January 2020

Reflective Practice: Counseling Students' Letters to Their Younger Selves in Practicum

Daniel A. DeCino
University of South Dakota

Phillip L. Waalkes
University of Missouri, St. Louis

Joel Givens
University of Purdue Fort Wayne

Reflective Practice: Counseling Students' Letters to Their Younger Selves in Practicum

Daniel A. DeCino, Phillip L. Waalkes, Joel Givens

In this reflective narrative study, we explored the stories of counselors-in-training at the end of their practicum courses. Thirty-six counselors-in-training (*N*=36) engaged in reflective practice and wrote letters to their younger selves about their practicum experiences. Using a narrative-focused data analysis process, we created a thematic structure to retell the grand narrative of participants' practicum training experiences. Discussion and implications of this letter writing activity are offered to help reveal how counselor educators can use reflective practices in their training courses.

According to the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016), practicum is a training course for students to develop beginning counseling skills and incorporate professional knowledge that helps them understand how their characteristics and behaviors can impact their work with clients. Furthermore, practicum and other applied training courses are required and can serve as a process for helping students develop their personal style of counseling (CACREP, 2016). Students may have prior professional (e.g., previous coursework, closely related jobs in the field) and life experiences (e.g., relationships with parents/guardians, experiences with mental health issues) that can impact their development as counselors. Since CACREP and instructors acknowledge that practicum is a crucial part of students training, counselor educators should prepare students to know how previous life experiences may interact with current training activities (Muro, 2004; Shepard & Brew, 2013; Storlie, Baltrinic, Mostade, & Darby, 2017). In order to help students recall and consolidate their salient learning experiences, narrative activities can be used as a tool for reflexive thinking and counselor development (Griffith & Frieden, 2000; Woodbridge & Rust O'Beirne, 2017). Researchers have found reflective practices can be helpful for counselors-in-training (Lamprecht & Pitre, 2018; Schmidt & Adkins, 2012). Yet, few have empirically researched how counselors-in-training reflect on their development. Exploring themes in the messages they tell themselves as part of their learning experiences may help illuminate ways counselor educators can help students grow in clinical courses.

Students' Experiences of Counselor Education Practicum

Ronnestad and Skovholt (2013) asserted students in their training often question their abilities and are unsure of how to become competent mental health professionals. Typically, counselors-in-training are required to complete didactic coursework (e.g., ethics & theories class) before transitioning into live and applied skills-based courses. As students begin their practicum training, a mixture of emotions often surfaces and students may formulate strategies to compensate their perceived lack of competence (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2013) and reduce psychological distress (i.e., counselor-in-training impairment; Smith, Robinson, & Young, 2007). In previous research, students have shared their emotional experiences with supervisors during prepracticum

Daniel A. DeCino, University of South Dakota; Phillip L. Waalkes, University of Missouri–St. Louis; Joel Givens, Purdue University Fort Wayne. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Daniel A. DeCino, Daniel.decino@usd.edu

and live supervision (Koltz & Feit, 2012) and in focus group interviews before practicum (Kurtyilmaz, 2015). Not only do these examples highlight how students can experience a range of intense emotions during their training, they may also suggest students relay their experiences more favorably to supervisors because supervisors have the power to decide if a student passes practicum. Graham, McDaniel, Douglas, and Snell (2002) referred to this process as *faking good*, which can negatively distort students' actual experiences. Thus, providing counselors-in-training an anonymous platform (i.e., electronic open letters to themselves) to share the messages they regard as important, as we did in the present study, affords them a chance to share reflections about themselves in ways that might be limited in other real-world situations (Rodham & Gavin, 2006, p. 95).

Reflective Practices in Counselor Education

For years, counselor educators have advocated for and used reflective practices in counselor training programs (Deaver & McAulliffe, 2009) and in professional settings (Atieno Okech, 2008; House & Jones Sears, 2002; Ziomek-Diagle, 2017). Griffith and Frieden (2000) defined reflective thinking as "an active, ongoing examination of the theories, beliefs, and assumptions that contribute to counselors' understanding of client issues and guide theory choices for clinical interventions" (p. 82). Ronnestad and Skovholt (2013) argued reflection and reflective practices are the most significant tools counselors-in-training may use to enhance critical thinking and gain insights from personal experience. Researchers have also recognized reflective practices are helpful for students' multicultural development (Collins, Arthur, & Wong-Wylie, 2010) and to identify and consolidate critical incidents (i.e., memorable moments) salient to their learning and identity development (Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006). Researchers have also used reflective practices before (Kurtyilmaz, 2015) and during primary care (Cox, Adams, & Loughran, 2014) and in preservice urban practicum settings (Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008). In short, Griffith and Frieden (2000) advocated counselor educators should use reflective practices to support counselors-in-training because it may be the most salient piece to preparing counselors.

In light of the importance of reflective practice in counseling, counselor educators' expectations of the quality of student reflections may encourage students to present their learning experiences differently (Howard et al., 2006). According to Bernard and Goodyear (2018), students experience *role conflict* when they are required to assume inconsistent roles during their training experiences. For example, a student might experience role conflict when an instructor mandates critical reflection on their practicum experiences where the counselor in training may feel stuck between wanting to agree there are areas of growth pointed out by their instructor, but also wanting to demonstrate they are competent to pass the course. In other words, students may perceive reflective practices as an invitation to openly share about their performance, but also an imperative to obey (Foucault, 1975). In addition to role conflict, counselors-in-training may lack the skills to engage in reflective practices. According to Stoltenberg (1981), beginning counselors have less awareness of self, clients, others, and the counseling process compared to experienced counselors. Without structure, encouragement, and training from supervisors, supervisees may struggle with how to engage in critical reflection (Stoltenberg, 1981). Despite a need for reflective practice in counselor training, we could find only two studies (Howard et al., 2006; Lee, Eppler, Krendal, & Latty, 2001) that explored students experiences with practicum and reflective practices. Yet, the stories practicum students tell their younger selves, instead of others with power and influence (e.g., supervisors, peers), remain unknown. Through the use of letters to their younger selves, the purpose of this narrative study was to identify the messages students felt were important to their learning during practicum. Given students may feel compelled to retell their experiences in ways that may seem more socially desirable (e.g., elevating their performance of a counseling technique) with supervisors (Howard et al., 2006) and peers, we sought to collect their stories and retell the salient messages students wished they could have told their younger selves at the inception of their practicum coursework. This project was also designed to give participants an opportunity to share their stories without a connection to course grades or direct link to their peers or instructors. The following research questions guided this narrative study, (a) What messages to themselves do students enrolled in

CACREP-accredited master's programs share at the end of practicum? (b) What were the common elements of practicum students' stories?; and (c) What, if any, important insights, positive or negative, were gained from students' practicum experiences?

Method

Narrative researchers seek to capture the salient stories people tell of particular experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). They may use a variety of methods to capture and retell participants' grand narratives. Elements of each story are analyzed, with particular attention to time, place, characters, rising action, and conclusion (Riessman, 2008). Narrative researchers interpret stories with an awareness of the systemic complexity surrounding the protagonist, including understanding broader institutional systems and challenging stereotypes (Patton, 2015). This narrative letter writing project was designed to capture and validate practicum students' reflective practices and to represent their stories.

Participants

Participants were eligible to participate in this study if they were currently enrolled in or recently completed a live CACREP-accredited practicum training course. Twenty-seven (75%) counselors-in-training reported being enrolled in an in-person practicum (live training) supervision (face-to-face) course format, six (16.67%) in an online course format, and three (8.33%) in a hybrid training format. Thirty (83.33%) participants self-reported as female and seven (19.44%) reported as male. Six (16.67%) counselors-in-training noted they were working towards a master's in school counseling, 25 (69.44%) were in clinical mental health counseling, and five (13.89%) were in couples and family therapy programs. Thirty-two (88.89%) were working on their master's degrees, three (8.33%) on an educational specialist degree, and one (2.78%) participant indicated "other." Participants were asked about their theoretical perspectives and responses varied. Most participants reported humanistic (e.g., Adlerian, Existential, Gestalt), cognitive (e.g., Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy), or constructivist and postmod-

ern counseling theories (e.g., Narrative, Reality/Choice) as their preferred theoretical orientation to counseling.

Sampling and Data Collection Procedures

To recruit participants for this study, we employed purposeful sampling procedures to enlist potential participants for in-depth analysis (Patton, 2015). First, the research team established training sites were required to be (a) CACREP-accredited master's training programs with live training clinics that (b) offered clinical, school, rehabilitation, or couples and family tracks and (c) located within the United States. We generated a list from first-hand knowledge of programs that met our criteria and obtained program coordinator/director contact information from CACREP's official website. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, we recruited participants in two phases. First, 2 weeks before the end of the Spring 2018 academic semester, we emailed six instructors at CACREP-accredited programs that indicated they offered live and field-based practicum training courses. Second, we utilized snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to recruit additional participants. We asked practicum instructors to forward the research opportunity to other instructors they knew that would fit our criteria and may be teaching practicum. Practicum instructors who received our forwarded email were asked to share our study with their students.

Data Collection. In narrative research, letter writing is a useful and creative mechanism that allows participants to express themselves in unique ways that are different from traditional data collection methods (Riessman, 2008). The purpose of this reflective practice letter writing activity was to gather the self-directed thoughts, messages, and lessons counselors-in-training told their younger selves at the end of their practicum courses. Practicum instructors forwarded our recruitment email to students. The recruitment email provided the description and purpose of the study, introduced the research team, and contained a link to the narrative letter writing activity. Participants were asked to write letters to their younger selves in time frames ranging from 2 weeks before the conclusion of their course to a month after their practicum course was complete. Instructions for participants were:

Please take a few moments to consider all of your experiences in practicum. Now, think back to when you began your journey in practicum.

The beginning may be the first day of class or before your first session with a client. What messages/words/thoughts/feelings/ do you recall today about your experiences in practicum that you would want the younger you to know?

In poem, letter, or other written form you feel suitable, please write your message down in the link provided. You may submit your letter at any time in the next week.

A month after the last practicum course we contacted ended, the survey link was closed and 37 letters were collected. One participant opened the link but did not write a letter, leaving 36 participants. Participants composed letters of varying lengths and formats. Most participants wrote their messages in traditional letter form, but three expressed their experiences in poetic form. The shortest letter was 8 words and the longest was 669 (M=270, Mdn=243, SD=169.88).

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness. In narrative methodology, researchers collect data in order to thoroughly capture and retell the grand narrative of a particular topic. Riessman (2008) asserted Thematic Analysis (TA) is arguably the most used form of narrative analysis. TA generally rests upon four guiding principles for narrative researchers. First, narrative researchers attend to prior knowledge or theory while also attending to emerging ideas from the data. Second, the story remains intact in both chronological and sequencing formats. In comparison to other methodologies where the data is fragmented and separated into themes, in narrative methods researchers attempt to retell the story as accurately as possible (p. 74). Third, narrative researchers attend to time, place, boundary, and setting when analyzing data to find nuance in the findings and set the stage for readers. Fourth, a case-centered focus is a primary consideration. In other words, narrative methodologists avoid looking across cases for their findings and search for a collective voice within one expansive case.

In this study, we used TA to interpret the data and retell 36 participants' experiences captured through their letters to their younger selves. We coded and analyzed participants' letters using Riessman's (2008) steps. First, we divided the entire data set into three separate batches of 12 letters to give researchers an opportunity to read the data without undue influence. Independently, each team member read and open coded their letters for narrative elements (e.g., setting, rising action, main characters). After the first round, we reconvened to discuss our preliminary findings. Then, each of us reviewed and open coded the remaining two batches of letters independently and engaged in scheduled follow-up discussions. We met a total of four times to discuss our interpretations of the data. We recognized *saturation* had occurred within the data when common ideas from participants' letters reemerged and we were able to construct one expansive and comprehensive grand narrative by the end of our fourth meeting (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

We used several methods to promote trustworthiness. Creswell and Poth (2018) stressed peer auditors can be a useful validation measure that examines both the research process and final outcome. The research team served as internal auditors to ensure important aspects of participants' stories were being reconstructed and retold without bias. During the first round of data analysis, we discussed our initial findings and addressed any discrepancies in our interpretations of the data. Author 2 and Author 3 raised concerns about the need to balance our desire to develop the data into a publishable manuscript, and our obligation to accurately retell students' experiences. We agreed to let students' words collectively and accurately represent their experiences by checking in with each other while analyzing data and writing results. This auditing strategy allowed us to reconcile any differences we were seeing in the data. Finally, the lead author kept an Excel spreadsheet that detailed our meeting times and dates, significant ideas that emerged during those meetings, and plans for moving forward with data analysis.

Researchers as Investigators. The authors self-identify as cis male, white, able-bodied assistant professors who have previous experience in prepracticum, practicum, and internship training courses. As counselor educators, we noticed field and applied

skills-based experiences represented a crucial intersection of students' theoretical knowledge and skill development. We recalled our students anecdotally reporting intense, disruptive, and expansive moments of growth during their practicum training. As researchers, we wanted to create a study that gathered their experiences without any direct instructor or supervisor influence, with the intention of gaining a deeper understanding of the stories.

Results

Thirty-six counselors-in-training participated in the letter writing activity and reflected on their practicum experiences. As a whole, participants' letters to their younger selves reflected detailed, emotional, and multilayered stories of challenge, growth, discomfort, and confrontation of the unknown. In order to retell their collective and marginal narratives, an outline of a story is used to demonstrate the interpretation process, honor the stories offered, and convey meaning, breadth, and depth among participants' experiences. Three main overarching phases of participants' practicum journeys are retold in sections *at the beginning*, *the middle*, and *at the end* to provide a structured account of participants' narratives. Within each section, key themes and subthemes shed light on participants' experiences in practicum.

At the Beginning

Counselors-in-training conveyed mixed sentiments at the beginning of their letters. Many participants began by making a brief greeting or statement to themselves and added contextual elements (e.g., locations, other important people, a sense of time) that were layered with intense and descriptive emotions. This phase contains one subtheme: a retrospective introduction.

A retrospective introduction. Most participants began their letters by introducing their younger selves at the beginning of this journey. Some participants were cordial and kind, and a few used humor like Participant 4's "Dear Hotshot, stop thinking you're a failure, or that you're God's gift to the earth." Several counselors-in-training foreshadowed their practicum training experiences with messages of

self-imposed fear of the unknown. Participant 2 wrote:

> You are beginning to embark on the journey to become a counselor. The journey will be long. There will be many struggles. There will even be times when all you want to do is give up. You will doubt yourself on this journey and wonder if counseling is what you are meant to do. All these things will happen. But there will be many bright sides to this future and you will overcome all the hardships that are coming your way.

Counselors-in-training also led with descriptions containing intense emotions that reflected their lives would change in many unpredictable, yet beneficial and growth-oriented ways. These sentiments usually included instructions to behave a particular way. For instance, Participant 20 shared:

> You are nervous and scared, not sure what to expect. I want you to take a deep breath. You may not think it yet, but you will survive. It will be a tough battle and there will be many obstacles. Be prepared to work hard and never give up. You will feel discouraged and overwhelmed, but keep calm and keep fighting.

For many, reflecting on their practicum experiences also presented a chance to contextualize their upcoming training in contrast to the world they were leaving behind. These passages seemed to make room for an evolving and emerging *new self*, while recognizing how prior career and life events influenced their current training. Participant 16 wrote:

> On the first night… I was extremely nervous and felt more pressure to 'perform' than I ever remembered feeling as a middle-school teacher. I actually felt nauseous and unprepared for sitting with a client (stranger) to discuss their deep, personal life.

A few participants also contrasted their upcoming practicum training with comparisons to significant health-related events. These offerings were often powerful messages of prior personal struggle and triumph. Participant 18 wrote, "This is going to be the single most difficult experience [practicum] in your life. You have gone through kidney failure, yet this will somehow challenge you even further." For the majority of participants, after they discussed the beginning of their practicums, they transitioned into richer nuances of their journeys anchored by pivotal

experiences during practicum that heightened their self-awareness.

The Middle

Counselors-in-training communicated a distinctive and intense period of discomfort via learning during their practicum courses. The middle portions of their journeys represented an expansion of their counselor identities in several dimensions. These moments of transformation were often signaled by declarations of feeling semi-autonomous. Participants also noted moments of trial and error as counselors that produced mixed therapeutic results with clients. The middle contains the following sub-themes: permission to learn and allies.

Permission to learn. Counselors-in-training generally expressed a decrease in anxiety over the course of the semester through support and appropriate risk-taking behaviors that bolstered their self-efficacy and deepened their work with clients. Participants often talked about wanting to get everything right in the beginning, but eventually giving themselves permission to view mistakes as opportunities for growth. For example, after experiencing some success, Participant 5 wrote:

> I want you to learn to let go of that control that you want to have, not just in session with your clients, but also in your life as a whole. When you learn to let go, things work themselves out. When you let go in session and let the client take the lead, your client will do the work they are meant to do.

Participants noted other moments of growth in developing their counseling skills when they overcame self-imposed hindrances. Participant 14 expressed:

> Reflections should NOT just be robotic regurgitation of whatever the client said. It needs to have a purpose and a meaning. I did not understand that for a long time. I just went through the steps of reflecting because I was told to, but this was not effective. I hated reflecting because it was pointless until I learned how to use it properly.

Interestingly, several counselors-in-training talked about their learning as moments for growth, yet failed to articulate *how* their skills evolved over time.

Allies. Counselors-in-training described how peers and supervisors became trusted support systems during their practicum training. Peer relationships were meaningful and helped normalize their thoughts and feelings during stressful experiences. In the words of Participant 15:

> When you are with someone for 6+ hours every Monday, you get close to the people around you. Lean on them, cry to them, and ask for their input, these are some of the most supportive people in your life right now.

In other letters, participants expressed sadness and regret when opportunities to build peer relationships in practicum were missed. Participant 17 wrote:

> Build relationships with your peers. I struggled with building this relationship due to many factors, but it would have been wonderful to have a support system of individuals who are going through the exact same things as you are at the same time.

Participants also expressed how supervisor relationships were initially met with skepticism, but evolved into trusted partnerships. In the cogent words of Participant 15, "your supervisors truly want the best for you and will only critique to help you learn." In other letters, participants expressed supervisors often challenged them to grow and alleviated their perceptions of the lofty expectations of practicum that limited their abilities to help clients. Participant 15 recounted:

> Your supervisor will tell you words that you will never forget… So spoiler alert! When your nerves are taking over and all you can think about is yourself and your performance, the best and most humbling words will come from your supervisor's mouth, "It's not about you, it's about the client and the pain that they are feeling." WOW! What a weight off your chest that must be….

Many counselors-in-training wrote about their personal and professional changes during practicum and through the middle and end portions of their letters. These sentiments represented shifts in their perceptions at the beginning of practicum and signaled a transition toward more personalized elements of their experiences.

At the End

Participants wrote about the ways they learned how to practice their counseling skills in nonlinear ways and became more reflective counselors. Many participants reflected on their experiences and shared practicum was a beginning into their new identities as helpers, rather than just another completed course in their graduate program. The following subthemes emerged from participants' experiences near the end of their practicums: counseling theory, self-expressive metaphor, the perfection myth, and change through experience

Counseling theory. Several participants discussed how they learned to integrate counseling theory into their work during practicum. Many participants felt only moderately successful with theory integration. Participant 4 shared their use of theory was a trial and error process, since "as it turns out, you don't know the right theory for you, and you've been trying your best since the start to see what works and what doesn't." Students also shared that they learned there were times when theory was not as important as effectively using counseling microskills (e.g., reflecting feeling, using immediacy, attending). In the words of Participant 14:

> I know that you are concerned that you have to learn and pick a theory. That does not matter as much as you think it does. It will help you to look at the client's situation a different way, BUT it is not as valuable as being fully present with the person in that room. Theory does not help when the person is emotionally falling apart. So become familiar with it.

Self-expressive metaphors. "Quiet the little critical termites that crawl around in your brain and attempt to chew up your self-confidence. You were made for this. Go for it!" Participant 31 shared at the end of the letter, demonstrating one of the metaphors participants used in this subtheme. Many counselors-in-training used metaphors to explain their experiences. This creative nuance demonstrated levels of deep understanding of their roles as counselors-in-training. These metaphors were messages of support, encouragement, survival, and personal expectations. For example, Participant 12 stated, "No one is expecting you to move mountains in the first session, or even in the last one." In other letters, participants shared messages of self-imposed doubt and feeling vulnerable during their practicum training. Participant 30 wrote, "bravely embrace the mysterious, splendid mess as it comes, as you always do. The symmetry of it all will reveal itself so slowly, indifferent to the natural panic and burning shame." Finally, a few participants relied on previous life experiences to reaffirm they have persevered through other tough challenges. Participant 7 expressed support and resilience through a weather metaphor:

> This semester will be a whirlwind of new experiences and strong emotions, but you'll weather this storm just as the countless others you have before. Take a deep breath, seek guidance when needed, and make time for your own self-care.

The perfection myth. Numerous participants expressed expectations of self-imposed perfection near the end of their letters. Expectations of perfection were constructed along the *personal self* and *professional self* within present and future orientations to time. A few participants' perfection myths seemed to be a preexisting condition from their academic identities and clashed with the organic and recursive learning process in practicum. Participant 10 shared:

> You're only a year and a half into your learning process, you don't need to know everything and be the "perfect counselor" for your clients. Take that pressure off yourself and remember the client also has responsibility in their growth.

Participants also adjusted their perfection myths to focus more on helping clients grow as opposed to serving their own personal agendas. The conclusion of Participant 12's letter stated:

> Lastly, just remember that you're not perfect, the client doesn't expect you to be perfect, but they do expect you to be there when no one else is. Be there. Be open. Show empathy. And most of all, be yourself.

Finally, by the end of practicum, some participants had developed a mindset of their learning as an evolution of personal change replete of success and failure in reaction against their previously held expectations for perfection. These examples noted a shift in perspective where mistakes were opportunities for learning and connecting with clients. Participant 7 wrote:

> Don't put so much pressure on yourself to be perfect, rather, embrace being imperfect. Imperfection allows us to continue to grow and learn in

all aspects of our life. Remember that things will fall into place, just not in the manner that you may expect or want. Practicum will be the most challenging yet rewarding experience of your graduate experience thus far.

Transformation through experience. At the end of their letters, many participants also expressed that they had unexpectedly surpassed their own expectations. Counselors-in-training wrote about the importance of staying focused, while also reflecting on their past experiences. Participant 23 wrote:

> You'll learn that you could push yourself further than you ever thought before, that even the most painful admissions of your own shortcomings, vulnerabilities, and demons that had to be overcome to help your clients would be sweet in the light of your own, liberating growth.

For others, exceeding their own expectations offered pleasant surprises that alleviated self-doubt and reaffirmed their desire to become counselors. Practicum students' sentiments indicated that the journey was not over, but more of a lifelong pursuit of becoming better through trial and error, and critical reflection of experience. For example, Participant 15 wrote:

> You realize that the path you chose is the right one, you realize that there's a lot of growth that you still have to go through in order to be the best professional you can, and you realize that the people around you who you think don't care about you, are actually really interested in your well-being and want to make sure you're doing well.

Finally, participants wrote about how their worldviews have changed as a result of their practicum training. These examples were deep admissions of transformation, and they highlight that what they learned informs who they were, who they are, and who they wish to be. Participant 35 wrote:

> In reality it was hard and a time for a lot of self-reflection. Doing this allows you to see who you are and where your values sit so well while letting you learn to let go of those values for the people you will spend time with so much. Knowing that this is expected is frustrating and scary because you have to let go and let someone lead when you have always led. Knowing this seems simple but doing can make you think. Be open to this and be willing to learn and grow from it because no matter how scary it is just

know it will be good and you will learn more than you ever thought possible.

Discussion

The participants in this study revealed messages, thoughts, feelings, and experiences that were important to students as they navigated their practicum training courses. By sharing practicum students' stories through their letters to themselves, as opposed to stories told to others (e.g., instructors, peers), the findings provide a unique, and potentially more genuine, understanding of the practicum students' growth and learning (Graham et al., 2002).

Consistent with previous findings (Howard et al., 2006), participants wrote about how learning to become a counselor required patience and a willingness to manage anxiety associated with perfectionism (Tyron, 1996). Students contextualized their practicum learning with prior coursework (Larson et al., 1994) and managed anxiety compared to prior work- and life-related events (Tang et al., 2004). For instance, students compared overcoming major illnesses (e.g., kidney disease) or switching careers (e.g., being a teacher) to practicum, to remind themselves that they could persevere through difficult situations.

We also uncovered that students set high and sometimes unrealistic expectations for themselves in practicum. This finding emerged through *the perfection myth* subtheme and indicated some students may place insurmountable self-expectations on themselves that may interfere with their growth as counselors. This finding aligns with Ganske, Gnilka, Ashby, and Rice's (2015) claim that maladaptive perfectionism (i.e., excessive rumination and unfair evaluation of one's performance) can negatively impact relationships with supervisors and clients. Although outside of the scope of this study, an expectation of perfectionism may be partially derived from students' perceptions of their instructors and program expectations. While setting expectations of counseling competence is important, instructors may consider how to address student perceptions of expectations during individual and group supervision.

Echoing prior researchers' findings on experiences that increased self-awareness and self-insight (Howard et al., 2006; Woodbridge & Rust O'Beirne,

2017), we also found students' self-awareness of their counselor identities increased during practicum. Students often lacked knowledge about themselves as counselors-in-training at the beginning of practicum and gained more self-awareness by working with clients. In applied counseling courses, students can gain self-awareness, learn, and feel normalized through their relationships with supervisors (Koltz & Feit, 2012). Students in the present study also reported that supervisors were often an important resource of support. Unique to this study, many counselors-in-training highlighted their peer relationships were also a significant source of support and trust and, in some cases, helped them learn how to set professional boundaries during practicum. This finding demonstrated that peer relationships within a highly stressful learning environment warrants further exploration.

Finally, in line with other researchers, we discovered practicum students perceived their use of counseling theory in session with clients as a process (Howard et al., 2006). Indeed, Howard et al. (2006) discovered students believed counseling theory, its conceptualization and application in practicum, was important. Our findings revealed more nuance in how counselors-in-training discussed counseling theory integration beginning in practicum. Given that many practicum training programs may emphasize theory to be integrated and used simultaneously in session with counseling skills (e.g., reflecting feeling), participants in this study suggested counseling theory integration requires practice over time, extending beyond a traditional semester-long course.

Implications for Counselor Education

While limited to practicum students' experiences, our study provides counselor educators and counseling practicum instructors with unique implications for consideration. Many practicum students in this study discussed the emotional intensity and challenge of their practicum experiences. Practicum instructors should help strike the right balance of challenge and support in structuring supervision. For some participants in this study, it seems their negative emotions got in the way of their growth. Rooted in our data analysis, we suggest a few ways that practicum instructors can offer support to their students without compromising challenge. First, since

numerous students relied on their resilience through previous life challenges to help them grow in practicum, practicum instructors should provide students with opportunities to reflect on their past experiences of intense learning and growth. Reflecting on past challenges can normalize resilience for students and serve as examples of how students can use their strengths to help themselves grow in practicum (Schmidt & Adkins, 2012). For example, practicum instructors may ask students to journal about an experience in their past where they tried something new for the first time and succeeded despite feeling challenged, or where they worked hard to overcome a hindrance to their growth.

Second, although it can be important to leave students space to struggle through their own anxiety and perfectionism, it also seems important for counselor educators to attune to students' emotional experiences during practicum. Based on the content of students' letters, managing emotions was a critical part of their growth in practicum for many students, often a requirement for learning how to more effectively use counseling skills. Practicum instructors should not dismiss student emotions, but should allow students opportunities to express their emotions in individual and group supervision. Emotional expression may help normalize and validate students' emotional experiences (Koltz & Feit, 2012). Since many students in this study reported appreciating the support of their peers, leaving space to discuss emotions during group supervision may prove especially helpful. Instructors using such an approach should take steps early on in the semester for group-building activities to help create trust, cohesion, and connection among supervisees, which in turn might help facilitate a more supportive and open environment (Lamprecht & Pitre, 2018). Along similar lines, at the beginning of practicum, practicum instructors could have students who recently completed practicum attend group supervision sessions to share their experiences and growth in practicum. Allowing students opportunities to reflect on their growth without their practicum instructor present (e.g., a group led by a peer or a doctoral student, peer journaling shared with peers instead of the instructor) may help students feel they can reflect on their growth more genuinely (Canton, 2006).

Third, practicum instructors may help lessen students' anxiety by setting clear expectations of the

counseling skills required to pass practicum. Providing examples of counseling sessions or role-play conducted by nonexperts (i.e., counseling students) can help illuminate effective, although not perfect, use of counseling skills at the practicum level. Similarly, having a clear evaluation instrument as part of the practicum course, with specific descriptions of counseling skills at each level, can help students more accurately understand their skill level and how they need to enhance those skills.

Fourth, although we did not gather data about the impact of the letters to themselves activity, counselor educators may use this creative activity as a tool in their practicum courses and during supervision to help students learn more about themselves as counselors-in-training (Howard et al., 2006; Shepard & Brew, 2013). For example, counselor educators could use letter writing as means to explore their perceptions of perfectionism and how this may impact their learning processes. Counselor educators may also use letter writing to help students identify anxiety and other forms of psychological distress. For instance, instructors could ask counselors-in-training to write letters that consider the complexities of learning through trial and error processes. Students taking on practicum from a growth-orientated mindset would help reinforce counselor educators' expectations and establish clearer expectations.

Limitations

There are several limitations noted in this study. First, additional trustworthiness measures might have enhanced the credibility of the present findings. Allowing participants to revisit their letters and double-check them for accuracy, clarity, and meaning may have helped alleviate any misunderstandings. In order to compensate for missing member checks, we performed several rounds of independent analysis and critical discussions regarding our coding and findings. Second, there was potential for participants to offer socially desirable responses in their letters. While the researchers on this project were not directly connected to students' practicum experiences, introducing ourselves as counselor educators may have influenced responses. Finally, most of our participants were females. More male counselors-in-training may have shared different stories pertaining to their experiences in practicum, in ways this relatively homogeneous sample did not.

Conclusion

Practicum for counselors-in-training remains a pivotal course for growth and professional development (Ronnestad, & Skovholt, 2013). Counselors-in-training in this study recalled moments of growth and insight from their practicum training in letters to themselves (Deaver & McAullife, 2009). Our study may help counselor educators and counselors-in-training use letter writing as a tool to identify the meaning of these experiences. Ultimately, we hope counselor educators incorporate reflective practice activities to help them shape their students' identities in practicum and beyond.

References

Atieno Okech, J. E. (2008). Reflective practice in group co-leadership. *The Journal of Specialists in Group Work, 33*, 236–252. doi:10.1080/01933920802196138

Bernard, J. M., & Goodyear, R. K. (2018). *Fundamentals of clinical supervision* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson.

Canton, P. (2006). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A guide for education of adults* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Collins, S., Arthur, N., & Wong-Wylie, G. (2010). Enhancing reflective practice through multicultural counseling through cultural auditing. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 88*, 340–347.

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). (2016). *2016 standards for accreditation*. Alexandria, VA: Author.

Cox, J., Adams, E., & Loughran, M. (2014). Behavioral health training is good medicine for counseling trainees: Two curricular experiences in interprofessional collaboration. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 36*, 115–129.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

Deaver, S. P., & McAuliffe, G. (2009). Reflective visual journaling during art therapy and counselling internships: A qualitative study. *Reflective Practice, 10*, 615–632.

Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York, NY: Vintage.

Ganske, K. H., Gnilka, P. B., Ashby, J. S., Rice, K. G. (2015). The relationship between counseling trainee perfectionism and the working alliance with supervisor and client. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 93*, 14–24. doi: 10.1002/j.1556-6676.2015.00177.x

Graham, K. E., McDaniel, M. A., Douglas, E. F., & Snell, A. F. (2002). Biodata validity decay and score inflation with faking: Do item attributes explain variance across items? *Journal of Business and Psychology, 16*, 573–592.

Griffith, B. A., & Frieden, G. (2000). Facilitating reflective thinking in counselor education. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 40*, 82–93. doi.10.1002/j.1556-6978.2000.tb01240.x

Holcomb-McCoy, C., & Johnston, G. (2008). A content analysis of pre-service school counselors' evaluations of an urban practicum experience. *Journal of School Counseling, 6*. Retrieved from http://jsc.montana.edu/articles/v6n16.pdf

House, R. M., & Jones Sears, S. (2002). Preparing school counselors to be leaders and advocates: A critical need in the new millennium. *Theory into Practice, 41*, 154–162.

Howard, E. E., Inman, A. G., & Altman, A. N. (2006). Critical incidents among novice counselor trainees. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, *46*(2), 88–102. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.2006.tb00015.x

Koltz, R. L., & Feit, S. S. (2012). A phenomenological study: The experience of live supervision during a pre-practicum counseling techniques course. *The Qualitative Report, 17*, 1–24.

Kurtyilmaz, Y. (2015). Counselor trainees' views on their forthcoming experiences in practicum course. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, *61*, 155–180. doi:10.14689/ejer.2015.61.9

Lamprecht, L. M., & Pitre, S. (2018). Developing a pre-practicum environment for beginning counselors: Growing my counselor educator self. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision, 11*, 1–31.

Larson, L. M., Clark, M. P., Wesely, L. H., Koraleski, S. F., Daniels, J. A., & Smith, P. L. (1994). Videos versus role plays to increase counseling self-efficacy in prepractica trainees. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 38*, 237–248. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.1999.tb00574.x

Lee, R., Eppler, C., Kendal, N., & Latty, C. (2001). Critical incidents in the professional lives of first year MFT students. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 23*, 51–61.

Muro, J. H. (2004). *An investigation into how CACREP accredited institutions meet the CACREP practicum standards* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses Global. (Accession No. 3157489)

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

Rodham, K., & Gavin, J. (2006). The ethics of using the internet to collect qualitative research data. *Research Ethics Review, 2*, 92–97. doi.10.1177/174701610600200303

Ronnestad, M. H., & Skovholt, T. M. (2013). *The developing practitioner*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Schmidt, C., & Adkins, C. (2012). Understanding, valuing, and teaching reflection in counselor education: A phenomenological inquiry. *Reflective Practice*, *13*, 77–96. doi:10.1080/14623943.2011.626024

Shepard, D. S., & Brew, L. (2013). Using creativity to make practicum a transformative experience. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, *8*, 444–455. doi:10.1080/15401383.2013.849579

Smith, H. L., Robinson, E. H. "M." III, & Young, M. E. (2007). The relationship among wellness, psychological distress, and social desirability of entering master's-level counselor trainees. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 47*, 96–109. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.2007.tb00041.x

Stoltenberg, C. (1981). Approaching supervision from a developmental perspective: The counselor complexity model. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 28*, 59–65.

Storlie, C. A., Baltrinic, S., Mostade, J., & Darby, T. (2017). Professional functioning: Exploring developmental narratives of counselor trainees. *Journal of Counselor Education and Supervision, 56*, 225–240. doi:10.1002/ceas.12074

Tang, M., Addison, K. D., LaSure-Bryant, D., Norman, R., O'Connell, W., & Stewart-Sicking, J. A. (2004). Factors that influence self-efficacy of counseling students: An exploratory study. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 44*, 70–80. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.2004.tb01861.x

Tyron, G. S. (1996). Supervisee development during the practicum year. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, *35*(4), 287–294. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.1996.tb01929.x

Woodbridge, L., & Rust O'Beirne, B. (2017). Counseling students' perceptions of journaling as a tool for developing reflective thinking. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision, 9*, 285–310. doi:10.7729/92.119

Ziomek-Daigle, J. (2017). Using reflective writing practices to articulate student learning in counselor education. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, 12*, 262–270.