The Experiences of Counselors-in-Training in a School-based Counseling Practicum

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Abstract

Counselor education programs often must choose between providing in vivo faculty supervision or a community-based setting. Programs that combine both elements have shown positive preliminary findings related to counselor development; however, the in-depth experiences of students in such programs have not been explored. This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of counselors-in-training who participated in a school-based counseling practicum with in vivo faculty supervision. Researchers identified six themes, including continuum of support within relationships, operational challenges and concerns, needs and challenges of the community, working with children, expectations and realities, and counselor identity development. Implications for counselor education and research are provided.

Keywords

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Counselor education programs expose counselors-in-training to clients in numerous ways during their practicum experience. According to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016), the counseling practicum is a clinical experience where counselors-in-training work directly with clients under the direct supervision of a qualified supervisor in order to practice and develop their counseling skills. The practicum experience varies across counselor education programs, with some programs utilizing in-house clinics to serve clients from the community and other programs placing students in community-based settings such as agencies or schools. The former typically allows students to receive in-vivo, or live, supervision from a faculty member from the program, whereas the latter typically relies on field-based site supervisors and self-report because in vivo supervision may not be logistically possible. Each of these practicum placement experiences has its inherent strengths and weaknesses; however, in either case, students have expressed a desire for authentic experiences that mirror and prepare them for future work sites (Coker & Schrader, 2004). Field-based practicum experiences can address students' need for practical counseling experiences with diverse client populations (Lauka & McCarthy, 2013; Robinson-Wood, 2008; Tate, Lopez, Fox, Love, & McKinney, 2014) while simultaneously providing a service for the community by expanding access to mental health care (Abdul-Adil et al., 2009; Lauka & McCarthy, 2013). Specifically, the school-based counseling program in this study addressed both the needs of an authentic community-based experience for practicum students while providing similar supervision methods as received by counselors-in-training in university based counseling training clinics (e.g., in vivo supervision).

The researchers' goal in the current study was to investigate the experiences of master's-level counselors-in-training who participated in a school-based counseling practicum that provided both a community-based field experience and in vivo faculty supervision. Researchers

sought to expand on prior research on practicum students' satisfaction with field-based practicum experiences (Coker & Schrader, 2004) to include overall experiences of these students in this unique practicum environment (school-based counseling clinic) that also included the benefit of in vivo supervision from a counselor education faculty member. Additionally, the community site for this practicum was a Title I (i.e., primarily low income) elementary school that offered the counselors-in-training with a perspective of a contextually challenging setting. This type of clinical experience gives graduate students the opportunity to intervene with the growing mental health and social needs of students in a setting in which culture and socioeconomic status are both highly salient components (Tate et al., 2014). The authors will present findings from semi-structured interviews and provide implications for counselor education programs.

Professional Identity Development in Counselors-in-Training

The counseling practicum is a time for counselors-in-training to get hands-on experience, which can, in turn, increase their self-efficacy as emerging counselors (Ikonomopoulos, Vela, Smith, & Dell Aquila, 2016). However, as novice counselors begin to transition from the learning environment to field experiences, they often experience anxiety about their performance as counselors, unrealistic expectations of themselves and of the counseling process, and a heightened awareness of being evaluated by a supervisor (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Auxier, Hughes, and Kline (2003) described a Recycling Identity Formation process, which notes the importance of experiential learning and external evaluation to the counselor identity development process for graduate students; their findings highlighted that the practicum and internship experiences were where much of the applied learning occurred. Researchers have also observed measurable differences in professional identity, values, and development between beginning graduate students and those in practicum and internship (Prosek & Hurt, 2014). These findings, as well as prior research, fit within the structure and theory of the Integrated

Developmental Model (IDM; Stoltenberg & McNeil, 2010), one of the most widely understood models of understanding how counselors progress over the course of their careers.

As counselors-in-training enter the field experience phase of their training programs, they often begin to recognize the gaps between the knowledge gained in counseling coursework and what is needed in a practical counseling setting, and their supervisors typically begin to recognize areas for growth and further development (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Moss, Gibson, and Dollarhide (2014) described novice counselors' frustration with the discrepancies between expectations of their counseling experiences based on classroom learning and the actual reality of their field experiences. As an example, students may struggle to integrate culture-related knowledge into case conceptualization and counseling practice (Clark, Moe, & Hays, 2017; Tate et al., 2014; West-Olatunji & Gibson, 2012). Furthermore, the researchers highlighted adjustment to realistic expectations of counseling and developing confidence and freedom as key themes of this novice counselor developmental period (Moss et al., 2014). Identity development in counselors-in-training is also marked by a shift from reliance on external validation and feedback from supervisors to developing the ability to evaluate oneself (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010; Gibson, Dooley, Kelchner, Moss, & Vacchio, 2012), which are consistent with counseling supervision literature.

Supervision in Counseling Field Experiences

Supervision during counseling field experiences can take on various forms, depending on the set-up and location of the field experience (e.g. university counseling center, community site; Fickling, Borders, Mobley, & Wester, 2017). For example, a controlled environment like a counselor education program's training clinic more easily supports in vivo supervision and immediate feedback from faculty supervisors. In contrast, site-based supervision relies on practitioners in the field to provide clinical supervision in settings where counselors-in-training

might expect to work after graduation. Graduate students frequently complete their clinical training experiences in a field site with the support of a site-based supervisor and a faculty supervisor (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). Lewis (2004) posited that having counselors-in-training complete their practicum in community-based settings can (a) bolster counselor-client collaboration, (b) foster community engagement, and (c) expose students to clients with a wider variety of presenting concerns. Additionally, other researchers have stressed the importance of supervisors to engage supervisees in conversations around race, poverty, and cross-cultural counseling, especially for non-minority counseling students (Day-Vines, Ammah, Steen, & Arnold, 2018; Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin, & Torino, 2010). However, supervision activities in field practicum experiences vary greatly across settings (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014).

The most commonly used supervision modalities include video or audio recording reviews, supervisee self-reporting, and in vivo supervision, and these can occur in an individual, triadic, or group setting (Borders & Brown, 2005; Borders, Brown, & Purgason, 2015; Borders et al., 2012). In video or audio review supervision, the supervisees and supervisors discuss and process recorded clips of counseling sessions, unlike self-report supervision, in which the supervisees and supervisors discuss the sessions based on the supervisees' self-reported recall. In contrast, in vivo supervision, often found in university training clinics, allows supervisors to watch sessions as they occur and provide immediate feedback to supervisees through consultation breaks, telephone-ins, bug-in-the-ear, or walk-ins (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). Whisenhunt, Romans, Boswell, and Carlozzi (1997) found that beginning counselors-in-training (i.e., those with 0 to 33 direct client contact hours) in their practicum preferred video review and self-report over in vivo supervision, whereas more advanced counselors-in-training (i.e., those with more than 90 direct client contact hours) preferred self-report or in vivo supervision over video review. Moreover, these same counselors-in-training believed that video review and in

vivo supervision, respectively, had more strengths as a modality of supervision (e.g., immediacy of feedback, heightens skill acquisition, allows for processing of non-verbals) than did self-report. In a study of marriage and family therapy students, Silverthorn, Bartle-Haring, Meyer, and Toviessi (2009) found that the presence of in vivo supervision resulted in quicker progress with the clients' presenting issue from clinicians' perspective. Moody, Kostohryz, & Vereen (2014) found similar results with masters students in a group counseling course receiving in vivo feedback on their performance. Despite these advantages, video review and self-report supervision remain more commonly used, especially in site-based supervision (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014).

School-Based Counseling Field Experiences

Across counseling program tracks, school counseling students are most likely to have a field experience directly in a school under the direct supervision of a practicing school counselor, much like a school counseling internship (Paisley et al., 2006). Thompson and Moffett (2010) outlined a model for school counseling practicum experience and noted that the university supervisor has clear roles and tasks, such as visiting the practicum site, collaborating with the school-based site supervisor, and giving ongoing feedback to the student. Another imperative is that school counseling site supervisors should have training and support in carrying out their role (Paisley et al., 2006; Thompson & Moffett, 2010); however, many site supervisors have not received training in providing effective and ethical clinical supervision (Cigrand, Wood, & Duys, 2014; Smith & Koltz, 2015). Despite these supervision limitations, research has demonstrated that school-based practicum experiences can expose students to the unique realities and challenges of working in schools, especially in urban settings where support and resources can be limited (Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008).

To ensure direct clinical supervision in site-based practica, some counselor education programs have collaborated with school districts to establish school-based counseling clinics staffed by counselors-in-training under the supervision of university faculty (e.g., Coker & Schrader, 2004; Cuccaro & Casey, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008; Lewis, 2004). Coker and Schrader (2004) found that school counselors-in-training found their experience in a supervised school-based practicum to be a more realistic and valuable experience than working in their university clinic site. Similarly, Cuccaro and Casey (2007) reported similar feedback from students who participated in a completely school-based practicum with a faculty instructor as a site supervisor. The counselors-in-training in their study rated the experience higher than students in a traditional practicum, but the researchers did not include information related to the psychometric features of their survey data. No studies were identified that examined the in-depth experiences of counselor education students from any counseling track providing services in an elementary school-based mental health counseling program for their practicum course.

Whereas school-based practica can be effective in engaging graduate students in the field and to provide a service to the community (Cuccaro & Casey, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008), limited research exists that has explored the experiences of graduate students who completed their practica in these settings. This limited information on the experiences of students in this type of practicum environment is problematic in itself as this information may provide implications for the development of future practica in school-based mental health clinics. Moreover, the practicum setting in which this study's participants worked was unique in the aspect that multiple forms of supervision (e.g., in vivo bug-in-the-ear) were available to these students that are often not offered to students in other field-based practicum programs. Because in vivo supervision with a counselor education faculty supervisor is rare in school-based practica, the present study addressed a gap in the counselor preparation literature. Understanding the

experiences of counselors-in-training participating in a school-based practicum with in vivo faculty supervision could provide insight into strengths and limitations of such programs, as well as providing implications for counselor educators in designing field experiences that blend the structure and support of a university training clinic with the authenticity of community-based work. Our guiding research question for this study was, "What are the lived experiences of master's level counselors-in-training who participated in a school-based counseling practicum?"

Methods

The researchers employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of counselors-in-training with a school-based counseling program set in an elementary school (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Researchers in phenomenology seek to understand the individuals' internal and collective experiences of a particular phenomenon and how these individuals perceive such experiences intentionally and consciously (Moustakas, 1994; Wertz, 2005). The research team utilized thematic data analysis (Moustakas, 1994) with the intent of identifying commonalities across the participants' subjective lived experiences in order to gain a broad understanding of the identified phenomenon. In this approach, researchers examine the data thoroughly to identify codes, or significant statements, within the data. Then researchers group these codes around larger categorical themes that emerge from patterns within these significant statements and provide an interpretation.

The School-based Counseling Program

The school-based counseling program in this investigation was at a Title I elementary school near a large university in the Southeastern United States. Demographically, more than 75 percent of the elementary school's students were ethnic minorities (primarily African American and Hispanic), and more than 90 percent qualified for free or reduced lunch. The school-based counseling program was part of a research collaboration between the university and a local

educational agency (Solomon et al., 2016). The practicum course operated as an on-site school-based counseling clinic in which students from the school and their families could have weekly appointments after school hours. Master's students from the university's counselor education program staffed the after-school counseling program, providing both individual and family-based services. As the counselors-in-training were fulfilling the practicum portion of their counselor training, the faculty supervisor gave them flexibility to use a variety techniques and modalities (e.g., play therapy, expressive arts, talking) determined to be appropriate for their clients, rather than using a manualized treatment approach; giving students supervised flexibility allowed them to practice treatment planning and intervention selection. A university faculty member with experience counseling children and families served as the on-site supervisor for the students, and a doctoral student served as the clinical coordinator who handled scheduling and parental contact. Both the faculty supervisor and the clinical coordinator were present each week for the entire time. Students received one and a half hours of group supervision per week, as well as one hour of individual or triadic supervision per week with the faculty member. The faculty member also observed sessions live via a web-based video system and could provide students feedback via an earpiece (i.e. bug-in-the-ear supervision). At the time of this research study, the school-based counseling program was in its second semester of operation.

Participants and Procedures

The researchers utilized purposive sampling to identify participants in this investigation, using a form of criterion sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Participants had to meet the criteria of being enrolled in a counseling practicum course, in which they provided school-based mental health counseling in one elementary school. Dukes (1984) suggested studying 3 to 10 participants in a phenomenological study, whereas Polkinghorne (1989) recommended a sampling of 5 to 25 individuals. A total of six counselor education student-participants were

recruited, meeting the recommendation of both Dukes (1984) and Polkinghorne (1989). Participants included five females and one male, ranging in age from 24 to 31 years old. Two students identified as Hispanic, three identified as Caucasian, and one identified as Other (Indian). Five of the six students were in the School Counseling track and one student was in the Marriage, Couples, and Family Counseling track. This university typically requires all students to complete their practicum in a university-based clinic. This school based site opened as a voluntary alternative and was open to all program tracks; however, mostly school counseling students were interested. All participants were in their first semester of practicum and were each given a $10 gift card following their interviews as an incentive for participating.

The university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study. Before each interview, participants signed a consent form and completed a demographic questionnaire. With the exception of the last author, each researcher interviewed one to two participants using a semi-structured face-to-face interview protocol. In each interview, the researchers asked the practicum students about the following: (a) their experiences participating in the after-school counseling program, (b) how their experiences with this program have been similar or different from other counseling or counseling-related experiences, (c) their perceptions of counseling before starting this specific practicum experience, (d) their experience with the process of getting involved in the after-school counseling program, and (e) what they saw as the positive (good) and negative (not so good) aspects of their experiences with this school-based mental health practicum. In addition, interviewers used follow-up questions to encourage a collaborative dialogue, clarifications, and expansive descriptions of their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interviews were audio recorded and lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes each.

Role of the Researchers

The research team consisted of six doctoral students in a counselor education program at a large public university in the Southeastern United States, as well as one faculty member from the same university, who acted as an external reviewer. These students completed their doctoral counseling practicum in a previous academic semester in the same school-based site where the research was conducted. However, they were not the current practicum instructors or clinical supervisors of the participants, thus reducing potential effects of investigator bias. One of the researchers was the clinical coordinator for the elementary school-based counseling program and acted as a liaison between the program and the school, primarily providing logistical support rather than clinical supervision. Because this particular researcher had interacted extensively with the counselors-in-training, she did not conduct any interviews; however, she did participate in the later stages of data analysis but not the initial coding and theming. As a team, the researchers examined potential biases and assumptions and discussed our role in the research (Hays & Wood, 2011; Wertz, 2005).

Data Analysis

An independent transcriber completed a confidentiality agreement and subsequently transcribed the recorded interviews. Two researchers individually reviewed the transcribed data, first for accuracy and a second time to identify tentative emerging key concepts that exemplified the meaning of an experience for a participant related to the after-school counseling program (Moustakas, 1994). To complete this process, each of the two researchers examined the transcripts in an electronic document, highlighting significant phrases, and noting words or phrases that capture the essence of the significant phrases in the margins. Next, the same two researchers met together to reach an agreement on the identified key concepts, or codes, which they developed in line with key concepts from the transcripts (Creswell, 2013), which they completed by examining their individual notes, documenting instances of consensus, and

discussing instances of non-consensus until a consensus was reached. These two researchers then reviewed the coded data individually and identified broader themes using a similar process. As with the codes, the researchers met together for a second time to find agreement within the identified themes and drafted an operational definition for each theme. Next, two additional members of the research team reviewed the transcripts with the identified codes and themes for accuracy. The final check of the codes and themes occurred with the entire research team. The entire team reviewed the codes and themes alongside the transcripts and had the opportunity to question the original two researchers, as well as the other pair who reviewed the codes and themes. Because of the tiered data analysis starting with the first pair of researchers developing codes and themes and the second pair of researchers checking for accuracy, the group consensus meeting proceeded smoothly and did not require major revisions to the meaning of the codes and themes; instead, the primary revisions that occurred at this meeting centered around the semantic phrasing of the broader themes. This process of refining and simplifying the codes and themes resulted in the final set of codes and themes presented below (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Because of the interpretive nature of qualitative research, the researchers took steps to assure trustworthiness of the findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). First, the research team bracketed their prior assumptions and potential by drafting positionality statements (Moustakas, 1994). For example, some of the clients that the practicum students were seeing at the school were former clients of the researchers in the prior semester. Thus, bracketing allows the researchers to be aware of any pre-conceptions from the subjects being investigated and their experiences with the same clients (Hays & Wood, 2011). Within the research team, the principal investigator was the clinical coordinator for school-based counseling program, and three members of the research team had clinical experience within a similar setting (i.e., school counseling or school-based

counseling). The researchers revisited these positionality statements throughout the data analysis process to help prevent prior assumptions from biasing the analysis or interpretation.

Second, the research team acknowledged the significance of researcher reflexivity. In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument for observation, data collection, and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Thus, throughout the research process, the team had discussions of how prior experiences played a role in the data collection and analysis and frequently reflected on whether the findings reflected the data or their experiences. Team members were explicit and transparent about their roles as researchers and any potential biases that each could bring into the process. As an additional step toward reliability of the data analysis, two research team members who were not involved in the initial data analysis checked the reviewed codes in the first round and followed up with a second review of the identified themes for final validation (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The last author acted as an external reviewer of the identified codes and themes. Researchers sent the drafted codes, themes, and interpretation to the participants who provided a member check as an additional measure of ensuring the accuracy of the findings. Participants agreed with the interpretation and provided no corrections.

Results

The researchers identified six themes reflective of the counselor education students' experiences with the school-based counseling program. A total of 331 significant statements were extracted and categorized into 35 meaning units, or codes. These codes were grouped into the six themes that emerged: (a) *continuum of support within relationships*, (b) *operational challenges and concerns*, (c) *needs and challenges of the community*, (d) *working with children*, (e) *expectations and realities*, and (f) *counselor identity development* (See Table 1 for themes and codes). Each theme is discussed in the following section with significant quotes from the participants to add to credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2013).

Table 1

Themes, Codes, and Frequency of Codes Observed

Theme	Code
Continuum of Support within Relationships	Clinical relationships
	Administrative relationships
	School based relationships
	Peer relationships
	Collaborative relationship
Operational challenges and concerns	Facilities
	Technology
	Documentation
	Concern about hours
	Confidentiality
	Recommendations
Needs and Challenges of the Community	Misconceptions
	Location
	Transient clients
	Termination
	Contextual challenges
	Flexibility
Working with children	Preparation
	Developmental considerations
	Setting limits
	Client motivation
Expectations and Realities	First time counseling experience
	Authentic experience
	Stressful
	Comparisons
	Realities of counseling
	Change
	Critical incident
	Counselor expectations
Counselor Identity Development	Positive experience
	Role of a counselor
	Skills of a good counselor
	Own identity development
	Self-awareness
	Self-efficacy

Continuum of Support within Relationships

The practicum students conveyed varying degrees of support and collaboration in interaction and communication with parents, peers, school staff, and counseling program faculty and staff, which contributed to success or struggle during their experience. Overall, students conveyed that peer, clinical, and administrative relationships added value to their experience and ability to persevere through challenging situations. Clinical relationships (e.g., triadic and group supervision) normalized their experience and provided opportunity for interpersonal learning and sharing of resources and information. Administrative relationships added support including assistance with logistics such as coordination of counseling room space, amelioration of technical issues during in vivo supervision, or contact with school staff to ensure child client attendance at sessions (e.g., reminding children who typically rode the bus to stay after on days where counseling was provided). Likewise, practicum students expressed relief during times of stress when they perceived care or concern by administrative faculty members or peers as a form of support and encouragement. One example of a peer relationship support experience shared by Practicum Student 4 (24-year old Hispanic female; School Counseling):

> If we had a really difficult session or if something went really well it was nice to be able to share with someone else what was going on and maybe get some instant feedback. So we were constantly sharing ideas, giving a little bit of feedback, or just encouragement.

Yet, not all relationships were believed to share this high level of perceived support and cohesion. Practicum students also conveyed challenges in creating and maintaining strong working relationships with both parents and school administration or personnel. Access and communication with parents seemed to be a barrier for some students, both in parent availability to collect information about the student-client and to establish connections between goals of counseling and the home environment. Although students experienced school personnel as

receptive and excited for the addition of in-school counseling services, challenges existed for access and communication with school administration, school counselors, and teachers.

Five students expressed lack of involvement by school counselors as disappointing and lack of communication about school policies related to their work at the school as barriers (e.g., dismissal procedures, use of school telephone to contact parents, arrival of a student for service). Students also encountered misunderstanding by school personnel and parents for the counseling services provided. Practicum Student 1's (29-year old Hispanic female; Marriage, Couple, & Family Counseling) comment exemplified this challenge of misconceptions about counseling children or play-based clinical intervention:

> I heard of an incident where a teacher told a parent…"All they do is just play games with them." And that really upset us… We work really hard on our interventions and being intentional.

Operational Challenges and Concerns

Working in the natural setting of a school environment presented challenges and logistical concerns for students. As counselors-in-training, all of the participants struggled with technology and facility limitations including recording for self-evaluation or in vivo supervision, privacy during sessions, and course requirements. Practicum students conveyed experiencing stress regarding documentation challenges and concern about getting the required number of client contact hours for successful completion of the course according to CACREP standards. Obtaining a private and consistent space presented challenges both from a facilities and confidentiality perspective for students. Practicum Student 3 (25-year old Indian female; School Counseling) noted, "Sometimes there wasn't a lot of time and a lot of interruptions there. Even though we have do-not-disturb signs outside, people would come in." Similarly, Practicum Student 4 (24-year old Hispanic female; School Counseling) added, "One thing that was quite

challenging was just the interruptions and kind of being shuffled around. We weren't always sure what rooms we were going to be in."

Likewise, technology limitations within the school setting prohibited video-recording options. Students therefore reported limited ability to review sessions (audio recording only) afterward for self-evaluation, presenting some challenges due to the population and developmentally appropriate intervention employed (e.g., play therapy). In describing this experience, Practicum Student 5 (24-year old White female; School Counseling) noted, "It was different not having visual feedback. So we would like listen to our audio, but I kind of wish I could see what I was doing." Students also reported that in vivo supervision from the faculty member was inconsistent in cases when technology performed inconsistently. Practicum Student 1 (29-year old Hispanic female; Marriage, Couple, & Family Counseling) shared how the limited in vivo supervision presented challenges for her:

> There would be points where I would be doing intervention and I would need feedback, but I would have to stop the intervention and go walk back. Or sometimes she [faculty supervisor] would come and knock on the door and pull me out of session to give me feedback if I didn't have the earpiece in.

Experience of these limitations and challenges yielded recommendations from the students for the addition of visual recording, protocols for contacting parents, and shared meaning regarding confidentiality and expectations of counseling within the school setting. An orientation for potential parents and school personnel to school-based counseling service was the most common recommendation shared by practicum students.

Needs and Challenges of the Community

The students described challenges and realities of the practicum site, including the school, neighborhood, and contextual challenges for families and their impact on the counseling

process. Students were exposed to the challenges faced by the clients and their families in a resource-poor environment, which had implications for the counseling process.

It's a Title I school, a lot of parents their car broke down so they don't have a ride or they're out of cell phone minutes for the month so they can't be in contact anymore. So just the community, the SES background of the students I think was like a big reality check for all of us (Practicum Student 3: 25-year old Indian female; School Counseling)

Other challenges included participating family misconceptions about counseling. Some parents did not fully understand the duration and time commitment, the process of play therapy or use of play-based intervention, or verbalized an expectation for quick results. These misunderstandings contributed to missed appointments or inconsistent attendance, resulting in a high need for flexibility and communication by students. Practicum Student 5 (24-year old White female; School Counseling) stated, "It was a good experience to learn about the parents and just kind of like in a school how difficult it can be at times. And a low SES school …we just all had to be flexible." Another example is Practicum Student 2's (31-year old White male; School Counseling) description of his experiences:

…it just gave me insight into all the things that students deal with, it gave me insight into what the environment is like in a Title I failing school that doesn't have a whole lot of funding that goes towards it… It definitely gave me insight into the amount of work that needs to be done for these students and for these families and it's great. I think it's great that the services are there.

The students also shared stress and frustration with the lack of termination with clients who moved away or ended services prior to a final session. Practicum Student 4 (24-year old Hispanic female; School Counseling) shared the following:

I had a client the first week a family that ended up not being able to continue so I saw

them like one or two sessions and then never again… So in the beginning it was a little

challenging to get those clients and feel like "Okay, we can start getting to work," and

then they end up never coming back again. And that happened to a few of us a couple

times.

Working with Children

The students had varying degrees of prior coursework and training to work with children

and adolescents. Therefore, many of the practicum students identified learning experiences

related specifically to clinical work with a young age group. Students shared a necessity to

modify their approach based on the developmental level and capacity of the child:

I just don't think I was expecting some of the students to be as verbal as they are because

you go through classes and you talk about art therapy and play therapy and things like

that, and play is the communication style of the younger kids, and while that's definitely

true and I found that, but I was definitely surprised by using those tools and being able to

build that rapport. (Practicum Student 5: 24-year old White female; School Counseling)

Students reported additional developmental modifications to effectively work with the

children such as the use of play therapy and play-based interventions, session duration, and

counselor intervention. Several students mentioned shortening focused session time due to the

attention span of the child. Additionally, three of the practicum students relayed challenges with

client behaviors in session for which they used limit setting. Often limit setting was needed to

protect technology or materials either associated with the in vivo supervision process or property

of the school in the physical space used for counseling. Finally, students revealed surprise with

the enthusiasm and motivation of clients to participate in counseling services. For example,

Practicum Student 3 (25-year old Indian female; School Counseling) remarked:

They [the children] knew what they were getting into before the first session and they

expressed to their parent that they wanted to come. Even when leaving, all of them said

that they wanted to continue the next semester.

Expectations and Realities

All of the students shared personal expectations prior to beginning their practicum,

including aspects of the setting, clientele, interactions, their role, and anticipated outcomes. As a

result, students identified a number of reactions and realizations associated with their first

experience sitting face-to-face with a client. Students reported feeling stress and unprepared, yet

ultimately that their experience resulted in a positive and enriching experience. Practicum

Student 2 (31-year old White male, School Counseling) noted, "You're already in that situation

where it's your first semester in prac[ticum], it's your first semester seeing clients, you're

worried about screwing everything up."

Their first experiences with an actual client also contributed to greater awareness for

realistic evaluation and expectations of client change within the therapeutic relationship. They

expressed being better able to define realistic and measurable changes achievable within a

limited time frame. For example, Practicum Student 6 (24-year old White female; School

Counseling) described her experiences:

… I felt a lot of pressure from that. Pressure to do well and be a good counselor and

change their lives and be amazing, but going into it I was just like, … I'm not going to be

able to completely help this person change 180 because maybe they don't need to.

In comparison, they described specific situations that presented challenges or were

learning opportunities. Through experiences different from their expectations, students shared

how this contributed to a perceived authentic experience for school-based mental health service

provision and future work in similar settings. Practicum Student 2 (31-year old White male; School Counseling) commented:

> …having that experience and working with that client, it showed me that you have to meet clients where they're at, which, I mean, they preached that throughout this program, "You have to meet clients where they're at," but it was different seeing it in practice and kind of being there… I think we kind of had an idea that most of the population was very low SES, but I don't think we anticipated the problems that they would come to counseling with.

Counselor Identity Development

Students relayed personal and professional growth and development resulting from provision of counseling services in the school setting. The setting and experience contributed to an overall positive experience resultant from the collaborative learning and advocacy for the profession. As shared by one student, "It was very positive, I loved working with children and being immersed in the school setting. I think it … really opened the eyes of the school to what counseling was in general…and a lot of the parents." (Practicum Student 1: 29-year old Hispanic female; Marriage, Couple, & Family Counseling)

The students' perceived development included understanding for the roles and skills of a good counselor. Attributes identified as necessary for counselors included flexibility, adaptability, creativity and care for the clients and community served. Several students shared how this experience affirmed their desire to help others. For some this also affirmed their interest to work with a similar population or setting, while others learned that other settings may better fit their approach. Additionally, students reported improved self-awareness, self-efficacy, and view of self as a professional.

Students reported newfound value and perceived utility for basic counseling skills to facilitate a client's process. In part, these changes were associated with personal experiences of client change observed in session or reported by the parent. As a result, students reported greater confidence in their clinical responses, decisions, and judgment. Finally, students relayed increased self-awareness through clinical supervision where they were able to process personal reactions to clients and experiences. The school-based practicum experience contributed to personal growth and development of a stronger counselor identity. Practicum Student 4 (24-year old Hispanic female; School Counseling) noted:

> …all your anxiety and anxiousness and worry and excitement will—you'll get to know yourself better…. Like before practicum you're like, "Oh my God, practicum," and then after it you're like a warrior.

Discussion

The six themes identified from the data support and expand upon the existing literature on the experiences of practicum students who have provided school-based counseling services to low-income children and families in Title I elementary schools. Each of the six themes provides additional insight into the unique experiences of practicum students who provided school-based counseling, particularly in a Title I elementary school where resources and support are limited.

Consistent with the current literature (e.g., Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008; Smith & Koltz, 2015), the researchers found that the practicum students in the current study reported the unique challenges of providing mental health services in a Title I elementary school, such as limited space to provide services and lack of communication between school personnel and counselors-in-training. However, such obstacles are common in Title I elementary schools and thus provide valuable, real-world experiences for practicum students that are unlikely when working in a university clinic site (Coker & Schrader, 2004). As such, these authentic school-

based experiences afford counselors-in-training the opportunity to experience and overcome unique challenges that are uncommon in a university clinic site while still receiving comparable in vivo supervision from a faculty member.

The school-based counseling practicum allowed students to experience their clients' realities which underscored the specific needs of the students, families, and community. Many helping professionals are unaware of the importance of social class for client conceptualization and intervention (West-Olatunji & Gibson, 2012); however, counselors with less biased perspectives of poverty demonstrated greater overall multicultural competence (Clark et al., 2017). In the present study, students identified experiential learning for the 'needs and challenges of the community' in which their clients lived. Thus, the perceived contribution of contextual factors to the counseling process, barriers to continuous attendance or premature termination may be important areas for counselor educators to address in training and curriculum per practicum student reports from the present study. Student learning could therefore be augmented through the addition of content specific to social class and clinical work in high needs, underserved, and impoverished communities, whether in practicum or other related courses (e.g., multicultural counseling, techniques of counseling).

Furthermore, prior research has noted that direct supervision from a qualified supervisor is difficult in school-based settings (Smith & Koltz, 2015); however, the researchers found that the practicum students experienced a lot of support and immediate in vivo supervision from their colleagues and supervisor. School counseling practicum students commonly receive supervision from site-based school counselors or university-based counselor educators; in each arrangement, students would not necessarily receive in vivo supervision (Paisley et al., 2006; Thompson & Moffett, 2010). The participants in the study, in contrast, received in vivo supervision from a counselor educator and their peers. Hence, although the participants experienced the challenging

(albeit valuable) scenarios in a school setting, they did so under the direct supervision of an experienced and qualified faculty member. Having this type of supportive environment in such close proximity to the clinical work supports the development of counselors-in-training as per the Integrated Developmental Model of supervision (Stoltenberg & McNeil, 2010). The practicum students also expressed appreciation for the peer support provided by their practicum classmates. Compared to an on-site school-based practicum in which a counselor-in-training may be the only intern at the school, the current study's findings highlighted the valuable opportunity for a group of practicum students to have shared experiences with one another, which contributed to a positive practicum experience (Coker & Schrader, 2004).

Limitations and Future Research

Although the results from the current study are promising for the implementation of school-based practica, there are several research limitations that need to be noted. First, the current program is in the early stages of development; thus, there are additional logistical issues that need to be addressed (e.g., communication with school administration and personnel, technology-related issues). Second, the results are restricted to the experiences of six practicum students from the same counselor education program offering services in one school. Also, as the sample mostly included students from the school counseling track, the researchers recognize that their experiences may not be fully transferable across all program tracks; however, it is important to note that the students were providing mental health counseling and not acting as professional school counselors. Lastly, the school-based counseling program was implemented in a Title I elementary school and, consequently, the experiences of practicum students might be different depending upon the type of school in which their practicum takes place.

Nevertheless, the results from the current study provide insight into future research on school-based counseling programs providing services in Title I elementary schools. For

instance, future research should explore the experiences of the school counselors and staff, along with the practicum students to ensure a collaborative approach is being facilitated to best meet the needs of the students and their families. As the current program yields a wealth of quantitative student data, another research avenue would be to analyze this data in conjunction with client outcome data and practicum student evaluation data. Moreover, future research should examine the effect in vivo supervision has on client outcomes in this type of practicum. Such findings could provide insight into the value of offering a practicum in a school setting.

Implications for Counselor Education and Supervision

The current study is among the first to explore practicum students' experiences in providing school-based counseling services in a Title I elementary school. First, the reported experiences highlight the need for counselor education programs to consider school-based clinics as a viable practicum option for counselors-in-training. The service delivery of mental health counseling is applicable across counseling tracks and the school setting provides exposure to the contextual challenges of community-based work; however, students must be prepared with adequate coursework in working with children, adolescents, and their families. For instance, although the challenges inherent to providing school-based counseling services in a Title I elementary school contributed to students' stress, the experience equipped them with necessary skills (e.g., flexibility) and knowledge (e.g., collaboration with school staff) that are essential for counselors to develop. Second, the school-based counseling practicum allowed students to gain experience in consulting with other professionals at the school, such as teachers and school counselors. Oftentimes, counselor education programs stress the importance of counseling skills and practice to their counselors-in-training that they overlook the other roles that might be expected of counselors, such as being consultants. An experience such as providing school-based counseling services in an elementary school can provide counselors-in-training with the

specific knowledge and skillset to effectively navigate the consultation process. Furthermore, as counselors-in-training do not receive consistent supervision in their school counseling site (Smith & Koltz, 2015), the current study provides a blueprint for how counselor education programs can address this concern while still operating a site-based practicum.

Counselor Educators and practicum supervisors should anticipate logistical challenges for school-based practicum experiences such as those reported by student respondents related to a consistent, private space and technology. These logistical challenges also seemed related to perceived barriers in communication with school teachers and staff and misunderstanding for the purpose and methods of counseling utilized. Similarly, inconsistent accessibility to space for counseling sessions could relate to the perception of the counselors-in-training that support was lacking at times. Therefore, programs that may seek to incorporate a school-based practicum site should consider such logistical concerns as well as student recommendations for a parent and school personnel orientation to the services. Furthermore, the clinical supervisor may also benefit from culture-specific knowledge and expertise including how poverty may affect the counselor, the student-client and their family, as well as the school teachers and staff. Topics for supervision may also be important to broach potential cross-cultural relationships and their influence to the counseling process (Day-Vines et al., 2018). Research with white counselors-in-training found perceived helpfulness from an active instructor approach to difficult discussions of race (Sue et al., 2010).

In summary, the purpose of this student was to explore the experiences masters-level counselors-in-training who completed their supervised practicum in a school-based mental health counseling clinic at a Title I elementary school. Participants in the study reported an overall positive experience that assisted them in understanding the realities and challenges of working in

a high-needs school while developing a counselor identity. Many of the findings of this study were consistent with and expanded upon current literature on school-based practicum experiences and school-based mental health programs. The current study provides implications for counselor education programs and avenues for future research focused on counselor development and the supervision process.

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