An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: School Counselor Trainees' Experience in Peer Group Supervision

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Supervision is a central component of counselor education programs in the development of competently trained professional school counselors (Bernard & Goodyear, 2015; Neufeldt, 2007; Tang, 2020) and is also viewed as an ethical responsibility of practicing school counselors (ASCA, 2022). Specifically, ASCA appropriately outlined how school counseling practicum and internship supervisors are engaged in supervision by “promoting professional growth, supporting best practices and ethical practice, assessing supervisee performance and developing plans for improvement, consulting on specific cases and assisting in the development of a course of action” (2022, D.c).

Within the school counseling literature, clinical supervision for school counselor trainees is broadly defined as a way to improve direct services and unique skills, particularly in the areas of guidance curricula, counseling, consultation and referral (Studer, 2005). More specifically, Miller and Dollarhide (2006) identify supervision for school counselors as a way to promote and educate professional values and behaviors that align with the ASCA National Model. Most recently, ASCA (2022) defined supervision as a collaborative relationship in which one school counselor promotes and/or evaluates the development of another school counselor or trainee through the alignment of professional competencies and standards. Additionally, ASCA (2019) and other scholars (Li & Peters, 2022; Luke & Peters, 2020) argued for the expansion of school counseling supervision to also include preparing school counselor leaders. Unlike related fields such as mental health counseling, school counseling is embedded within complex educational and cultural influences requiring unique contextual considerations in supervision. Because of the unique skill set needed for the role, school counselor trainees supervision may best be received from supervisors with professional experience as a school counselor (Studer, 2006; Brott, et al., 2021) in individual, triadic, or group formats (Borders, 2012; Peters & Luke, 2021).
School counselor trainees typically receive clinical supervision from both a site supervisor and a university faculty supervisor in their graduate program during their clinical coursework in practicum (Hamlet, 2017, 2021). The field practicum is an essential and required component in preparing school counselor trainees for professional practice and is typically the first experience for learning a more in-depth understanding of the counseling process and showcasing counseling skills with an actual student client. As it relates to practices of university supervision, The Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Program (CACREP) 2016 standards stipulate that the professional practices of counseling skill development be supervised. CACREP does not offer prescriptive suggestions on practical application; essentially, giving the counselor education program the autonomy to choose how to execute supervision practices with and for counselor trainees. CACREP does, however, denote that counselor education programs provide a group supervision component to any field practicum course.

Despite the importance of supervision in school counselor trainee’s development, there has only been a handful of studies that examined university supervision training with school counselor trainees including Ikonomopoulos et al., (2006) exploration of trainees’ self-efficacy in practicum. Similarly, Sneed (2017) explored and described the experience of practicum students competency relating to self-efficacy and anxiety. Watkinson, Cicero, and Burton (2021) examined structuring practicum seminars with mindfulness activities as an integrative approach to their university supervision practice of school counselor trainees. In another study, Conn, Roberts, and Powell (2009) compared hybrid and face-to-face university supervision among school counseling internship students. These studies mentioned, however, do not specifically describe or make sense of how school counselor trainees experience university supervision
specifically clinical peer group supervision within their practicum class. The understanding of school counselor trainees’ lived experiences of receiving group supervision and participating in clinical peer group supervision in a university setting is imperative to informing counselor preparation programs and best practice of supervision.

**Purpose**

There is limited evidence regarding the nature, structure, and impact of peer group clinical supervision has on school counselor trainees. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of school counselor trainees in group supervision while specifically participating in clinical peer group supervision. Professional peer interactions may make significant and meaningful contributions to professional development prompting the examination of peer group supervision as a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning in counselor education. Greater understanding into the lived experiences of school counselor trainees, how they prioritize their work, and make clinical decisions may create meaningful teaching and learning opportunities for counselor educators. By understanding the student experience, the counselor educator in this study may glean practical pedagogical ideas for future clinical courses. The current study was designed to answer the question: How do school counselor trainees in a field practicum course make sense of their experience in clinical peer group supervision?

**Literature Review**

**Group Supervision**

Supervision is a significant component of the roles and responsibilities of counselor educators. Depending on the institutional context, a counselor educator may provide individual, triadic, and/or group supervision with counselor trainees. Group supervision can be defined as
“the regular meeting of a group of supervisees (a) with a designated supervisor or supervisors; (b) to monitor their quality of their work; and (c) to further themselves as clinicians, of the clients with whom they work, and of service delivery in general” (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019, p. 190). There are many unique characteristics associated with learning experiences that occur in a group setting. Bernard and Goodyear explain these benefits of group supervision over individual supervision as vicarious learning, greater quantity of feedback, normalizing supervisee’s experiences, and learning of group processes.

There are many systemic factors to consider related to group supervision within counselor education programs. As the instructor of clinical coursework, the counselor educator of the course is typically identified as the university supervisor and person of record for group supervision. As the accrediting body for counselor education programs, CACREP mandates faculty-student ratios and guidelines for frequency and duration of supervisory sessions for clinical coursework. For example, practicum students must participate in an average of 1½ hours per week of group supervision on a regular schedule throughout the academic semester (CACREP, 2015). Additionally, the group supervisor must be a core, affiliate, or doctoral student at the university and must have relevant professional experiences and credentials to provide in-person or virtual supervision.

**Clinical Peer Group Supervision**

Historically peer group supervision has been a widely accepted training modality in counselor education programs (Borders, 1991; Borders, Brown, & Purgason, 2015; Benshoff & Paisley, 1996; Crutchfield & Borders, 1997). Peer supervision has been defined as “arrangements in which peers work together for mutual benefit” (Benshoff, 1994, p. 1). Peer group supervision can be described as 7-12 colleagues or professionals typically from the same
field or experience level that use their knowledge and experiences to process clinical issues or improve clinical skills (Jackson-Cherry, & Sterner, 2021). Peer group supervision is popular with trainees in helping professions (Corey, Haynes, Moulton, & Muratori, 2010) varying widely in the design, formation, and activities. A structured peer group supervision experience is the preferred modality for counselor trainees (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014) focusing on group leadership, processing, and case presentations (Counselman & Weber, 2004) in a safe and brave space for discussion, learning and feedback (Borders, 1991 & Basa, 2019).

Peer group supervision formats can be described as facilitated, planned or ad hoc interactions (Golia & McGovern, 2015). In a facilitated clinical peer group model, there is a trained supervisor who offers interventions as a moderator and a process observer (Basa, 2019). The supervisor as the processor guides the discussion, asks questions for clarification, and provides feedback that is of clinical and professional significance to the students. Golia and McGovern (2015) described planned clinical peer supervision as established peer group meetings with the definitive purpose of discussing clinical and case issues with colleagues. Each student provides a case or asks questions related to their experiences. Ad hoc peer supervision as outlined by Golia and McGovern involves more impromptu moments of engagement amongst trainees. These encounters tend to be outside regularly scheduled supervision sessions. In sum, trainees can develop through these aforementioned peer group supervision any of which enhance their clinical competencies, autonomy, feelings of self-efficacy and professional identity.

Anagogy in Counselor Education

In higher education there is an affirmation that educators need to gain a deeper understanding into students’ learning processes (Khandelwal, 2009), and to the different types of experiences in the classroom that prompt and contribute to student development. Counselor
education is no exception. The literature is rich in supporting the need for counseling education programs to explore new practices to bridge the gap between traditional teaching and the learning needs of today’s counselor trainees. The methods and techniques of how to educate, train and transform students in counselor education programs have been the subject of discussion for decades. Barrio Minton et al. (2014) examined counseling pedagogical trends finding only a scant number of articles addressed teaching and learning in counselor education. Brackette (2014) added the importance of examining teaching and learning to forward the profession in meeting the challenging and ever-changing roles of the profession.

Since Barrio Minton et al. (2014) publication, there has been an increased interest in the theory and research into adult learning in counselor education. Since adult learners tend not to retain information as well from more traditional teacher-centered teaching methods (Malott et al., 2014), more experiential courses that generate intellectual growth and create independent thinking are warranted. These type of learner-centered approaches and methods are needed to satisfy the educational needs of counselor trainees. Further, the learner-centered approach allows for the retention of more information. Additionally, this type of learning serves as a reinforcer and allows for the information to be more easily accessed as it becomes more familiar in practice. Since supervision is the signature pedagogy for training and supporting school counselor trainees (Tang, 2020), it is imperative to understand what constitutes good teaching and effective supervision in the eyes of these adult learners.

Method

To understand how university supervision shapes the learning of school counselor trainees, a qualitative research design was employed. “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what
meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). As the focus of interest for this study, the researcher sought to understand the experience of students in university supervision through conducting an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) research inquiry. IPA examines in detail at how someone makes sense of lived experience, and gives detailed interpretation of the account to understand the experience under investigation (Tuffour, 2017). Building on this assertion, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) postulated “IPA shares the views that human beings are sense-making creatures, and therefore the accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experience” (p. 4). Within the IPA paradigm, a purposive sampling is recommended because a more closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant (Smith & Osbourne, 2008). As such, this phenomenological tradition was selected as the best method to capture the essence of the school counselor trainees’ experiences related to personal reactions, feelings, and thoughts about group supervision within a practicum course.

**Participants and Procedure**

A comprehensive and rich description of the context in which the research takes place is important in phenomenological studies. IPA is no exception. The participants were graduate students enrolled in a school counseling program within a counselor education program at a large, urban research university in the Midwest portion of the United States. The CACREP accredited 60-hour counseling program consists of both clinical mental health counseling, school counseling and a doctoral program in Counselor Education and Supervision. Before the semester of this study, all students had completed courses in school counseling (introductory), theories, group, and counseling techniques.

Prior to participant recruitment, the researcher obtained approval for this study from the Institutional Review Board. One section of a field practicum course for school counseling
students at the lead researcher’s university was chosen purposively for the study. The informed consent document approved by IRB was utilized. This document explained the purpose and details of the study. Further, the informed consent guaranteed participants that their identities would be kept confidential by using pseudonyms. All students received the consent letter describing the study and the questions that would be used in the study as well as emphasizing that participation in the study was voluntary and would have no bearing on the student’s grades within the course. Participants were told they could withdraw their participation at any time. To safeguard participants, a graduate student collected the consent forms while the lead researcher was out of the room. The forms were then given to the lead researcher’s colleague for storage until the end of the semester. After grades were posted, the consent forms of students who agreed to be in the study were then separated and only those responses were examined in the qualitative analysis. During data collection, the researchers never discussed the study with any of the trainees enrolled in the practicum course.

All students (n = 7) within one section of a school counseling practicum course were invited to participate; of which, all chose to participate in the study. Due to the small pool of participants, and to ensure anonymity only a general overview of demographic will be shared. The sample contained six females and one male participant. The sample included participants who self-identified as White/Caucasian, African American, and Multi-Racial. All participants were completing their practicum experience in public schools. The participants are identified as Mona, Natalie, Octavia, Pat, Rachel, Sam, and Terry. These name selections were based upon a random list of names.

Course Context and Structure

University supervision can be best explained as an observational and evaluative process of counselor trainees (students) provided by members of the counselor education faculty or
doctoral students in a counselor education. In this study, the participants were simultaneously receiving university supervision through individual or triadic supervision format with a faculty member or doctoral student along with the group supervision component required by CACREP with a faculty member, who was also the instructor of record for their field practicum class. CACREP-accredited programs must provide practicum students with 1.5 hours on average of group supervision per week throughout the duration of the academic semester. This practicum course was designed as a three hour per week course providing trainees with a minimum of 1.5 hours required for group supervision with up to three hours when needed.

All practicum course sessions met in person. School counselor trainees had opportunities to be actively engaged in peer group supervision over a 15-week semester. Building on the work of Minor and Duchac (2021), the andragogical design strategies of cooperative learning included case studies, structured case presentations, evaluation, and reflection. Specifically, a facilitated or supervisor-led peer group clinical supervision framework was used. The counselor educator’s constructivist approach to teaching, learning, and supervision allowed supervisees the opportunity to share their experiences with their colleagues and receive feedback from the university supervisor as well as their peers.

Data Collection

The primary means of data collection were diary accounts and semi-structured interviews. A researcher designed questionnaire used in the form of a diary journal was used to assess the most helpful and hindering events in group supervision. Diaries can be a rich data source detailing how individuals make sense of their experience (Silverman, 2011). Participants were asked which in-class group supervision events they felt were the most important. An event was described as anything that either they, their university supervisor/instructor, or peer supervisor said or did that was helpful or hindering to their group supervision experience. The
diary was completed as an assignment after each group supervision session and collected by the instructor.

At the end of the semester, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant ranging in length from 45-60 minutes. Interviews are a useful means for gaining detailed and rich explanations of experiences and phenomena and are a commonly used method of data collection in IPA (Larkin & Thompson, 2011 & Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). All participants were asked 12 questions designed to collect data as rich and reflective of the participants’ experiences as possible.

**Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that researchers address preconceptions by being aware of “how they slant and shape what they hear and how they interface with the reproduction of the speaker’s reality and how they transfigure into falsity” (p. 148). It is important for qualitative researchers to acknowledge all experiences, beliefs, and potential biases related to the issues addressed in the study at hand. The lead researcher has been both a counselor educator and school counselor in the Midwest. She is licensed and/or certified as a school counselor in multiple states. For this study, the first author was the primary researcher and the university supervisor instructor for the field practicum course. In an attempt to reduce bias, a second researcher was added to form a research team. The second author/researcher is a LPCC-S as a mental health counselor/supervisor in multiple states and is a counselor educator. He acted as a peer-debriefer during the research process. Shufutinsky (2020) discussed the significance of reflexivity on the part of researchers as a way of adding to the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research. Both researchers participated in introspection and discussing of biases prior to evaluating the data as a way of aiding in the reduction of those potential biases.
In addition to professional and research experiences that may have affected the study, the researchers identified other biases and assumptions of school counseling supervision. First, the topic of this study was of interest to both authors having been primary instructors for the clinical field coursework at their respective universities. Second, they assumed instructors’ knowledge, personality, clinical experience, and teaching skills greatly impact student learning and engagement. Third, the lead researcher of the study would be considered an insider researcher as she was also the instructor of the practicum course. Therefore, she was mindful of researcher bias on how her personal values and experiences may influence the research process. As an ethical researcher, she took steps to minimize this potential bias throughout the different stages of the research process which is outlined in the trustworthiness procedures of the study. Last, as counselor educators, the authors are always striving to bring the art and science of teaching into the classroom in ways to improve teaching practices and to enhance student learning. Therefore, the researchers expected feedback to inform and possibly influence future teaching practices.

As recommended by Patton (2015), a variety of procedures were used to address trustworthiness: prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, peer debriefer, and keeping an audit trail. The researcher spent roughly 15 weeks ensuring adequate time and establishing trust with the participants acting in the role of both inside and outside observers during the semester. This length of time allowed for a dynamic engagement between the researcher and research participants. The researcher practiced triangulation by using different data sources including diaries and interviews. Also, the researcher employed member checking, a process in which participants were given opportunity to correct any errors in their interview transcript, as well as a peer debriefer was used to uncover biases, perspectives, and/or assumptions, if any, made on the part of the researcher. The peer debriefer, who has 20 years as a
qualitative researcher, discussed the research (transcripts, themes, relationships, and conclusions) with the researcher throughout the data analysis process. The peer debriefer is also the second author of this inquiry. An audit trail as suggested by Mills and Gay (2019) was used taking the form of a written description of each part of the research process. Since reflexivity is important to qualitative research and imperative to the use of IPA, the researcher kept a reflexive journal during the research process, documenting her thoughts and experiences before, during and after data collection in order to reflect upon and interpret the research as recommended by Miller and Minton (2016).

Data Analysis

The researcher followed Smith’s (2009) six-stage analysis process. After reading the transcript many times, the researcher extracted topics or patterns that were significant or compelling. This process was continued throughout the initial transcript. Next, the researcher reviewed the notations to identify themes that captured the attributes of the important components. The emergent themes were recorded on the right margin of each transcript, identifying keywords that captured the essence of important components. This interpretative process was replicated for all seven participants. With ongoing consultation from the peer debriefer, the researcher reviewed all emergent themes and identified a comprehensive list of superordinate and subordinate themes for each case. All seven participants engaged in this member-checking process and confirmed the accuracy of the analysis to their lived experiences. After all transcripts were individually analyzed and member checked, the researcher conducted cross-case analysis to identify superordinate and subthemes that represented shared experiences of all participants. Finally, similar themes were clustered into four superordinate themes.
Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
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<tr>
<td>Organizing the learning environment through..</td>
<td>Structure</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
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<td>Discussion</td>
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<td>Processing</td>
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<td>Understanding of…</td>
<td>Humble learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Group process</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Practical and useful information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Believing that…</td>
<td>Peers have valuable insights and offerings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supporting growth in others is vital</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Risk taking leads to growth</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Trusting the process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skill development in…</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feedback</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Theory development</td>
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</tbody>
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Results

Using Smith et al. (2009) as a guide for analysis, four superordinate themes were uncovered to answer the research question: How do school counselor trainees in a field practicum course make sense of their experience in clinical peer group supervision? A superordinate theme is defined by Smith et al. as “a construct which usually applies to each participant within a corpus, but which can be manifest in different ways within the cases” (p. 166). In this inquiry, the four superordinate themes were organizing the learning environment, understanding, believing, and skill development. The superordinate themes reflected patterns of experiences across cases; the subordinate themes provided greater detail and depth for each superordinate theme (see Table 1).

Superordinate Theme 1: Organizing the learning environment
The superordinate theme of organizing the learning environment resulted from the interpretation of the data generated by the research question and included the subthemes of structure, collaboration, discussion, processing, and professional experience. The concept of the organization of the learning environment was significant for all the participants, specifically the activities and processes of the group supervision and peer clinical supervision component of the course. Natalie addressed the structure of the learning environment relating to being in the school counseling program.

I am very glad that we had peer group supervision only with school counselors because our experiences this early on are very different from mental health counselors so it was useful to hear from peers who were in similar sites and dealing with similar clientele. Octavia had a similar sentiment about the structure of the learning environment with “I also really liked that we were broken up from the mental health students.” Additionally, Octavia added more about the group supervision size specifically.

I think peer group supervision was effective with the class size that we had and would be fine with two more students; however, if the classes were any larger it may be difficult to get as much out of that type of supervision.

Natalie noted the collaborative classroom environment led by the instructor/supervisor created “a learning environment where we built stronger links between each other and [the instructor] which definitely helped each other grow as school counselors.” In group supervision, Pat explained the role of the instructor/supervisor when sharing case presentations. “It was most helpful when [the instructor] would chime in at the end and offer a neat activity to try…or offer practical feedback or a suggestion had the biggest impact on me and my counselor experience.”
Participants acknowledged the discussion and processing of the group supervision and clinical peer group supervision in many ways. Some participants, such as Terry and Pat, highlighted the processes related to case presentations. Terry expressed

The part of peer group supervision I found most helpful was not being allowed to speak while I was listening to peer feedback after my [case] presentation. This allowed me to fully concentrate on what they had to say and to be present.

Pat reflected that one of the most beneficial aspects of the case presentation was “the presenting student [remained] silent while peer supervision is taking place.” Sam described the video portion of the case presentation being the most important part of group supervision as “watching myself in front of others during my presentation was most helpful.” Mona added that the clinical peer supervision focused on strengths during case presentation which “encourages support and building each other up.”

**Superordinate Theme 2: Understanding**

The superordinate theme of understanding resulted from the interpretation of the data generated by the research question and included the subthemes of humble learning, group process, and practical and useful information. All the participants mentioned being anxious as they were new to the profession, but all expressed in some way that the group supervision and the clinical peer supervision portion of the class was a place to learn and grow. Mona explained her humble learning experience in terms of differences between individual supervision and clinical peer supervision.

Peer supervision has been different from my individual supervision in that the people who are commenting on my skills and giving suggestions are coming from the same
place as I am. Most of the time, they are experiencing a similar situation, and often have the same apprehension or excitement in regard to how it can be handled.

Rachel also addressed her humble learner stance through the experience of clinical peer supervision and individual supervision.

I was extremely nervous for peer group supervision at the beginning of the semester. My expectation was that it was going to be more intense than it was. I did not want anyone to hear my recordings or watch my videos. After discussing a few recordings with my university supervisor [in individual supervision], I realized it may be beneficial to hear other techniques my peers are using and get their advice on what to do with some of my students where I am feeling stuck.

Sam added to her understanding reflecting on the importance of group process as the group supervision process allowed us to express what we learned from the session and what we felt was missing. This allowed us to learn from one another and gain different perspectives on how different concerns and issues can be explored with the student client.

Octavia added to the collaborative group processing with peers as “very insightful since we were able to share our experiences and bounce ideas off of each other. Being in group supervision also exposed me to different experiences that I may come across.” Natalie reiterated the importance of group processing in finding practical and useful information as “we got the opportunity to listen to each other’s sessions and give feedback via discussion and [written] feedback using forms. These were such useful experiences, not only to get feedback, but also to get ideas and hear what others are doing in session.”
Superordinate Theme 3: Believing

The superordinate theme of believing resulted from the interpretation of the data generated by the research question and included the subthemes of peers having valuable insights and offerings, supporting growth in others is vital, risk-taking leads to growth and trusting the process. All participants discussed the importance of the interpersonal environment that lends itself to working and learning from others through group and peer supervision. Natalie commented on her faith in the instructor and her peers. “[Our professor] set the tone for supervision by being congruent with stories and feedback. [Our professor] had a strong school counseling identity which helped with authentic feedback. This helped me understand how things may play out in a school setting.” She explained her experiences from group supervision and being with peers as … “a setting to foster collaboration and encouragement throughout our experiences.” Pat described the process of peer group supervision and her experiences from others as “helpful for me to gain feedback and helpful to me seeing their experiences.” Adding from this assertion, she explained confidence. “I think my competency has improved since peer group supervision in terms of skills and confidence. I quickly learned that it did not matter what I looked like compared to my peers as we were all new to the counseling experience.” Terry summarized growth within himself from working with his peers as “To be successful you need to open to comments, be able to accept constructive criticism and understand that no matter how old or experienced you are you can always learn something. With that understanding, I listened to my class and absorbed what they had to say, allowing me to grow and prepare for my career.”

Superordinate Theme 4: Skill Development

The superordinate theme of skill development resulted from the interpretation of the data generated by the research question and included the subthemes of reflection, feedback, and
theory development. All participants discussed the importance of the peer group supervision through attention to both the trainees’ own actions, emotions, and thoughts and to building of their counseling skills. Rachel explained peer group supervision and learning counseling skills as focusing “on what may be effective moving forward with the student we are working with or next steps for their success. It is a good mix of supervision being able to reflect back on what was already done and how to move forward in the future.” Sam uses formal theory along with her professional experience by sharing “I am very proud of my progress with Solution-Focused and practicing my basic counseling skills of pacing and immediacy.” Adding more to theoretical development, Octavia shared “I strengthened my knowledge and skills in Solution Focused Brief Counseling. In addition, Octavia discussed how she changed her behavior for her sessions after peer supervision as “I started conceptualizing all my students through an ecological lens using reflection, empathy, and probing.” Mona described her reflection of her professional work as “Group and peer supervision helped me develop as a counselor because it prepared me to advocate for not only myself, but the profession as well by allowing me to get my opinions out there in a professional manner.”

Discussion

This study sought to understand how school counselor trainees’ make sense of their lived experiences of receiving group supervision within practicum in order to inform and improve professional teaching and supervision practices. Seven participants who were enrolled in a practicum course completed weekly diaries and a retro reflective semi-structured interview, allowing insight into their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. The depth of the information gathered from these data sources provided a wealth of information beneficial and applicable for the counselor educator teaching and supervising the group supervision component and/or
offering clinical peer supervision within a field practicum course. Given the lack of research on the impact that group supervision and clinical peer supervision has on school counselor trainees in practicum, the findings gave information to start to fill this gap.

**Organizing the learning environment**

Findings suggest that a structured group supervision experience with directive elements of clinical peer supervision within a practicum course could help facilitate school counselor trainees’ personal and professional development. Part of expressing who the counselor trainees are and who they hoped to become as professionals in this study involved openly acknowledging to themselves and to others their priorities, successes, opportunities for growth and the lessons that they learned throughout the semester. Overwhelmingly, participants reported that they were both anxious and uncertain about practicum, but open to the experience. Such statements expand on what Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) described as typical feelings and experiences of beginning level counselors. As such, this is quite common and widely documented and consistent with the counselor education literature that trainees experience anxiety as part of their practicum experience (Kuo et al., 2016; Watkinson, Cicero, & Burton, 2021). Practicum instructors/group supervisors balance the task of managing their counselor trainees’ range of emotions while they experiment and showcase clinical skills. Ellis et al., (2005) postulated that the roles, responsibilities, and format of supervision may contribute to the anxious feelings of novice counselors. Where as past researchers found trainees experience anxiety throughout their practicum experience (Kuo et al., 2016; Watkinson, Cicero, & Burton, 2021), the present study showed that the structured elements of the course outlined in Minor and Duchac (2021) allowed those anxious feelings initially experienced and acknowledged by the participants to quickly dissipate turning to feelings of interest and curiosity as the trainees were able to authentically
demonstrate the utility of what they were learning. These findings expand on the literature describing the need for a structure and process of peer group supervision (Borders, 2012; Borders et al., 2015 & Stone et al., 2020). These findings may offer clarity for counselor educators on how to navigate and manage the instructor and supervisory role in group supervision.

**Understanding**

This inquiry diverged from many previous studies just focusing on one and done type activities (Dong, Campbell, Vance, 2017; Ellis, Hutman, & Deihl, 2013; Shepard & Brew, 2013) during practicum to focus more on a structured peer group supervision approach by gathering and synthesizing information, integrating and demonstrating counseling and supervisory skills, while giving and receiving feedback from peers and the instructor. These learning-centered anagogical underpinnings in this study positively impacted the personal and professional development of the school counselor trainees. During group supervision and specifically clinical peer supervision, the instructor and trainees evaluate learning together. This more aligns with learning centered findings in Watkinson, Cicero, and Burton (2021) where trainees shared they wanted to be actively involved in their practicum course focusing more on shared learning experiences of other students and learning and evaluating school counseling practices with each other and their instructor. As counselor educators hold the highest responsibility for introducing and assessing best methodologies in educational settings, a closer examination of learner centered education is warranted by faculty for the purpose of meeting the diverse needs of students.
Believing

The behaviors exhibited by the university supervisor/instructor and peer supervisors were discussed throughout all the participants. This study affirmed the importance of school counselor educators’ role on identity and skill development of school counselor trainees. The narratives from the participants implied that the clinical experiences of counseling faculty influenced trainee’s development. The results from this study further corroborates previous research related to the importance of supervision for school counselors and the need for supervision support from individuals who have experience as a school counselor (Studer, 2006; Minor & Duchac, 2021; Tang, 2020) and those who have an understanding of the contextual and educational influences on school counselors (Betters-Bubon, Goodman-Scott, & Bamgbose, 2021). Given the building of evidence supporting school counselor training by those who have professional experience in school counseling, these results also further highlight the importance of school counselor trainees’ participation in school-counseling-specific supervision (Brott, et al., 2021; Walley et al., 2009) and school-counseling-specific field experience courses (Minor & Duchac, 2021). The information shared about the importance of school counselor educators’ preparation and practice may also speak to a larger reaction to the needs in the profession (Betters-Bubon, Goodman-Scott, & Bamgbose, 2021; Li & Peters, 2022).

The participants reported how the peer supervisors influenced their professional identity and skill development as well. The participants discussed the importance of sharing stories amongst peers, as well as, openness to giving and receiving feedback on their counseling practices. Our study extends the existing research on the importance of storytelling described in Watkinson, Cicero, and Burton (2021). Additionally, findings from our study gave empirical support on the important role peer supervision groups have on professional development.
**Skill Development**

The learning by doing component of the group supervision and clinical peer supervision appeared to strengthen or change participants’ approaches to conceptualizing and intervening with student clients. Skill development is learned through observing and then committing to action an intervention that is believed to be helpful. Betz (2004) discusses skill development taking into consideration self-efficacy and the establishment of a level of confidence. As a student participates in a group or clinical supervision experience, they are learning through both persistence and performance. Further, there is a suggestion that vicarious learning is also occurring, which will be of benefit to the student throughout their career. Our findings indicate that providing school counselor trainees opportunities to practice and showcase their counseling skills positively impacted skill development.

More advocacy for the training needs of school counselor trainees by school counselor educators is warranted. A unified professional voice as supported in Betters-Bubon, Goodman-Scott, and Bamgbose (2021) is needed to strengthen the training needs of school counselor trainees in counselor education programs. Additionally, having students learn from the experiences of those that have experiences within the field of school counseling is seen as valuable and contributing to the profession.

**Limitations and Future Research**

A rigorous protocol was followed to ensure this study was as trustworthy as possible; however, this study does have limitations. One limitation of the study may have been bias of the research participants. They may have wanted to shed a positive spin on their experiences since the instructor of the course was also the researcher for the study. Although the researcher took multiple measures to prioritize confidentiality concerns, participants may have limited their
responses being a student in the practicum course and a participant in the research study.
Second, as with most qualitative studies, this research is also limited by the small sample of
seven individuals. For phenomenological studies, there is the need for larger sample sizes to
yield diverse responses and increase trustworthiness. For typical IPA designed studies, there is a
recommended limit of six participants (Creswell, 2013). The sample size of this study was larger
than recommended. Last, although participants were representative of those completing the
practicum course, participants were relatively homogeneous in ethnic and gender identity. This
could mean that results could be different for a different set of researchers, participants, and
other [practicum] learning environments (Yardley, 2008). Last, the lead researcher was also the
instructor of the course in which the research was conducted. This research study had the
potential for increased favorable responses due to the perceived hierarchy of student and
instructor despite all the procedural safeguards that were in place.

With the call for more SoTL research in counselor education by Barrio Minton et al.
(2014), a focus of future research could be about making the teaching and learning in counselor
education more learning centered. Future research could address this deficiency within the SoTL
literature in counselor education by looking further into counselor educators’ teaching and
supervisory practices across the clinical coursework series (e.g. counseling techniques, group
counseling, practicum, and internship) from the school counselor student/trainees perspective.

Another area of future research could be generated from Brott et al. (2021) call upon the
critical need for peer clinical supervision in the development of counselors-in-training during
field experiences. Future research could build upon the findings mentioned in this study to
include best practices and procedures for designing peer clinical supervision experiences at the
university setting in all clinical coursework. In turn, this experience may foster school
counselors’ continual involvement in peer clinical supervisory experiences within their professional practice.

**Conclusion**

This study offers a pedagogical framework for counselor educators to add shape and structure to their group supervision component of practicum in order to support student learning and program development. Utilizing a phenomenological framework the subordinate themes of organizing the learning environment, understanding, believing, and skill development along with several sub-themes were discovered. The intent of this study was not to generalize the experience of these school counselor trainees; rather, it was to showcase the voices of the participants as they explored their own thoughts and reactions during group supervision to improve clinical and teaching practices for the betterment of our profession.
References


Sneed, TD. (2017). The Lived Experience of Counseling Practicum Students: A Phenomenological Study. ProQuest LLC.


