An Examination of the Developmental Progression of Pre-Practicum Counseling Students

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Abstract

This study examined feedback from 36 master's-level pre-practicum counseling students through weekly dyad practice logs. Analysis revealed five themes: internal experience, session structure, questions, balancing multiple skills, and practicing advanced skills. These findings can help counselor educators better structure pre-practicum courses to address students' specific developmental needs and areas requiring clarification during this critical training phase.

Keywords: techniques, skills, counselors-in-training

An Examination of the Developmental Experience of Pre-Practicum Counseling Students

The training of new counselors is complex due to the multifaceted nature of therapeutic skill development, which requires students to simultaneously master technical competencies, develop self-awareness, manage emotional responses to client material, and integrate theoretical knowledge with practical application in counseling situations. The primary task of obtaining a master's degree in counselor education programs is learning and mastering the basic skills of counseling. While this is a common goal for most counselor educators, there appears to be a lack of research that assists counselor educators in teaching these skills in pre-practicum or counseling techniques courses. It is vital to explore and study how these skills are taught, as pre-practicum classes are commonly considered the bridge between academic courses and clinical work for students preparing to begin their practicum and internship experiences (Woodward & Lin, 1999). Woodward and Lin (1999) also stated that pre-practicum courses often encourage students to begin developing their counselor identities as they navigate the transition from coursework to clinical work through practicing skills. These skills are commonly known as microskills and can include attending behaviors, questioning, paraphrasing, summarizing, reflection of feeling, reflection of meaning, immediacy, focusing, and confrontation (Egan & Reese, 2019; Ivey et al., 2018; Kottler & Shepard, 2015). Although these skills are considered the foundation of counseling (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Egan & Reese, 2019; Ivey et al., 2018; Woodward & Lin, 1999), there is little research examining not only skills instruction but also feedback from students on their needs and experiences during their pre-practicum skills training.

Counselors-in-training are tasked with mastering these basic skills along with other professional growth areas while receiving feedback from instructors in the form of supervision. Ryan and Melody (2017) referred to supervision as a mediating factor, bridging the gap between theory and practice. Supervision, whether it be individual or group, takes place over time, implying there is an inherently developmental aspect to the process (Lee & Everett, 2004). The supervision process in a pre-practicum or techniques course takes the beginning counselor-in-training who may exhibit high anxiety, limited self-awareness, and external motivation, and moves them toward a place of increased confidence, internal motivation, control, and self-awareness (Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010). Supervisors also attempt to lower levels of anxiety through direct and indirect feedback during the semester as students practice skills (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Providing supervision that includes targeted feedback on the discrepancy between students' skills mastery and self-efficacy has the potential to promote reflection and development at this key point in clinical skills training (Daniels & Larson, 2001; Hoffman et al., 2005).

Bernard and Goodyear (2019) asserted that counselor development is a cyclical process in which the counselors-in-training move from a level of increased anxiety to greater calm and understanding. Parallel to the process of growth for the counselor-in-training are the developmental tasks that are important for successful skills mastery and establishing identity in preparation for field work (Woodward & Lin, 1999). Anxiety is often high as students practice their skills (Daniels & Larson, 2001). Offering a forum to share concerns and receive support, as well as input on skills practice, allows students the opportunity to confidently improve those skills and may indicate areas for instructors to emphasize or review (Swank & McCarthy, 2012).

The environment created by the instructor lays the foundation for learning that occurs during the teaching and supervision of basic counseling skills (Coleman et al., 2009). Providing a process for counselors-in-training that builds on the strengths of students contributes to higher levels of motivation and belief in the process (Hoffman et al., 2005). According to Stoltenberg and McNeill (2010), cognitive processing and motivation affect student learning. A tool or resource that incorporates cognitive processing and motivational factors can assist counselors-in-training in developing the microskills necessary for effective counseling practice (Ivey et al., 2018).

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2016) states that it is important for students to receive ongoing direct feedback for their skill development. Swank and McCarthy (2012) supported that students engaged in their pre-practicum experience need feedback throughout their semester-long skills training instead of waiting until the end of their clinical training. Research has found that counseling students struggle with feedback in general, particularly when that feedback is corrective and focused on personal qualities. Coleman et al. (2009) conducted two studies that found students rated positive feedback more acceptable than corrective feedback. The authors concluded that students may be more open to receiving corrective feedback when it is integrated with positive feedback. Additionally, Coleman et al. emphasized the importance of modeling how to give and receive corrective feedback to normalize this process in counseling programs (Coleman et al., 2009).

Method

The research question for the study was: "What are the developmental needs of students

throughout a semester of pre-practicum?" The researchers utilized narrative inquiry to understand the experiences of the pre-practicum student participants.

The authors of this examination believe it is important to expose counselors-in-training to an ongoing format where they have a space to share questions or concerns and receive positive, growth-oriented feedback. These authors created an instrument/instructional tool where students can rate their own skill performance, ask direct questions, and receive constructive instructor feedback to further develop and enhance their microskills in preparation for clinical work. This tool will serve as a key element for understanding the experience of the pre-practicum students to be addressed in this study.

Counseling students are asked to navigate many skills through their initial skills training course. To help students gain individualized positive and growth-oriented feedback, the dyad log was created to give students a space to learn and develop, receive supervision of skills, and ask direct questions to instructors. Through weekly logs and reflections with direct feedback delivered through writing in the Learning Management System (LMS), the authors of this study gained an understanding of the thoughts of what pre-practicum students regarding what went well and what needed improvement with their practice client during the semester. The use of weekly logs and reflections also provided students with regular opportunities to ask questions and express concerns. The following study was designed to examine if, and when, themes emerged from the pre-practicum students' experiences and if a developmental progression related to student concerns emerged over the semester's training.

To conduct this narrative inquiry, the authors utilized an instructional tool/instrument called dyad logs, which are similar to journal entries with established prompts for participants to document their unique experiences in the pre-practicum class.

These created dyad logs consisted of five specific questions:

1. Briefly describe what your session was about.
2. On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, how would you rate your last session with your client?
3. What are some things you felt went well with this session?
4. What are some things that you felt did not go well with this session?
5. What question(s) do you have for your instructors about your skills/session?

Of these questions, only responses to questions 3, 4, and 5 were analyzed for codes and themes in this study. The terms pre-practicum and techniques in counseling will be used interchangeably for the purposes of this study, due to the similarities in their definitions and variations of use across academic programs.

The dyad logs were an online form created by the authors that pre-practicum students completed after each practice counseling session conducted with a classmate, also called a dyad partner. Dyad partners were assigned at the beginning of the course and remained the same for the duration of the semester. Over the course of a 15-week semester, students completed dyad logs approximately 10 times, specifically following the weeks when they practiced and recorded skills sessions with their partners. The timing of these logs aligned with the introduction of new counseling skills by instructors, which occurred at strategic intervals rather than every week of the course. Consistent with narrative research methodology, the dyad logs provided chronological documentation of students'

experiences throughout the semester, capturing their self-reported reflections on skill development over time (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Cortazzi, 1993; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

Participants

A total of 36 master's-level students across two sections of a techniques in counseling course were recruited for this study. All students from these sections chose to participate, though some elected not to have their data included in the final analysis. Techniques in Counseling is a required course that students can take at different points in their academic program sequence but always prior to entering the practicum field experience. While use of the dyad log instrument was a required component of the pre-practicum course for all students, participation in this research study by allowing their anonymized logs to be analyzed was entirely voluntary.

This counselor education program has students enrolled in three tracks consisting of clinical mental health counseling, school counseling, and college counseling and student development. Students from each track were included in this study. Students from each track were included in this study. Students enrolled in both sections of the course ranged in age from their early 20s to their 50s. The identities of students in the two participating classes reflected the demographics of the program's overall student population, which has a large percentage of students reporting their race as white and their gender as women. To protect and maintain confidentiality, the researchers did not collect demographic information on individual study participants or engage in member checking.

Procedures

The University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study. Researchers followed the ACA Code of Ethics along with ACES Best Practices for research while conducting this study. The study recruited a purposeful sample of 36 master's-level students engaged in two pre-practicum courses. One of the pre-practicum courses was designated as on-campus and the other was designated as online; however, both sections of students were taught on Zoom in response to the coronavirus pandemic. This counselor education program has students enrolled in three tracks consisting of clinical mental health counseling, school counseling, and college counseling and student development. Students from each track were included in this study. Students enrolled in both sections of the course ranged in age from their early 20s to their 50s. The identities of students in the two participating classes reflected the demographics of the program's overall student population, which has a large percentage of students reporting their race as white and their gender as women. To protect and maintain confidentiality, the researchers did not collect demographic information on individual study participants or engage in member checking.

This instrument/instructional tool offered a better way to provide students with consistent written feedback, supervision, and a place to ask direct questions of instructors in the cases of limited class time or when students did not want to ask the questions in front of an entire class. Dyad logs were completed for points as part of the class grade. Students submitted the logs through a Google form for each week they met and practiced skills with their assigned dyad partner. Students were provided with a written informed consent form near the end of the semester that explained the authors' interest in viewing and analyzing their deidentified dyad logs for research purposes. Obtaining consent near the end of the semester increased the validity of the data because their completion of the logs was not biased by their knowledge of its potential use in research. The primary researcher deidentified student logs and randomly uploaded

the logs to a secure shared folder for the entire research team to code. The informed consent also confirmed that dyad logs would not be analyzed for research purposes until final grades were assigned. Students were provided with detailed information about how their confidentiality would be maintained during the research process and explicit assurances that their decision whether to participate would have no impact on their course grades. Students were also notified of their ability to withdraw themselves or their dyad logs from participation at any time.

Research Team

The research team consisted of the principal investigator (PI) and two co-investigators. The PI identifies as a White American cisgender woman and was the co-director for a community counseling center, an assistant teaching professor, and the instructor of record for both pre-practicum courses. The PI has over 10 years of experience in counselor education and commonly teaches the doctoral supervision class. One co-investigator identifies as a Black American cisgender woman who is a licensed professional counselor with over 10 years of counseling experience. The other co-investigator identifies as a White American cisgender man; a licensed professional counselor with over five years of counseling experience. Both co-investigators were advanced doctoral students who served as teaching assistants for each section of the class and had taken a doctoral level supervision course.

Positionality Statement

As researchers and course instructors, the authors recognized that there were power differentials between researchers and the participants who were students in the classes. Researchers immediately understood that the professional roles and ultimate control of academic outcomes for the course could unintentionally influence the participants'

perception of autonomy, even though the voluntary nature of research engagement was clearly communicated. In addition to being teachers of the content, the researchers also acknowledged that, as licensed counselors, site supervisors, and former or current graduate students, the researchers were positioned as insiders. From this position, they expected students at this level to experience fears and discomfort related to applying their knowledge, skills, and abilities as part of the course. Researchers anticipated and accepted that sociopolitical backgrounds, including race, gender identity, and socioeconomic status, could influence perceptions and interpretations of responses. Other aspects of identity, such as age, professional identities, time in the profession, and academic status, were also recognized as potential factors shaping the research process. Knowing that cultural, personal, and professional biases, beliefs, and blind spots are consistently present in research and practice made it particularly important for the researchers to consider how these factors played a role throughout all phases of the study. The researchers also noted that shared interest in the training and supervision of emerging counselors offered an opportunity to collectively and critically explore student experiences in more depth.

Data Collection and Analysis

While use of the dyad log instrument was a required component of the pre-practicum course for all students, participation in this research study by allowing their anonymized logs to be analyzed was entirely voluntary. Use of an electronic consent process was intended to underscore that research participation was voluntary and in no way connected to course outcomes. This also served to prevent unintended coercion or pressure as a result of asking for consent face-to-face, discussing it in class, or

requesting participation immediately before the assignment of final grades for the semester. Dyad logs from each week were downloaded from the learning management system, deidentified by one researcher, and randomly uploaded to a secure, password protected Google Drive accessed only by the three researchers.

To analyze the data, thematic analysis was utilized, whereby each investigator reviewed the data independently and developed codes inductively (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2008). Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative inquiry to organize and describe data in detail, coupled with identifying existing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Of the dyad logs, only questions 3, 4, and 5 were analyzed for codes and themes: what things they felt went well with the session; what things they felt did not go well with the session; and what question(s) they had for instructors about their skills/session. Because the data were collected and organized temporally, each investigator examined the content of the dyad logs with the ability to maintain the sequence of participants' stories, in effect keeping the narrative accounts intact (Riessman, 2008). Consistent with thematic analysis, we created a codebook, collectively discussed codes, then identified and agreed on themes to support the ideas that participants communicated in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To address the trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers used multiple processes, including reflexivity, triangulation of researchers and intercoder agreement, and triangulation of data (Nowell et al., 2017). The use of reflexivity involved examining identities and positionalities to determine how biases, experiences, and expectations potentially shaped the research and interpretation of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For instance, the researchers considered the roles of instructor and teaching assistants and the associated power differentials between instructors and student participants. To address this, the researchers approached the research process with mutual respect and egalitarianism among team members, thereby ensuring each individual had opportunities to openly express opinions and disagreements about all aspects of the study. Researchers attempted to distance themselves from the consent process by using an electronic form sent directly to potential participants near the end of the semester. The crafting of consent language and the timing of distribution demonstrated intentional efforts to emphasize the voluntary nature of research involvement and distinguish between participation and coursework or grading. It was also important to examine the position as insiders, not only as teachers but as individuals who possess backgrounds as counseling students and clinical supervisors. The research team also explored their unique sociopolitical backgrounds in real-time to understand how those identities had the potential to shape perspectives. This exploration of researchers' positionality and potential biases was accomplished through regularly scheduled research meetings where these topics were introduced and processed until consensus was reached.

Additional approaches for increasing trustworthiness included the triangulation of researchers, the achievement of intercoder agreement, and the triangulation of data (Nowell et al., 2017; Patton, 1999). The study involved three investigators who independently examined data multiple times and subsequently coded participant texts before achieving intercoder agreement. Moreover, the researchers utilized two additional sources, or artifacts, to examine consistencies and variabilities across participant narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 1999). Artifacts such as the course syllabus and the learning management system for the course were considered for their content, clarity, lack of

clarity, and impact, not only on the participants' responses but on researcher positionality and biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 1999). Use of artifacts is also consistent with narrative forms of inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell & Poth, 2018), and further serves to support the trustworthiness of the findings.

Results

Upon completing the data analysis, five themes and corresponding subthemes were identified. The five themes that emerged included: Internal Experience, with corresponding subthemes, Emotional Experience, Cognitive Experience, and Self-Awareness; Session Structure; Questions; Balancing Multiple Skills; and Practicing Advanced Skills. Responses from 10 weeks of dyad log responses to questions 3, 4, and 5 were analyzed. Although there were instances of each topic mentioned throughout the 10 weeks of data collection, the themes were developed based on an increased frequency and emphasis on certain subjects at various weekly timepoints. A detailed example of each theme, subtheme, and related participant quotes will follow.

Theme 1: Internal Experience

The first theme, internal experience, is defined as the intrapsychic occurrences of the trainees. The internal experience theme was found to have three subthemes: (a) emotional experiences, (b) cognitive experiences, and (c) self-awareness. These subthemes describe the subjective processes and types of introspection that student participants reported experiencing. Internal experience was presented as the first theme because student participants mentioned these areas of concern most frequently on the dyad logs during the semester. Across six of the 10 weeks involving data collection, including weeks one (basic attending behaviors), two (active listening), four (reflection of feeling), five

(reflection of meaning), seven (confrontation), and eight (goal-setting), students repeatedly described fear, low-confidence, distractions, and efforts to avoid projecting personal perspectives and judgments on the client/dyad partner.

Emotional Experiences

Regarding the students' emotional experiences, a substantial number of participants indicated that they felt anxiety as they engaged with their client/dyad partner during the practice sessions. Experiences of anxiety were described in various ways and related to different parts of the counseling process, including worries about not asking the right questions, feeling discomposed, fear of not knowing what to do next and generally feeling stuck, in addition to expressing uncertainty about their skills and knowledge base. One example was the student participant who inquired during week one, "Does it get easier? The panic that I won't ask the right question?!" Likewise, a student participant detailed at week four, "There was an 8-10 second period where I couldn't think of which question I wanted to ask, which left me flustered and gave me a lot of anxiety." In both instances, the individuals labeled their experiences and described the resulting behavior, while also centering their apprehensions and thoughts about using a learned skill.

Cognitive Experiences

The cognitive aspects of the student participants' internal experiences consisted of self-doubt and indecision, as well as expressions of low confidence and difficulty concentrating during the counseling encounters with their client/dyad partner. This included the individual who wrote at week seven, "There must have been countless times where you went into a session with something heavy on your mind. What are some techniques you used to clear yourself of

your inner troubles so that you can be laser-focused on the client?" During the following week, the reflections of two students illustrated self-doubt and uneasiness regarding competency, beginning with the individual who wrote:

> Reviewing the list of skills for the second taped session, I have a real sense of anxiety and doubt regarding whether or not I will be able to smoothly apply each skill within the context of the session. I realize I need to trust the process, but I am still a bit nervous about the process for next week.

Similarly, another student acknowledged:

> I am struggling with checking the skills off and do not feel very competent yet to simply guide the client and bring in skills as needed (while maintaining the skills that need to be used throughout the sessions). Does this come with time?

Each example offers further insight into the real-time cognitive experiences of the student participants, coupled with instances across multiple weeks suggesting identification with the role of an imposter. Simultaneously, they were demonstrating varying levels of self-examination and analysis.

Self-Awareness

The researchers labeled the last subtheme as self-awareness because students explicitly referenced their attempts and challenges with avoiding bias, making judgments, and imposing personal values or opinions on the client/dyad partner during the sessions. Although the statements were generally associated with the students' internal processes, we created a separate sub-thematic label to reflect the unique focus on impartiality, relinquishing control of client/dyad partner decisions, and the overall

impact that worldview may have in the session. Exhibited in week seven, a student participant wrote, "As a counselor, I felt like I sometimes was asking questions that could be interpreted as making judgments/assumptions or maybe pushing my own beliefs… How do I make/word my open & closed questions sound less judgmental…?" Further illustrated in week eight, two individuals highlighted realizations connected to client agency and personal perspective that were consistent with the expressions of their peers, such as the individual who noted:

> I was hoping [they'd] take me up on a suggestion to put off worrying about something until the trigger actually happened, but [they] actually wanted to make the decision earlier (and I felt a little disappointed, but realize I need to release that hold on what I had thought was a good idea)… How do you detach from ideas you have in order to let the client make their own choices? In general, how do you detach from client outcomes? Is it just to tell yourself to do your best effort and let the client have responsibility to the rest?

When focusing on the impacts of the counselor's perspective, another student recognized, "I am noticing still how much my worldview and understanding of society and history influences how I understand and interpret what people say… I am still working on how neutral and skillful I can be." The identified quotes represent distinct components of internal experiences, as documented by the students while engaging in dyads. These internal experiences include their feelings and thoughts related to distress, as well as their attempts to navigate the potential impacts of imposing personal perspectives in sessions. Beyond occurrences in the internal environment, student participants also inquired about their external experiences, which most frequently

involved an attendance to productive session sequences and overall format.

Theme 2: Session Structure

Our identification of the next theme, session structure, was informed by student participants' written statements or questions about the ways they organized content, primarily during four weeks, including one, three, five, and six. Dyad log responses connected to this theme involved identifying appropriate opening statements/questions, prioritizing session content, and formulating closing statements/questions to demonstrate effective session sequences. During week one, a participant reflected, "Ultimately, I felt a bit clumsy. I think it would have flowed better to… place a little bit more structure into the first session, like, perhaps using an intake assessment that could guide introductory questions." At week three, one of the participants shared their perspective that, "Due to the high number of topics mentioned, I felt like less progress was made and caused the session to be all over the place… What [are] the first couple of steps after addressing goals for the counseling sessions?" In the fifth week of their dyad sessions, a student noted:

> I am still having a hard time closing out the session. Each time I close out, it feels rushed, not authentic, and awkward. It is something that I still need to work on. How do you end sessions with your client? Any tips or advice?

Here, the student participants demonstrated that in their current level of development they concentrated more broadly on their session arrangements and its effectiveness for the client/dyad partner. Conversely, we also identified the student participants' emphasis on the precise technique of using questions in dyad sessions.

Theme 3: Questions

The third theme, questions, was defined as the student participants' focus on, and concerns about, the types of questions they asked in their dyad sessions when they were in the role of counselor. Across the duration of the study, participants issued the most inquiries about the types, frequency, and timing of questions they asked during weeks one, two, three, and six, including one individual who commented during the first week, "I would like to know what tips you have for developing open ended questions that remain on topic." Similarly, during week two, one student wrote:

> I tried to ask open-ended questions, but I feel like I still asked quite a few closed questions or leading questions. It is something I do in my own life… and it is hard for me to shed that habit in the counseling room.

At week six, another student participant wrote, "I could apply more strategically placed open questions to further explore goals as well as to empower my partner to develop potential resolutions to the conflict(s)…" The quotes during weeks one and two focus more generally on crafting the question and attending to type (e.g., open, closed, leading), while the quote at week six demonstrated more advanced analysis of questioning, as the student participant evaluated timing and placement of questions to achieve specific goals. Each example offers insight into the participants' efforts to categorize and include different types of questions, as well as their attempts to determine the appropriate amount and timing of questions. Additionally, student participants desired to identify strategies for utilizing numerous skills and techniques to make progress with their dyad partners.

Theme 4: Balancing Multiple Skills

We defined the next theme, balancing multiple skills, as participants' thoughts about

incorporating a variety of techniques with dyad partners as the semester progressed and new skills were introduced, coupled with the required session recordings. As the semester progressed, most notably during the 10-weeks of data collection, student participants increasingly documented concerns about their ability to incorporate multiple skills or techniques with clients/dyad partners. Statements related to this theme were most prominent during three of the latter weeks– seven, eight, and nine. In week eight, one student inquired, "How do you personally juggle all of the skills during your sessions? Do you find yourself using more skills than others? How can I make sure I am being as effective as I possibly can?" Likewise, at week nine a student participant wrote, "I think I'm still feeling a bit thrown not just by taping but by trying to incorporate so many skills and make sure I get them in there." In each instance, the students expressed some level of awareness that identifying and using appropriate techniques in one session was a complex process requiring discernment and balance. However, navigating that internal decision-making process in real-time, in conjunction with being recorded for evaluation, is a part of counselor training and advancement that requires ongoing practice.

Theme 5: Practicing Advanced Skills

The final theme, practicing advanced skills, was defined as participants' questions and/or expressed discomfort about incorporating higher level techniques. These techniques included skills like broaching, empathetic/supportive confrontation, self-disclosure, reframing, feedback, immediacy, and the use of silence. Participants also reported avoiding the use of such techniques as a result of discomfort. Contrary to our expectations, student participants focused their responses on incorporating advanced skills across three of the earlier weeks in the 10-week study, rather than closer to the end. With the exception of week six, when

empathetic confrontation was introduced, this outcome was inconsistent with the planned semester chronology and assignment of tasks as outlined by the syllabus and learning management system and requires further elaboration in the discussion. Participants communicated about the use of advanced skills most frequently during weeks three, four, and six. At week three, a student participant illustrated this when they acknowledged:

> I still am not comfortable with silence, and that sometimes makes me jump the gun and talk over [the client's] thoughts. I just don't want [the client] to feel awkward or make it look like I'm not prepared with something to say, but I know I need to lean into the silence more.

Aligned with the previous participant's feelings of concern about utilizing an advanced technique, regarding the use of self-disclosure during week four, one student reflected:

> I think there were moments where my self-disclosure wasn't necessary and I can see being counterproductive if a client had different political views. I tried to catch myself but it wasn't until after a moment of self-disclosure and her talking that I realized I was definitely showing a bias. I tried to pull back afterwards and remain neutral, but that definitely caught me off guard.

Both participant quotes highlight the discomfort and/or level of readiness that the students felt while incorporating more advanced techniques. As practitioners, we recognize that the ability to effectively utilize skills and techniques categorized as more advanced, although foundational, requires consistent practice. While this is known in the field, our use of the dyad log instrument to examine student participants' responses in real-time enabled us to immediately

identify skill areas that warranted further attention, which has direct implications for both the practice and research of counselor education and training.

Discussion

This study involved the examination of weekly dyad logs to focus on the reflection of counseling students' counselor/client dyad practice experience over their pre-practicum semester. The results provided responses to the research question: *What are the developmental needs of students throughout a semester of pre-practicum?* Based on the themes discovered from this narrative study's thematic analysis, the following were stated as primary needs or focus areas for counselors-in-training during the pre-practicum course experience: (a) the internal experience of the counselor in training, which included emotional experiences, cognitive experiences, and self-awareness subthemes; (b) session structure; (c) questions; (d) balancing multiple skills, and (e) practicing advanced skills. These themes help provide counselor educators with a specific direction, or road map, for instruction or facilitation of trainee growth and development as they prepare for their field experiences.

Training support for the first theme, students' internal experience, is essential and has an impact on the other four thematic areas related to counseling skills. As counselor educators work with students' emotional responses, cognitive experiences, and self-awareness (i.e., critical thoughts, challenging emotions, blind spots, biases) the internal clinical core of the burgeoning professional is being constructed. By working with the trainee's internal experience through ongoing skills practice with guided reflection in a safe space, students develop their clinical judgment and their clinical confidence. In turn, this judgment and confidence facilitate the

development of clinical instincts. These instincts involve the awareness of what is important to attend to and recognizing what skills to incorporate, along with when and how to use them. As instructors, a key goal is increasing student confidence in their clinical decision-making.

The other themes that emerged in the analysis related specifically to skill development and structuring the session, all of which involve clinical judgment. Upon examination of the themes across the 10 weeks, the authors were able to make several observations. Skills over the semester became more complex, as that is indicative of all skill models in that they add and build on each other (Egan & Reese, 2019; Ivey et al., 2018; Kottler & Shepard, 2015). Themes related to skills, however, were not always linear or hierarchical; instead, they would re-emerge or recycle. For example, regarding internal experiences, each time a new skill was introduced, a student's doubt or anxiety had the potential of reappearing. Therefore, addressing the internal experience through instruction and supervision needs to be an ongoing process.

In their dyad logs, students reported concerns about the use of questions over the entire semester. Structuring the session was a repeated concern, as was learning and navigating multiple skills, particularly knowing what skill to use and when. Furthermore, findings from the study suggested that implementing more advanced skills (i.e., broaching, confrontation, immediacy, reframing, feedback, self-disclosure, and use of silence) in conjunction with the basic listening sequence (i.e., nonverbals, paraphrasing, feeling reflections, etc.) was also challenging. As noted in the results section, the authors discussed the unexpected outcome that questions and concerns about the advanced skills emerged earlier in the semester, rather than during the latter weeks. One explanation is that skills training models

introduce the advanced skills quoted by participants, such as comfort with silence and self-disclosure, in the earlier part of instruction (Ivey et al., 2018).

Based on these findings, the authors recommend that counselor educators consider several approaches to address this phenomenon. First, instructors might benefit from frontloading more structured support for advanced skills, providing supplemental resources and demonstrations earlier in the semester than traditionally planned. Second, educators should consider implementing progressive practice opportunities that pair basic and advanced skills together from the beginning, rather than teaching them in strict sequential order. Third, instructors might develop specific anxiety-reduction strategies focused on these advanced skills, such as graduated exposure exercises that allow students to practice potentially uncomfortable techniques in low-stakes settings before applying them in dyad sessions. Finally, the use of reflection tools like the dyad log can help instructors identify and address emerging concerns about advanced skills as they arise, rather than waiting until these skills are formally introduced later in the curriculum.

The findings of this examination add to the current literature on skill development with counseling trainees by illuminating the developmental experiences and concerns of pre-practicum students during their skills training. Through the described methodology, which incorporated ongoing reflection and informal feedback, researchers were able to identify key themes that align with previous research highlighting the importance of supportive, growth-oriented approaches to skill acquisition (Coleman et al., 2009; Swank & McCarthy, 2012). Additionally, this study provides thematic feedback directly from pre-practicum students regarding the areas that need to be targeted during

their coursework before entering the field. Overall, the results of the study have strong implications for counselor education and training, as well as research.

Counselor Education and Training

The findings from this study on the persistent concerns of counselors-in-training during skill development should help counselor educators identify specific areas of struggle to focus on in their teaching and supervision. Based on results, the authors recommend that curricula be designed to specifically address the five thematic areas of concern identified for pre-practicum counseling students, and these themes could be carried forward into other classes as well, such as practicum and internship. Future counselor education programs would benefit from incorporating more visual demonstrations, such as videos, that explicitly model the intricacies of various skills and areas of concern identified in this study. The authors suggest that instructional strategies and supervision approaches should intentionally build the confidence and self-efficacy of students, which will be crucial for addressing their internal experiences. This focus on internal experience should relate to students' ability to demonstrate a variety of skills that may prove challenging for them.

The dyad log approach described in this study could provide counselor educators with an organized method for assessing students' ongoing progress. Programs might consider implementing similar reflective journaling tools to create a modified structure of supervision for courses like pre-practicum and techniques of counseling where students are engaged in classroom practice. Such reflective tools could offer faculty a way of identifying when students are in distress before it impacts their development. The authors recommend that counselor education programs consider incorporating regularly assigned reflection exercises across the semester to enable

instructors to adjust and adapt their teaching in real-time to meet the evolving needs and concerns of students. The appendix provides examples of instructional strategies that could be readily employed to address the thematic areas of concern identified in this study and other areas of students' uncertainty.

Research

There are several implications for future research. Researchers could use the identified themes to target and investigate the effectiveness of instructional strategies that improve those areas for pre-practicum students. For example, with theme 1, the internal experience in the appendix highlights using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and mindfulness approaches in supervision to address challenging thoughts or emotions of the pre-practicum student. Research could also be conducted on other skill areas of concern, like theme 3, questions, which would be particularly valuable given the persistent nature of questioning challenges across the entire semester and their fundamental role in establishing therapeutic rapport. Similarly, additional research focusing on advanced skills would benefit the field by helping identify effective teaching methods for these more complex techniques that students struggle with early in their training. Both research directions could utilize the instructional strategies shared in the appendix to measure student outcomes and growth on relevant variables such as skill proficiency, clinical confidence, and therapeutic effectiveness.

Additionally, researchers could examine the impact of the dyad log tool itself, including student thoughts and how to improve the instrument considering its use as a mechanism for instruction. This research would be valuable because understanding students' perceptions of reflective tools could lead to more effective implementation and higher engagement with the reflection process, ultimately enhancing skill development. Dyad logs could also be adapted for instruction and training in other courses, coupled with researching it as a method for tracking students' growth across time in a simple, efficient way. Such adaptations would be beneficial because they could provide a consistent framework for developmental assessment across the counselor education curriculum, allowing programs to identify patterns in student development that might otherwise remain undetected in isolated courses, and creating opportunities for more targeted educational interventions at critical developmental junctures.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include data collection from two pre-practicum sections in one counselor education program at a large public university in the Southeastern United States. Responses may have differed by variables such as program diversity with alternate training methods, regional variations, and other dissimilarities across academic institutions. Furthermore, no demographics were obtained from students to see if there were divergent responses and themes related to constructs such as gender identity, racial identity, age, location, life responsibilities, support, previous career, or exposure to skills. Another significant limitation was the absence of member checking, which, while helping to maintain confidentiality, prevented researcher's from confirming interpretations with participants which potentially limited the trustworthiness of the findings. A final limitation was the recognition that students completed the same format for the dyad log each week, which may have generated some "log fatigue" in the responses. All these variables are important to consider with any further research related to the dyad logs and expanding on the results of this study.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the counselor education field by identifying and analyzing five key developmental themes that characterize pre-practicum students' experiences during their foundational skills training. Understanding these specific areas of challenge enables counselor educators to develop more targeted and effective instructional approaches that can enhance students' skill acquisition, reduce developmental anxiety, and increase their clinical self-efficacy during this critical training phase. Additionally, the authors' sharing of the dyad log as an instrument could be used to further enhance the training of counselors and increase focus on areas of concern that may arise during phases of skill development. Further research and implementation have the capacity to expand upon the impact of this work and its relevance to skills courses, preparation for field experiences, and other classes or stages of counselor training.

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Appendix

Instructional Strategies for Addressing Themes

Theme	Instructional Strategy
Working with the internal experience of the pre-practicum student.	Identify Cognitive Distortions. Use a Cognitive Behavioral approach in supervision. Use Acceptance Commitment Therapy and Mindfulness approaches in supervision.
Working with questions in counseling.	Demonstrate Closed questions and outcome(s). Demonstrate Leading questions and outcome(s). Demonstrate Open-ended questions and outcome(s). Create a Question Resource List that includes lists of questions to open sessions, close sessions, set goals throughout sessions, focus the session, get unstuck.
Structuring the session.	Teach the appropriate process for opening and closing a session. Teach the process for setting goals. Offer a mini session problem solving model, if needed. Model a session without structure and with structure and process the difference/what worked and what didn't work. Demonstrate and practice.
Practicing advanced skills.	Demonstrate and consistently practice; use the same client case example and show different skills side by side. Define a deliberate practice model for the advanced skills. (McLeod, 2021)
Balancing multiple skills: How to know what to use when.	Review skills and why skills are used. Use a skills tracking sheet and observe a strong session and document skills used. Use a skills tracking sheet and observe a weaker session and document skills used and discuss how to improve.