Consistent with the previous research, adolescents living in lower SES homes were more apt to report mental health or internalized behavior problems; adolescents in disadvantaged households scored 1.33 points higher on psychological distress (.36 SD) and .06 points higher on conduct problems (.24 SD) and were also 1.57 times more likely to report early substance use in comparison to their peers (Rivenbark et al., 2020).

### ***Achievement***

Psychological distress, which is often increased for children living in poverty, unfortunately can make it more difficult for a student to do well in school (Caladas & Bankston, 1997). There is substantial evidence that low academic performance and low SES are correlated (Caladas & Bankston, 1997). In a study conducted by Malecki and Demaray (2006), it was predicted that social support would be related to academic achievement and that social support would act as a buffer regarding academic performance. The results regarding social support as a buffer are presented in the section *Providing Social Support and Social Systems*.

This study's population was a total of 164 students in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades in an urban middle school in Illinois (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). Students were identified as being from low SES if they received free or reduced lunches, those not receiving free or reduced lunches were identified as higher SES (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). The school under research is a low-



income urban school where 68% of students in the school are qualified for low-income resources (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). According to Caladas and Bankston (1997), when a student participates in a free or reduced-cost lunch program, they have a higher chance of decreased standardized achievement scores. At the time of this study, the school was on an academic warning list from the state of Illinois due to high numbers of students performing low academically (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). The demographics of this study included 18.9% African Americans, 2% Asian Americans, 64.6% Latino, 7.9% White, and 7.3% identified as other (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). To determine grades, the student's quarterly report card with grades for all subjects was averaged to show a total GPA for the year in each course (Malecki & Demaray, 2006).

No relationships between social support and GPA of students from higher SES were found; all correlations were low and not significant as predicted (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). However, many associations with students who have lower SES were moderate and significant regarding social support and GPA, as students with low SES typically have lower GPAs in comparison to their peers from middle to high income families (lower SES: 2.36, higher SES: 2.73) (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). Several analyses were completed to examine gender, grade level, ethnicity, and SES status differences on GPA and social support (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). Additionally, it was found that girls scored notably higher than boys relating to social support as they are more likely to initiate interactions with staff when they need help- (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). In their research, no other significant patterns were found regarding demographic differences, but this is due to the sample not being representative of the general population (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). As we know, poverty affects African American and

Latino individuals disproportionately so had a representative population been utilized, this would have been the result (USCB, 2021).

In research conducted by Roy and Raver (2014), similar results were found. Data for the study came from the Chicago School Readiness Project, a socioemotional intervention that was introduced in 35 classrooms (N = 602 children) at 18 Head Start sites in seven disadvantaged and low-income Chicago communities (Roy & Raver, 2014). Families were first assessed when they were enrolled in Head Start in 2004 and they were followed for 4 years following (Roy & Raver, 2014). At the time of enrollment, the average age of caregivers were 29.53 years (SD = 7.66%); 70% of which identified as African American, 26% identified as Latino, and 4% identified as non-Hispanic White (Roy & Raver, 2014). Most families were from households whose income fell below the national poverty line (Roy & Raver, 2014). Through their research, the risk index significantly predicted internalizing (B = .12, SE = .01, p = .02) and externalizing (B = .15, SE = .05, p < .01) behavior problems and literacy (B = -.10, SE = .05, p = .06) at trend level (Roy & Raver, 2014). With each added risk experienced in preschool, children engaged in increased behavior issues and lower school performance in the future years (Roy & Raver, 2014). This is congruent with the other research that was found by Malecki & Demaray (2006).

### **Poverty in a School**

As children from low SES are already at risk for lower achievement, it is critical for school staff to provide additional interventions to ensure these students are doing well in school (Evan, 2004). Research suggests that families from lower SES environments felt less of a belonging in their school which may be linked to lower achievement in the middle and high school population (Felner et al., 1995; McNeely et al., 2002). Not only do students from low SES not feel a belonging to their school, but they also have less connections with peers. Dodge et al.

(1994) states that children in low SES experience greater uncertainty in relationships with peers from preschool to third grade as compared to their higher SES peers. Additionally, low-income communities and school districts, as often found in rural areas, are more likely to have less qualified teachers, creating another barrier for students who are already at-risk of failing in school (Ingersoll, 1999).

### **How School Counselors Can Help**

Psychologists and other mental health providers have an ethical and professional responsibility to recognize, understand, and act on poverty as it can influence an individual's mental health and wellbeing (Juntunen et al., 2022). However, due to the inherently complicated nature of poverty and the uniqueness of each situation, an integrated approach is required to best address the situation across all levels of intervention (Marshall et al., 2022). Poverty and low SES look different for each person experiencing it, therefore, the intervention used may need to be personalized for each situation (Marshall et al., 2022). It is also challenging because economic marginalization is complex as each situation is unique and there are a lack of common terms, constructs, and measures to determine how much poverty a person is experiencing (Juntunen et al., 2022). Once a school counselor identifies a need for intervention, it is first essential to target the stress resulting from poverty, as this can reduce the long-term consequences related to poverty; after targeting the child's stressors, it is essential for school counselors to understand more about themselves as counselors (Marshall et al., 2020).

### ***Recognizing Privilege***

If counselors, other mental health providers, and staff in the school are seeking to improve their services for individuals from low-income households, they should first recognize

how their social class affects their views and beliefs surrounding poverty and analyze those beliefs and practices (Goodman et al., 2013). The beliefs and ideas that mental health providers have about poverty may be linked to their upbringing which may have been privileged (Foss et al., 2017). These beliefs that each mental health provider brings to their everyday practice may cause more discrimination in the services they provide and may lead to internalized false stereotypes or implicit biases surrounding the low SES population (Foss et al., 2017).

Prior to working with a client from low SES, mental health providers have described working with this population with avoidant behaviors and have used stereotypes congruent with those of the general population to describe individuals from low SES (Smith et al., 2013). This is problematic as the stereotypes and implicit bias they are privileged to hold can negatively affect their work with clients who are from low SES (Smith et al., 2013). Through this privileged lifestyle, mental health providers and counselors may not have had an opportunity to learn about the realities of living in poverty which may have affected their views on individuals living in low SES (Foss et al., 2017). Additionally, some providers may not understand how poverty may influence their sessions and interfere negatively with the progress they are seeking (Foss et al., 2017).

A step forward in working with clients living in poverty is feeling sympathy; however, the more difficult and demanding aspect is to locate oneself within the larger system and analyze how the system advantages some groups and disadvantages others and to determine which beliefs and attitudes support the system (Smith, 2009). Identifying class privilege goes beyond feeling sympathy toward an oppressed group, but rather identifying the policies, procedures, attitudes, beliefs, and taken-for-granted social aspects that provide barriers for those living in poverty and adds advantage to those who are not (Smith, 2009). Smith (2009) lists a variety of

training opportunities for supervisors to provide students working on their practicum or other training the chance to explore issues of class privilege and classism to better prepare them for a future career where they will likely be working with oppressed individuals.

### *Acknowledging Implicit Negative Feelings*

Due to the nature of their work and training that is related to at-risk individuals, mental health providers already in the field are assumed to have more positive feelings towards the population of individuals who live in poverty (Rehner et al., 1997). However, there is support that despite working closely with this population daily, some mental health providers hold negative feelings toward those who experience poverty (Rehner et al., 1997). These negative feelings that are held may be due to a bad experience with a low SES client in the past or may be due to implicit bias. Direct service providers, especially those who were younger and have less experience in the field, tended to have the most hostile feelings toward individuals from low SES households in comparison to other social service providers (Rehner et al., 1997).

It is unknown whether these negative feelings are influenced by education level, or the inconsistency of feelings held by mental health providers, as there is variability in the research collected; however, it is important to note that these discrepancies can affect both attitudes and behaviors when working with individuals from low SES (Rehner et al., 1997). Self-assessments that counselors may take throughout their educational period may be beneficial to continue once they are practicing professionals so they can acknowledge and recognize when they are feeling burnout or recognize their negative implicit bias (Rehner et al., 1997). As counseling and mental health educators are striving to teach more to challenge future providers' views surrounding poverty, and whether their personal views are congruent with those of the field, it is important to

continue these self-assessment opportunities once the provider is in the field as well, as this can drive the deliberateness to work with individuals experiencing poverty (Rehner et al., 1997).

### *Experience and Education*

There are barriers faced by individuals in poverty that mental health providers may not be aware of as mentioned above due to privilege (Foss et al., 2011). Foss et al. (2011) explain the discrepancies between the needs that clients in poverty express and the services they are provided by counseling services. Some of this incongruence may be a result of counselors and other providers having no firsthand experience of the life of poverty and therefore being unable to sufficiently empathize with their clients (Foss et al., 2011). For example, a parent may not have flexibility in their work schedule and cannot help their child with homework or they may be unable to help as the curriculum may be too difficult.

With hopes to raise awareness for poverty conditions and how it can negatively affect a person, the Reform Organization of Welfare (ROWEL) developed a poverty simulation to provide others with a first-hand experience (Engler et al., 2020). In their research, Engler et al. (2020) examined the impacts of participation in a poverty simulation on undergraduate students who are going into helping positions, such as school counseling, where they will be working directly with students who may be living in or affected by poverty. Engler et al. (2020) was most interested in whether participation in the poverty stimulation allowed participants to have a better understanding of causes of poverty and that they are not all self-implicated. Engler et al. (2020) conducted a total of two research studies, one with undergraduate students, the other with practicing providers in the helping field. Participants in Study 1 were 126 undergraduate students (22, males, 101 females, 3 did not identify their gender) (Engler et al., 2020). On average, these students were 21.6 years of age and they identified themselves as being middle or upper middle

class (Engler et al., 2020). The students were 94% Caucasian, 6% African American, 2.6% Hispanic, 1.7% Asian, and .9% identified themselves as other (Engler et al., 2020).

Through correlational analyses, a significant negative association between age and SES was discovered ( $\rho(118) = -.31, p = .001$ ) (Engler et al., 2020). Higher SES indicated a positive correlation with internalized beliefs at pretest ( $\rho(119) = -.26, p = .005$ ); however, age was positively correlated with a more externalized belief at posttest ( $\rho(118) = .25, p = .006$ ) (Engler et al., 2020). This demonstrates that younger participants tended to have high SES and were more likely to maintain internal attributions for poverty before participating in the poverty simulation in comparison to older participants or those who were from lower SES (Engler et al., 2020). It was also identified that students who were older tended to be from lower SES and were less likely to endorse internal attributions surrounding poverty before participating in the poverty simulation and after participation, they were inclined to have stronger external beliefs regarding their experiences (Engler et al., 2020). The results supported the hypothesis that when students became more aware of the experience of poverty, it allowed them to attribute causes of poverty to external factors rather than internal ones (Engler et al., 2020). Other research indicates that participation in a poverty simulation allows students in their future professional interactions to advocate for clients who experience poverty (Yang et al., 2014). The results from this study indicate that changes in one's views regarding the causes of poverty may be responsible for students' becoming better advocates in their future professions (Engler et al., 2020).

In Study 2, Engler et al. (2020) used a sample of 98 providers (20 males, 78 females) from a range of social service agencies in a small United States city. The average age of these professionals was 38.58 and most identified themselves as middle or lower middle class (Engler et al., 2020). Of the participants who identified their ethnicities, 57.9% were Caucasian, 22.1%

were African American, 10.5% were Asian, 7.4% were Hispanic, and 2.1% were Native American (Engler et al., 2020). Engler et al. (2020) found a significant effect when comparing providers' beliefs over time through an ANOVA measure ( $F(2, 90) = 3.44, p = .036$ ). Results indicated that practicing provider participants' beliefs regarding poverty became less internalized, however, they did not shift to an externalized belief perspective when examined through a post-test (Engler et al., 2020). These practicing participants were more likely to blame poverty on internal causes when defining the causes (Engler et al., 2020).

In conclusion, Engler et al. (2020) inquired that higher levels of education prior to the experience was an indicator of the simulation having stronger effects on beliefs about poverty. However, these results do not mean that practicing providers, such as school counselors who have been in the field for five plus years, will not benefit from additional training regarding poverty; on the contrary, this highlights the significance of individualized approaches to continuing education rather than a "one-and-done" approach (Engler et al., 2020). Consistent and regular training experience offered to staff will strengthen their advocacy orientation, as maintaining an internal belief system regarding poverty does not benefit the students living in low SES (Engler et al., 2020). Interestingly, if students in higher education were receiving training regarding poverty in comparison to professionals already in the field, the students were more likely to apply what they learned, which demonstrates the significance of college programs preparing future providers sufficiently (Engler et al., 2020).

Presumably the students had more education than the professionals already in the field, which explains the openness to new ideas surrounding poverty (Engler et al., 2020). Another possibility is that those who are already practicing their profession already have developed beliefs through their experiences that may seem to contradict what they are learning about



poverty in the simulation (Engler et al., 2020). Additionally, those in direct care or helping positions may have experienced frustrations in their field that increases their likelihood of attributing individual blame to those living in poverty (Engler et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of higher education facilities, especially for programs such as mental health providers, school counselors, and educators, to provide information regarding serving clientele in poverty or low SES as they do not have professional experiences in their desired fields yet and are still developing their belief systems with less reservations about accepting what they are learning (Engler et al., 2020). Lastly, the group of professionals were older in age and may be less likely to accept change in their existing thoughts and beliefs in comparison to the students, who are more willing to change (Engler et al., 2020).

On the contrary, Strasser et al. (2013), did not indicate differences between the results of practicing professionals and educating students when analyzing a poverty simulation. They did, however, come to the same conclusion that continuing education is positive for staff in helping positions (Strasser et al., 2013). The study was conducted similarly, with hopes of examining the impacts of participation in a poverty simulation for students and providers of public health and their beliefs towards individuals living in poverty or in low SES, in addition to awareness surrounding barriers faced (Strasser et al., 2013). The procedure included a pre-and postsurvey containing Likert scales and qualitative questions was administered to 91 participants (Strasser et al., 2013). Through paired t-tests, significant associations were identified between participation in the simulation and an increase in empathy, understanding, knowledge of the barriers faced by those living in poverty, and confidence in working with the population (Strasser et al., 2013). This demonstrates the need for effective training for individuals in college in addition to

effective continuing education and training provided to practicing providers (Strasser et al., 2013).

Those who have participated in the simulation have a better understanding of poverty, less stereotyped beliefs, more empathy, and fewer negative feelings toward individuals living in low SES (Yang et al., 2014; Vandsburger et al., 2010). Participants in the poverty simulation reported ways in which the experience they had affected their work (Yang et al., 2014). Those in the public health field held a greater understanding of the barriers and the experiences faced by individuals living in poverty (Rehner et al., 1997). This suggests that providing training where mental health providers or school counselors can experience what it is like to live in low SES is beneficial, as the counselor is better able to understand the experiences and feelings of a low SES client.

In addition to experience, education is essential to create the best trained school counselors possible (Engler et al., 2020). As mentioned above, an increased level of education often correlates with more openness and willingness to accept ideas regarding a population such as those from low SES (Engler et al., 2020). Not only are appropriately trained providers better able to understand the impact of poverty on a family or individual, but they may also be more competent in advocating for greater changes that attend to the societal issues of poverty (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). Educated folks have a greater understanding of how poverty is not a controllable factor in an individual's life, it is typically not as simple as a person becoming employed and rather may be the result of generations living in poverty, unable to overcome financial struggles (Cozzarelli et al., 2002). Members of the public often lack knowledge regarding poverty and those who are experiencing joblessness or homelessness, attributing

poverty to disposition rather than the situation (Cozzarelli et al., 2002; Feagin, 1975; Kleugel & Smith, 1986).

Family poverty has determinants in previous generations and some of which may be indicators of the effects of poverty on children (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). For example, low school achievement and becoming a teen parent increases a teen's risk of raising their offspring in poverty (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). This demonstrates how education level, achievement, family structure, along with other determinants can affect upcoming generations due to family poverty being passed down (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). Other aspects of family poverty can disproportionately affect children in poverty and keep them from escaping the cycle such as distressed neighborhoods, low-achieving and less funded schools, less nutritional food, and many more (Yoshikawa et al., 2012).

### ***Providing Social Support and Social Systems***

School counselors are in a school to provide social support to all students. However, it has been found that social support can be a protective factor for students from low SES (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). A study conducted by Malecki and Demaray (2006) sought to examine the moderating effect of social support on academic achievement for low SES students. The sample used data from 164 students in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades in an urban middle school in Illinois (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). Students receiving free or reduced lunch were considered low SES while students not receiving free or reduced lunch were considered higher SES (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). When evaluating the amount of social support each student was receiving, the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASS) was utilized (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). This scale includes a 60-item rating scale to measure perceived social support in the areas of parents, teachers, classmates, close friends, and school (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). Students

responded by rating statements with frequency and importance on a Likert scale from 1-6 (Malecki & Demaray, 2006).

Through the results, it is still unknown what the relationship is between academic success and levels of social support, but social support appears to be helpful to students from low SES (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). For some students, extra social support can be the protective factor a student needs to achieve their fullest, whereas for other students, social support will not increase grades (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). No significant correlations were found between social support and academic achievement, as measured by GPA, for peers from higher SES households (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). However, social support from parents, teachers, classmates, close friends and the school were significantly related to GPA scores for students from low SES households (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). Interestingly, parent and classmate support were the most important predictors of high GPA in students (Malecki & Demaray, 2006).

This means that students with decreased parent or classmate support rather than teacher, close friend, or school support, had a higher GPA if they had a higher SES and a lower GPA if they had a lower SES, while students with higher social support had a fixed GPA regardless of their SES (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). This stresses the importance of social support to students as it provides a protective factor to students with a low SES (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). These research findings may be beneficial in creating individualized tier 1 interventions for students who need additional support (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). Several interventions that may be beneficial to a student who is from a low SES may include increasing parental involvement in the student's school, providing training to teachers and staff regarding various social supports they can provide students and how to do so, implementing a program to provide peer support for students such as peer tutoring, and lastly focusing on how to provide a sense of belonging to low

SES students to create an increased adult and peer social network (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). Research related to psychological wellbeing and poverty shows the importance of providers in public service, such as school counselors, to advocate for their clients to serve their needs as best as possible (Engler et al., 2020).

Similarly, Reife et al. (2020) found social support from adults is essential for students who reside in urban poverty. Participants included 286 adolescents between the ages of 11 and 16 (and their parents) who had complete data for the measures needed for the current study (Reife et al., 2020). Of the participants, 46.2% identified as Black, 24.5% as Latino, 10.8% as White, 8.4% Asian, 4.2% Mixed/Biracial, and 5.9% as other (Reife et al., 2020). This study also used free or reduced lunches to identify students from low SES; approximately 90% of the participants were low-income (Reife et al., 2020). Measures used included Exposure to Violence Survey-Screening Version, Conger and Colleagues Family Economic Pressure Index, Urban Adolescent Life Experiences Scale, and The Child Behavior Checklist (Reife et al., 2020). Due to no existing measures capturing the data desired surrounding protective strategies and coping skills, Reife et al. (2020) asked youth to describe protective factors in their own words in addition to questions that prompt students to reflect on the use of coping strategies in their lives (Reife et al., 2020).

According to Reife et al. (2020), social support is beneficial to most youth, but it is even more effective for those who experience high rates of stressors. Social support allows students to appropriately learn and utilize coping strategies they have likely not yet been introduced to in their home lives (Reife et al., 2020). Through their research, it was found that all psychological outcomes (self-report internalizing symptoms, self-report externalizing symptoms, parent-report internalizing symptoms, and parent-report externalizing symptoms) were significantly and

positively correlated (Reife et al., 2020). All aspects of stress exposure (violence, economic strain, major, and minor events) were significantly and positively correlated as well (Reife et al., 2020). Economic strain was significantly and negatively correlated with coping strategy usage (Reife et al., 2020).

Although most youth did identify adult support in their lives, nearly one third of this sample did not (Reife et al., 2020). In addition, results suggest that the presence or absence of adult support may be a determinant in whether specific coping strategies are successful for youth in poverty (Reife et al., 2020). This also suggests that relationships with individuals who are not immediate family and not within the context of a formalized program, are beneficial for youth (Reife et al., 2020). Youth without adult relationships did not seem to benefit from the use of coping strategies or skills that are associated with positive outcomes (Reife et al., 2020). This literature demonstrates the importance of school counselors providing social support to students living in poverty.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this research was to examine various ways that school counselors can support students living in low SES households. This information pertains to school counselors as school counselors can provide resiliency to low SES students by offering social support (Reife et al., 2020). This could be as simple as building relationships with students during passing time or lunch/recess. Students receiving social support are more likely to achieve higher academically; this means that school counselors can provide the resiliency students need to improve their academics while buffering negative effects that are associated with poverty (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). Additionally, school counselors can provide education to parents from low SES homes regarding the importance of being involved in their children's lives and how that can

affect their children's internalized and externalized behaviors, as well as decrease parental stress levels (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2022).

As far as education goes for future school counselors who will be working with students from low SES, it is essential that post-secondary programs prepare school counselors effectively (Engler et al., 2020). Higher levels of education often correlate with more willingness of individuals living in poverty, in addition to a greater understanding of the effects poverty may have on a family or individual, educated individuals are better able to advocate for low SES individuals (Engler et al., 2020; Yoshikawa et al., 2012). This demonstrates the need for effective training for individuals in college in addition to effective continuing education and training provided to practicing providers (Strasser et al., 2013). Experience with low SES individuals is significant for school counselors as well; school counselors must put themselves in situations where they will gain further experience around this population (Engler et al., 2020; Foss et al., 2011).

However, more research is still needed to gain more insight into what school counselors can do to help students living in low SES. For example, half of the research studies examined were missing demographics of students of color living in poverty (Justice et al., 2019; Rivenbark et al. 2020). This is essential as Black and Hispanic folks experience poverty at a disproportionate rate in comparison to White folks (USCB, 2021). While researching, more information was found regarding adults, there is missing information in the research regarding children and adolescents living in poverty. There was also limited research on the environmental factors of poverty for youth. It was difficult to find information regarding research on privilege, implicit negative feelings of practitioners, and how it will benefit those working with individuals living in poverty and better serve the populations they are trying to reach.

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