Experiential and Transformative Learning for School Counselors: Impacts of Counseling First-Generation, Low-Income, College-Bound Students

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Abstract

Through the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this study examined the impacts of counseling first-generation, low-income college-bound students by way of a school counselor experiential learning program at one small, private university in the eastern United States. This study explored experiential learning, including from a transformative learning perspective, as well as its overall impact on school counseling student preparation. Themes that emerged indicated that school counseling graduate student interns, when placed in a culturally diverse experiential learning setting, have the potential to increase their counselor competencies including multicultural competencies, and to have a transformative learning experience. These impacts were discussed along with a social justice advocacy perspective. Implications of these findings, including encouragement for the development of similar university-community partnerships, were included.

Keywords

Author's Notes

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Experiential learning entails the acquisition of knowledge and meaning through real-life experiences (Yardley, Teunissen, & Dornan, 2012). Such learning has been utilized across multiple fields, including counselor education (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Ieva, Ohrt, Swank, & Young, 2009). Experiential learning has been shown to elicit transformative learning that changes the way one views the world (Henning, Gut, & Beam, 2019; Mezirow, 1997). Within the field of counselor education, both experiential learning and transformative learning experiences have been shown to positively impact the acquisition of counselor competencies and skills, including multicultural competencies (Blanchard, Broido, Stygles, & Rojas, 2016; Keating, McWilliams, Hynes, Clarke, & Strawbridge, 2019). The current study sought to examine the impact of an experiential learning program on transformative learning and the overall counselor competencies of school counseling students. School counseling students partook in this experiential learning program, which included working with a diverse student population, during their graduate internship experience.

Experiential Learning

Substantive evidence supports the use of experiential learning activities to increase and enhance the acquisition of concepts across multiple disciplines (Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, & Kasl, 2006). Regarding medical and clinical disciplines, the term is often described as an infusion in curriculum to bring the learner into contact with others, such as clients or patients, in a specific experience (Yardley et al., 2012). Furthermore, it has been shown that experiential learning exercises have the ability to expand the way that adult learners understand information (Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, & Kasl, 2006). These authentic practice-based experiences, lent from experiential learning, have been shown to reach a multitude of learners, as they allow for individual learning styles and individual perceptions of experiences (Yardley et al., 2012).

A major advantage of experiential learning is that there is the potential for group problem solving, as students receive peer support and faculty mentoring throughout their experiences (Fawcett & Evans, 2012; Rush, 2008). Peer support offers students the potential for group problem solving experiences which enhances understanding and self-efficacy of the subject (Midgett, Hausheer, & Doumas, 2016; Alavi-Arias, Farnam, Granmayeh, & Haghani. 2018). Faculty mentoring during such student experiences not only supports skill acquisition, but student reflection as well. The use of this mentoring culture in clinical experience is strongly recommended (Henning et al., 2019). As such, experiential learning can be a powerful tool to assist in educational experiences, including from a counselor education framework.

Experiential learning is a strategy that is utilized in counselor education programs to bridge theory and practice (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Ieva, Ohrt, Swank, & Young, 2009), transforming the students' understanding of information obtained in the classroom into applicable, real world skills. This theory to practice framework is often illustrated as part of the relationship between the classroom and clinical experience. Experiential learning as a form of clinical experience is informed through counseling theory, grounded in practice, and enhanced through reflection (Yates, DeLeon, & Rapp, 2017). The purpose of experiential learning is to bring awareness, empathy, and accuracy of understanding to the student (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002). Experiential learning has been recommended within the field of counselor education as a tool for increasing counselor multicultural competency as well as counselor self-awareness (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Keating et al., 2019).

While experiential learning is utilized in counselor education programs, limited research has studied the outcome of such experiences on counseling student transformative learning, and

professional and personal growth. As such, the current study aimed to establish the impact of an experiential learning field experience on graduate counseling students.

Transformative Learning

This study explored experiential learning alongside experiences with transformative learning. Mezirow has referred to transformative learning as "the process of effecting change in a frame of reference" (1997, p. 5). Experiential learning has the potential to provoke this change through a growth of consciousness from a change in worldview and view of one's self. By reexamining learned material from the perspective of new interactions and firsthand experiences, experiential learning offers counseling students enhanced understanding of counseling competencies. Such reexaminations can occur through the student's own awareness; as such learning has been described as involving experience and reflection (Henning, Gut, & Beam, 2019).

Experiential learning has been suggested as a tool for eliciting counselor growth and self-awareness (Fawcett & Evans, 2012; Keating et al., 2019). This is in line with Mezirow's (1997) discussion of transformative learning, "education that fosters critically reflective thought, imaginative problem posing, and discourse is learner-centered, participatory, and interactive, and it involves group deliberation and group problem solving" (p. 10). Transformative learning as a result of experiential learning exercises has been observed, through avenues such as university study abroad programs and community immersion. During these experiences, changes in graduate student personal beliefs, biases, and challenging of ethnocentric assumptions occurred (Earnest, Rosenbusch, Wallace-Williams, & Keim, 2016; Prosek & Michel, 2016). However, the need for continued research in the area of transformative learning, specifically related to cultural diversity and cultivating transformation, has been established (Earnest et al., 2016).

As a best practice, counselors-in-training should immerse themselves in the many facets of the profession (Barrow, Baker & Fusarelli, 2018), and experiential learning can be a tool to achieve this educational immersion. Limited studies have researched the connection between transformative learning and experiential learning in the mental health field. However, one study did identify transformative learning in counseling students through fieldwork interactions with clients in a mental health setting and another through study abroad counseling courses (McDowell, Goessling, & Melendez, 2012). Students recounted knowledge gained by the experience and acted in the fieldwork based on their newly acquired knowledge and skills (Rush, 2008). While these initial studies show positive results between experiential learning and transformative learning, similar research in the field of counselor education, specifically in school counselor education, is lacking. The current study explored experiential learning from this perspective, as well as its overall impact on school counselor competencies and student preparation.

Counselor Competence

Experiential learning exercises are often implemented with the intended outcome of an increase in the skills of counseling students, measured by their work with individuals outside of the classroom setting. Overall, a formal definition for this competency is, "the extent to which a therapist has the knowledge and skill required to deliver a treatment to the standard needed for it to achieve its expected effects" (Fairburn, & Cooper, 2011, p.38). As the American Counseling Association's (ACA) Code of Ethics notes, appropriate counselor competence is not only important, but an ethical obligation (ACA, 2014). Specifically related to school counselors, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) describes counselors' competencies to include the knowledge, abilities, skills, and attitudes that are essential to successfully counseling the pre-K-12 student population (ASCA, 2012). ASCA further dictates that counselor education programs

establish benchmarks to ensure that school counseling students meet counselor competencies. This affirms that it is the responsibility of counselor education programs to provide future counselors with the competencies deemed necessary to provide support for their intended population. Sommers-Flanagan establishes that supporting counseling students as they assimilate an understanding of skills through practice is an important aspect to achieving such standards (2015). Counselor education programs should support students in their efforts to obtain such competencies, including through interactions with diverse populations (Sheperis, Henning, & Kocet, 2016).

An important, yet sometimes overlooked area of counselor competency is advocacy skills and action. Counselors need to support clients and understand their lives in context; therefore, counselors are called to work towards equity and be agents of social change (Bemak & Chung, 2005; House, 2004; Stone & Dahir, 2006). A counselor with an advocacy orientation not only empowers the client, but also encourages systematic change, including from a social justice perspective. As the ACA advocacy competencies note, to achieve such competencies a focus on social, cultural, and economic factors and their effects on the individual and society should be included (Ratts, Toporek, Lewis, & ACA, 2010). These areas of competence have been used as a framework for putting social justice strategies into action (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). There is a current call for school counselor preparation programs to include competency building from this advocacy and social justice perspective (McMahon & Patel, 2018). Such competency building is in line with the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (American Counseling Association, 2014; Ratts et al., 2016; Sue, Sue, Neville, & Smith, 2019). To explore this further, the current study examined the concept of social justice advocacy preparation on school counseling students from an experiential learning perspective. Included within this was the impact of such an experiential learning program on counselor multicultural competence.

Multicultural Competence

As globalization makes the world seem even smaller, and the United States continues to increase in its cultural diversity (Shrestha & Heisler, 2011), the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCC) in counselor education (Arrendondo et al., 1996; Sue, Rasheed, & Rasheed, 2016; Sue, Sue, Neville, & Smith, 2019) remain at the forefront of counselor preparation. Multicultural counseling competency guidelines (American Counseling Association, 2014) describe that counselors must develop attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, skills, and actions that will enable them to work ethically and competently with diverse populations. As such, it is vital that counselors-in-training are well prepared through the MCCs. Such preparation includes experiential learning opportunities, including fieldwork training, in which counseling students can immerse themselves with diverse client populations. Evidence shows that students are better prepared for working with diverse populations when they have experiential learning opportunities (Earnest et al., 2016). These opportunities may allow them to gain greater breadth and depth of experience by involving them in social, political, cultural, and environmental aspects of a collective community (Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004), as well as have an impact on their multicultural counseling competence (Achenbach & Arthur, 2002; Blanchard et al., 2016). The value of such learning experiences would be not only to increase counselor competence, but specifically competence from a multicultural perspective—or multicultural competence. Multicultural competence, which is a necessary part of overall counselor competence, has been defined as "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable a system, agency, or group of professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989, p. 13).

One of the goals of experiential learning is to see beyond our own cultural lens, so to have a more complete and culturally encompassing learning experience when working with diverse

populations (Achenbach & Arthur, 2002). Multicultural competencies within the field of counseling have been noted to include self-awareness, knowledge, and skills (Arrendondo et al., 1996; Sue et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2019). In fact, as the AMCD Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies note, multicultural counseling competence should include awareness of one's own cultural values and bias, and awareness of the client's worldview (Arrendondo et al., 1996).

Sue's (2019) multidimensional model for developing cultural competence includes the counselor having an engaged and active role as cultural awareness occurs through growth. Throughout this learning process, culturally competent counselors should have a positive attitude about learning about other cultures and exploring the process of their own personal growth (CSAT, 2014). Serving as a culturally competent counselor involves cultural knowledge and skills, professional development, and also personal reflection and self-awareness around one's own culture and privilege and the impact on the counseling sessions (Mcdowell, Goessling, & Melendez, 2010). Counselor self-reflection and self-awareness is an ethical obligation within the profession and is a necessary step towards counselor self-awareness, including through a multicultural lens (Pompeo & Levitt, 2014). Cultural competency is not an end point, but rather an ongoing process of continual personal reflection, professional development, and social justice advocacy. Within counselor education programs, there are calls for cultural competency skills, as well as for such programs to role model this through more inclusive counselor education tactics within the classroom (Paone, Malott, Pulliam, & Shannon, 2019). While multicultural training is not just recommended, but essential for counseling skills (Arrendondo et al., 1996; Sue et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2019), how exactly it may impact counselor trainees during experiential education, including from a transformative learning perspective, is still an area that warrants further study.

The current study examined the experiences of counselors-in-training, including from a multicultural perspective, during their field experience work in the college readiness program known as the *Future Scholars* program.

The *Future Scholars* program

The current study aimed to examine the specific impact, on counselors-in-training, following experiential learning through counseling in a college readiness program for low- income first generation college-bound students. This program was known as the *Future Scholars* program. For the counselors-in-training, fieldwork in this program represented a form of experiential learning with a diverse population. Recent statistics regarding the schools served in the *Future Scholars* program indicate a student population of 47.4% female and 52.6%, male. In terms of race and ethnicity, the high school was 25.3% White, 51.8% Hispanic, 21% Black, and 1.1% Asian. Additionally, 75.4% of students are economically disadvantaged, 12.1% are classified as having a disability, and 11.3% of students are English language learners (ELL). The Middle School's demographic information is similar to that of the aforementioned High School. Within this school, 47.4% identify as female and 52.6% identify as male. In terms of race and ethnicity, 24.2% are White, 55.1% are Hispanic, 17.7% are Black and 1.3% are Asian. Further, 82.8% of students are economically disadvantaged, 14.3% are students with disabilities, and 10.5% are ELL (State of New Jersey, 2018). The *Future Scholars* program represents a college readiness program which aims to increase higher education access for students, specifically first generation low-income middle and high school students.

First-generation college students are defined as students whose parents have not attended or graduated from college (Swail et al., 2012). College readiness programs aim to increase access to higher education, and many of these programs work to target student populations that have

traditionally been underrepresented at higher education institutions, such as minorities, low-income, and first-generation college students. As former President Obama noted regarding increasing access to higher education, "Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma. And yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education. ... This is a prescription for economic decline. ... This country needs and values the talents of every American" (fgcb.org, 2019).

The focus of the current study was the investigation of the experiences of graduate school counseling students following their field experience of counseling students enrolled in the *Future Scholars* program. The *Future Scholars* program exemplifies experiential learning in the field of counselor education, through clinical practice in school counseling. The *Future Scholars* program is a university-community partnership, with a goal of increasing the numbers of low-income, first generation students graduating from high school. It is a pre-college bridge program in a predominantly low-income school district. This program partners with the local middle school and high school and provides valuable experiences that encourage high school completion and college attendance. Eligibility of program admittance for the middle and high school students is that they are low-income free meal status, and first-generation students. It supports increased student access to higher education, whereas many will enter a career in the field of education or human services to become agents of social change.

During their field experience, school counselor student interns are placed at a community partner school to provide counseling and support services in small groups and individual meetings, which are held outside of the classroom. Topics focus on time management, study skills, and other college and career readiness subjects, which are discussed on a weekly basis. Topics around increasing access to higher education are also discussed, including student goals and how they

align with higher education, the admissions process, improving grades and extracurricular activities, and financial aid resources. In addition, the *Future Scholars* program provides students with information to share with their families in order to help make the college and career process easier. This includes an informational segment regarding how to apply for financial aid. Finally, students are also asked at the start of the program what they would like to learn, and some additional lessons are created based on these responses.

This program serves as an experiential learning exercise for the school counseling graduate students. During this experience, the graduate students work to enhance their clinical skills and knowledge while advocating for a diverse population of first-generation low-income students. School counseling students are supervised and mentored by current professional school counselors and an internship faculty member. These school counseling students are evaluated by their site supervisor, and a university internship class that runs simultaneously during the semester. While these school counseling students may count hours spent in the *Future Scholars* program towards their 300 hour semester internship requirement, they often do not need to because their main internship placement will meet more than enough of the required hours. Therefore, while the school counseling students are considered interns in the program, they also realize that it is very likely that their time spent in the program will be in addition to what is needed to complete their internship requirements.

The current study focused on the experiences of the school counseling students during this experiential learning opportunity, by way of a transformative learning lens, while also examining the impact on counselor competencies. There remains a need to further explore the impact of more diverse experiential learning opportunities for counseling students and the potential influence on both transformative learning and counselor competence. As it relates to multicultural competence

specifically, this study adds to the body of literature by examining the impact of working with first-generation, low-income college-bound students. We sought to gain a deeper understanding of shifts in counselor competence and experiences with transformative learning by way of their experiential learning opportunity. The overarching research question that guided the study was: What were the experiences of, and impact on, school counseling students who interned in the *Future Scholars* program?

Methods

A qualitative approach was applied in this study, with the specific use of a phenomenological research design (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological research tradition assumes that individuals can assign unique meanings to a phenomenon and invites participants to describe their own experiences in their own manner. Research in this tradition focuses on gaining understanding of a phenomenon through recognizing the distinct and shared essences and experiences of a phenomenon (Patton, 1990). An interpretive phenomenological analytic (IPA) approach was applied as a means for qualitative analysis (Smith & Eatough, 2007). IPA was chosen based on its hermeneutical approach to exploring the meaning of participants' subjective experiences in an effort to understand a particular phenomenon (Smith & Eatough, 2007; Thompson & Zahavi, 2007). Using the IPA approach allowed for a detailed analysis of each participant's lived experience before analysis was completed on another case followed by cross-data comparison to analyze both unique and related themes (Smith, 2004).

Participants

A total of six participants who responded to the research participant request were included in this study out of eleven who were eligible. All participants were school counseling students at a master's level CACREP-accredited program at a small, private university on the East coast.

Participants were identified through a non-probabilistic purposeful sampling procedure (Patton, 1990), which consisted of a deliberate selection of study participants who met criteria that enabled them to contribute meaningfully and richly to a particular phenomenon. Parameters for this study included current or former graduate students in the counseling program at the university, and all participants must have completed their internship in the *Future Scholars* program by the time the interviews took place. All six participants identified as female. Of the six participants, five (83%) identified as White or Caucasian and one (17%) identified as Latina. Participant ages ranged from 24-28 years old. Of the six participants, two (33%) identified as first-generation college students.

Instrumentation

    Demographic questionnaire. Information related to age, race, ethnicity, program specialization, graduation year, college generational status, and former internship placement grade level was collected from all participants (N=6) via a brief demographic questionnaire. In order to explore the experiences of school counseling students who interned in the *Future Scholars* program, data was collected via individual interviews.

    Individual interview questions. Semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews were used as the principal method of inquiry due to the format's ability to elicit in-depth information (Seidman, 1998). A total of eight questions were asked of all participants, focused on overall experiences with the *Future Scholars* program, the shift in perceptions as a result of the *Future Scholars* program, school counselor preparation, and social justice advocacy. The following prompts or questions were provided: (a) Talk about your experience in the *Future Scholars* program; (b) For you personally, what part of the *Future Scholars* experience made the greatest impact? Describe that impact in detail and how it was meaningful to you; (c) Comparing yourself before and after your experience with the *Future Scholars* program, describe what ways you were

changed/transformed, if any; (d) Did any assumptions that you held previously change over your time in the program?; (e) As a result of your time in the program, describe how your perspectives and knowledge around working with low-income first generation college students has changed, if at all; (f) In what ways are you now better aware of both the strengths of, and the challenges faced by, first-generation college-bound students from low-income backgrounds?; (g) How has this experience better prepared you, if at all, for your future work as a school counselor? And, (h) As a result of your experience with the *Future Scholars* program, in what ways, if any, are you now more inclined to serve as a social justice advocate?

Focus group questions. After the completing the semi-structured interviews, data was analyzed for thematic findings. Thematic findings were presented to all participants during a focus group where they were given an opportunity to expand, correct, or comment on the findings. Seven follow-up questions, developed immediately following the initial interviews, were asked of all participants to gain deeper insight into the data: (a) Why did you choose to be an intern for the *Future Scholars* program? Was there something about the program's mission that was meaningful to you personally? (b) What components of the *Future Scholars* program curriculum were especially impactful to you? (c) A transformative learning experience in one which affects you on a deeper level, impacting the way you view yourself, your learning, and as such inspires change or a shift in one's viewpoint. All of you noted that your experience in the *Future Scholars* program was transformative. Discuss in what ways were you transformed in your personal views and beliefs.; (d) During the interviews, there was mention of having gained a better awareness of your own privileges and their impact. Please speak more about this.; (e) Regarding any assumptions/biases that you held prior to your work with *Future Scholars*, please give specific examples.; (f) Discuss and give specific examples of any of the strengths that you observed, of

these low-income first-generation college-bound students.; (g) During the interviews, there was a theme of an increased belief in the importance of/motivation to work as a social justice advocate. Please give specific examples of how you might plan to act as a social justice advocate in the future. To enhance validity, reliability, and accuracy, data from semi-structure interviews and focus groups were corroborated.

Researchers

The research team consisted of four females whose ages ranged from 28 to 39. Their self-reported races were White ($n=3$) and Biracial ($n=1$). Two of the researchers are counselor educators at the university, while two were masters-level counseling students. One member of the research team identified as a first-generation college student.

Procedure

Data collection. The study was approved by a university institutional review board and all participants provided signed consent. Two data sets were collected via semi-structured individual and focus group interviews. All data was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by one of the researchers. While the individual interviews were considered the leading data source, data gathered from the focus group allowed for group interaction and data clarification that provided more meaningful insight (Morgan, 1997).

The first author conducted all individual interviews. Individual interviews were audio recorded and conducted via phone due to varied participant geographic locations. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by another research team member. Based on initial findings from the individual interviews, additional related questions were developed by the research team to allow for deeper exploration during the second phase of data collection—the focus group interview. The first and second authors conducted the focus group with all participants present. Focus group

questions covered topical items: (a) deeper insight into participant experience with the *Future Scholars* program; (b) transformative learning experience as a result of participating in the *Future Scholars* program; (c) participants' awareness of their own privilege as a result of working with the specific student population; (d) shifts in assumptions and/or biases toward the specific student population, and (e) willingness and preparedness to advocate on behalf of students. Participants also were asked to elaborate upon or correct interpretations within the focus groups. An example of a clarification question was when a few participants mentioned the importance of/motivation to work as a social justice advocate, and the researchers asked participants to provide specific examples to clarify that theme. The focus group was also audio recorded and lasted 58 minutes. The focus group was then transcribed by one team member.

Data analysis. Data analysis followed the suggested four-step process of an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 2004). Researchers immersed themselves in the data by reviewing each individual interview transcript and the focus group transcript multiple times, noting words and narratives that reflected participants' experiences. This triangulation of data allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon while increasing the credibility and validity of results. Codes were identified that reflected potential themes shared throughout the data. Next, researchers met to review all transcripts and notes from the initial stage of review with the purpose of clustering emerging themes (Smith, 2004). Clustered emerging themes were then outlined in a shared document to allow for visualization following an initial meeting. Third, upon consensus of emerging themes, researchers reviewed transcripts consistently in order to create broader, super-ordinate categories to check for interrelatedness. This reiterative process involved the process of discussion, comparison, and reexamination of data. Lastly, a final list consisting of categorical names with representative quotes that best captured participants' thoughts and

experiences, and ultimately, meaning making of a phenomenon were chosen (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Upon reaching consensus, findings were checked against those of the auditor to corroborate findings and identify any themes that might have been overlooked. The auditor deemed findings to be aligned with those of the other researchers.

Achieving Trustworthiness

Researchers took intentional steps to establish trustworthiness. First, credibility was achieved through varied engagement with research participants via gathering diverse forms of data (e.g., demographic questionnaire, individual and focus group interviews). Moreover, researchers utilized ongoing consults and the first author maintained an extensive audit trail to allow for transparency and possible replication of the study. To avoid potential bias, researchers continuously engaged in reflective dialogue throughout the data analysis process to identify and set aside judgements or assumptions about the data (Creswell, 2007). Data was triangulated to ensure trustworthiness via multiple data sources including the use of varied researchers (e.g., two counselor educators and two counseling students). The researcher who served in the auditor role had no prior connection to the study to reduce biased data interpretation (Creswell, 2007). While the auditor had no prior connection to the study, she was a counselor-in-training who understands the nature of the study.

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Findings

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Following data analysis using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), three superordinate themes emerged. The first theme, *counselor competence*, highlighted an overall increase in two particular counseling skills—group and advocacy skills. A second and related theme, *multicultural competence*, demonstrated an increase in multicultural competence in relation to participants' awareness of their own privilege, knowledge gained of diverse students'

experience, and overall increased worldview. It is important to note that competence and skills were self-evaluated, based on participant self-reports. The final superordinate theme, *catalyst for transformative learning*, described participants' abilities to connect theory to practice and their experiences with humanization of learning. These themes are described in further detail and will be illustrated.

Counselor Competence

Participants described significant improvement in their counseling skills as a result of their participation in the program. Participants cited gains in two sub-areas related to counselor competence: (a) group skills, and (b) advocacy skills.

Group Skills. Prior to their participation in the program, many of the participants described a lack of prior opportunities for group facilitation. A statement reflecting this was:

> At my internship, I didn't run any groups. There just weren't any groups in place… getting that group experience through MFS really helped me as a group leader and in my group counseling skills. Otherwise, all the skills I would have had was just from one group counseling class.

Similarly, participants expressed the lack of opportunity at previous internship sites, highlighting their experience with the *Future Scholars* program even further. For example, "I think it [*Future Scholars*] gave me a lot of counseling experience, because up until that point in my internships, we counseled students and we had case studies, but this was every week we spent an entire day running small groups." Since group counseling and facilitation was an integral part of the *Future Scholars* experience, many participants spoke about an increase in their confidence and a better understanding of the group dynamic. Additionally, when asked about the group experience and group skills, participants spoke about a better understanding of the importance and power of group

counseling including how the group setting allowed students to share similar challenges and experiences, in a safe environment. Finally, participants explained that, through their *Future Scholars* experience, they were better prepared to effectively connect group and individual counseling sessions, a transferable skill to their current and future roles as school counselors.

Advocacy Skills. Participants described the acquisition of specific advocacy skills to utilize as school counselors. Included within this area of advocacy, participants noted their awareness of and increased actions to advocate for students, including from a social justice perspective, and in equipping students with the tools to advocate for themselves. "My supervisor and I were teaching the student how to advocate for himself in a more assertive and not aggressive way, so not necessarily my advocating on behalf of the student…but teaching the student to speak out on his own behalf." Other participants shared similar experiences of instilling advocacy skills within the students or to parents: "help them be aware of what their child can achieve when given the right supports and that…your involvement with the child's education is extremely important." Other participants shared that they learned that school counselors may need to advocate to the teachers and other school faculty on the students' behalf:

> We also have to advocate to the other people in the school, because they might not necessarily understand the things that we have learned like what that student had to go through on a daily basis to be here… so not necessarily for the student, but for what they are going through to open other people's perspectives.

Finally, participants explained that, in order to be an effective social justice advocate, the counselor must remain knowledgeable about the needs of the population.

> As a social justice advocate, you really have to be aware of your student population needs, and without that awareness you won't be able to advocate for them. So, definitely knowing

those cultural backgrounds and even doing more professional development on multicultural counseling and development can help advance skills in order to be able to advocate for my students.

Multicultural Competence

The second superordinate theme identified was multicultural competence. Participants described a deeper understanding of their own privilege, an increase in knowledge of students from diverse backgrounds, and an overall increase in worldviews.

Awareness of one's own privilege. Participants described gaining a greater awareness of their own privileges through their work with the *Future Scholars* first-generation, low-income student population: "it [*Future Scholars*] also made me feel more grateful for my own experiences that I had as a person and made me realize all of the great things that I have in my life that these students may not have." Participants described: "I have gained a greater gratitude for my own life, but also as a professional level I have gotten more comfortable working with students of other cultures." Participants also discussed privilege as it relates to higher education opportunities:

I didn't realize how much of it I took for granted myself, like going through the college application process. I had parents who went to college, so they helped guide me, so it made me more aware of when you don't have that person in your life that has been through that experience or knows what to do there is a lot that goes into college applications and a lot of work that falls on the student.

Participants also spoke about their new-found awareness of their assumptions and language regarding access to higher education:

I found that you can't just say 'oh have your parents take you on a tour of a college' because their parents might work on the weekends, they may not have a car... So, finding just things that you can sometimes think of and say and you don't even think that it is about privilege

Knowledge gained of diverse student experiences. Participants cited a deeper understanding and increased knowledge of diverse student experiences:

It gave me a new respect for these kids because, not only do they have to go to school and have all the normal expectations of a child when they are in school, but they have other things in their life and responsibilities that they have to juggle and make work while still being held accountable for their schoolwork.

Similarly, participants spoke about the strengths of the students in the *Future Scholars* program:

Some of the students had so many responsibilities before they even got to school that morning because their parents were working and they were in charge of getting their brother or sister on the bus…to think the amount of responsibilities they hold on their shoulders and they still come to school and they still do their best… it is just incredible to see how much responsibility and maturity they had at such a young age and that will transpire with them as they continue to grow.

Participants cited resiliency, perseverance, and independence as strengths that many of the students possessed. In addition to the strengths of the students, the participants also spoke about student challenges: "Some of the challenges are definitely aspects of the family needs or desires the student wants to go to college…but right now financially their family needs them to work full time, that could be a challenge."

Shift in Assumptions and Biases. The final sub-theme identified within the superordinate multicultural competence theme was a shift in assumptions and biases:

I assumed that all of the students that I would have would not be very high achieving students because of their ethnicity and their SES….but that changed because over the course of the year I did see how, with certain supports or just on their own, the students were able to succeed.

Another participant cited similar assumptions, "Because of the demographic we are working with, I wasn't sure how interested the students would be about college, but they were actually more interested in college than just careers."

Participants also spoke about assumptions they made about the students' parents:

Another bias that I would have is that the parents wouldn't be super involved in their children's academics…but [for] about half of the students their parents were always calling the counselor... I think I had that [bias] because I assumed that families who have two parents working multiple jobs simply wouldn't have time to talk with faculty at the school about their children's educational opportunities.

Catalyst for Transformative Learning

The final superordinate theme, *Catalyst for Transformative Learning* encompassed two sub-themes – theory to practice connections and humanization of learning.

Theory to Practice Connections. Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the benefit of hands-on experience through the *Future Scholars* program, including being able to combine the theory and technique that was taught in the classroom with real-world experiences, which directly aligns with the definition of experiential learning (Arthur & Achenback, 2002):

It is so important to have that classroom foundational knowledge first…but when you really see it and you can make those connections of what you are experiencing...and what you learned it the class, it just kind of helps it stick and really enhance your in class

learning...when you see it played out in the real world and maybe it is a little different from what you learned about

Other participants mentioned similar thoughts, such as: "…we learn about it in class, but it is definitely different to see in first person."

Learning hands-on experience and how to think and react quickly was also described:

I think the difference with it being hands-on with students is when you are in a classroom if you are not sure of the answer, you can wait and see if your classmate answers it…or you can take five minutes to think about it and answer it, but when that student is in front of you talking, you don't have five minutes, you have to think on your feet…the hands-on was more helpful to me because it made me jump into action…you had the student relying on you to help so it made you really think on your feet.

Humanization of Learning. The final sub-theme identified was humanization of learning, which has been described as, "the fact that the therapist ascribes psychological depth and agency to his /her patient (Tarnowska, Kofta, & Jedlinski, 2015). Many participants spoke about the emotional component when working with the students. The participants explained that the concepts and case studies that were being discussed in the classroom were no longer abstract. Instead, participants worked with students' real-world challenges and emotions. Through this experiential learning program, students were able to connect humanize that which had prior simply been a case study in a textbook.

When you are out working with these students, there is that emotional component that you don't get when you are just talking about a case study…like that kid is sitting in front of you and they are 12 years old and they have had these crazy life experiences that you never thought a 12 year old could go through and they are sitting there talking about it.

Participants also discussed the appreciation and gratitude that the students had for the participants, which further showed a humanized connection: "when I gave him that handwritten list, he had tears in his eyes where he was so appreciative, and I didn't really realize that I could make such a big impact on a student." Finally, participants expressed greater interest in the news and political climate, since many of their students and their families were personally affected:

I started paying attention to the world more like what was going on in the news. Not that I ignored it before, it just didn't affect me as much. Once I was in this program and it affected my students, then it started affecting me.

Other participants shared similar experiences. Participants also described researching "undocufriendly" colleges, deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA), and other topics that impact undocumented students. By seeing how their students were emotionally and physically impacted by these changes, these topics became personal.

Discussion

This study sought to examine impacts of counseling first-generation, low-income college-bound students by way of a school counselor experiential learning program at one small, private university on the east coast of the United States. The *Future Scholars* experiential learning program highlighted in this study was a university-community partnership with a middle and high school from one local city, whereby graduate school counseling students provided counseling and support services in small group and individual settings as part of their internship experiences. Thematic results gleaned from this study illustrated the need for more diversified internship experiences that would allow more opportunities to work with diverse student populations. Moreover, participating in an experiential learning program that provided more opportunity to

further one's counselor competence in relation to group and advocacy skills were also deemed significant.

At its core, experiential learning opportunities should result in an increase in skills based on work completed with individuals outside of the classroom setting, in an attempt to bridge theory to practice (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Ieva et al., 2009). As per the American Counseling Association's (ACA) ethical standards (ACA, 2014) and the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) competencies, counselor education programs should prepare students by providing opportunities to increase knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes to optimize counseling practices in K-12 settings (ASCA, 2012). While all CACREP-accredited counseling programs must meet the minimum requirements of 700 field placement hours (CACREP, 2016), it is the responsibility of each program to provide students with culturally diverse experiences. Participants noted a significant preparation increase in group skills and awareness of group dynamics, as this experience allowed for a true theory to practice connection. Given the nature of the program and the demographic makeup of the middle/high school students, participants shared several examples of advocating for students. Participants also expressed an intention to become social justice advocates in the future, which is especially important, as programs are called to include curriculum and opportunities to increase social justice advocacy awareness (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016).

Thematic findings related to multicultural competence were directly aligned with the literature highlighting one of the goals of experiential learning, supporting the idea that curriculum and opportunities should be presented to allow for a more complete and culturally immersive learning experience (Achenbach & Arthur, 2002). Three of the sub-themes under the superordinate theme of *Multicultural Competence* provided insight into participants' awareness of their own

levels of privilege in comparison to their first-generation, low-income students, while gaining an increased understanding of diverse student experiences. This is supported in much of the seminal research on multicultural competence and shows the necessity of such experiential learning programs (Arrendondo et al., 1996; Cross et al., 1983; Sue et al., 2016). Despite this existing body of literature, there still remains a gap in much of the counselor education and supervision literature examining the specific impact of working with the first-generation, low-income college bound student population. This study aimed to bridge this gap and could serve as useful for counselor educators, supervisors, and counselors-in-training. Moreover, while a substantial base of counseling literature focused on the importance of experiential learning in counselor education, overall, does exist (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Ieva et al., 2009; Keating et al., 2019; Yardley et al., 2012), more research is needed to address the impacts of opportunities that are more culturally diverse, since we know that it can lead to a transformative experience while increasing multicultural competence. An experience such as the *Future Scholars* program connects content learned from the required general multicultural course and directly places students in cross-cultural situations while increasing minimum multicultural competencies—self-awareness, knowledge, and skills (Arrendondo et al., 1996). Results were also supported by Sue's multidimensional model for developing cultural competence (2019), as it directly addresses the significance of being placed in experiences whereby individuals can be engaged and play active roles in cultural awareness. Lastly, participants described an overall shift in assumptions and biases as the final sub-theme, where they noted a shift in prior assumptions and biases toward students who come from first-generation, low-income backgrounds to a more in-depth understanding and level of compassion as a result of hearing students' stories firsthand. Engaging students in experiences that allow for

this shift in assumptions and biases is also a critical component of multicultural competence (Arrendondo et al., 1996; Sue et al., 2016).

Participation in this experiential learning program focused on counseling first-generation, low-income middle/high school students served as a catalyst for transformative learning, defined as "the process of effecting change in a frame of reference" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). Participants shared an overall growth in consciousness in relation to direct experience and interactions with a more diverse student population. This is at the heart of experiential learning, in that such opportunities foster critical reflection of one's own self-awareness (Fawcett & Evans, 2012; Keating et al., 2019). Participants cited meaningful opportunities to connect theory to practice as one of the most beneficial experiences. Scholars have noted this experience to be one of the most critical to experiential learning in order to enhance counseling skills (Arthur & Achenback, 2002; Ieva et al., 2009). Participants noted a more in-depth understanding of course content that they had learned during prior semesters, particularly content related to group & advocacy skills implementation and multicultural counseling competence. Closely related to theory to practice connections, participants described their meaningful experiences with humanization of learning, that is, the newfound ability to connect emotion to course content—namely, case studies, theory and techniques focused on diverse student populations. They were able to put names and faces to experiences previously learned in the classroom, and in turn, increased overall empathy and emotional capacity to counsel such student populations. Again, this is especially important, as it is directly aligned with the goals of both experiential learning and multicultural counseling competence (Arthur & Achenback, 2002, Ratts et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2019). Themes that emerged from this study have direct implications for school counselors and counselor educators specifically, which will be discussed in the following section.

Implications for Counselor Education

Themes that emerged from this study indicate that school counseling graduate students, when placed in a culturally diverse experiential learning setting, have the potential to increase their counselor competencies, including multicultural competencies, and to have a transformative learning experience. Results of this study have far-reaching implications for the field of counselor education and preparation. As the American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics notes, appropriate counselor competence is not only important, but an ethical obligation (ACA, 2014). As such, counselor education programs have the ethical responsibility to produce novice counselors that have the competencies necessary to enter the field.

Counselor education programs should support students in their efforts to build their counselor competencies, including through interactions with diverse populations (Sheperis, Henning, & Kocet, 2016). By providing a multitude of experiential learning opportunities, counselor education programs can offer their students placement choices that differ in client populations. Most notably, there may be an increased opportunity for students to work in a setting and with clients that differ from the student intern. For counselor education programs, this may entail encouraging students to choose field experiences that are outside of their comfort zone. It also may mean requiring a multitude of different experiences (settings, populations) to increase their knowledge and understanding. In the current study, participants worked with low-income, first generation students, which provided a rich experience from a multicultural and social justice advocacy perspective. Given that there is a current call for school counselor preparation programs to include competency building from this advocacy and social justice perspective (McMahon & Patel, 2018), counselor education programs should consider expanding their experiential learning

offerings to assist this goal, which would result in more intentional multicultural experiences beyond the current one course minimum (CACREP, 2016).

The value of transformative learning is well documented (Mezirow, 1997; Prosek & Michel, 2016), and as the current study shows, such learning can be encouraged, in the field of counselor education, through experiential learning opportunities. It has also been stated that as a best practice, counselors-in-training should immerse themselves in the many facets of the profession (Barrow, Baker & Fusarelli, 2018). As such, programs might consider not only requiring field experiences, but other experiential opportunities for enrichment. For example, offering study abroad courses, and experiential community volunteer opportunities would increase training through immersion.

Findings from this study have shed light on the above areas, as the exact ways in which school counseling students benefit from experiential learning have been discovered, including from a transformative learning perspective. Based on the current findings, other school counselor programs may consider similar university-community partnerships to promote student experiential learning opportunities, in an effort to increase counselor competencies, including multicultural competencies.

Borrowing from already established programs may ease the transition of offering these new alternatives. As such, we encourage other school counseling programs to consider offering a similar mutually beneficial collaboration at their institutions. It serves as a way to build ties with and enhance the local community, while promoting excellence and access for low-income first-generation college bound students. Such programs contribute to the university through transformative learning experiences and counselor preparation. Finally, from a global perspective, such partnerships encourage an increase in future teachers and future school counselors that will

be agents of systemic social change. As a program that holds so many positive attributes, it is hoped that other universities will create similar dynamic partnerships.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations associated with the study that are worthy of discussion. Given that the sample of the study consisted of only six participants, the results may not be generalizable to all school counseling students. Furthermore, 83% of the participants identified as White and 100% of participants identified as female, which is dissimilar to the population of students served. Given this, participants may have been unable to fully understand and empathize with the students served, which may have impacted the participants' ability to relate to the student population. Such a limitation may have impacted their perceptions and responses during the study. If the race and gender of the participants were more diverse, the themes that emerged within the current study may have been different. Another limitation to consider is that the second round of interviews was conducted in a focus group setting. In a group setting, participants may have been influenced by other participants' responses and may feel pressured to answer in a certain way or choose not to disclose their opinions due to differing group perceptions.

As previously discussed, the results of the current study show that experiential learning programs, such as the *Future Scholars* program, enhance counselor competencies, multicultural understanding, and transformative learning, which is a significant finding for future counselors and researchers in the field. Other researchers might use these findings as a precedent to inform their research. Further research might include a sample of participants with diverse backgrounds that better aligns with the demographics of the student population. Researchers may also choose to utilize quantitative measures (as opposed to the qualitative interviews utilized in the current study) to gain another view of this important research topic. Another specific area for future

research might include evaluating the experiences of the middle and high school students in relation to the school counseling student growth. Additionally, a longitudinal study to observe the school counseling students' experiences when working as professionals might be used to measure any lasting impacts from prior experiential learning. Such future studies may result in additional significant themes and results that can enhance counselor competencies, multicultural understanding, and transformative learning experiences.

Conclusion

Findings of this study support the importance of experiential learning in the field of school counselor education and preparation. Furthermore, a better understanding of the specific benefits of such culturally diverse experiential opportunities was gained—including increased counselor competency, multicultural competency, and learning that is transformative. Through this experiential learning program, there was a self-reportedincrease in skills through outside of the classroom learning, or bridging theory to practice, which is in direct alignment with the purpose of experiential learning (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Ieva et al., 2009).

Counselor education programs should strive to not only educate and prepare socially responsible and ethical counselors, but should also encourage students and the institution to be connected to their local community and to work for social change through action.

There is a current call for school counselor preparation programs to include competency building from this advocacy and social justice perspective (CACREP, 2016; McMahon & Patel, 2018), and we offer the *Future Scholars* program as one example of experiential learning to support this endeavor. We encourage other school counseling programs to consider offering similar experiential learning opportunities for their students, which would allow for an immersive experience with low-income persons of color.

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