

## **School Counselors' Conceptualizations of Their Students**

Phillip L. Waalkes

University of Missouri-St. Louis

Emily Woodruff

Madison, Wisconsin

Daniel A. DeCino

University of South Dakota

Jaimie Stickl Haugen

St. Bonaventure University

### **Abstract**

Conceptualization can inform school counselors' work with students including about cultural and environmental influences on student success. Yet, there is limited research about school counselors' conceptualizations of their students. We used qualitative content analysis to examine a nationwide sample of school counselors' ( $N = 174$ ) descriptions of students. The predominantly White participants described their students from largely individualistic perspectives with limited mentions of context and cultural identities and counseling theory. To develop contextual thinking and theory-driven conceptualizations, school counselors can reflect upon how privilege and marginalization influence them and their students and form consultation groups with other school counselors.

*Keywords:* school counseling, conceptualization, social justice, counseling theory, school counselor cognitions

### **School Counselors' Conceptualizations of Their Students**

Counselors should develop systemic case conceptualizations of their clients (Sperry, 2016). School counselors' conceptualizations can inform decision making not only for individual students, but also the school's counseling program as a whole (Dollarhide & Lemberger-Truelove, 2019). School counselors who do not reflect on how they conceptualize students may favor certain groups of students and may lack awareness of oppressive systems influencing their marginalized students (Hutchinson, 2011; Moss & Singh, 2015; Ratts et al., 2015). Similarly, White privilege may hinder school counselors from recognizing systems of oppressions and their own cultural positionality (Moss & Singh, 2015). If school counselors are not aware of culture and oppression, they may struggle with conceptualizing the systemic context that affects their students and have difficulty creating programs that close achievement and opportunity gaps (American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2019b). Currently, little is known about how school counselors think about their students within cultural and systemic contexts and apply theory to their work. Therefore, in this exploratory qualitative content analysis (QCA) study, we sought to understand how school counselors describe their students based on their conceptualizations of them.

### **Conceptualization in Counseling**

Conceptualization is described as a counselor's professional or clinical comprehension of a client and their needs (Welfare et al., 2013). It requires awareness of relevant elements of a client's character, behavior, and systemic context (Sperry, 2005). The process of conceptualization includes differentiation, or how counselors recognize various pieces of information relevant to the client's struggles, and

integration, or how counselors make associations between various pieces of client information (Butler & Constantine, 2006).

Conceptualization is a process influenced by a mental health professional's years of experience, cognitive complexity, and their professional specialization (Welfare et al., 2013). Since the process of conceptualization looks different between psychologists and social workers then it is likely to look different between counseling specializations (Welfare et al., 2013). Since the professional role of a school counselor differs significantly from other professional counseling roles (i.e., there are specific models, standards, and competencies unique to school counseling), it seems likely that school counselors also need to develop unique conceptualization skills (Dollarhide & Lemberger-Truelove, 2019). However, little is known regarding how school counselors think about their students.

### **School Counselors and Conceptualization**

Although clinical mental health counselors usually form conceptualizations about an individual client, school counselors need to form conceptualizations of individual students, groups of students, and the needs of their school. ASCA (2019a) expects school counselors to learn about their students from “student interviews, direct observation, educational records, consultation with parents/families/staff, and test results” (3.1). These interventions require school counselors to be fully immersed in the school community rather than focused on one student at a time as is often the case for other types of counselors. School counselors can set goals and collect data based on the ASCA Mindset and Behavior Standards (2014) that described the student attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed for success in order to evaluate their school counseling

programs (ASCA, 2016; ASCA, 2019a; ASCA, 2019b). Thus, school counselors must develop relevant conceptualizations that can support individual students, student groups, and the school system as a whole.

Conceptualization skills can enhance school counselors' multicultural awareness and competence to promote equitable support and access to education for all students (ASCA, 2019b). ASCA's (2019a) School Counselor Professional Standards and Competencies call school counselors to apply evidence based counseling theories to their work with students (B-PF1) and to maintain a conceptualization of cultural, social, and environmental influences on students (B-PF6). Similarly, the Multicultural Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2015) require critical awareness from counselors in terms of both self-reflection and conceptualization of counselors and clients within systems of privilege and oppression. School counselors who do not intentionally reflect on how they are conceptualizing their students may fall into traps of bias towards certain groups and have a lack of awareness of the systems of oppression influencing their students (Ratts et al., 2015). For example, school counselors in one study reported being more eager to work with students who perform well academically (Hutchison, 2011). Developing multicultural competence is a continuous, lifelong process requiring personal reflection and awareness of the ways oppressive policies operate in schools (Moss & Singh, 2015; Ratts et al., 2016). For example, White school counselors may not be aware of the unearned advantages their Whiteness provides them and the ways this privilege limits their awareness of how oppressive systems operate in their schools and impact their students of color. Ultimately, awareness of context, culture, and systemic of oppression are central to

school counselors' work of promoting access and equity to all students (ASCA, 2019b), but schools counselors with more privileged identities may struggle to integrate this awareness into their conceptualization skills.

Since the quality of school counselors' conceptualizations influence the quality of their work and their relationships with students (Butler & Constantine, 2006) and their multicultural competence (Ratts et al., 2015), a deeper understanding of how school counselors describe their students may shed light on the characteristics school counselors often focus on in their conceptualizations. Analyzing these characteristics may lead to understanding common themes related to how school counselors think about their students in ways unique to a school context. The purpose of this exploratory study was to understand how school counselors describe their students in an effort to gain insight into the kinds of student characteristics they viewed as more and less important and the degree to which school counselors integrate contextual, systemic, and cultural thinking into their thinking about students. Understanding school counselors' perceptions of these characteristics may illuminate areas where school counselors usually focus in their thoughts about students and areas where more intentional focus seems warranted (Sperry, 2016). Such knowledge may inform more intentional reflection and metacognitive awareness for school counselors along with ways to support school counselors in developing conceptualization skills and avoiding bias (Hutchinson, 2011; Ratts et al., 2015). In the present study, we sought to answer three research questions: (a) what characteristics do school counselors use to describe their students?, (b) what possible gaps are there in categories of characteristics school

counselors use to describe their students?, and (c) which student characteristics do school counselors view as most and least important in their work with students?

### **Method**

To answer our research questions, we used qualitative content analysis (QCA; Schreier, 2012). After obtaining institutional review board approval (IRB), participants were sampled from ASCA's online membership database, which was publicly available to members at the time of the study. All school counselors with emails listed in the database from a random sample of 32 U.S. states ( $n = 11,128$ ) were invited to participate. Potential participants were sent an initial email invitation with the survey link and a follow up email invitation about one week later. The survey included a demographics questionnaire and the Counselor Cognitions Questionnaire (CCQ; Welfare, 2006; Welfare & Borders, 2010a). Ten of the 32 states were in the Midwest region of the U.S. (31.25%), ten were in the West region (31.25%), six were in the South region (18.75%), and six were in the Northeast region (18.75%). One hundred and seventy-four respondents completed the survey resulting in a response rate of 1.56%.

### **Participants**

One-hundred and forty-nine participants (85.63%) identified as women and 25 identified as men (14.37%). The ages of participants ranged from 25 to 65 ( $M = 41.33$ ,  $SD = 10.82$ ). Most participants (86.21%;  $n = 150$ ) identified their race/ethnicity as White. Eight participants (4.60%) identified as Multiracial/Multiethnic, 7 (4.02%) identified as Hispanic/Latino/a, 3 (2.72%) identified as African American/Black, 4 (2.72%) identified as other, and 1 (0.57%) identified as Asian American/Pacific Islander. Participants'

years of experience working as a school counselor ranged from .5 to 34 ( $M = 8.80$ ,  $SD = 7.22$ ). Sixty-nine participants (39.66%) worked in high schools, 45 (25.86%) worked in elementary schools, 41 (23.56%) worked in middle or junior high schools, 12 (6.90%) worked in schools they characterized as other, and 7 (4.76%) worked in k-12 schools. Seventy-two (43.11%) participants reported working in a school in a suburban area, 60 (34.48%) reported working in a school in a rural area, and 42 (24.14%) participants reported working in a school in an urban area. The approximate free and reduced lunch percentages of students at participants' schools ranged from 0% to 100% ( $M = 49.88\%$ ,  $SD = 28.87\%$ ).

### **Counselor Cognitions Questionnaire**

The CCQ (Welfare, 2006; Welfare & Borders, 2010a) was designed to evaluate counselors' levels of cognitive complexity in terms of differentiation and integration. Since cognitive complexity has been linked to case conceptualization skills (Ladany et al., 2001), we used the differentiation section of the CCQ as an exploratory qualitative method of understanding the characteristics school counselors use to describe their students. The open-ended qualitative nature and cognitive focus of the differentiation section of the CCQ seemed like a natural fit for this purpose. Although conceptualization is a complex process specific to contexts and individuals, the phrases participants used to describe students in the CCQ represent a distillation of what was most relevant or important to their work with their students. These distilled impressions school counselors form based on their observations of students, like they described in the CCQ, are an indication of counselors' cognitive development that has been linked to counselor effectiveness (Borders, 1989; Fong et al., 1997; Welfare & Borders, 2010a).



Therefore, we considered school counselors' descriptions of students as an important indicator of the way school counselors conceptualized students.

Welfare and Borders (2010a) normed the CCQ on 80 master's level counseling students across seven Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited counseling programs and 39 post-master's level counselors. Nearly half of the participants identified themselves as school counselors. The CCQ has been used in a variety of settings demonstrating evidence of content validity and strong interrater reliabilities ranging from .95 to .99 (Welfare, 2006; Welfare & Borders, 2010a; Welfare & Borders, 2010b). The CCQ is based on personal construct theory (Crockett, 1965) and models of counselor development (e.g., Blocher, 1983; Stoltenberg, 1981). Development of the CCQ included feedback from a panel of counseling supervisors, two pilot studies, and expert review by an experienced supervision researcher (Welfare & Borders, 2010a).

Counselors complete the differentiation section of the CCQ by identifying one former client with whom they believe their work was effective and one former client with whom they believe their work was less effective. In open spaces, they list up to 25 characteristics describing both clients one at a time. Counselors are encouraged by the written directions to describe each client as completely as possible by using words or phrases to represent client characteristics (e.g., makes good grades, hard worker, athletic). Counselors list as many characteristics as they can come up with but do not have to fill in all 25 spaces. Then, counselors rate each client characteristic as mostly positive, mostly negative, or neutral. The counselors then rate the importance of each characteristic to their overall impression of the student on a scale of 1 (not at all

important) to 5 (extremely important). Counselors completing the full CCQ would move on to the integration section, which involves grouping client characteristics into categories. However, this component of the CCQ was not used in our study because designed to measure cognitively complexity in a way that did not fit with the exploratory nature of our study. We adapted the changed “client” to “student” to reflect a school counseling context. Otherwise the language and structure of the differentiation section of the CCQ was not changed.

### **Research Team**

Our team consisted of three counselor educators (the first, third, and fourth authors) with numerous years of experience as counselor educators and as school counselors and one master’s student in clinical mental health counseling (the second author). The first and third authors identify as White and male and the second and fourth authors identify as White and female. The first author recruited participants and developed the data analysis procedures. The first three authors coded the data. The fourth author served as an auditor. Disagreements in coding were navigated through discussion and returning to the data until consensus was achieved. In rare cases where consensus was not easily reached, coding was determined through majority rule (i.e., two out of the three coders agreeing or by seeking the input of the auditor; Schreier, 2012).

### **Data Analysis**

We employed QCA to develop a thematic structure for our data (Schreier, 2012). First, we used an iterative and recursive inductive strategy to identify themes without using a priori codes. We reviewed a portion of the student characteristics and created a

list of mutually exclusive and exhaustive themes to help build the coding frame (Schreier, 2012). After meeting to discuss and develop a collective list of themes, we independently reviewed a different portion of the student characteristics for additional themes. We met again and further refined the collective theme list. After the theme list was developed, the first author created a coding frame (available from the first author upon request) to facilitate coding of characteristics within the theme structure. Finally, the fourth author, serving as an external auditor reviewed the theme list and coding frame and offered feedback. We discussed the feedback and made changes to the coding frame to enhance clarity and representation of the data.

Second, for the pilot phase, we engaged in a deductive process of coding each of the characteristics within the themes according to the parameters in the coding frame (Schreier, 2012). Twenty participants' characteristics were used as a trial run to help refine the coding frame. We completed three rounds of coding for this trial run. During each round, we independently coded each characteristic. After interrater reliability was calculated, we discussed their discrepancies in coding and revised the coding frame in a recursive and iterative process. These revisions included collapsing related themes, developing new themes, and clarifying descriptions of themes. In the first trial run, we calculated an interrater reliability of .60 (65% agreement) among the three coders. In the second trial run, the interrater reliability was .71 (76% agreement). After the third round, the interrater reliability was .94 (95% agreement). After the trial runs, the auditor offered feedback on the coding. We adjusted the wording of numerous themes and their descriptions based on this feedback. We divided the remaining characteristics and coded them independently.

Third, after we coded all characteristics, we divided the themes evenly and independently developed lists of subthemes within each theme using a similar inductive and then deductive process. We discussed their codes until consensus was reached about the content and wording of the subthemes. Next, we individually coded the characteristics within their themes into the subthemes. We convened again to reach consensus on the coding of the subthemes. Finally, the auditor reviewed the subthemes and the subtheme coding and offered feedback. We discussed this feedback and adjusted the wording of the subthemes and the coding.

### **Trustworthiness**

We used a number of strategies to promote trustworthiness. First, to reduce the impact of our biases, we bracketed our assumptions about school counselors' conceptualizations of students throughout the data analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We each wrote a statement about our biases and assumptions and we shared and discussed them throughout the data analysis process. Second, the external auditor offered feedback throughout the data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Third, the coding process was iterative and recursive as we continually revisited the data to help create prolonged engagement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Fourth, the team-based approach, including consensus surrounding the development of the thematic structure and the coding frame during the trial run, promoted triangulation by infusing the perspectives of different researchers into the coding process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Results**

Through the inductive coding procedure, we identified 15 themes and 128 subthemes that described the characteristics school counselors used to conceptualize

their students (e.g., motivated, unorganized, withdrawn, intelligent, athletic). Table 1 provides a ranking of each theme by the percentage of characteristics coded in that theme. The most frequently coded themes and a selection of their subthemes are described below as well as a few other themes of note.

### **Friendliness, Cooperativeness, and Openness**

The most frequently coded theme was friendliness, cooperativeness, and openness ( $n = 986$ , 34.68%). This theme included characteristics representing a wide array of characteristics related to students' interactions with others including: the student's sociability, friendliness or withdrawal; their cooperativeness or defiance; their warmth, empathy or pugnaciousness; and their openness or guardedness to ideas and people. Usually, these characteristics were described in individualistic terms without awareness of context. In other words, they were presented as abstract personality or character traits (e.g., open minded, caring, friendly, loyal, honest, outspoken, disruptive, aggressive). Compared to the overall importance mean of 3.83 for all characteristics, participants rated characteristics in this theme as about average importance on the 1-5 scale ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ).

Thirty different subthemes were represented within the friendliness, cooperativeness, and openness theme. We organized the subthemes into 4 color-coded categories and one other category to thematically group subthemes. Green traits included positive characteristics that likely facilitated connection with others and personal growth. Green traits represented the largest category within this theme ( $n = 447$ , 45.33%) and had the highest average importance rating ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ). Characteristics coded into this category included openness, growth, cooperation,

honesty, respect, kindness, and outgoingness. The most frequently coded of the 12 green subthemes were warmth, kindness, and caring ( $n = 150, 33.56\%$ ), willingness to open up to others, outgoing, and social ( $n = 100, 22.37\%$ ), and willingness to hear different perspectives ( $n = 48, 10.74\%$ ). Red traits included ostentatious characteristics like assertiveness, boldness, rebelliousness, and rudeness ( $n = 140, 14.20\%$ ). The most frequently coded of the 8 red subthemes were rudeness and defiance ( $n = 60, 42.86\%$ ) and pugnaciousness ( $n = 28, 20.00\%$ ). Purple traits included guardedness, manipulation, lying, and a lack of empathy ( $n = 139, 14.10\%$ ). The most frequently coded subthemes of the 4 purple traits were guardedness ( $n = 61, 43.88\%$ ) and manipulation, lying, and deception ( $n = 44, 31.65\%$ ). Characteristics coded into blue traits included shyness, quietness, withdrawal, and avoidance ( $n = 110, 11.16\%$ ). The blue category had the lowest average importance ( $M = 3.62, SD = 1.23$ ). The most frequently coded of the 3 blue subthemes were avoidance, withdrawn, and closed off ( $n = 45, 40.91\%$ ) and shyness and quietness ( $n = 44, 40.00\%$ ). The remainder of the characteristics in this theme that did not fit in one of these color-based categories were coded into the other traits category ( $n = 150, 15.21\%$ ). Characteristics within the other category included introversion, extroversion and sensitivity.

### **Academic, Cognitive, and Emotional Abilities**

The theme with the second highest frequency of characteristics was academic, cognitive, and emotional abilities ( $n = 393, 13.82\%$ ). Characteristics coded into this theme reflected school counselors' assessments of students' abilities, skills, achievement level, or potential in one of these three areas. Overall, participants were more likely to report characteristics they viewed as positive ( $n = 290, 73.79\%$ ) as

opposed to those they viewed as negative (21.37%) or neutral (13.49%). Participants rated characteristics in this code as about average importance on the 1-5 scale ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ). The most frequently coded subthemes were high cognitive intelligence ( $n = 178$ , 45.29%), favorable social/emotional abilities ( $n = 62$ , 15.78%), maladaptive social/emotional abilities ( $n = 40$ , 10.18%), and low academic achievement ( $n = 32$ , 8.14%).

### **Perseverance, Motivation, and Goals**

Perseverance, motivation, and goals was the theme with the third highest frequency ( $n = 372$ , 13.08%). This theme represented school counselors' perceptions of students' motivation, resiliency or perseverance, and life goals. This theme included characteristics indicating high motivation or perseverance and a lack of motivation or perseverance. Participants were more likely to use characteristics to describe students they worked with effectively ( $n = 207$ , 55.6%) rather than students they worked with ineffectively. They viewed these characteristics as higher than average importance ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ). The most frequently coded of the 10 subthemes for this theme were unmotivated ( $n = 96$ , 25.81%), motivated ( $n = 80$ , 21.51%), resilience ( $n = 50$ , 13.44%), and lacks self-control ( $n = 48$ , 12.90%).

### **Other**

Other was the fourth most frequently coded theme ( $n = 243$ , 8.55%) and included characteristics related to student demographics (e.g., grade, gender), school attendance, and characteristics whose meaning could not be discerned. Interestingly, all subthemes relating to demographic characteristics were rated with lower than average

importance (age/grade = 2.06; race/ethnicity = 2.59; gender = 2.04; socioeconomic status = 2.33; gender/sexual identity = 3.40).

### **Contextual and Family Factors**

The fifth most frequently coded theme ( $n = 204$ , 7.18%) was contextual and family factors. This theme included factors largely outside of a student's control including: behaviors of parents, guardians, or siblings, and systemic issues facing their school and community. Participants were less likely to include these factors for students who they thought their work was more effective ( $n = 91$ , 44.61%). They were also much more likely to believe these characteristics were mostly negative ( $n = 119$ , 58.33%) as opposed to mostly positive ( $n = 42$ , 20.59%) or neutral ( $n = 43$ , 21.08%). The most frequently coded of the 5 subthemes for this theme were family challenges and dysfunction ( $n = 94$ , 46.08%) and trauma ( $n = 42$ , 20.59%).

### **Attention Seeking**

Attention seeking was in the lower half of the most frequently coded themes ( $n = 46$ , 1.62%). Characteristics in this theme demonstrate attention seeking, dramatic behavior, or the desire to gain the approval of others. Participants viewed characteristics in this theme as more important than average ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) and predominantly as negative ( $n = 29$ , 63.00%).

### **Counseling Theory and Techniques**

The least frequently coded of the 15 themes was counseling theory and techniques ( $n = 9$ , 0.32%). Characteristics in this theme referenced specific interventions, theories, or techniques that the participant used in working with the student. Additionally, characteristics related to the focus or goals of the counseling



relationship (e.g., anger management, communication skills) were included as well.

Although it was the least frequently coded theme, participants also rated this theme as having the highest average importance ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ). Additionally, at a higher rate than any other theme, participants were more likely to list characteristics for students with whom they felt their work was more effective ( $n = 6$ , 66.67%). The most frequently coded of the 3 subthemes for this theme were microskills ( $n = 6$ , 66.67%) and theory ( $n = 2$ , 22.22%).

## **Discussion**

In this study, we sought to understand how school counselors describe their students through a QCA (Schreier, 2012) using characteristics that school counselors identified in the differentiation portion of the CCQ (Welfare & Borders, 2010a).

Friendliness, cooperativeness, and openness was the most frequently coded theme.

Within this theme, participants often described students' strengths (e.g., honesty, respect, kindness). Many of the positive characteristics in this category align with ASCA's (2014) Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success (e.g., B-SS 1, B-SS 2, B-SS 4), which may indicate that school counselors' thinking about students may be informed by these Mindsets and Behaviors as well as other influences. Within this theme, school counselors described students they worked less effectively with using fewer positive characteristics. For example, school counselors were more likely to describe students they were less effective in working with using red (e.g., rudeness, pugnaciousness, rebelliousness) and blue (e.g., avoidance, shyness) traits. School counselors may not feel as skilled in serving students behaving in these ways as compared to students who behave in more agreeable ways. These students may have

more severe issues or more troubled lives or feel disconnected from their peers or schools and are critical for school counselor to support. Furthermore, school counselors reported blue characteristics less frequently than red traits. They also rated blue characteristics as less important than red characteristics. This may indicate that school counselors are less aware of students struggling with less visible issues and that they may inadvertently work less frequently with these students.

The second and third most frequently coded themes were academic, cognitive, and emotional abilities and perseverance, motivation, and goals. Again, these themes seem linked to ASCA's (2014) aspirational Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success as well as the emphasis on accountability and measuring student abilities and growth within the ASCA National Model (2019b). Participants often seemed to understand their students in measurable terms related to academic performance and social and emotional development (e.g., good grades, star athlete, popular) and to focus on students' potential for growth in terms of their motivation and perseverance. Possibly, broad cultural characteristics and policies influencing public schools (e.g., high stakes testing, focusing on goal setting and accountability) plus professional school counselor resources (i.e., ASCA Mindset and Behavior Student Success) may have influenced the ways that participants perceived their students.

The contextual and family factors theme was less frequently coded than themes describing students in terms of individualistic traits (e.g., friendliness, cooperativeness, and openness). It seems some participants may more often think about students using dominant Western individualistic cultural values without considering contextual factors. Given the predominantly White sample in this study, White privilege may serve as a

barrier for participants' awareness of important contextual factors surrounding their students' race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other cultural identities (Moss & Singh, 2015). Additionally, school counselors were more likely to mention mostly negative characteristics regarding students' home lives than ways that family and community were sources of strength. For example, school counselors reported positive family support systems (e.g., supportive parents) less frequently than negative family influences (e.g., mom in jail, father absent). This may indicate that school counselors may identify familial and community strengths less and are limited in their abilities to fully understand their students' cultural and familial backgrounds (ASCA, 2019a).

Participants rated demographic information, such as age, gender, SES, and sexual identity, with lower than average importance. Possibly, White school counselors working in rural and suburban areas, like the majority of those in our sample, may not consider their students' gender, race and ethnicity, and other demographic factors as central to their work with students or may feel reluctant to draw attention to them. As a result, some school counselors may be missing important ways that their students' identities influence their lives at school (e.g., experiences of racism from other students and teachers, facing hunger, bullying because of their sexual orientation). Yet, school counselors should be aware of the impact of cultural, social, and environmental influences on their students (ASCA, 2019a). Researches (Moss & Singh, 2015; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018) have called all school counselors, especially those who are of White and privileged identities, to strive towards recognizing their influence and power in schools to become social justice allies to help meet the needs of all students.

Finally, counseling theory and counseling techniques were coded the least frequently of all themes. It seems that school counselors may not use specific counseling theory (e.g., Solution Focused Brief Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Theory, Reality Therapy) in thinking about their students. Although some have argued counseling theory is important for school counseling practice (Dollarhide & Lemberger-Truelove, 2019), it seems that participants in this study felt that counseling theory was of limited importance and utility. This finding contrasts the importance of theory in the ASCA school counselor professional standards competencies (2019a) and may warrant further research to determine which counseling theories, if any, are relevant to a school counseling context.

### **Implications**

Considering the finding that participants in this study did not consistently described their students using contextual characteristics (e.g., contextual and family factors), it seems that school counselors should continue developing their awareness of cultural, social, and environmental influences on students (ASCA, 2019a). Since power differentials between White school counselors and students can reinforce barriers for students of color accessing school counseling services (Moss & Singh, 2015), White school counselors should strive to better understand their own Whiteness and consider contextual factors influencing their students. They can challenge themselves to continuously examine how privilege may impact their ability to fully understand the experiences of their marginalized students and remain open and humble to wanting to learn more (Ratts et al., 2015; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018).

School counselors can use a number of different resources to help them identify their students' contextual factors and remove barriers to their awareness of these factors. First, Ratts and Greenleaf (2018) developed a framework for adapting the MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2015) to school counseling social justice leadership. Using this step-by-step framework, school counselors identify how student groups are being impacted by contextual and systemic factors. School counselors using this framework contextualize an issue based in the privilege and marginalization of themselves and their students with self-awareness and awareness of differences in worldview. Second, Helms' (1995) White Racial Identity Development Model, Atkinson and colleagues' Minority Identity Development Model (1998), and Edwards' (2006) Aspiring Social Justice Ally Identity Development Model can serve as resources for school counselors to reflect on barriers to their awareness of cultural and contextual factors influencing their students and help them strive for anti-racist school counseling practice. Finally, since school counselors often lack consistent clinical supervision (DeKruyf et al., 2013), they might consider developing peer group consultation and supervision groups with colleagues (see Borders, 2012) to foster intentionality around developing awareness of how racism, classism, homophobia, and other systems of oppression function in their students' lives, identifying students' familial and cultural strengths, and discussing potential biases and personal limitations that may impact their work with students (ASCA, 2019a; Moss & Singh, 2015).

Since participants in this study did not frequently describe students as having less visible characteristics such as shyness, quietness, withdrawal, and avoidance (e.g., blue traits within the friendliness, cooperativeness, and openness theme), it may be

valuable for school counselors to be intentional about supporting such students. School counselors can help their schools utilize standardized support structures, such as Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS; “PBIS.org,” n.d.) or Multi-tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS), to help meet the needs of these students. Similarly, since screening students for mental health issues can help prevent serious student issues from going untreated (Cujipers et al., 2006), implementing school wide student needs assessments can help identify students who may be struggling but who are not yet on the school counselor’s radar.

Although counseling theories and techniques were coded the least frequently of all themes by school counselors in the present study, theories are foundational to effective and accurate conceptualizations of students (ASCA, 2019a; Crawford, 2010; Dollarhide & Lemberger-Truelove, 2019). Considering the unique school context and time constraints that school counselors often face, there may be a need to adapt clinical mental health theories to enhance relevance to the school setting. Scholars have recognized the importance of adapting and developing counseling theories that are relevant for school counseling practice and have developed valuable resources to support school counselors with this integration (e.g., Crawford, 2010; Dollarhide & Lemberger-Truelove, 2019). Moreover, there is a need to improve school counselor training programs to teach students how to effectively integrate theory into their work with students. CACREP core curriculum requires that all counselors-in-training (regardless of specialty) are knowledge about and skill in theories of counseling (CACREP, 2015); however, counselor educators should tailor course content in a way that is relevant for school counselors. In order to do this, counselor educators could

develop school specific case studies to encourage students to apply theoretical approaches with students in schools. Further, educators can develop assignments and discussion questions that consider systemic application of theory in schools and identify strengths and challenges of implementing various theoretical approaches in a school setting.

### **Limitations**

We recognize several limitations in this study. First, although our results shed light on the way school counselors describe their students, they do not reveal the full picture of their conceptualization abilities, including the complex internal thinking that school counselors may have about their students. The CCQ's structure may have limited school counselors' abilities to describe their students in complex and contextual ways. Space for lengthier responses could have led to different themes in the ways school counselors describe their students. Additionally, since school counselors were asked to consider their thoughts about individual students (i.e., a student they are effective with and a student they are less effective with), results may not represent school counselors' conceptions of students as a whole. In their practices, school counselors may think contextually in ways that were not reflected in their lists of characteristics. Second, our low response rate (1.56%) may limit the generalizability of our findings. Third, themes in participants' descriptions of students they worked effectively with or less effectively with do not necessarily equate to their effectiveness in terms of student outcomes. School counselors' perceptions of their effectiveness may be different from those of their students. Fourth, although our sample was representative of 32 states, participants were predominantly White (86.21%) and the

majority served rural or suburban schools (75.86%). It is possible that counselors of color and those who work in urban may have perspectives not well represented in our themes. Fifth, aside from socioeconomic data, we did not collect much data about the types of populations that participants served. Similarly, we could have collected more data about the backgrounds and intersectional identities of participants. More detailed and intersectionally-grounded descriptions of participants' student populations and participants' cultural identities may have allowed us to offer more specific and contextualized implications for how school counselors can conceptualize students and reduce potential bias.

### **Directions for Future Research**

There is a need to explore school counselors', and especially privileged school counselors', potential bias or attraction towards working with certain students, as well as school counseling utilization patterns by students with various identities (Hutchinson, 2011). Future researchers could also explore how contextual and individualistic thinking plays out in school counseling practice. Since school counselors are called to be social justice leaders who work with students in culturally relevant ways (Moss & Singh, 2015; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018), they could further understand how school counselors perceive and integrate students' unique contexts and identities (e.g., race, gender, ability status, sexual orientation, family context) into their conceptualization. It is also important to understand the connection between school counselor perceptions, conceptualizations, student outcomes, and school counselor accountability practices (ASCA, 2019b; Dahir & Stone, 2009). Researchers could use mixed-methods research designs to explore school counselor perceptions of students they work effectively with



combined with student outcome data in order to enhance our understanding the relationship between the two. Finally, to our knowledge, there is no research that currently exists on school counselors working with students demonstrating attention seeking behaviors. Given the predominantly negative perceptions that school counselors held of students who demonstrated attention seeking behaviors, it would be beneficial to understand school counselor experiences and interventions with students who demonstrate these characteristics. Additionally, researchers might explore the types of student behaviors counselors perceive as attention seeking.

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**Table 1**

*Thematic structure of school counselors' conceptualizations of their students*

<b>Theme Name</b>	<b>% of All<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>% Eff.<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>% Pos.<sup>c</sup></b>	<b>% Neg.<sup>d</sup></b>	<b>Importance<sup>e</sup></b>
Friendliness, Cooperativeness, & Openness	34.68	54.77	48.07	40.37	3.87
Academic, Cognitive, & Emotional Abilities	13.82	52.67	65.14	21.37	3.85
Perseverance, Motivation, & Goals	13.08	55.65	47.31	39.25	4.07
Other	8.55	53.91	27.16	34.57	3.26
Contextual & Family Factors	7.18	44.61	20.59	58.33	3.94
Emotions	5.59	45.28	22.64	61.01	3.90
Mental Illness & Related Symptoms	4.12	58.12	4.27	76.07	4.23
Interactions with Specific People/Groups	2.92	39.76	33.73	56.63	3.89
Physical Traits & Abilities	2.25	53.13	40.63	29.69	2.88
Fun & Humor	2.18	58.06	91.94	1.61	3.35
Attention Seeking	1.62	39.13	19.57	63.04	3.93
Beliefs about Self	1.58	48.89	13.33	77.33	3.89
Values	1.37	64.10	74.36	12.82	3.92
Interests	0.74	61.90	66.67	4.76	2.79
Counseling Theory & Techniques	0.32	66.67	66.67	22.2	4.56
<b>Overall</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>52.87</b>	<b>43.26</b>	<b>40.59</b>	<b>3.83</b>

*Note: <sup>a</sup>The percentage of all characteristics coded in this theme. <sup>b</sup>The percentage of participants who mentioned characteristics in this theme for students for whom their work was more effective (the more effective percent and the less effective percent always add up to 100%, so only the percent of more effective is shown). <sup>c</sup>The percentage of characteristics in this theme flagged as mostly positive. <sup>d</sup>The percentage of characteristics in this theme flagged as mostly negative. <sup>e</sup>The average importance rating of characteristics within this theme on a scale of 1 (low importance) to 5 (high importance).*

### **Biographical Statements**

Phillip L. Waalkes, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the counselor education program at the University of Missouri-Saint Louis. He worked as a school counselor in a rural K-12 school. His research interests include qualitative research methods, the development of teaching and research in counselor educators, school counselor training, and the development of school counselors.

After serving two years in AmeriCorps and then working as a case manager for homeless veterans, ex-offenders, and individuals with mental health diagnoses, Emily Woodruff decided to shift her career trajectory towards counseling. She is enrolled in a Clinical Mental Health master's program with Antioch University. She is still exploring research areas but has an interest in social justice, multiculturalism, and understanding chronic homelessness within a societal context.

Daniel DeCino, Ph.D., LSC-Colorado, LPC, & NCC is an Assistant Professor at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion, SD. He is a former school counselor at a K-8 magnet school and 6-12 charter school. His primary teaching responsibilities are practicum for school counselors and core counseling classes for students in clinical and school counseling programs. His research interests include multicultural counseling competence, school counselors and school counselor training, social justice, Critical Race Theory, and critical consciousness.

Jaimie Stickl Haugen, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Counselor Education at St. Bonaventure University in the School of Education. She previously worked as a school counselor and a counseling grant manager where she supervised and supported school counselors at the district level. Her research interests primarily involve school



belonging, youth suicide, urban schools, and inequities in education for underserved students.