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# Examining Pre-Service School Counselors' Site Supervisory Experiences Specific to Group Work

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*This consensual qualitative research (CQR) study explored the group leadership supervisory experiences of (n = 10) school counseling internship students. Findings suggest the importance of fostering group leader advocacy skills and the need to assess students' group leadership supervisory experiences during fieldwork placement. Implications for counselor educators and supervisors are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *consensual qualitative research; group leadership; school counseling; site supervision*

Group counseling in schools is an essential component of a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2012). With the student-to-counselor ratio continuing to rise well above recommended best practice (Akos, Hamm, Mack, & Dunaway, 2007; American School Counselor Association, 2012), group interventions may represent critical opportunities for school counselors to effectively service all students. Although the benefits of group counseling with children and adolescents are well documented (e.g., Erford, 2010; Sink, Edwards, & Eppler, 2012), scholars suggest that inadequate group leader training may result in counselors'

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hesitancy to lead groups in their schools (e.g., Steen, Bauman, & Smith, 2008). Furthermore, researchers have found that contextual factors related to school culture and/or graduate students' confidence leading groups may likewise contribute to the underutilization of group work in practice (Steen, Bauman, & Smith, 2007; Steen et al., 2008).

One important training factor found to enhance the development of group facilitation skills is supervision (Bore, Armstrong, & Womack, 2010; Dollarhide & Miller, 2006). With respect to the nature of this training, the majority of clinical supervision likely occurs during fieldwork placement when students experience and reflect on both didactic and experiential knowledge and skills (Trepal, Bailie, & Leeth, 2010). In fact, site supervision—occurring between a practicum or internship supervisor and a pre-service counselor—has been identified as one of the most critical times for experiential learning (Furr & Carroll, 2003). As school counselors-in-training move from their 100 hour practicum to a more intensive 600+ hour internship, this relationship becomes even more important (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). Site supervision during internship therefore presents an opportune time to examine pre-service school counselors' group leadership development.

Unfortunately, according to Bore et al. (2010), more than half of the pre-service school counselor participants in their study indicated dissatisfaction with the supervision they received specific to group facilitation. Similarly, Steen et al. (2008) indicated that some practicing counselors reported negative feelings regarding their internship experience because of a “sink or swim” approach by their site supervisor, reflecting a lack of intentionality in the supervision process; in addition, only 28% of respondents in that study observed their supervisor running groups with children or adolescents prior to conducting their own. According to CACREP (2016), pre-service school counselors are required to have exposure to leading or co-leading groups during their internship experience, yet it appears that some do so without the benefit of observing an experienced professional first. This may in turn contribute to a lower sense of self-efficacy and the potential for lower performance outcomes. With the overall clinical supervision of practicing school counselors continuing to lack (e.g., Herlihy, Gray, & McCollum, 2002; Miller & Dollarhide, 2006; Moyer, 2011), the preparedness of site supervisors to provide appropriate supervision specific to both individual and group leadership skills may fall exclusively in the hands of counselor education programs and their abilities to provide training and accountability for appropriate supervisory practice. Exploring pre-service school counselors' experiences in site supervision specific to group leadership offers a step towards understanding how

best to prepare site supervisors and support graduate students for the realities of group counseling in the schools.

Beginning to address this gap in literature, Springer (2016) conducted a quantitative study that examined aspects of site supervision as predictors of group leader self-efficacy for pre-service school counselors. Springer surveyed 123 pre-service school counseling internship students; findings indicated that beyond the influence of general self-efficacy, receiving feedback and managing anxiety specific to group leadership (two important aspects inherent in supervision), were the greatest predictors of group leader self-efficacy. The contextual specifics and quality of participants' group leader experiences and supervision, however, were beyond the scope of this study. Given that the quality of clinical supervision has been associated with self-efficacy as well as "growth and maintenance of counseling skills," (Cashwell & Dooley, 2001, p. 39), there appears to be value in exploring its connection to students' experiences in more depth. As such, the investigators designed the following qualitative research study seeking to further understand students' site supervisory experiences during internship surrounding the practice of group work.

## METHODS

Over the past 10 years, *JSGW* has continued to publish calls to the field for more rigorous group work research; this has included highlighting the value of both quantitative and qualitative inquiry. In 2009, Rubel and Villalba contributed to an important discussion around the underappreciated value of qualitative approaches to the study of group work. Their article concurrently highlighted some of the assumptions around its positionality in the discussion of rigorous research practice. Rubel and Okech (2017) continued this conversation by addressing the current state of qualitative group work inquiry and "illustrat[ed] important principles of sound qualitative research" (p. 83). Heeding these calls, the research team chose Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) specifically for its rigorous integrative approach and its unique methodological parallel to group work practice. The team felt that choosing a qualitative approach that combined the tenets of Grounded Theory and Phenomenology with a rigorous consensus process (Hill, 2012) appeared to be an important way to bring constructivism and post-positivistic research values into the complex examination of group work supervision. The following discussion highlights the researchers' process as they moved through this structured methodological approach.

## Context and Participants

The principal investigator's initial charge included identifying research team members with content and methodological expertise. After choosing three other school counselor educator group members who balanced these areas of expertise, the group determined that the overarching research question, "What personal and site specific characteristics support the practice of group work in pre-service school counselors' internship experiences," would be answered most thoroughly through a consensus process. Upon obtaining IRB approval from each researcher's respective institution, authors followed the CQR process in the collection and analysis of subsequent data.

Researchers interviewed students from five school counseling graduate programs located within four states (Georgia, Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio). Four participants attended graduate programs in urban environments, five participants in rural communities and one in a suburban community. Nine of the ten participants were enrolled in CACREP-accredited school counseling programs, however the expectations for all participants followed CACREP (2016) standards. For instance, all students were expected to have weekly interactions with their supervisors and required to gain experience with group counseling. At the time of the interview, all participants had completed at least 300 hours of site supervision in their internship experience. Eight participants identified as female and two identified as male. Six participants identified as Caucasian, two as African-American, one as Latina, and one as Asian-American. Two participants worked as interns in an elementary setting, and one participant worked in a K–8 setting. Four participants worked as interns in the middle school setting, while another participant split the internship experience between middle school and high school settings. The final two participants completed their internship experiences in the high school setting.

*Procedure.* All four members of the research team participated in the design, recruitment, and interviewing processes; however, in an effort to avoid any potential coercion, all interviewers conducted interviews with students outside of their home institutions. Beginning in the spring (2015) semester, researchers provided the contact information for internship instructors to disseminate a recruitment email to all school counseling internship students. This email included a request for interested students to answer demographic and experiential questions that would help to identify those currently engaging in group leadership under supervision.

Upon receiving notice of their interest, researchers gave preference to students who had completed more hours of internship. In an effort to obtain more participants, "snowball" sampling (Creswell, 2013) was

utilized as researchers encouraged interested participants to forward emails to other potential school counseling internship students. Once participants were chosen, researchers coordinated a time to conduct an interview using Zoom, an online video-conferencing platform.

*Interview questions.* Authors followed CQR guidelines to create a semi-structured interview protocol and to analyze subsequent data (Hill, 2012). Through engagement in team meetings, each researcher contributed to the content of the interview protocol. As a group, the team came to consensus regarding each of the nine interview questions and potential sub-questions therein. Each interview lasted between 50 and 90 minutes, depending on participants' answers. Researchers exercised flexibility by asking follow-up questions for clarification throughout each interview. The recorded interviews were professionally transcribed and the research team analyzed the data provided from each completed interview.

*Research team.* The research team consisted of three White, cisgender women and a White, cisgender male. Each researcher currently identifies as a school counselor educator and has previous experiences running small groups as a professional school counselor in K–12 public school settings. All research team members trained in CACREP-accredited counselor education doctoral programs, which included advanced coursework in supervision and qualitative research methods. Three of the four authors previously provided site supervision for school counseling fieldwork students and each of the four authors currently supervises counseling interns at the university level.

*Data analysis.* Data analysis began after the completion of all interviews and accompanying transcriptions. According to CQR best practice, the first step in the analysis process included identifying domains to help segment the data (Hill, 2012). Accordingly, the research team chose one particularly detailed interview to analyze as a group in order to identify possible domains. Initially, each researcher coded this transcription independently; the coding was followed by a meeting to discuss ideas and engage in a rigorous dialogue to identify potential domains. This process of consensualizing the domains is essential to CQR methodology (Hill, 2012). Following this process, the research team then divided the remaining nine transcriptions to code independently. Researchers specifically chose interviews that they had not originally conducted. The research team came back together to discuss specific questions and concerns and reviewed select transcripts again, together, for clarification. Following this process, the team engaged in the second step of the CQR analysis process, which included the extraction of core ideas

in an effort to develop preliminary domains, categories, and sub-categories (Hill, 2012). The third step in the CQR process included cross analysis (Hill, 2012). At this time, each member of the research team went back into the raw data (i.e., transcripts) to place it into domains, categories, and sub-categories reflecting on data points occurring across interviews. These potential categories were again brought back to the group, discussed, and refined until consensus was reached. A primary step in reaching consensus amongst the group was creating a spreadsheet placing all raw data in to the domains, categories, and sub-categories. A table (Appendix) was then created to determine and illustrate the frequency (general, typical, variant, or rare) with which these categories occurred based on CQR guidelines (Hill, 2012).

*Trustworthiness.* Researchers took several steps to promote trustworthiness throughout the design and analysis of this study. Bracketing researcher bias is an important aspect of the CQR process that should begin with the study's inception and extend to and beyond the analysis of results (Hays & Singh, 2012; Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, & Hess, 2005). With respect to this study, research team members intentionally discussed the relationship between researcher and participant and built in time at the beginning of each meeting to discuss their positionality and its potential impact on the data collection and analysis processes.

*Researcher positionality.* During team meetings, researchers discussed their values and beliefs as they related to the context of the school and supervision specific to group leadership. To encourage these discussions, team members engaged in reflexive journaling at three stages of the process (before creating the interview protocol, following data collection, and after analysis) and intentionally set norms that included the acknowledgment and challenging of these pre-existing beliefs. Specifically, researchers openly shared their expectations for inconsistent onsite administrative support for school counselors, their values around consistent and intentional daily site supervision, and their overall skepticism of site supervisors' abilities to provide adequate supervision, particularly surrounding the practice of group counseling. Furthermore, over the course of the design, data collection, and analysis processes, researchers also discussed their positionality in reference to the internship students with whom they interviewed. The team acknowledged that their previous roles as practicing school counselors and current roles as counselor educators and faculty field placement supervisors likely influenced the follow-up questions that

they asked during the interview process and perhaps equally impacted the way in which participants responded.

Additionally, to address the reciprocity between researcher and participant, team members acknowledged the power differentials that existed between researcher and participant and professor and student and intentionally interviewed participants outside of their respective universities. The use of an external auditor to support the bracketing of researcher values is another important step in the CQR process (Hill, 2012) and was also utilized to encourage trustworthiness at several points throughout the design and analysis of this study.

*External auditor.* According to Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997), auditors should be used during the CQR research process to provide feedback regarding the team's content (i.e., domains, core ideas, and cross-analysis) and process (i.e., intergroup dynamics). The auditor for this study was chosen based on his experience with qualitative research and supervisory expertise. In addition, in acknowledgment of the racial/cultural diversity of the sample and recognition of the racially homogenous group of researchers, an African-American male counselor educator provided a unique perspective, which included feedback on the data itself as well as our intergroup process. While the gender and racial diversity of the research team (including the auditor) was relatively small, the group's demographics as a whole seem to mirror the profession of Counselor Education. For instance, in the latest CACREP (2017) Annual Report, approximately 60% of full-time faculty members teaching in CACREP-accredited programs identify as female and about 74% identify as Caucasian.

Throughout the design, data collection, and analysis stages, the auditor reviewed the researchers' reflexive journals and the team's video recorded team meetings and provided consultation specific to group dynamics and the formulation of domains and categories. Additionally, consistent with the CQR process, multiple researchers reviewed each transcript, and the team utilized auditor feedback when they struggled to come to consensus. This process ensured that the definitions of domains and categories were clear to all researchers and that selected data were appropriately placed. Finally, to support the trustworthiness of the study, researchers conducted member checks to ensure that they had accurately understood participants' experiences.

## RESULTS

This study was structured around exploring the question, "What personal and site specific characteristics support the practice of group work

in pre-service school counselors' internship experiences?" Subsequent analysis of interview data indicated an emergence of five overarching domains, which included several categories and subcategories. The domains begin with the systemic and interpersonal influences impacting the participants (e.g., administrative and site supervisor expectations). The next set of domains reflect the intrapersonal characteristics of the interns (e.g., dispositions and actions), and the final section illustrates the overall group-as-a-whole "wishes" for more training and supervision across the entirety of the counselor education curriculum.

### **Domain 1: Culture of the Internship Site**

The core ideas that emerged from the data, which confirmed domain one as the culture of the internship site, included themes around school climate, roles of professionals at the internship site's school counseling department, the manner in which the role of school counseling internship students is conceptualized at the site, and the overall tone of the school counseling program as guided by the department's mission and vision. This domain may be best appreciated through the voice of participants who shared their experiences. The following participant's comment clearly evidenced the impact of the role of the school counselor on interns' experiences. She stated, "I think a lot of it was just they expected the counselors to solve all the problems. I . . . led a small organizational group because a lot of the teachers were like [a student] doesn't know where anything is. . . ." Suggested in this quote, participants felt that there was a broad and rather unclear definition of the role of the school counselor. This often led to less intentional guidelines for the intern. Generally, this phenomenon seemed to further confuse the role of the intern at his/her site, which muddled the perceived supervisory expectations and thus the interns' overall school counseling onsite responsibilities. As such, the category titled "the role of the school counseling intern" was shared by one participant who said:

I didn't really know how to go about recruiting the students [for group] because I didn't know the students as well. . . . So I had reached out to [the counselors] and asked them for help about who [they thought] would be good for this group. But they ended up just saying, "well, why don't you just take the alternative education kids because they need counseling anyway."

As evidenced by this emic quote, participant voices consistently echoed the sentiments of uncertainty around the role of the intern. This confusion was often further confounded by the inconsistent influence and leadership of school-based administration. For instance, one participant shared:

I mean, we have to kind of run everything by administration first anyway, but . . . they're always okay with what we're doing. Sometimes they'll come in to the group. Like when we had to do the big group . . . they'll pop in to see how we're doing. We get a lot of good feedback from them.

Yet, some administrators seemed less supportive. For example, one participant shared:

In the [graduate training] program, of course, we're taught the ASCA model and implementation, how to do that. And then, when you get into a "real world" school setting, you know, sometimes like I found, you find principals that are like, we're not doing that.

Clearly, participants communicated that elements of the school greatly informed the scope, sequence, nature, and supervision of counseling interventions. If the building leaders' priorities did not match those of the intern (e.g., no groups), the onsite supervisor would be left to provide supervision more in line with the vision of the school leader, rather than best school counseling practice. The specific manner in which interns developed and demonstrated small-group leadership further depended upon the approach of the professional school counseling site supervisors.

## **Domain 2: Professional Approach of Site Supervisor**

The second domain centered on the supervision style and related behaviors of the site supervisor. The first category that emerged under this domain was titled Comprehensive Counseling Program Implementation. To illustrate this category, one participant shared the following about her site supervisor's idea of school counseling programs:

. . .from [graduate] school, I feel like we learned a model and . . . stick with the model [yet] I feel like [my site supervisor] kind of does her own thing, like she knows what she's good at and she sticks with that.

The second category which fell under the Professional Approach of Site Supervisor domain was simply named Supervision. Variety appeared in the manner in which site supervisors approached the supervision process. For example, one participant shared the following supervision process with respect to how her site supervisor worked to support her group-leadership development:

In the beginning, [my site supervisor] was like, "Why don't you just watch me [lead a group] and then I'll have you do some and I'll observe you. And then when I feel you're ready, I'll let you out on your own." So that's what a lot of it has been like, "observe me first and then I'll observe you. And then when I feel you're okay, then I'll let you go on your own."

Yet, not all participants reported an organized structure to how their group leadership supervisory process occurred. For example, another participant shared the following about her site supervisor, "He's a sort of a laissez-faire school counselor supervisor . . . as long as I'm learning and . . . no one's being hurt or as long as no one is telling me things that he should know, then everything is fine." While participants reported variation regarding the supervision provided by their site supervisors, there was inconsistency around how each felt about his/her supervision experience; some interns seemed content with minimal or less directive supervision, whereas others longed for increased time to process their experiences. This difference may rely on the unique dispositions of each intern and their appreciation of feedback.

### **Domain 3: Disposition of the Intern**

Domain 3 was structured around interview data that highlighted the attitudinal and professional dispositions of the participants/interns. In some instances, it was challenging for the research team to decipher which category was most appropriate, and on several occasions, data were actually dual coded since they addressed both categories. For example, one participant shared that:

It was just amazing to watch [group members] step outside of their box and work with each other and provide each other feedback that, you know, maybe I wouldn't have been able to provide to them, because they're on their same level. And it was just really nice to see how they grew throughout the actual group experience. And just myself, too, just how I grew through the group experience because it was just my first time ever doing it. I pretty much just dove right in.

In this example, the participant shared her attitude of amazement around the group process occurring during her internship, but she also referred to the development of her own group leadership throughout her internship experience. She valued the feedback process among her group members while exhibiting a willingness to take educational risks by throwing herself into new experiences. Each of these attributes is necessary for growth and development as interns move throughout the supervisory process. As such, while difficult to isolate, the general dispositions of each participant seemed to greatly inform the action(s) believed to be important in the future planning, implementation, and acceptance of supervision specific to group work.

#### **Domain 4: Action of the Intern**

The fourth domain that emerged from the data, Action of the Intern, was perhaps the most robust of all. One participant shared an example of action she took to leverage teachers, an important stakeholder group at her site. She shared:

I communicated with the teachers . . . I continually email them. I'm sure they are going to be glad when I'm done emailing them to death, but . . . they've been pretty helpful in learning more about the students that are in the group beyond what I see in group because it's always nice to have a couple of different perspectives on the same kid.

In addition to leveraging stakeholders, participants also shared efforts to advocate for themselves and for their groups. In the subcategory, advocating for self, one participant explained her self-advocacy efforts:

I'm going to have to seek out . . . help because . . . my administrator can't give me that help. I know I'm going to have other school counselors in my school. . . doing their own thing. So I think I really need to seek supervision. I need to be very intentional about my own goals for myself . . . I really want to get my LAC and then like go into supervision that way because I think . . . [with] groups, classroom guidance, like I need help just managing my own reactions and being like, "Did I do this okay?" Is it that this kid is just really troubled or is it that I did the wrong thing?

In the same spirit of advocacy, participants also indicated the importance of advocating for groups that they knew would be meaningful for students. For instance, one participant shared the following about her internship site when discussing why she advocated for small group interventions:

They have some serious achievement gaps, which is one of the groups I ran. I ran an academic at-risk group. So I was like, you know, why aren't we working with these students? Like, we've known about them, they've been on the radar, but what are we doing to be helpful?

This emic quote also alludes to data-driven decision making, another action many participants spoke about throughout their internship experience. In addition to the previous participant's advocacy in addressing achievement gaps, another participant talked about making professional decisions based on data by stating:

And then of course [you identify] a goal, so what are we trying to accomplish here. Are we trying to reduce, you know, relational aggression in the classroom, you know? So how are we going to . . . track the data? How are we going to measure it?

The final action participants generally spoke about in their interviews involved resourcefulness. Many participants discussed how they would

identify and make use of available resources to support small group interventions at their sites. For instance, one participant discussed leveraging research to ensure that she appropriately planned for small group sessions, "I looked up some articles of, like, similar groups to the one we were thinking about and kind of based some things [on that]...in our pretest—what topics we might look at." Some of these actions were also influenced by the intern's expectations of their supervisory experiences.

### **Domain 5: Intern Supervisory Expectations**

Participants varied in their satisfaction with their overall supervisory experiences. This was equally true about supervision specific to group work. Much of these expectations seemed to have been influenced by participants' past experiences. This may have led to participants openly sharing desires about how site supervision during their internship could have been different. Researchers utilized the emic quote "I wish I had..." as a category in domain five to represent these missed supervision opportunities.

One participant spoke passionately about how significant her group class was in shaping her group leader disposition. This data is an example of information categorized in the influential past experience domain. Despite reporting many growth fostering past experiences, many participants felt disappointed in the actions of their current site supervisors, especially with respect to group leadership. For example, one participant shared:

I feel like the relationship that [my site supervisor] created has really been ... like a co-worker, so I just feel like he's kind of like, "hey, this is your thing. You're doing groups. I don't do groups." I would like to see him more involved in groups, if only because I would hope that they would continue after I left and he is not invested in it. And I can see the growth of kids and how it affects the school community.

Finally, another participant shared his wishes for increased supervision focused on group leadership, which points to the essence of this study:

I'm actually really glad that I'm doing this research project, like, that I'm having this conversation with you because I think [group work] is a place in my program where I wish I'd gotten more help.

While several participant voices are highlighted within this section, a summary of results across domains, categories, and subcategories is illustrated in the Appendix. Reviewing these results, it is clear that the majority of participants appeared to maintain both an awareness of their group leadership growing edges and a desire to improve upon

these skills and abilities in efforts to support their future students. Simultaneously, a consistent theme emerged around the lack of site supervisors' intention and ability to support this growth process. These insights and understandings give voice to several significant considerations; perhaps most important are the related implications for counselor educators and site supervisors.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the reported experiences of pre-service school counseling internship students specific to the personal and site specific characteristics that supported the practice of group work. Researchers chose to use CQR, a rigorous qualitative research methodology, to gain a thorough understanding of the meaning of participants' experiences through a consensus process. The following discussion highlights the various themes reported by ( $n = 10$ ) participants across interviews and contextualizes these findings within the current literature.

Overall, participants (school counseling internship students) felt that the site culture and style of their site supervisor had an important influence on their experiences. While some of these experiences seemed to support their professional development, other moments appeared to hinder it. Interns also shared examples of how their personal dispositions and strengths helped to move their own group leadership initiatives forward, regardless of barriers experienced by the overall culture of the site or their supervisors' inconsistencies. Participants also offered examples of personal or academic experiences that both supported and took away from their group leader opportunities; these included areas they wished to have had as part of their group leadership site supervisory experience.

### Site Culture and Supervision

School counselor educators continue to discuss the unique aspects of school culture that can influence the implementation of group work practice (Schimmel & Jacobs, *in press*; Steen et al., 2008). It is therefore not surprising that participants in this study highlighted the influence of the school environment and strongly valued supportive site cultures, particularly as they related to their overall field placement experiences. Although difficult to specifically qualify, the general sentiment shared by participants was that they felt more efficacious and empowered to engage in and initiate small group interventions when they perceived support from key stakeholders (e.g., site supervisors, administrators, teachers).

Discussion included their abilities to manage a complex set of personalities, as each participant reported unique inter and intra departmental dynamics, administrative control, and variable supervisory engagement. These findings go hand-in-hand with Springer's (2016) recent study suggesting that receiving feedback specific to group leadership can support intern's group leader self-efficacy. It is therefore not surprising based on self-efficacy research (Bandura, 1986) that stakeholder feedback may encourage outcomes such as intern's confidence and motivation to work through contextual challenges both generally and specific to group work. Results of the current study clearly demonstrate that interns' strengths, coupled with stakeholder support for their growing edges, helped them to navigate challenges they faced specific to the unique culture of each site and each specific supervisory experience; less addressed in this study, however, was the articulation of specific people with whom the intern must rely on for support in managing each of these relationships. ASCA (2012) and ACA (2014) ethical standards suggest that this responsibility largely falls on the shoulders of site supervisors. Therefore, findings from this study support the continued need (but current industry deficiency) for high quality school counseling site supervision (Ockerman, Mason, & Chen-Hayes, 2013; Peterson & Deuschle, 2006).

### **Intern Dispositional Strengths and Leadership**

Some participants were not shy about speaking to their need to further develop their group leadership skills. At the same time, they also shared at length about their personal leadership qualities that helped them find success (i.e., "I pretty much dove right in"). For example, interns often credited their abilities to be resourceful, industrious, and committed as dispositional strengths that supported their ongoing commitment to group leadership. This appeared to be particularly relevant when much of their learning involved a rigorous process of trial and error.

*Attitude.* Although participants shared varying levels of support and passion for group counseling, all consistently spoke about their commitment to facilitating groups at their internship sites. As such, it appeared that a "can do" attitude often served as the reminder to interns that they would ultimately rise to the occasion of becoming a group leader. This is particularly noteworthy as group work experts often share that group facilitation can feel like a "highly threatening experience" (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005, p. 549) and induce anxiety for beginning counselors (Rubel & Kline, 2008; Sink et al., 2012). The approach of participants in this study may therefore reflect not only that the interns considered it best practice to provide small group interventions at their sites but also conceptualized

the experience as standing between their current academic point in the department and graduation from their respective programs.

While students were unanimously concerned with completing their university required group leadership hours, the quality of their experiences seemed to differ in importance from participant to participant. Moreover, the scope and nature of their group facilitation appeared to be equally influenced by the role and interests of their site supervisors. Generally speaking, interns shared that at best, site supervisors were supportive and insightful in a singular instance providing *in vivo* observation and subsequent group leader supervision. At worst, and in almost all cases, participants communicated that they felt supervisors were apathetic, disinterested, or even discouraging regarding their desire (or requirement) to lead small groups. Unfortunately, these experiences are consistently noted in previous literature suggesting a lack of intentionality and an overall dissatisfaction with site supervisory experiences specific to group leadership (Bore et al., 2010; Steen et al., 2008).

Despite these supervisory experiences, ultimately, all participants (at varying degrees of intensity) leveraged their unique attitudinal dispositions and leadership skills to ensure that they were able to facilitate groups at their internships sites. In some cases, this process simply involved a conversation with their site supervisors to reorient them to the counselor education program's internship agreement. In other cases, however, interns had to work much more strategically to confirm that they would have access to students for small group counseling. The latter situation represents the experiences shared by most participants.

*Collaboration.* Participants in this study shared the inconsistencies and disappointments surrounding many of their site supervisory interactions; however, similar to the way that they learned to navigate the culture of their respective sites, interns also discussed the value and need to collaborate with many (non-supervisory) stakeholders in order to bring their small group school counseling intervention plans to fruition. This is consistent with the voices of pre-service participants in Steen et al.'s (2008) study who also expressed appreciation for feedback from both supervisors and other stakeholders around school contextual factors impacting the practice of group work (e.g., dialoguing with staff, managing student schedules, and navigating logistical issues).

In the current study, participants broadly expressed various collaborative approaches that supported their learning process and advocacy skill development. For instance, participants discussed the need to work closely with teachers and administrators to obtain permission for students

to be excused from regularly scheduled academic coursework to attend group sessions. Other participants talked at length about educating their site supervisors about the American School Counselor Association (2012) National Model, highlighting the “small group responsive services” component therein. Several participants shared the delicate steps they took when engaging stakeholders (e.g., teachers, administrators, school counselors) in conversations around student needs—often pointing to publicly published school performance data which highlighted an opportunity to address the needs of marginalized subgroups (e.g., English language learners, students with special needs).

### **Missing Pieces**

All participants shared their excitement to soon graduate and become practicing school counselors. They also unanimously expressed appreciation for the requirements to engage in group leadership opportunities throughout their training. However, each participant also communicated a longing for opportunities lost or missed throughout their internship experiences. Overwhelmingly, participants desired more guidance from their site supervisor around general group leadership development. Primary concerns included identifying students in need of small group intervention, screening procedures, creating and obtaining informed consent appropriate to the site, developing the scope and sequence of group session plans, and managing troubling group member behaviors.

Participants spoke to past experiences (e.g., coaching, working in residential in-patient facilities, group process graduate coursework) as helpful in managing the aforementioned challenges and insecurities experienced around group leadership. However, similarly to Ohrt, Ener, Porter, and Young (2014) participants who desired more effective supervision specific to group work, only few interns spoke to meaningful site supervisory experiences that furthered their clinical development. This may reflect a larger concern around the lack of clinical supervision provided to practicing school counselors (Herlihy et al., 2002) who, regardless of their own continuing clinical development, often become site supervisors. True to the strengths-based orientation of the counseling profession, most participants in the current study discussed their desires for increased and specific supervision that would help them to utilize their strengths throughout the developmental process. Likewise, in hopes of making up for a lack of meaningful supervision, many interns talked about desires to obtain future supervision specific to group leadership, either in pursuit of their counseling license or from a school counseling department chair or school counseling coordinator.

## LIMITATIONS

Findings reported in this study provide meaningful data specific to the needs of pre-service school counselors; however, there are a number of limitations that should be considered as the results are interpreted. For instance, the diversity of research participants and their experiences was a strength of this study; however, the demographic differences and grade levels of each internship site may have influenced the breadth of students' supervisory experiences beyond the dyadic relationship. Additionally, the convenience sample obtained from researchers' institutions (their own students) and the one participant gathered through snowball sampling (outside of the four institutions) represented an intentional and limited sample. Participants' prior relationships with at least one member of the research team could have influenced the way they answered the interview questions. Furthermore, the exploration of site supervisors' perceptions of their supervisees was beyond the scope of this study. These data would have provided additional information to help contextualize participants' experiences. With respect to the interview process itself, all interviews were conducted online via video-conferencing, which could have affected the rapport developed and subsequent openness of each research participant. Additionally, due to the timing of the semester, only one interview and one round of member-checks was possible, which could mean that additional information specific to the supervision of group leadership might have existed beyond the interview. While the makeup of the research team members included gender and racial/cultural diversity, it did not exactly mirror the demographic characteristics reported by participants. As such, as with all qualitative studies, generalizability beyond this sample is not intended.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In accordance with prior research (e.g., Springer, 2016), the most prominent concerns of interns centered around the support and quality of feedback they received around group leadership during their internship experiences. Although highly motivated, school counseling supervisees expressed variability, uncertainty, and trepidation specific to group leadership. As illustrated by this research, interns undoubtedly desired specific and challenging feedback and were disappointed when that was not a part of their experience, even though they were meeting the expectations outlined by their counselor education programs and internship sites.

Participants in this study seemed to truly understand the utility of data when planning for student interventions and conceptualizing the related function of small groups. Subsequently, they reported feeling disenfranchised if/when their site supervisors did not share their enthusiasm or understanding. While they expressed an openness to further developing professionally through experiences outside of site supervision, the clear disconnect revealed by participants in this study underscores a professional discontinuity between practitioners in the field—school counselors who utilize an ASCA Model framework—and those who do not.

The idea that a changing of the guard continues to take place in the field of school counseling is not a novel idea. Since the development of the American School Counselor Association (2012) National Model and the introduction of the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (The Education Trust, 2009), the school counselor's role has been defined as one that is systemically focused and data driven. As such, many school counseling master's degree programs have adopted curricula that support the modern definition and function of school counselors. However, many professionals employed by school districts in "guidance counselor" roles have resisted the transition to this newer approach (American School Counselor Association, 2012). This hesitation thereby creates confusion and potential difficulties for pre-service school counselors as they move through field placement and into practice. Given the present, complex landscape of the school counseling profession and intersection of this study's findings with that of current research, there are a multitude of implications for school counselor educators and site supervisors as well as recommendations for future research.

### **Implications for School Counselor Educators**

Due to the nature of their professional experiences and education, school counselor educators may represent the individuals most strongly invested in changing the school counseling profession. With this investment comes great responsibility, including intentionally assisting prospective interns with securing meaningful field placement sites and appropriate on-site supervisors. This may include continuing to foster strong relationships with community school personnel (e.g., counselors and administrators) in order to learn more specifically about their training and supervisory styles.

*Supporting meaningful site supervisory practice.* If selected site supervisors do not have an identified model of supervision, counselor educators may choose to work closely with them to further their

training and guide their supervisory practices specific to group leadership. Duffy and Finnerty (*in press*) suggest one application of Luke and Bernard's (2006) school counseling supervision model applied to group counseling. Similarly, Rubel and Okech (2006) developed the Supervision of Group Work (SGW) model, also adapted from Bernard's (1979) Discrimination model. Utilizing a model for supervision, specifically one identified to address the unique qualities of group work, allows the supervisor to focus on specific skills and dispositions while dually encouraging them to give clear and accurate performance feedback specific to various modalities (e.g., group work) (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). Training site supervisors (and graduate students who are likely to become site supervisors) in a specific model may be the most efficient and effective way to improve their supervisory skills.

Working closely with site supervisors in this manner can also help counselor educators to assess and improve the quality of internship experiences for their students. In addition, targeting sites that implement the ASCA National Model may afford the intern a more congruent training experience. Counselor educators should consider the disposition of each site's administrative team and their openness to change from a traditional "guidance" approach to comprehensive school counseling. In doing so, interns may be more likely to experience pre-professional experiences that model healthy, collaborative school counseling/administrative partnerships.

*Faculty-led supervision.* In response to the voices of participants, counselor educators may consider engaging internship students during their faculty-led supervision classes in the following activities: a) articulating data collection strategies specific to group counseling, b) identifying relevant stakeholders to leverage in the design, implementation, and assessment of group intervention, c) role-playing small-group advocacy conversations, and d) locating a variety of group counseling resources. Although a singular solution to developing site supervisor competence, particularly around the supervision of group work, does not exist, these recommendations serve as reminders for more specific group leadership discussion in faculty-led internship classes.

### **Implications for Site Supervisors**

Perhaps the only stakeholders more influential than counselor educators specific to the field experiences of pre-service counselors are site supervisors. The findings from this study subsequently offer plenty of implications for this critical stakeholder group. Similar to previous

research (e.g., Ockerman et al., 2013), findings indicate that the role of the school counselor significantly varies from school to school. Therefore, it is important for site supervisors to intentionally set aside time to orient interns to building-specific norms. These conversations should include articulation around the role of the school counselor and that of the intern at the site. This may also include but not be limited to discussing inter/intra group dynamics impacting the school counselor's positionality in the school and the intern's role in communicating with stakeholders.

Implications from this study also highlight the need for supervisors to adopt and utilize an intentional supervision plan (ideally a model) that specifies supervisory meeting times, honors the developmental needs of supervisees, and includes the supervision of all counseling modalities, including group work. Specific to the supervision of group counseling, within such a plan, site supervisors should provide opportunities for pre-service counselors to discuss their experiences designing, implementing, and observing small group counseling. This recommendation is consistent with research suggesting that experience, observation, and elements within supervision are some of the greatest predictors of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Moreover, supervisors should allow interns to construct/co-construct the group leadership process from start to finish—from locating initial resources to engaging directly with school and community stakeholders. By encouraging them to engage in this process, interns may further develop their group leadership skills and confidence.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Findings from this study add to our understanding of intern's experiences in site supervision specific to small group leadership. However, much remains unknown about this process. Therefore, future research is needed to continue to support the preparation of school counselors and the professional development of site supervisors.

This study aimed to understand interns' experiences. While this information is valuable, understanding the experiences of their on-site counterparts—the site supervisors—may prove equally as enlightening. Relatedly, the construction and validation of an instrument and/or instructional materials usable throughout the supervision process specific to group leadership development would likely provide valuable tools for the profession. Creating and providing group leadership supervision training and studying its effects within interns' site supervisory experiences may further increase our understanding of the needs of both students and site supervisors. Specifically, implementing a model of group supervision such as the SGW model (Rubel & Okech,

2006) and exploring its efficacy for site supervisors would be valuable. Finally, examining practitioners' use of data-driven decision making specific to group leadership would help to clarify best practices for school counselors and shed light on additional training needs for interns and site supervisors.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insight into the site supervisory experiences of pre-service school counselors. Results suggest that interns' experiences more generally and specific to group leadership are influenced by the culture of the site and the professional approach of the site supervisor. Additionally, interns' dispositions, actions, and expectations appear to affect how they make sense of these experiences and plan for future group leadership decisions as practitioners. Addressing the interplay of these multilevel factors and reinforcing the importance of group work in a comprehensive school counseling program may influence school counselors-in-training to continue to advocate for and provide group counseling interventions despite the general lack of these services in current practice.

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## APPENDIX

<i>Domains, categories, and subcategories</i>	<i>Illustrative core idea</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Culture of the internship site	School climate	General
<b>Role of the school counselor</b>	Departmental role(s), supervision, mentorship	General
<b>Role of the school counselor intern</b>	View of the role of intern	Typical
<b>Administrative approach to SC &amp; SC intern</b>	Sets the tone for school counseling program mission/vision	General
Professional approach of site supervisor	SC program and supervision	General
<b>Comprehensive counseling program implementation</b>	Delivery of services	General
<b>Supervision</b>	Approach to supervision	General
<i>Style of supervision</i>	Model of supervision	General
<i>Attitude towards supervision</i>	Beliefs about supervision	Typical
Dispositions of intern	Internal qualities of intern	General
<b>Attitude of intern</b>	Belief system of intern	General
<b>Leadership characteristics of intern</b>	Leadership style (Internal characteristics of intern)	Typical
Action of intern	External, observable qualities of intern	Typical
<b>Leveraging stakeholders</b>	Intern garners stakeholder support	Typical
<b>Advocacy efforts of intern</b>	Intern advocacy skills	Typical
<i>Advocates for self</i>	Intern advocates for self at site	Typical
<i>Advocates for group</i>	Intern advocates for group at site	Typical
<b>Data-driven decision-making</b>	Intern makes decisions based on data	Typical
<b>Resourcefulness of intern</b>	Intern uses available resources	Typical
Intern supervisory expectations	Overall expectations of intern	Typical
<b>"I wish I had"...</b>	Ideal experience of intern	Typical
<b>Influential past experiences</b>	Former experiences that shaped the intern	Typical

*Note.* The frequency label of "general" indicates that the idea was present in all or all but one of the participants. A frequency label of "typical" indicates that the idea was present in at least half of the participants (Hill, 2012).