A Phenomenological Investigation of Mentors' Experience with a Culturally Responsive Tier 2 Modular School-Based Mental Health Treatment

Emily Horton, University of Houston Clear Lake, horton@uhcl.edu

Tiffany Simon, University of Houston Clear Lake

TJ Schoonover, Northern Illinois University

Madeline Powers, University of Houston Clear Lake

Ashley Baines, Sam Houston State University

Gerald Strait, University of Houston Clear Lake

Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of mentors implementing the Empowering Horizons Program (EHP), a culturally responsive, Tier 2 modular school-based mental health intervention designed for sixth grade students. The EHP supports student mental health and goal setting through eight in-school group mentorship sessions facilitated by trained graduate students and paraprofessionals. Mentors utilized adaptable activities such as value card sorts, relaxation strategies, and skill-building exercises to meet the unique needs of diverse student populations. Twelve mentors and 80 students participated in the program, with mentors encouraged to modify content and use students' preferred languages to increase accessibility and engagement. Through qualitative analysis of mentor interviews, findings revealed four central themes: (1) growth in confidence (2) motivational interviewing skills, (3) cultural connection, and (d) shifting biases about the middle school population. The study highlights the promise of modular, culturally responsive programs in promoting wellness, equity, and connection within educational communities, and offers practical implications for counselor preparation and school-based mental health initiatives.

Keywords: culturally responsive counseling, school-based mental health, Tier 2 intervention, mentorship

Legislators and school officials across the nation continue to sound the alarm on the mental

health crisis among children in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES],

2022). Before 2020, the rate of mental health concerns in school-aged children increased by 30%, with the most common diagnoses including mood, conduct, attention deficit hyperactivity, and anxiety disorders (Glassgow et al., 2020; Lebrun-Harris, et al., 2022). Additionally, research by the NCES (2022) found that 69% of public schools reported an increase in the number of students who were requesting mental health services. Nationally, millions of students need mental health interventions yet are unable to access these services due to shortages of school-based mental health providers and the lack of culturally responsive and efficient Tier 2 interventions (Meng & Wiznitzer, 2024; National Association for School Psychologists, n.d.; Weir, 2024).

Addressing this growing mental health crisis requires scalable, cost-effective interventions that can be integrated within the school setting. While Tier 2 interventions are designed to provide targeted support for students at risk of developing more severe mental health concerns, access remains a persistent challenge due to resource limitations and workforce shortages (Meng & Wiznitzer, 2024; National Association for School Psychologists, n.d.). As schools seek innovative solutions to bridge this gap, leveraging existing personnel—such as teachers, counselors, and other school staff—to serve as student support mentors has gained increasing attention.

Mentorship programs within schools have been proposed as a promising avenue for expanding mental health support, while fostering positive relationships that contribute to students' well-being. School-based mentoring programs (SBMPs) provide structured support through individualized or group-based interactions, offering students guidance in both academic and social-emotional domains (McQuillin et al., 2020). Given the potential of these programs to serve as a culturally responsive and accessible Tier 2 intervention, understanding the experiences of mentors in these programs is critical to refining and enhancing their effectiveness.

School Personnel as Mentors in School-Based Mentorship Programs

School counselors are tasked with supporting all students and their diverse needs. In recent years, they have increasingly utilized Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to address these needs (Goodman-Scott & Ockerman, 2023). MTSS consists of three tiers: Tier 1 interventions, which aim to support all students (Savitz-Romer & Sink, 2023); Tier 2 interventions, which offer additional, moderate support for students who need more services than are available at Tier 1 (Olsen et al., 2023); and Tier 3 interventions, which are the most intensive interventions or are referrals to outside professionals (Ziomek-Daigle, 2023). Tier 1 interventions generally address 80-85% of the student population through general programs and expectations (Savitz-Romer & Sink, 2023), while the remaining 15-20% of students participate in Tier 2 activities, such as individual meetings, small group sessions, or more targeted interventions (Olsen et al., 2023). Those who do not respond to Tier 2 then receive Tier 3 support (Ziomek-Daigle, 2023).

School-based mentorship programs (SBMPs) may be one effective Tier 2 intervention, as they can help address both academic and social-emotional student needs. The success of these SBMPs, however, is often influenced by the qualifications and training of the mentors. Research has shown that non-mental health school personnel, while crucial to the implementation of these programs, require strong supervision and adequate training to effectively support students (McQuillin et al., 2015; Sanchez et al., 2018). School counselors play a critical role in overseeing SBMPs, ensuring that mentors without a mental health background are properly equipped with the skills necessary to address students' academic and emotional needs (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2024; McQuillin et al., 2015). Given the wide range of students' needs, school counselors may consider collaborating with school-based mentors to deliver Tier 2 programming such as the culturally responsive mentoring intervention integrated into the Empowering Horizons Program (EHP).

Cultural Adaptation and Program Evaluation

Cultural responsiveness is critical in the design and implementation of SBMPs, especially as school populations become more ethnically diverse. Mentoring programs that are tailored to align with students' cultural backgrounds and specific needs tend to show more positive outcomes (Benish et al., 2011; Peterson et al., 2017). The importance of culturally responsive practices is especially evident in programs targeting marginalized populations, where traditional mentoring models may inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes or fail to engage students meaningfully (Benish et al., 2011). This highlights the importance of cultural adaptation in mentorship, which will be a focal point in our study's examination of Group Instrumental School-Based Mentoring (GISBM).

Group Instrumental School-Based Mentoring (GISBM)

GISBM is a model that integrates group mentoring with structured, skill-building activities. This approach has demonstrated effectiveness in improving student outcomes, but its success hinges on the effective training and supervision of mentors (Strait et al., 2020). Mentors, typically paraprofessionals, receive specific professional development in motivational interviewing (MI) and evidence-based practices, which they use to guide students toward academic and personal goals (Miller & Rollnick, 2012). The effectiveness of GISBM is closely tied to the quality of the mentoring relationships, which is why supervision is critical to its success (McQuillin et al., 2015). Our study will explore the experiences of mentors in a GISBM program to better understand the impact of supervision and cultural adaptation on program outcomes.

Rationale and Research Question

Across the nation, millions of students need mental health interventions but face significant barriers to access due to a shortage of school-based mental health providers and a lack of culturally responsive, efficient Tier 2 interventions. To help address this gap, we implemented Empowering Horizons, a program designed to meet the mental health needs of students in a Title I school with a

predominantly underrepresented student population. Given the importance of understanding how mentors experience and make meaning of culturally responsive Tier 2 interventions, we employed a phenomenological approach to gain deeper insight into their perspectives while implementing the Empowering Horizons Program (EHP) and their ideas about the program's impact. Accordingly, our research question was: What were the lived experiences of mentors implementing a culturally responsive Tier 2 intervention in a middle school?

Method

Because phenomenology aims to explore and illuminate individuals' lived experiences, we utilized this approach to examine mentors' understanding of the EHP. Specifically, we followed Moustakas' (1994) delineated steps for transcendental phenomenology wherein the focus centers on the lived experience of a phenomenon, the meaning made from the phenomenon, and the essence of the shared experiences of the phenomenon. We investigated the meaning-making of the phenomena of being a mentor facilitating a culturally responsive Tier 2 intervention in a middle school setting.

Empowering Horizons Program

The EHP is a GISBM that was funded by a Department of Education grant. The EHP trains, supervises, and supports graduate students and school personnel to implement the program to support K-12 students (Horton et al., 2025) and involves eight group mentorship sessions that teach the students new skills to help create and meet their goals. The mentors implement multiple interventions such as value card sorts, relaxation techniques, and other skill-building activities. The mentors for this study were paraprofessionals and graduate students who were chosen by the first and sixth authors. Mentors completed six hours of training on how to implement the program. All EHP sessions were completed in-person at the students' school. A total of 12 mentors and 80 students participated in the EHP. Mentors were encouraged to adapt the sessions if needed to meet

the cultural needs of the students. If a student preferred the content in a different language and the mentor was proficient in that language, they could provide it in the student's first language. This theoretically enhances comprehension, engagement, and inclusivity, allowing the student to grasp complex concepts more effectively and succeed academically.

Data Collection

Data was collected across several domains, including hand-written post-session surveys, post-session focus groups, and post-intervention individual interviews. After each of the eight group sessions, mentors completed a hand-written qualitative survey, wherein they answered keep, quit, start (KQS) questions, including: (a) What activities should we keep for this session? (b) What activities should we quit doing for this session? and (c) What activities should we start doing for this session? Also, following each of the eight group sessions, mentors participated in a focus group and answered questions such as, (a) What was your overall experience with today's mentoring session? (b) What was most challenging about today's mentoring session? and (c) How have you grown, if at all, since previous mentoring sessions? Following the completion of the EHP implementation, mentors completed an individual interview and reflected on their overall experience. Individual interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes. In the individual interviews, mentors reflected on questions, such as, (a) Please tell me about your experience with EHP, (b) Walk me through your journey, beginning, middle, and end, engaging with the EHP program, and (c) What have been some of your biggest takeaways from the EHP experience overall?

Data Analysis

Because the purpose of the research study was to examine mentors' lived experiences implementing the Tier 2 intervention at the secondary level, we adopted a transcendental phenomenology approach. This approach entails epoche, or bracketing, in which we set aside our experiences as much as possible to hear and understand the participants' perspectives. Accordingly,

we aimed to highlight participants' stories of how they experienced the phenomena of mentorship and what factors influenced their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). We adhered to Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam's (1966) phenomenological analysis and related seven steps: horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, final identification of the invariant constituents and themes, construct individual textural descriptions, construct individual structural descriptions, and construct a textural-structural description of meanings and essences of the experience. Through the analysis process, we aimed to reveal the essence or meaning of a human experience (Moustakas, 1994). A constructivist paradigm, wherein reality is relative to the individual, undergirded our transcendental phenomenological analytic process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). As a research team, we allowed the data to emerge through the experiences, perspectives, and processes of the participants while engaging in trustworthiness strategies to limit the impact of our own perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Participants

After obtaining IRB approval, we recruited participants in the local community, at the middle school, and those enrolled in the counseling and school psychology programs. In alignment with the recommendations from transcendental phenomenology, we interviewed 12 mentors. Participants in the present study were trained in the Empowering Horizons Program (EHP) and then implemented it at the same Title I school in a large city in the Southwest United States. The training involved multiple days of in-person, on-site learning of a 100-page manual, engaging in role-plays, and learning about the local student body. All graduate student mentors were from the same local university, and all paraprofessionals were staff at the school wherein EHP was implemented. Most participants (n=7) identified as Hispanic, which aligned with the school, where over 81% of

the middle school students were Hispanic. Table 1 indicates additional demographic data about the

12 mentors involved in the study.

Table 1
Participant Demographic Data

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Bilingual	Professional Role
Ximena	33	Female	Hispanic	Yes, Spanish	Paraprofessional
Viviana	23	Female	Hispanic	Yes, Spanish	Counseling Student
Lola	29	Female	Hispanic	Yes, Spanish	School Psychology Student
Kennedy	28	Female	White	No	School Psychology Student
Jesus	30	Male	Hispanic	Yes, Spanish	School Psychology Student
Gabrielle	21	Female	African American	No	School Psychology Student
Bora	47	Female	Korean American	No	Counseling Student
Anamaria	25	Female	Hispanic	No	Counseling Student
Alondra	31	Female	Hispanic	No	Counseling Student
Aileen	23	Female	Vietnamese	Yes, Vietnamese	School Psychology Student
Eloisa	36	Female	Hispanic	Yes, Spanish	Paraprofessional
Shanice	41	Female	African American	No	Paraprofessional

Note. Please note that two paraprofessionals, Eloisa and Shanice, did not complete the individual interviews but did engage in the other two forms of data collection.

Researcher Positionality

There are six authors for the current study. Four of the authors identify as White and two

identify as Black. Four of the six authors identify as Female and two identify as Male. Three of the

authors are counselor educators, with two of them school counselor educators. There is one

counselor education and supervision doctoral student who specializes in school counseling. One author is a school psychologist and one is a school psychology doctoral student.

It is important to note that none of the authors identify as Hispanic, and our backgrounds may shape our interpretations of the data. To ensure we did not impose our perspectives onto the findings, we actively worked to set aside biases and assumptions. For example, we engaged in reflexive journaling to document and acknowledge any preconceptions about the study population, allowing us to mitigate their influence during data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness

According to Alase (2017), phenomenological investigations must integrate trustworthiness strategies, such as member checking, triangulation, and auditing. Accordingly, we intentionally employed trustworthiness procedures throughout the study, including before, during, and after data collection and analysis.

To enhance the depth of our findings, we employed methodological triangulation by analyzing data from three distinct sources: hand-written post-session surveys, post-session focus groups, and post-intervention individual interviews. Triangulation was achieved through a systematic process of comparing and integrating insights across these data sources to identify patterns, corroborate findings, and provide a comprehensive understanding of mentors' experiences with the EHP. First, post-session surveys captured immediate, session-specific reflections from mentors, allowing us to track ongoing feedback regarding what activities were effective, challenging, or in need of modification. These responses provided initial insights into emerging themes related to program structure and mentor engagement. Second, post-session focus groups offered a dynamic, interactive setting where mentors expanded on their survey responses in greater depth. These discussions provided opportunities for shared meaning-making and clarification, enabling us to

assess consistency in perspectives while also identifying new or evolving themes as the program progressed. Finally, post-intervention individual interviews allowed for a holistic, retrospective reflection on the entire EHP experience. By analyzing these interviews alongside the focus group discussions and post-session surveys, we could compare individual and group-level perspectives, ensuring that key themes were not limited to a single data source. Through this triangulation process, we validated findings by examining their presence across multiple sources, refining our interpretations, and ensuring a robust understanding of mentors' lived experiences. This approach strengthened the trustworthiness of the study while capturing both immediate and reflective insights into the mentoring process.

Further, we facilitated member checking by inviting mentors to read and edit the transcription of their individual interviews, of which no mentors requested any changes. Throughout the study, we also engaged in other reflexive practices, such as bracketing our biases through research meetings during the coding and analysis stages and writing rich and thick descriptions.

Findings

There were four superordinate themes and one sub-theme from the data: (a) growth in confidence, (b) motivational interviewing skills, (c) cultural connection, and (d) shifting ideas about the middle school population. One subtheme, redirecting and drawing out, was connected to the theme of MI skills.

Growth in Confidence

One theme that emerged from the data was how the mentors' growth in their confidence changed throughout the EHP. Participants shared how initially they felt anxious and unsure of what to expect. Kennedy shared her feelings at the beginning of the program, when she said:

I think, at first I was so scared that my kids were gonna hate me… like, I wasn't going to be a good mentor… I wasn't even going to be able to connect with them… I was so scared and hesitant at first.

This feeling of anxiety around working with the students was also shared by Viviana when she reflected, "I was nervous the first session, I was like, are these kids going to like me? How am I going to relate to them?" Bora summarized the experiences of the students and the mentors at the beginning of the program when she said, "Everybody was nervous at the beginning, we didn't know what to expect. And I would argue that maybe the kids were also a tad bit nervous."

Although there were nerves about starting the EHP, participants relied on their training for the program to calm their nerves. Viviana reflected on how she reviewed the preparation materials to calm her nerves: "I expected it to be scary… I woke up two hours earlier to go over the manual, the PowerPoint, the notes, and it just went really well." Alondra also reflected on nervousness about the program but seeing it in action calmed her nerves; she elucidated, "I was nervous when we would do the circles and training. But it felt natural once I was there." Participants often reflected on how their training and the structure of the program brought them some relief. Bora expressed her experiences with the curriculum when she was nervous, saying, "I had a curriculum I had to follow, which was beneficial when you were nervous and couldn't think straight. You had someplace to go." Participants felt more confident in facilitating sessions because of the structure of the program and their training, which increased their confidence to adjust quickly. Jesus shared his experience when he explained:

I like that it was structured. I think after a certain point, I felt like it was a good foundation… It's good to have a structure and work within those boundaries and if needed to kind of do something outside of that.

As the participants progressed through the program, their confidence grew. Participants ascribed this to the structure of the groups and the comfort level within the groups. Jesus exemplified such by sharing, "I was able to click with the kids within the first two sessions and they became comfortable with me. Then it became 'I want them to be comfortable with one another'." The confidence for all participants (n=12) grew from each session. In the after-session forms, each participant shared that they felt more confident at least once during the program. Kennedy shared her feelings about her growth from the program, specifically when working with adolescents:

> I definitely feel like I'm more confident working with this age group because I feel like they can be slightly intimidating at first. But I definitely feel more confident. And I definitely see that I'm able to communicate and relate to them.

Participants frequently expressed how much they enjoyed participating in the program. Some even discussed it being one of their favorite parts of their education. Anamaria shared how she felt after the program: "It was a very eye-opening growing experience, probably one of the most growing experiences I have had in a very, very long time in my college career."

Motivational Interviewing Skills

The second theme that emerged in the data was the impact of participants' experience using Motivational Interviewing (MI) skills in a group. Anamaria shared how she felt nervous: "I was nervous because I was doing group counseling for the first time. Once I started doing it, I just got the hang of it." Some participants shared how they connected with the skills and enjoyed them, and how they used them in their life outside of the group. Lola shared, "I think the active listening and reflective statements I loved. I think I'm always utilizing that nowadays with family and friends and stuff." Aileen also expressed how much she enjoyed the openness of MI when she said, "The motivational interviewing part, I liked how it was more listening and not precisely fixing the problem or giving feedback on the problems, just understanding where they're coming from and letting them

tell their story." Eloisa valued the MI skills learned so much that she shared how she wished that all school staff were trained in motivational interviewing skills, such as open questioning, affirming, reflecting, and summarizing (OARS; Miller & Rollnick, 2012). Ximena wondered what it would be like for other school staff to learn: "I wish that all teachers went through this type of learning, learning these methods." Participants overall shared positive experiences of learning and implementing MI skills, and many shared how they found the MI skills helpful when group dynamics necessitated re-directing and drawing out the students.

Redirecting, Drawing Out

A sub-theme to the theme of MI skills was the need to redirect and draw out the student group members. Multiple participants shared that they frequently had to redirect the students. One participant, Anamaria, shared how her students responded to a specific task when she explained:

> I had trouble keeping them engaged. Because I felt like they were bored with organizing. I didn't know how to make it fun. That is where I struggled. They were kind of looking around when I was talking about organization skills.

Gabrielle shared similar experiences with students being distracted when she noted, "Sometimes they get off topic or talk over one another. They did not seem like they wanted to talk about goals, but other unrelated things." Although there were some difficulties with redirecting and little interest in the goals of the group for that particular session, others shared positive experiences with the same focus of the mentorship curricula. Alondra shared that the session's focus on organization helped students in getting comfortable with them when she reflected, "I felt like my group was initially really shy. But for some reason, the organizational piece just had them really come out of their shells." Furthermore, Aileen shared how participants made a game of the group tasks when she said, "They started really participating… I think it turned into a game for them." Finally, Shanice also

expressed that the group tasks assisted in redirecting students when she considered "two students were really distracted, but planning for the future really engaged them."

Some of the participants had a difficult time with redirection, while others had a better experience and more positive reflections on it. Lola shared that she had a difficult time with the agenda during some sessions and had to redirect the group: "I think I was very fortunate to have a group that was very respectful. When I would have to redirect, they were always willing and very responsive to that." Kennedy expressed some positive pieces of needing to redirect when she stated, "I think my group was close friends. They can get off topic and you have to bring them back. But they're comfortable with each other, which I'm very happy that's there." In addition to the reflections in the interviews and focus groups, every participant shared in their post-sessions feedback that at least once during the program they had difficulty redirecting and focusing. Every participant had this issue when the groups met on Halloween.

Cultural Connection

The location of the EHP program was within a culturally diverse school, which created groups with diverse students. The third theme of the data was mentors' cultural connections with students, such as utilizing the Spanish language in session to support students. Lola shared how she was able to use Spanish in her groups when she recollected:

> I think that there were moments where we were able to speak in Spanish, and I think that just like built a greater connection and I just felt very at ease and comfortable. And I felt like they were comfortable with me.

Lola shared how the group members supported one of their fellow group mates who spoke Spanish. Viviana mirrored this experience, "I had one student that preferred to do it in Spanish. And two of the boys were like 'Oh, we can do it in Spanish. We know Spanish.' But I had one student who didn't even understand it." Ximena went on to explain that she had to say everything twice in the

group, in Spanish and English for the group member who did not speak Spanish. Ximena was not the only participant who made this accommodation for their students. Jesus shared that he had a student who spoke Spanish and as such, he would communicate with him in his preferred language. Jesus reflected:

> There was one kid, he was just really quiet. At first, I thought he wasn't comfortable with English. So, I would say instructions in English for some students, and I'll switch to Spanish because the students also understood that. I was hoping he would be more comfortable with that.

In addition to supporting students who spoke Spanish, others shared their own experiences working with students with a similar identity. Jesus shared, "It was refreshing to be able to work with people from my own background." Alondra reflected that she appreciated that the curriculum for the group allowed flexibility to meet diverse students' needs. Aileen reiterated, "All the materials and lessons were flexible in a way that weren't culturally specific, like terms and activities." In addition to these personal cultural experiences, one participant reflected how working with diverse students will impact their work in the future. Aileen shared that she appreciated, "Being exposed to lots of different things, working with different groups from different backgrounds, different cultures, helping just have those skills to be able to work with diverse students moving forward."

Shifting Baises About the Middle-School Population

The participants for this study initially had mixed feelings about working with middle schoolers, which emerged as the fourth theme of the data. Aileen shared, "I know that working with middle schoolers isn't for everyone." Gabrielle had a similar reflection. Some of the participants felt intimidated and worried that the students would not be engaged in the content. Alondra reflected on her feelings that the students would not be interested in the group, "Maybe some of them thought the idea of them being there was kind of silly, which I could tell, and how do you convince them at

that age that this can really help you?" Other participants felt nervous at the thought of working with middle schoolers. Jesus shared his experience when he said he felt, "A little intimidated. Just because, you know, they can have an attitude, like this idea that they know everything, like overconfidence." Lola was also intimidated but felt much better about her experience once it started. She reflected:

> I think it was much easier than anticipated. I think I was just so intimidated by middle school and the stigma of middle schoolers, children that can have attitudes. You know, the general stereotypes. I think coming in and being a small group, my misconceptions were able to clear out and I think it became easy and smooth as time went on. I don't feel intimidated now.

Some participants had mixed feelings; for example, one participant had fun with the students from the start of the group. Kennedy shared her excitement about the group when she noted, "The group of kids, I think I found them really fun to be with because you can actually hold a genuine conversation with them but still joke around like you're with kids." As she reflected on the experience, Aileen shared her journey of feeling her negative bias toward middle schoolers shift: "Like being more patient. I was really biased about middle schoolers and now I'm not, and I'm feeling more confident."

Although at the beginning of the program some participants had mixed feelings about working with middle schoolers, this shifted with experience. Lola shared a takeaway about working with middle schoolers:

> Not to see the children as little kids… not to appear as if you're their parent or someone much wiser. To just be very open to what they want to tell you. Just open-minded to whatever they told you at first, and whatever they tell you throughout the semester.

Mentors shared that working with middle schoolers can be difficult because, at times, it can remind them of their own adolescent experiences. To illustrate, Gabrielle reflected on a personal connection

she had with one of the students: "It did remind me of my own middle school experience. Especially with that one girl who was quieter. I just felt like I could relate to her a little." Broadly, while mentors experienced a myriad of emotions, including apprehension about middle schoolers, most of the group described a significant shift in their ideas about the demographic after the mentorship experience.

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the experiences of mentors implementing a culturally responsive Tier-2 intervention at a middle school. There were multiple forms of data collection, including hand-written reflections, focus groups for 12 participants and individual interviews for 10 of the 12 mentors. The data was analyzed, and four themes were identified: (a) growth in confidence, (b) motivational interviewing skills, (c) cultural connection, and (d) shifting biases about the middle school population, with one sub-theme of redirecting and drawing out which was connected to the theme of motivational interview skills.

The growth in confidence is consistent with previous literature on the experiences of students and mentors in the program (Fehérvári & Varga, 2023; McNeven et al., 2019; Weiss et al., 2019). The results from this study are one of the first to explore the experience of the mentors. The growth in confidence that the mentors experienced could allow for greater implementation of the EHP and is a positive outcome for the program.

Additionally, the increase in confidence in the mentor's use of MI skills was consistent with a prior study of K-12 students' experiences as mentees, which found that students gained more knowledge throughout the program and felt a strong connection with their adult mentors (Weiss, et al., 2019). Key aspects of MI are the relationship and learning skills. The participants' reflections on their gain in confidence in these areas could have a direct impact on the students' knowledge and connection with their mentors. Similarly, McQuillin and colleagues (2013) hypothesized that some of

the inconsistent results of SBMP were due to a mismatch in the mentor's theory of change. For example, mentors in our study shared that the relational focus of the mentoring process closely aligned with the students' needs, as reflected in the feedback they received. The results of this study, coupled with the results from Weiss and colleagues (2019), provide some support that consistency in the theory of change from mentors may have a positive impact on learning and relationships in the groups.

Cultural connection was another key theme that emerged from the participants in this study, with participants identifying the positive aspects of connecting with students who had similar cultural backgrounds and serving their communities. These results suggest that SBMPs benefit from being culturally responsive in ways that more directly meet the needs of their students. Students who are marginalized can feel a greater connection to a school program if it is culturally responsive, especially with language (Benish et al., 2011).

Mentors discussed concerns that they had about middle schoolers before starting the EHP. This could have negatively impacted the implementation of the EHP and the experiences of students. If mentors have biases such as this, that could also impede implementation, for children are a unique cultural group and stereotypes need to be addressed before starting the mentorship program.

Participants in this study shared how their experiences as mentors helped them grow as professionals. There is a lack of publications on the experiences of mentors in school-based mentorship programs (SBMPs); results have mainly focused on the student experiences. The results of this study are important to help schools plan and implement future SBMPs. These programs can be implemented by a school-based mental health professional, such as a school counselor; although, that is not often the case (Sanchez et al., 2018). School counselors are situated as appropriate people to plan, train, and support mentors in an SBMP.

Implications for School Counseling

Though schools serve as the main context for the provision of youth mental health services, schools lack sufficient professional providers to keep pace with the high demand and need for these services. School counselors are pivotal providers of mental health support for students; however, there are often not enough school counselors to support all students. ASCA recommends that there be a student-to-school counselor ratio of 250:1; despite this recommendation, the most recent national data has the ratio at 381:1 (ASCA, 2023). School counselors need additional support to ensure they meet the needs of all students, specifically children who are marginalized. Concerningly, the students lacking support are disproportionately youth from Hispanic and Black communities (Hodgkinson et al., 2017; Peterson et al., 2017). This study suggests that school counselors would benefit from starting a culturally responsive mentoring program like EHP to address the social-emotional needs of the over 2.1 million adolescents in the United States who require mental health services and are not receiving support (SAMHSA, 2019).

School counselors can use a standardized curriculum, such as the MI modules used in EHP, at their school districts and adapt as appropriate for students' needs. Based on the results of this study, the use of MI could increase the confidence of mentors in SBMP. Participants in this study expressed anxiety in the beginning sessions of the program but were more confident as time went by, specifically with their MI skills—this could decrease the amount of school counselor oversight required. Moreover, school counselors can recruit new underrepresented graduate students and paraprofessionals with similar identities to the middle school students to serve as mentors. This could improve the outcomes for the students, as well as the experiences for mentors. Based on the results of this study, mentors had a positive experience being culturally responsive to their students. For example, the school district where EHP occurred was 88% economically disadvantaged, 81%

Hispanic, and 79% bilingual in Spanish, and the majority of the mentors in the program were Hispanic and bilingual in Spanish.

School counselors can use their existing training and knowledge base to begin and facilitate a Tier 2 mentoring program, similar to EHP. School counselors have received training in multiple counseling theories, such as MI. Additionally, they are consistently involved in providing training to staff related to mental health issues. Their knowledge of MI and experiences leading training in schools can make them an ideal candidate to lead an SBMP. School counselors would want to ensure that they are aware of mentors' values and stereotypes to ensure they are aligned with the program goals. For example, the participants in this study had concerns about working with middle schoolers; the school counselor would want to ensure there is adequate time to acknowledge and work through these kinds of ideas. This can be done during the training time for the program and continue to be monitored during the implementation.

Importantly, school counselors can integrate culturally responsive practices within the mentoring programs at their respective schools. Tier 2 interventions can use the following cultural awareness and adaptation practices: 1) development of treatment goals consistent with each student's values, 2) flexible use of instructional and non-instructional delivery of material to meet cultural needs and preferences, 3) cultural adaptations of curriculum and integration of cultural elements based on input from stakeholders representative of the cultures and values of the student population, and 4) formative evaluation of processes to efficiently adapt the intervention during implementation (Self, et al., 2023).

Limitations

There are multiple limitations for this study. First, this is a qualitative study, thus the results are specific to the context of the data collection and the limited number of participants. Second, qualitative research always has the risk of research biases in the data analysis. This was addressed by

completing data triangulation, member checking, and reflexive practices. Third, there was only one male participant in this study. Fourth, two of the 12 mentors in the project did not complete the individual interview.

Conclusion

The Empowering Horizons Program (EHP) seeks to increase at-risk middle school students' access to a culturally responsive Tier 2 school-based modular mental health treatment, using an evidence-based group mentoring framework for training, supporting, and embedding underrepresented graduate students, paraprofessionals, and volunteers in schools (McQuillin et al., 2015; Strait et al., 2020). This qualitative study found multiple impacts of the experience for the mentors' development, including increased confidence in mentoring skills, improved ability to use Motivational Interviewing strategies - especially Redirecting and Drawing Out, excitement about developing culturally responsive connections with youth, and decreasing concerns about working with middle school students. The study suggests that EHP can be a successful way to support the professional development of a variety of educators so they can support students.

References

Alase, A. (2017). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A guide to a good qualitative

research approach. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies, 5*(2), 9–19.

https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.5n.2p.9

American School Counselor Association. (2023). *Student-to-school-counselor ratios 2022-2023*.

https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/a988972b-1faa-4b5f-8b9e-

a73b5ac44476/ratios-22-23-alpha.pdf

American School Counselor Association. (2024). *The school counselor and the use of non-school-counseling

credentialed personnel in implementing school counseling programs.*

https://www.schoolcounselor.org/Standards-Positions/Position-Statements/ASCA-

Position-Statements/The-School-Counselor-and-the-Use-of-Non-School-Cou

Benish, S. G., Quintana, S., & Wampold, B. E. (2011). Culturally adapted psychotherapy and the

legitimacy of myth: A direct-comparison meta-analysis. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 58*(3),

279–289. http://doi.org/10.1037/a0023626

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.*

Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2017). *Handbook of qualitative research.* Sage.

Fehérvári, A., & Varga, A. (2023). Mentoring as prevention of early school leaving: A qualitative

systematic literature review. *Frontiers in Education, 8*, 1156725.

https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1156725

Glassgow, A. E., Wilder, J., Caskey, R., Munoz, G., Voorhees, B. V., & Kim, S. (2020). Mental

health diagnoses among children and adolescents with chronic medical conditions in a large

urban cohort. *Journal of Behavioral Health and Psychology*, *9*(4), 1–8.

https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8373015/

Goodman-Scott, E., & Ockerman, M. S. (2023). Integrating school counseling and MTSS. In E. Goodman-Scott, J. Betters-Bubon, P. Donohue, & J. Olsen (Eds.), *The school counselor's guide to multi-tiered systems of support* (2nd edition, pp. 28–60). Routledge.

Hodgkinson, S., Godoy, L., Beers, L. S., & Lewin, A. (2017). Improving mental health access for low-income children and families in the primary care setting. *Pediatrics*, *139*(1), e20151175. http://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-1175

Horton, E., Simon, T., Baines, A., & Strait, G. (2025). Empowering horizons program: A bridge to culturally responsive tier II modular school-based mental health treatment. *Journal of Professional Counseling: Practice, Theory, and Research.* http://doi.org/10.1080/15566382.2025.2492526

Lebrun-Harris, L. A., Ghandour, R. M., Kogan, M. D., & Warren, M. D. (2022). Five-year trends in US children's health and well-being, 2016-2020. *JAMA Pediatrics, 176(7), e220056-e220056.*

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

McNeven, S., McKay, L., & Main, K. (2019). The lived experience of professional mentorship and its implications for school-based mentoring programs. *Journal of Education, 200*(2), 89–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022057419875129

McQuillin, S. D., Lyons, M. D., Clayton, R. J., & Anderson, J. R. (2020). Assessing the impact of school-based mentoring: Common problems and solutions associated with evaluating nonprescriptive youth development programs. *Applied Developmental Science*, *24*(3), 215–229. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1454837

McQuillin, S., Strait, G., Smith, B., & Ingram, A. (2015). Brief instrumental school-based mentoring for first- and second-year middle school students: A randomized evaluation. *Journal of Community Psychology, 43*(7), 885–899. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21719

McQuillin, S. D., Terry, J. D., Strait, G. G., & Smith, B. H. (2013). Innovation in school-based

      mentoring: Matching the context, structure and goals of mentoring with evidence-based

      practices. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, *6*(4), 280–294.

      http://doi.org/10.1080/1754730X.2013.832009

Meng, J. F., & Wiznitzer, E. (2024). Factors associated with not receiving mental health services

      among children with a mental disorder in early childhood in the United States, 2021–2022.

      Preventing Chronic Disease, 21, E79.

Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2012). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change* (3rd edition).

      Guilford Press.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage.

National Association of School Psychologists. (n.d.). *Shortage of school psychologists*.

      https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/policy-priorities/critical-

      policyissues/shortage-of-school-psychologists

National Center for Educational Statistics. (2022, May 31). *Roughly half of public schools report that they

      can effectively provide mental health services to all students in need.*

      https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/05_31_2022_2.asp

Olsen, J. (2023). Tier 2: Providing culturally sustaining supports for students with elevated needs. In.

      E. Goodman-Scott, J. Betters-Bubon, P. Donohue, & J. Olsen (Eds.), *The school counselor's

      guide to multi-tiered systems of support* (2nd edition, pp. 183–217). Routledge.

Peterson, L. S., Villarreal, V., & Castro, M. J. (2017). Models and frameworks for culturally

      responsive adaptations of interventions. *Contemporary School Psychology*, *21*, 181–190.

      https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-016-0115-9

Sanchez, A. M., Cornacchio, D., Poznanski, B., Golik, A. M., Chou, T., & Comer, J. S. (2018). The

      effectiveness of school-based mental health services for elementary-aged children: A meta-

analysis. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 57 (*3), 153–165.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2017.11.022

Savitz-Romer, M., & Sink, C. (2023). Tier 1: School counseling instruction and classroom management for every student. In E. Goodman-Scott, J. Betters-Bubon, P. Donohue, & J. Olsen (Eds.), *The school counselor's guide to multi-tiered systems of support* (2nd edition, pp. 114–149). Routledge.

Self, K. J., Borsari, B., Ladd, B. O., Nicolas, G., Gibson, C. J., Jackson, K., & Manuel, J. K. (2023). Cultural adaptations of motivational interviewing: A systematic review. *Psychological Services*, *20*(1), 7–18. https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000619

Strait, G. G., Turner, J., Stinson, D., Harrison, S., Bagheri, R., Perez, T., Smith, B. H., Gonzalez, J., Anderson, J. R., Simpson, J., & McQuillin, S. D. (2020). Paraprofessionals use of group school-based instrumental mentoring: Examining process and preliminary outcomes. *Psychology in the Schools, 57*(9), 1492–1505. http://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22417

van Kaam, A. (1966). *Existential foundations of psychology.* Duquesne University Press.

Weir, K. (2024, October 1). *Tackling mental health issues in schools: What will it take?* American Psychological Association. https://www.apa.org/topics/schools-classrooms/mental-health-concerns

Weiss, S., Harder, J., Bratiotis, C., & Nguyen, E. (2019). Youth perceptions of a school-based mentoring program. *Education and Urban Society, 51*(3), 423–437. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124517722830

Ziomek-Daigle, J. (2023). Tier 3: Specialized services for students with intensive needs. In E. Goodman-Scott, J. Betters-Bubon, P. Donohue, & J. Olsen (Eds.), *The school counselor's guide to multi-tiered systems of support* (2nd edition, pp. 218-240). Routledge.