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Exploring Pre-practicum Site-Based Experiential Learning in School Counselor Preparation

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Abstract

In this study, participation in a pre-practicum site-based experiential learning assignment was examined. First semester pre-service school counselors who were enrolled in an introductory school counseling course, engaged in observation, counseling, and academic support with students and clients at community and school sites. Qualitative data was collected across three cohort groups and examined through phenomenological inquiry. Participants shared common themes, including that they: (a) Recognized inequities while they expanded their worldview; (b) Preferred a structured experience; (c) Valued relationships; and (d) Drew connections to the classroom and the field.

Keywords

Experiential learning, service learning, school counselor training, pre-practicum

School counseling practicum and internship experiences provide opportunities for students to enhance their learning (Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2015). However, formal clinical experiences are often the first time that students are exposed to the helping fields, thus, making it challenging for them to transition from practicing skills and theories in the classroom, to providing counseling to “real-life” clients (Gehlert, Graf, & Rose, 2014, p. 38). In order to support this transition, pre-practicum field-based experiential learning assignments expose pre-service school counselors to school and community settings to broaden their understanding of the field before entering formal clinical experiences (Ockerman & Mason, 2012; Wilczenski & Schumacher, 2008). Such early experiential learning opportunities may also help students confirm that the field, or their specialty area, such as school counseling or clinical mental health, is a fit before progressing more deeply into the curriculum (Arman & Scherer, 2002).

Presently, there is limited research on the integration of experiential learning into school counseling programs, particularly for students who have yet to enter practicum settings (Arman & Scherer, 2002; Ockerman & Mason, 2012; Havlik, Bialka, & Schneider, 2016). Therefore, in this study, researchers investigated the experiences and challenges of three cohorts of school counseling graduate students engaged in a pre-practicum field-based experiential learning assignment. For this assignment, students served at both community and school-based sites during their first semester of the program.

Background on Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is defined as active engagement in a rich experience that provokes reflection and change (Beard, 2010). This type of educational experience provides a platform for students to participate in hands-on learning. Dewey (2007) argued that students must be given

opportunities to actively engage in their own learning and develop concepts and opinions by reflecting on those experiences. Kolb (1984) further suggested that learning occurs when individuals interact with their environment, through which they continuously gain knowledge and insight. This type of learning steers away from what Freire (1970, p. 72) termed a “banking” concept of education, where students simply absorb the knowledge that is dictated to them, towards a method that encourages students’ active participation in their learning. The application of this active participation through experiential learning in higher education is often observed through field-based learning experiences (Lewis & Williams, 1994). Field-based experiences, such as practicum and internship are popular forms of experiential learning in counseling, in order to prepare students for their careers.

Experiential Learning in the Context of School Counselor Training

Experiential learning has many benefits for students in the field of school counseling. Such experiences allow students to gain perspectives on diverse populations (Culp, Chepyator-Thomson, & Hsu, 2009) and enhance their multicultural development and social responsibility through skill building and insight development (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Baggerly, 2006; Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004). Further, through enhancing the educational experiences and moral development of children, while simultaneously providing an enriching opportunity for pre-service counselors (Likona, 1991; Williams, 1991), partnerships between public schools and universities can be mutually beneficial (Arman & Scherer, 2002; Clark & Horton-Parker, 2002). The involvement of pre-service school counselors within systems can both enhance the overall academic achievement of the students they serve, as well as assist in increasing pre-service counselors’ knowledge and understanding of specific school environments (Clark & Horton-Parker, 2002).

House and Sears (2002) emphasized the importance of including early field experiences in the school environment. Such early clinical experiences encourage opportunities for pre-service counselors to integrate theory and practice, understand the school system, and collaborate with both school and community resources (House & Sears, 2002). Since clinical training is often considered the most critical aspect of school counseling students' program (Akos & Scarborough, 2004), exposing students to the field from the onset of their program may ensure that they are better prepared when they enter subsequent practicum and internship experiences (Burnett, Long, & Horne, 2005). This also provides them with an opportunity to see the reality of the school counselor role and the multiple responsibilities they have in the school system (Arman & Scherer, 2002), while giving students a chance to see how the role differs in practice compared to what they learn in class.

These opportunities allow students to link their coursework to practical application in the field (Havlik et al., 2016; Barbee, Scherer, & Combs, 2003), gain a stronger understanding of the field, and confirm their interest in the counseling profession (Arman & Scherer, 2002; Dockery, 2010). In fact, engaging in experiential learning experiences prior to entering practicum has been shown to decrease anxiety and increase self-efficacy for students entering practicum, particularly for those who have had limited prior exposure to the field (Barbee et al., 2003). It may also offer students an opportunity to practice the processes related to supervision, such as group reflections and discussion of experiences that occur during practicum and internship experiences (Gehart, Graf, & Rose, 2014). Additionally, perhaps, having students engage in pre-practicum experiential experiences may also serve as a method for faculty members to engage in early gatekeeping in order to flag students who might not be a fit for the counseling profession (Gehart et al., 2014).

Arman and Scherer (2002) described a model of pre-practicum service learning, where school counseling students ($N = 7$) engaged in experiential learning in public schools for approximately 35 hours throughout the course of their first semester. The assignment exposed students to their identified counseling specialization in order to affirm whether it was the right fit, as well as to provide students with an opportunity to apply theories learned during their initial coursework through shadowing the counselor, providing individual and small group counseling, as well as co-facilitating classroom lessons. The participants reported that the service learning experience enhanced their ability to integrate theory into practice and increased their knowledge of school counselors' roles. In another example, a pre-practicum experiential learning assignment was specifically designed to promote a social justice orientation for school counseling students by having them conduct a needs assessment, visit a community agency, and connect with parents at their assigned school (Ockerman & Mason, 2012). Participant comments suggested they felt the experience helped them to be more prepared for internship. Though these assignments varied, they all exposed students to the field of counseling at the onset of the program.

Engaging in pre-practicum experiential learning outside of the university with community or school partners is not without challenges. With multiple roles and responsibilities, the required time commitment may make it less desirable for all partners (Hansen, 2012). Students may also find it challenging to balance their academic course work, family, and personal relationships with their time invested in the experiential learning assignment. Further, partners in the community may find it difficult to prepare for the experience and to provide sufficient supervision. School sites may also see a lack of long-term benefits from the interventions provided by the pre-service counselors, since their involvement is typically for a limited period

of time (Hansen, 2012). Finally, it may already be challenging for programs to find internship and practicum sites for all students, so adding an additional community or school-based site assignment may be complicated. However, despite these challenges, pre-practicum experiences offer an additional opportunity for students to gain experience in the field. Thus, it is critical to closely examine such assignments, in order to identify the benefits and challenges for students.

Method

With pre-practicum learning assignments exposing students to schools earlier and providing them with opportunities to apply content learned in introductory courses, this study investigated the experiences of students participating one such assignment. With limited research available on incorporating pre-practicum site-based experiential learning assignments into school counseling graduate programs, this study seeks to shed light on the topic. Thus, two central research questions guide this study:

- What are the shared experiences of pre-service school counselors engaging in pre-practicum school and community based experiential learning?
- What are the challenges of pre-service school counselors engaging in school and community based pre-practicum experiential learning?

This study was designed using phenomenological inquiry, in effort to identify the common themes shared by the participants related to the essence of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2012) engaging in a pre-practicum experiential learning assignment. This study was approved by a University Institutional Review Board and all participants provided voluntarily consent to participate.

Participants

Participants in this study ($N = 21$) included three separate cohorts of first semester female school counseling graduate students engaged in a pre-practicum field-based experiential learning assignment at a mid-sized, private, and Mid-Atlantic university. The participants included a predominantly White sample ($n = 17$, 81%), along with four Black or African American participants (19%). The vast majority of the participants had entered the program directly from undergraduate institutions and had limited prior experience working in schools. Data were collected across three cohort years (2012, 2013, & 2014). Year 1 (Y1) had six participants, Year 2 (Y2) had eight participants, and Year 3 (Y3) had seven participants. Because the school counseling program at the university was small in nature (i.e. approximately ten students or less per year), all of the first year school counseling students were identified as potential participants. In order to participate in the study, participants had to be (a) enrolled in the Introduction to School Counseling course, (b) in their first year of the graduate school counseling program at the university, and (c) engaged in the site-based experiential learning assignment.

Experiential Learning Sites and Assignment

The purpose of the assignment described in this paper was to (a) help students apply the theories and skills learned across their courses, (b) alleviate some of their anxieties about entering their formal practicum and internship experiences, (c) introduce them to the helper role in order to affirm their career path, and (d) enhance their multicultural awareness. In the assignment, students were required to serve at a school or community site for approximately 30 hours throughout the semester (i.e. three hours per week for ten weeks). Along with their engagement at the site, students were required to submit monthly reflective journals and weekly activity records. Class time was carved out to discuss students' experiences at the site.

The experiential learning sites were selected in order to provide students with appropriate training experiences (e.g., shadowing, client/student interactions, mentorship). The course instructor provided one to two sites each semester, but the students could also select an alternate site, with approval from the instructor. The sites varied across the three cohort years. In Y1, students engaged in experiential learning at three different sites. The course instructor provided a community-based program serving adults from low-income communities and those living in poverty. This community-based site was selected because it allowed students to use their individual counseling skills in a supervised environment, while learning about the systemic issues and barriers facing families. Students at this site ($n = 4$) worked one-on-one supporting clients with resume development, job applications, and housing applications. Two students sought alternate options: (a) a middle school in an urban area and (b) a women and family shelter.

After completion of the semester, participants in Y1 suggested that they would have preferred to work in a school setting to get more direct experience working with school counselors. Therefore, in Y2, based on this student feedback, students were all placed in schools. The majority of the students ($n = 7$) engaged in experiential learning at a private high school that served low-income students in a large metropolitan area. At this site, students engaged in tutoring relationships with high school students. One student, alternatively, opted to participate in her experiential learning experience at a public charter high school, with a similar population. In Y3, the course instructor offered students two sites to engage in experiential learning. The first site, where students ($n = 4$) engaged in learning, was at a suburban middle school. At the second site, students ($n = 2$) served at an urban middle school, with a more diverse population. One student elected to serve her experience at a suburban middle school located near her home. At all

three sites in Y3, students observed the school counselor and engaged in school counseling related tasks. Although the sites varied greatly, across all sites, participants were involved in supervised, one-on-one helping relationships with clients, providing services consistent with school counseling (e.g. career advisement, academic support, and/or personal/social counseling).

Researchers

Researchers in this study were both female assistant professors at different institutions. The first author was a former middle school counselor. During her training program, she had engaged in experiential learning in the form of internship and practicum experiences. Afterwards, she had several years of experience supervising pre-service students in experiential school counseling school-based experiences. The first author also taught the Introduction to School Counseling course during year one and two of the study. She supervised the students in their experiential learning experiences and taught other school counseling courses at the university. During the third year of data collection, she did not teach the course. Instead, an alternate faculty member used her syllabus, curriculum, course model, and goals to run the course and the learning assignment.

The second researcher (third author), a female assistant professor, became involved in the project after the data collection was completed. She taught school counseling courses and worked in school and mental health settings providing counseling and academic and career advisement. She assisted with the data analysis. A third researcher was invited to assist with the data analysis at the end of the process as a peer reviewer and co-writer of the results. She was a master's level clinical mental health counseling graduate student with prior experience with qualitative data analysis but had not engaged in the experiential learning assignment. She

reviewed the data set, summarized the themes independently, and provided feedback for the researchers on their themes.

Data Gathering Methods

There were three separate cohorts of participants where multiple data sources were collected across three years (Y1, Y2, & Y3). The researchers chose to gather multiple data sources as a method for data triangulation in order to enhance their understanding of the experience, explore the data more deeply through varying the methods of data collection, and provide participants with multiple modes to express their thoughts and reflections (e.g. some students may be comfortable reflecting in a written journal versus a focus group) (Cope, Bryant-Lukosius, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). During each of the three years, students' weekly activity records (i.e. objective accounts of activities in which participants engaged in at their sites) were collected, as well as reflective journals (i.e. unstructured and internal written reflections on their experiences), and open-ended pre- and post- surveys. Researchers also ran two focus groups at the end of the experience. Participants completed all of the pre- and post- experience surveys during class time. The reflective journals and weekly logs were an on-going class requirement. Students provided consent to be included in the research and were informed that their participation was voluntary. Not all student enrolled in the course participated in the study.

In the pre-survey, students were asked to describe their prior engagement in experiential learning, as well as their expectations of their experiences, any challenges they anticipated, the ways they thought they may grow from the assignment, and how the experience related to their growth as school counselors. In the post-survey students were asked to describe the experience and any challenges faced, reflect on how they grew from the assignment, and describe their role and the students' roles at the site. Journals were used to allow participants to reflect over the

course of the semester and think deeper about their lived experiences engaging in the assignment (Janesick, 1998). Lastly, the focus group discussions focused on students' experiences and reflections on their challenges and successes. Researchers chose to use focus group format over individual interviews in order to elicit group interaction and to encourage a deeper level of insight from participants (Morgan, 1997). The focus group interviews included a mostly unstructured reciprocal conversation where the facilitator (first author) and students engaged in dialog about the experience (Groenewald, 2004). A graduate assistant, who was not related to the study, transcribed the focus groups. Overall, there were 112 individual sources of data collected and reviewed.

Data Explication

Using Groenewald's (2004) five steps of data analysis, authors closely examined the surveys, focus group transcripts, and reflective journals through a phenomenological orientation. Step one included bracketing and phenomenological reduction, during which the researchers discussed their presuppositions, re-read all forms of data, took notes, and wrote reflective journals. Reflective journals were used to create transparency in the data explication process (Ortipp, 2008) and for researchers to engage in a deeper level of interpretation, through reflecting on the various materials (Janesick, 1998). Prior to the examining the data, the researchers discussed and shared the meaning units they expected to find in effort to be more objective throughout the process. In step two, the authors extracted meaning units from the data set by first independently reviewing the full data set and taking notes on the meaning units that emerged. They initially looked at each type of data separately (i.e. journals, surveys, and focus groups) and then as a whole. After they completed this step independently, they met as team to further

discuss their perceptions of the data set and the meaning units across all types of data. They came up with shared meaning units based on their discussions.

From the units of meaning in step two, the researchers met to cluster the shared meaning units from step three. Twenty-one clusters initially emerged, along with supporting meaning units. Selected examples included: (a) feeling anxious about the experience; (b) feeling uncertain on how to help; (c) being excited to engage in the experience; (d) desiring to help and make a difference; (e) observing the achievement gap firsthand; (f) recognizing inequities; (g) valuing and recognizing the importance of relationship building; and (h) recognizing the value of the services offered. After they thoroughly reviewed the meaning units again and created a list of non-redundant units, they discussed the meaning of each of the units in a more holistic sense. From there, they discussed how the meaning units fell into clusters. After this step, they had four clusters of meaning units: (a) recognizing diversity; (b) structure of experience; (c) relationship building; and (d) connecting content. In step four, the researchers summarized each of the surveys, journals, and transcripts, and validated the clusters of meaning units derived from step three and made appropriate adjustments. Finally, they returned to the data set and selected common themes across all of the data types and wrote a summary (step five). During the analysis, the researchers analyzed the data set as a whole, but also reflected on the separate experiences of each cohort and the differences between their settings (school vs. community settings). They focused on similarities across all experiences.

Trustworthiness

There were several steps taken towards establishing trustworthiness in this study. First, the researchers were intentional with the selection of their research method (Shenton, 2004) and, therefore, followed Groenewald's (2004) five steps closely to ensure consistency and validity in

the process. Additionally, since the first researcher facilitated and supervised the experiential learning experience, the second and third researchers were purposely selected because they had not been involved with the assignment and could challenge her presuppositions. Throughout the process, two of the researchers engaged in peer debriefing, where they first worked independently with the data set and subsequently discussed their findings, assumptions, and potential biases together (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researchers also kept an audit trail, so that the courses of action taken throughout the data analysis could be traced (Shenton, 2004). To further establish validity, after step five was completed, the researchers engaged in member checks with participants to test the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the data set (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers also used reflective journals during this process to create transparency (Ortlipp, 2008) and incorporated peer scrutiny by inviting a peer (i.e. a graduate assistant), who was not affiliated with the research, to review the transcripts and themes (Shenton, 2004). Lastly, the researchers attempted to triangulate the data by using three different cohorts of participants and through having multiple data sources (i.e., journals, focus groups, and surveys) (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Findings

Across all of the participants, four common themes were identified in their experiences engaging in the pre-practicum experiential learning assignment. Participants noted that they: (a) recognized inequities while they expanded their worldviews; (b) preferred a structured experience; (c) valued relationships; and (d) drew connections to the classroom and the counseling field. The following section provides an overview of the essential themes uncovered across the data sources, as well as direct quotes from the participants.

Recognizing Inequities While Expanding Worldviews

The experiential learning assignment led participants to experience firsthand the injustices and inequities that many individuals face everyday. They were exposed to a new environment while being supported in the classroom. For example, a participant serving in a community setting stated, “I grew as a person because it opened my eyes to issues of poverty and inner-city living experiences. (Participant #6, Y1, Post-Survey)” The assignment at both the school and community sites provided participants with a deeper level of insight into poverty and economic distress:

Growing up in a fairly wealthy school district, I had never seen firsthand any fellow students struggling financially or dealing with strained home life, but I am so thankful to have my worldview shaped now. To be a helpful, effective counselor, I must expose myself to different cultures and understand more about different populations of students. By becoming a more multicultural competent counselor, I can show more empathy and understanding for what they may be going through or feeling. (Participant #4, Y2, Reflective Journal)

In this sense, students’ worldviews were shaped as they experienced other cultures firsthand:

Before my pre-practicum experience, I knew very little about the conditions of schools in [name of school district]. I now have a greater understanding and appreciation of the daily challenges that the school personnel and students face and the efforts they have made to help overcome these challenges. (Participant #4, Y3, Post-survey)

Another participant who served at a school site shared, “It is unfortunate, but society is not socially just. There are so many disadvantages that some of these students have to face with just growing up in an area of [city name], that poses challenges to their academic careers. (Participant

#3, Y2, Reflection Journal)” Similar insights were shared across students who served at school and community sites. One participant who resided in the area in which she served shared: “Since I live in the school district in which my pre-practicum site is located, I was shocked to see how many children come from broken homes. (Participant #3, Y3, Post-Survey)” On a whole, the assignment exposed participants to new environments, while they learned more about themselves and the community around them.

Preferring a Structured and Highly Organized Experience

Reflecting on the experience, students became frustrated with ambiguity and preferred to have a high level of structure, where their roles and responsibilities at the site were clearly defined. Across all three years, there was a level of variability in the tasks in which students engaged. For instance, at one school site, students expressed frustration that their responsibilities changed every week: “A lot of time we would go and they wouldn’t have anything for us to do. We would stand there for literally a half hour to forty-five minutes before they even notice we were there. (Participant #3, Y2, Focus Group)” Although the nature of the assignment was intentionally left fairly open to allow flexibility for site supervisors, it became apparent that students preferred more structured assignments:

Our school counselor said that she typically doesn’t plan things because a lot of her day is crisis management. So, she sometimes had trouble coming up with things for us to do, so we went to the classrooms a lot. And I feel like if we had come in with kind of like a set list of things that we needed to experience that might have helped her because she kept asking, “What are your requirements?”(Participant #1, Y3, Focus Group)

During the second year of the experiential learning assignment, a new school was added. Setting up the new partnership took time and delayed the start of the assignment. The participants

reported frustration with aspects the assignment: “The ‘frazzeled-ness’ of the experience. Not getting to start service early enough in the semester. Not having enough time and wanting to do more to help the students. (Participant #5, Y2, Post-survey)” This student went on in a reflective journal to highlight the confusion:

Students were chosen seemingly at random to be tutored. The room I ended up working in had seven other undergraduate [name of university] students. They also seemed confused about who they were going to be partnering with and it seemed as though there was no consistency from week to week. (Participant #5, Y2, Reflective Journal)

The community setting (Y1) provided a unique challenge for the students. Although they felt their individual experiences while serving there were structured each week, they expressed concern about the general structure of the site, and felt that they spent too much of their time on unhelpful training. One participant stated that the biggest challenge was the “time commitment and being unsure if I was actually qualified to help people. I don't think volunteers can be properly trained to assist the people's complex issues. Their problems were systemic and frustrating. (Participant #2, Y1, Post-survey)” To improve the structure of the course, one participant recommended: “Better communication from [name of site]’s coordinators would have improved this experience by making their expectations clearer. (Participant #3, Y1, Post-survey)” Across participants at all sites, it seemed that having an experience that was clearly defined and predictable, was preferred.

Valuing Relationships

The participants’ reflections highlighted the value of building relationships with those with whom they served. The experience seemed to be deemed more meaningful for the

participants when they were able to connect with their clients or students. In the school setting, this meant regularly meeting with the same students:

There was one student that I met with three times and at the end of the final meeting she said, 'oh yeah, because we meet on Wednesdays together, I've been only here three times with you.' But for her she kind of reflected on it saying *we* meet on Wednesdays, as like a consistent thing, which made me very happy. That almost feeling like putting words in her mouth but she felt like I made some impact. (Participant #4, Y2, Focus Group)

Participants who had such regular meetings with their clients expressed a sense of accomplishment and pride in their work:

I think my greatest success was the second meeting with [student name] because that was when he remembered me and I was shocked that he remembered me. I wasn't sure if I really wanted to work with him the second time because the first time was, really, really stressful and it just didn't feel like I moved anywhere. But he came out of the classroom and threw his books down when he had to come out. And he comes out and I was like, 'Hi [name] do you remember me?' He is, like, 'yeah, I remember you'. And that was like, 'oh, he does he knows who I am.' So it was nice and he was able to be a little bit more open the second time. (Participant #1, Y2, Focus Group)

Participants were surprised to form relationships when they were at their sites for such a limited period of time. One participant stated that she:

...wasn't expecting that kind of relationship, with them at all. I just thought they would kind of roll their eyes and not want to deal with us. But, yeah, right from the start, it was like they wanted to talk to us. Kind of like we were friends with them. (Participant #6, Y3, Focus Group)

For those participants engaged in tutoring relationships, they also highlighted the importance of forming relationships: “It was nice to help her with her school work, but it was even better that she opened up a little to share with me about herself. (Participant #3, Y2, Reflective Journal)”

Participants stated the “one-on-one” experience was one of the most valuable aspects of the assignment. These one-on-one interactions provided participants with opportunities to build relationships with their clients or students:

It was neat to be able to talk about the future plans that she has and how she is so excited about them. You know, even just like as we were walking back to her class after spending the whole time doing homework, I was able to facilitate that conversation with her, which was good, and then there was one student who I worked with, and I only worked with her twice, but you know, I was able to build a little bit of relationship. (Participant #3, Y2, Focus Group)

Overall, the relationships that participants built with their clients or students made the assignment much more meaningful for them.

Drawing Connections to the Classroom and the Counseling Field

For participants, the experience helped them to connect the classroom content to their work at their sites and to gain a deeper understanding of the field of counseling. For example, one participant shared, “The service learning experience really does build on what we are talking about in the classroom. Whether we are talking about classroom guidance or providing student structure, you can see that. (Participant #5, Y2, Focus Group)” The community site provided students with the opportunity to practice their counseling skills: “I grew as a counselor because it was my first one-on-one setting. I got valuable time collaborating with clients on an equal goal.

(Participant #6, Y1, Post-survey)” Additionally, through the experience, participants could apply theory to practice, as evidenced by one individual who shared:

In the career class I had, I saw it really come into play, at least with [my supervisor]. She took every one of her students to a college visit and then she had them fill out the questions after. And then they all had to write a formal letter to the place that they went to visit. (Participant #1, Y3, Focus Group)

Those working with school counselors appreciated being exposed to an educational setting and gained deeper insight into the students that she served:

This type of reflection and exposure, such as this to a high school, including how this school functions and the lives of those involved, constantly develops my awareness and foundation of experience for counseling. Further, any hands-on experience and in interactions with students helps me better learn about myself and understand the various realities faced by students. (Participant #5, Y2, Reflective Journal)

The exposure to a school helped the participants to feel more comfortable in that setting, “I’m glad I was given the opportunity to be in a school and reacquaint myself with that setting. I feel more comfortable and prepared for my practicum experience. (Participant #4, Y3, Post-survey)”

Across sites, participants repeatedly reported feeling more prepared to enter practicum the following semester: “I know what I am in for when it comes to practicum and it has given me firsthand knowledge, which I value so much. (Participant #1, Y1, Post-survey)” Through the assignment, students were able to draw connections to the class content, which ultimately enhanced their learning.

Discussion

In this study, researchers explored the experiences of first semester pre-service school counselors participating in a pre-practicum school or community-based experiential learning assignment. Through the qualitative examination of surveys, reflective journals, and focus group transcripts, common themes were identified across three cohorts of participants. Participants shared four common themes related to their experiences engaging in the assignment. They reflected that they: (a) recognized inequities while they expanded their worldviews; (b) preferred a structured experience; (c) valued relationships; and (d) drew connections to the classroom and the counseling field. Each of these themes provides insight into the use of pre-practicum site-based experiential learning assignments. Such assignments seem to facilitate the early development of pre-service school counseling students' preparation for practicum.

This assignment aligns with experiential learning approaches, in that students engaged in meaningful active learning and reflected on their experiences in the field, while concurrently connecting the experiences to the classroom content (Dewey, 2007). In this way, the findings from this study support previous research, which suggests that counseling students can better connect course content to the field when they have early experiential learning opportunities integrated into curricula (Havlik et al., 2016; Okerman & Mason, 2012). From this type of engagement, students can build their self-efficacy and feel more comfortable entering practicum settings (Barbee, Scherer, & Combs, 2003; Dockery, 2010). Therefore, counselor educators should consider how such assignments fit into their programs and determine what types of experiences might benefit their particular population of students (e.g. community settings versus school settings).

The results of this study also support the findings of previous research that described how experiential learning assignments, which expose students to counseling-related settings in different cultures from their own, help students to develop their multicultural awareness and social justice mindsets (Burnett et al., 2004; Ockerman & Mason, 2012). The pre-practicum assignment in this study provided participants with opportunities to reflect critically and to begin to develop their multicultural counseling competencies while serving in the field. They were able to identify inequities and start to shift their current worldviews. This may help students to engage in more reflective and deeper learning when they enter multicultural counseling coursework and/or begin practicum and internship experiences in following semesters. To facilitate this process, during class time, instructors can regularly debrief students about their experiences to encourage reflection on their learning and their multicultural competencies related to the experience (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Dockery, 2010). They can also design discussion to focus on social justice and the inequities students will see when they enter schools.

As reflected in participants' responses about the organization of their respective sites, the findings showed that having a highly structured and well-organized experience is important. This is not surprising, considering that ambiguous assignments may be confusing for students. Branthoover, Desmond, and Bruno (2010) suggest that assignments in counseling courses be clearly aligned with CACREP standards, and, thus, this particular assignment could be improved by requiring students to observe or engage in tasks that are directly related to the CACREP requirements for school counselor education programs. When developing partnerships with sites, programs should design requirements that are mutually agreed upon between sites and clear to all involved parties, while recognizing that students should engage in tasks directly related to how they are being trained. When designing an experiential learning assignment, instructors should

create a detailed plan, that is written into the syllabus, which includes a clear description of the assignment, as well as a description of how the experience connects to the course content and objectives (Dockery, 2010; Hansen, 2012). Working closely with site supervisor to develop very clear responsibilities for students is essential. This conversation may begin by talking with supervisors about expectations for each party's roles and developing responsibilities and guidelines (Arman & Scherer, 2002). Since students may be working across multiple sites during the semester (which can make it more difficult to standardize the experience), the students themselves should be encouraged to converse with their site supervisors early on and work collaboratively with them to design the experience at the site, and ensure that it fits the course goals and benefits the site. Additionally, throughout the experience, university supervisors should be in regular contact with the sites and ask for their feedback and recommendations that could enhance the experience (Baggerly, 2006). To ensure that students are benefiting from their experiences at the sites, formal or informal evaluation of programs can be integrated through student feedback and observation (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002). Thus, counselor educators who choose to integrate such assignments must be committed to the additional time and work it takes to make the experience effective for all stakeholders. Ideally, they should maintain partnerships with sites and continue relationships year after year so that expectations are better understood.

One particularly interesting finding in this study is that participants valued the relationships they developed with those with whom they served. Building these relationships seems to serve two main purposes. First, the relationships affirm the value of the work of the participants, which helped them to build their confidence. Second, it rendered the experience more meaningful for them. This echoes the findings of Bialka and Havlik (2016), which investigated service learning partnerships. They found that high students working with the

university students reported that the relationship they formed with each other was one of the most meaningful aspects of the experience. With this in mind, faculty designing experiential learning assignments should ensure that experiences allow participants to build rapport and connect with those with whom they are working. In the present study, something as simple as working with a student more than once seemed to have a lasting impact.

Community vs. School Sites

Although this study focused on the common experiences of participants, it is important to note that some distinctions arose between participants at community versus school sites. At the community sites, participants reflected on more salient issues related to observing economic distress and poverty, which facilitated an enhanced “eye-opening” experience. Although participants felt this experience was valuable, the majority stated that they preferred to serve in a school to learn more about their intended profession. At the school sites, participants gained much deeper insight into the role of the school counselor. Whereas, those who served at the community site were able to draw connections between their work with adults living in poverty or homeless situations and children’s educational barriers. However, these experiences were less direct. Those serving in schools highlighted the first-hand exposure to the field and expressed that they were able to learn the roles and experiences of school counselors in schools through direct observation. This provided them with a clearer connection between what they were learning in the classroom and what they were observing at the site. Therefore, it is important for instructors to consider their goals when determining what types of sites to use for such assignments. They should base their choice of sites on the purpose of the assignment and how it relates to the course content.

Limitations and Future Research

There were several limitations with this study. First, participants in this study were from one university's program. Thus, the findings may not be transferable to all school counselor-training programs and only reflect the unique experiences of this group of participants. Second, there was not one standardized site across the participants, with some students serving in schools and others in community settings. The findings were also based on the self-report of the participants, which may not be truly representative of their skills and attitudes. Further, the pre- and post-test surveys included several very direct questions that do not align as well with phenomenological inquiry. Lastly, the participants were all female and predominantly White, and therefore, may not represent the views and experiences of male students or students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

For future research, counselor educators examining experiential learning assignments should include the voices of the clients and/or students served and the supervisors' experiences. This would provide deeper insight and understanding into the mutual value of such programs and highlight how to better design such assignments so that all stakeholders benefit. Further, future research on this topic should be longitudinal in nature and follow-up with participants during their internships and practicum experiences. This would help counselor educators to better understand the long-term effects of such assignments and whether they ultimately enhance students' self-efficacy. Additionally, studies should examine different types of experiential learning assignments (e.g. community sites versus school-based sites and/or project-directed assignments where students have a very well-defined plan at the site versus more flexible assignments where the student and site supervisor determine the experience) and determine

which types are more effective for learning. Lastly, research on this topic should include a more diverse participant sample, related to gender, race/ethnicity, and experience level, etc.

Conclusion

In conclusion, pre-practicum site-based experiential learning assignments seem valuable for school counseling students. Such assignments can bring content to life and ensure that students have a deeper understanding of materials prior to entering practicum. These early experiences may help students to be more prepared for practicum and internship and render those classes more meaningful. Instructors engaging in such assignments with their students should be intentional with the organization of the assignment and provide clear instructions and directions for students working at their sites. They should also design experiences where students engage more deeply with those they are serving, in order to facilitate relationship and rapport building. Lastly, this experience can be a foundation for developing multicultural awareness and competencies. School counseling graduate programs should be encouraged to integrate such pre-practicum experiences at the onset of degree programs to encourage enhanced growth in students. Finally, programs should recognize that pre-practicum experiences might be more beneficial for students who have not had prior experience in the field (Barbee et al., 2003). For those who have more life and work experience, the assignment should be tailored in order to provide an experience that is more meaningful.

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