School Counselor Educators' Experiences Navigating Practicum and Internship During COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many counselor education programs. We interviewed 10 school counselor educators to explore their experiences navigating practicum and internship experiences during the pandemic. We identified five themes: (a) supporting SCITs, (b) decision-making, (c) rethinking clinical experiences, (d) preparedness, and (e) gatekeeping. We discuss implications for student training and research.

Keywords: COVID-19, counselor educators, school counselors-in-training, gatekeeping, telemental health

In December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) was informed about cases of pneumonia in China that were later attributed to the highly contagious novel coronavirus COVID-19. As cases and death counts rose, the WHO in March 2020 classified the outbreak as a global pandemic (Ohannessian et al., 2020). To slow the spread, officials in countries around the world began to order control measures such as self-quarantine and social distancing. In addition, many countries implemented national school closures affecting an estimated 862 million children and young people worldwide (Viner et al., 2020). Thus, U.S. counselor educators had to make decisions about how school counselors-in-training (SCITs) completing a practicum or internship experience in school settings would obtain their required hours and relevant experiences.

Although some clinical counseling sites transitioned quickly to virtual counseling options and were willing to provide these opportunities for counselors-in-training at their sites, schools experienced more difficulty in considering how to offer school counseling services to students. School counselor educators had to collaborate with school districts and their state's department of education (DOE) to ensure their SCITs would be able to complete their practicum and internship requirements. Counselor educators also needed to ensure the alternative experiences met standards for SCITs to be credentialed by the state DOE as professional school counselors while upholding the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Standards for those working within CACREP-accredited programs.

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Gatekeeping

The American Counseling Association's (ACA) 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* includes gatekeeping as an ethical obligation to clients and the counseling profession (Schuermann et al., 2018). Counselor educators are responsible for preparing SCITs with the skills, knowledge, and attributes required to become competent professional counselors (ACA, 2014; Brown-Rice & Furr, 2015; Gilbert, 2014; Homrich, 2009; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). The 2016 CACREP Standards provide terminology guiding counselor education programs to evaluate SCITs regarding "retention, remediation, and dismissal" (Section 4, Standard H). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2018) stated in its *Ethical Standards for School Counselor Education Faculty* that those who teach in school counselor education programs should provide students with both "formative and summative feedback" (Standard B-6) as they matriculate through the program.

According to Swank and Smith-Adcock (2014), the process of gatekeeping begins at admission. The gatekeeping process then continues throughout SCITs' progression through the program to monitor their appropriateness and fit for the profession (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2016; Dean et al., 2018). Counselor educators have an ethical responsibility to determine whether an SCIT is competent before they begin seeing clients (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2016). During practicum and internship placements, both counselor educators and site supervisors share the responsibilities of gatekeeping SCITs, with site supervisors specifically responsible for providing on-site daily supervision of students in practicum and internship while they are at their clinical placement site. Dean et al. (2018) examined counseling programs' (*N* = 28) collaboration efforts with site supervisors regarding remediation or dismissal of a trainee in fieldwork. The researchers found a need for clear policies and follow-up procedures for counselor educators and site supervisors when encountering issues during field placement.

The distance learning modality creates a complex challenge for gatekeeping for counselors entering the field (Burt et al., 2011; Gilbert, 2014; Hall et al., 2010; Jones & Karper, 2000). During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, counselor educators sought to maintain standards and promote competency among SCITs using virtual counseling experiences. School counselor educators are responsible for providing feedback, completing site visits, and collaborating with site supervisors to ensure SCITs received a meaningful clinical experience (Thompson & Moffett, 2010). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on clinical supervision created a greater need for gatekeeping and consideration of ethical standards for virtual field placements.

COVID-19 Effects on School Counselor Education

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted counseling practicum and internship placements, requiring the shift to using *telemental health* services, also known as distance counseling or telebehavioral health. Telemental health is a modality for providing real-time mental health services using a virtual platform when the client/student and provider are physically in different places during the

session (Morgan et al., 2008; VandenBos & Williams, 2000). The number of school counseling programs that offered courses on telemental health or incorporate telemental health skills into existing counseling courses or practicum and internship experiences before the COVID-19 pandemic is unknown. However, the pandemic created a situation where school counselor educators, SCITs, and site supervisors all had to adapt quickly to a new normal. School counselor educators and site supervisors needed to collaborate to develop best practices for continuing care for students and facilitating the practicum and internship experience for SCITs, while also learning telehealth themselves. School counselor education programs have experienced the displacement of CITs previously (e.g., New Orleans in 2005 because of Hurricane Katrina); however, the previous displacements have been of lesser magnitude than that caused by the pandemic.

The challenges of COVID-19 affected school counselor educators and SCITs. Many school counselor educators maneuvered the roles of parent and teacher for their children at home, while attempting to meet the academic demands of the SCITs in the program. SCITs struggled with anxiety caused by the uncertainty of the pandemic and the ability to complete the semester and receive credit for their practicum or internship experience, while also navigating changed personal roles (e.g., teacher to children who were home from school). With the many challenges the COVID-19 pandemic presented, school counselor educators remained accountable to the profession to uphold gatekeeping practices, while supporting SCITs.

School Counselor Preparation

School counselor educators have the responsibility to ensure SCITs are prepared and competent to work with students (CACREP, 2016) while ensuring they have met the DOE requirements. SCITs are prepared differently than clinical CITs (Benshoff & Paisley, 1996; Colbert et al., 2006; Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Henderson, 1999; Kozlowski & Huss, 2013; Sears, 1999). School counselor educators not only teach counseling skills but also inform SCITs of the implementation of the ASCA (2019a) National Model, consultation practices, and advocacy skills to help all students succeed in school. According to the ASCA "School Counselor and School Counseling Preparation Programs" position statement, school counselors are best prepared when they complete an accredited master's program that "align[s] with the philosophy and vision" (ASCA, 2020, para. 1) of the ASCA National Model, the *ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies* (ASCA, 2019b), the *ASCA Standards for School Counselor Preparation Programs* (ASCA, 2019c), the *ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success* (ASCA, 2021), and the *ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (ASCA, 2016). Traditionally, SCITs obtain practical experience implementing counseling programs during their practicum and internship experience (Kozlowski & Huss, 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, school counselor educators had to uphold the standards for preparing SCITs while school districts transitioned from face-to-face to virtual learning. This included upholding the clinical and supervision hours required by CACREP (2016).

In considering the design and implementation of counseling programs for virtual schools, we found only one study. Osborn et al. (2014) explored the experiences of school counselors in virtual schools ($N = 4$) and found they experienced similar duties and goals as school counselors working within in-person schools, but different challenges (e.g., lack of socialization with other school counselors, frustration with service goals due to caseload size). Although Osborn et al. recommended inclusion of technology within counseling program courses, including a discussion about ethics related to technology, they did not specifically address training SCITs to work in a virtual school setting. The transition in the delivery of clinical experiences to a virtual setting during the pandemic warrants exploration into how school counselor educators navigated this experience while following CACREP standards and maintaining gatekeeping expectations. Thus, we sought to explore school counselor educators' lived experiences overseeing school counseling practicum and internship experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring 2020 semester.

Method

We used a transcendental phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Wood, 2011) to explore the lived experiences of school counselor educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, we used a social constructivist lens, viewing each participant's experience as a counselor educator during the pandemic as unique (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012). Social constructivists maintain that people develop knowledge through interactions with others in society (Andrews, 2012). For this study, we sought to understand the interactions between school counselor educators and SCITs experiencing practicum and internship during a pandemic. Thus, we thoroughly explored the experiences of each participant.

Researchers

Our research team consisted of both authors. The first author is a Black female doctoral student with experience working as a school counselor. The second is a White female counselor educator with 10 years of experience as a counselor educator. For this study, we discussed our biases and emotions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected counselor education. Specifically, we discussed feeling stressed and challenged as we navigated our roles (first author as supervising SCITs, second author as making decisions about SCITs educational experiences during the pandemic). We believe practicum and internship experiences are crucial in preparing SCITs to work in schools following graduation. Additionally, we believe in ensuring SCITs receive relevant and practical counseling experiences while obtaining direct hours with students to foster counseling self-efficacy during practicum and internship. Despite the difficulties experienced during the pandemic, we believe it is crucial that students continue to obtain these experiences, which requires supportive faculty, creativity, and flexibility.

Participants

We used purposive sampling to recruit school counselor educators teaching a practicum and/or internship course for SCITs during the spring 2020 semester. There were 10 participants: seven female and three male. The age range of participants was 36 to 61 years (M = 47.5, SD = 8.35). All 10 participants reported working in a CACREP-accredited program. Four of the participants worked in an institution in a rural area, five in a suburban area, and one person worked remotely for a program serving SCITs across the country. All participants reported working at a public university. The size of the school counseling program ranged from 12 to 1,300 SCITs, with a median of 24. One participant identified as African American, one as Asian, and eight as Caucasian. Years of experience as a school counselor ranged from 0 to 15 years (M = 6.4, SD = 4.66). Participants' years of experience as a counselor educator ranged from 3 to 21 years (M = 8.8, SD = 5.43).

Procedure

Following approval from the institutional review board, the first author completed a broad search of school counseling programs in each region of the country, including both CACREP- and non-CACREP-accredited programs and identified at least one school counselor educator listed on the program's website. We also identified school counselor educators we knew to reach out to for recruitment. The first author is an active member of a Facebook group for this population and reached out to members who had posted or commented within 2 weeks, demonstrating they were engaged in the group within that period. Last, we used snowball sampling. We contacted all potential participants through email, attaching an informed consent letter to the recruitment email. Contacting the first author to schedule an interview constituted consent. Interviews occurred through the video platform Zoom and lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Data Collection

We collected data through semistructured interviews. Research questions focused on how school counselor educators made decisions for direct and indirect activities in a virtual setting, and the challenges and barriers educators experienced in ensuring SCITs received a meaningful practicum or internship experience. We developed the interview protocol by focusing on three main areas during the pandemic: (a) practicum and internship experiences of SCITs, (b) gatekeeping, and (c) decision-making. We based the interview questions on the literature on gatekeeping and practicum and internship for SCITs and discussions among school counselor educators related to practicum and internship experiences during the pandemic. We also conducted a pilot interview that helped refine the interview questions. Sample questions included, "How has COVID-19 created a need for change in your program, and as a result, what changes have you made?" "How did you make decisions about changing the program?" and "In what ways did you seek guidance from any accrediting bodies or professional organizations while making programmatic decisions regarding clinical experiences during COVID-19?" We also asked

participants to provide demographic information, including age, gender, race, years of experience as a counselor educator, years working as a professional school counselor, size of the program, and location type of the university.

Data Analysis

During the epoche process, we bracketed our biases, judgments, and feelings (Moustakas, 1994) related to the COVID-19 pandemic and discussed potential bias resulting from the continued effect of the pandemic. We applied three phenomenological reduction processes to identify thematic content (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). First, we individually analyzed transcripts and identified themes. Then, we met to reach agreement on coding and themes. Last, we identified quotes to support each theme.

Trustworthiness

We engaged in multiple processes to ensure the credibility of the study. Specifically, we used member checking (Gall et al., 1996; Hays & Singh, 2012), triangulation, and bracketing to establish trustworthiness. Regarding member checking, participants received a copy of their transcript to review for accuracy. We used both method and researcher triangulation to explore the data from different perspectives. Bracketing was used to help reduce researchers' biases that could negatively affect the research process.

Findings

We identified five themes and three subthemes that captured the lived experiences of school counselor educators during the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring semester of 2020. The themes were (a) supporting SCITs, (b) decision-making, (c) rethinking clinical experiences, (d) preparedness, and (e) gatekeeping. The theme of rethinking clinical experiences had two subthemes: direct and indirect. The theme of preparedness had one subtheme: training post-COVID. We used pseudonyms to protect the participants' identity.

Supporting SCITs

Participants expressed a desire to support SCITs during the pandemic. All participants identified ways in which they supported SCITs in their practicum and internship experiences to advocate at their sites, meet direct and indirect hour requirements, and maintain emotional well-being during the pandemic. Greg noted considering how to "give the students the best experience we can, given the circumstances, without punishing them for something that has nothing to do with them." All of the participants also discussed expressing empathy for the SCITs and validating their emotions. David stated, "I think just normalizing, bringing in that element that we're all trying to figure this out. I think that was probably the most important thing to help me stay connected with them."

Participants expressed general frustration with "not knowing" and "not having the answers" despite ongoing communication with CACREP and the

state DOE regarding changes. Alisha explained, "I would communicate with them as quickly as I could, as clearly as I could, and as honestly as I could. I felt like in doing those different things, I was able to say I'm learning as well." Although participants reported the importance of sharing as much up-to-date information with SCITs as possible, they also discussed the importance of expressing that they cared about students. Hazel stated,

> Sometimes . . . we [believe that we must] have all of the answers first, before we issue the message. . . . I don't think that's what's in the best interest of students. I think they need to know that we care first.

Many of the participants also expressed a sense of responsibility to recognize the emotional toll the pandemic was having on the SCITs. Hazel shared, "I don't know if it's accurate, but it felt like there was so much anxiety on the part of students that I had to loosen those boundaries a little bit around communication. . . . I started using GroupMe."

Decision-Making

Participants said that during the pandemic, having access to other school counselor educators through communities such as interest networks, Facebook groups, and state school counselor associations helped them feel supported in their decision-making. Alisha explained, "The interest network is a good place for it [decision-making support] as well, where we come together and have these conversations and have 'like minds' to discuss these topics." Additionally, Bianca commented, "There are a lot of pieces that I'm really trying to collaborate with others to learn more about." Participants also reported normalizing the stress of the situation through their communities. Erika stated, "We were all struggling because nobody knew what the answers were, so it felt good to have that support [from colleagues]."

Participants also provided insight into the decision-making process within their department. Barry stated, "It's not [for] me as a professor to decide, but [for] the school. As [it] boils down to it, I can't do anything that they say I can't do." All participants reported responsibility for ensuring that SCITs were able to earn a school counseling certification from their state DOE and secure a job in the local school system after they graduated. Monica noted, "Making sure that they're able to be certified, making sure that everything falls under the state department's requirements, what also falls under CACREP requirements."

Rethinking Clinical Experiences

Participants discussed a need to "rethink" the clinical experience for SCITs during the shift from a traditional face-to-face setting to a virtual setting. Several participants acknowledged that encouraging or requiring SCITs to obtain more than the minimum hours during their practicum was a "saving grace," once CACREP allowed those practicum hours to count toward internship. David stated, "Students who finished their practicum hours early . . . went ahead and started their internship hours." Participants discussed

innovative ways their SCITs earned direct and indirect hours using technologies such as Google Classroom, recorded classroom guidance lessons, and virtual individual and small-group sessions through Zoom or Google Meet. Participants also shared how they made decisions with site supervisors. Myra explained, "When my interns would have a question, I would refer them first to their site supervisor, and then they'd also run it back by me." Additionally, Monica expressed gratitude toward her site supervisors in reporting, "The site persons could have easily said 'forget it,' but they kept working with their interns, plugging them in." The subthemes of direct and indirect capture these alternative activities.

Direct. Participants described creative ways SCITs were able to earn direct hours virtually. David shared, "My intern was able to ride the bus with a couple of other school counselors and deliver those meals. . . . Still being able to connect with them in that way; I think that was meaningful." Tera also stated,

> One of my students was able to spend some significant time at the school because . . . students [were] coming in to pick up learning packets . . . [it was an] opportunity to briefly interact with students and families.

Furthermore, Monica shared, "Students did attendance follow-ups and graduation checks. . . .They would get Google Phone and just have their own hours."

Several participants discussed how their SCITs were able to provide classroom guidance lessons virtually by sharing recorded lessons on Google Classroom. Additionally, Alisha reported, "They did TV lessons for those students who didn't have access to the internet. They were doing it live at a TV station. . . . They would go in and do lessons every day for counseling."

Indirect. Participants reported activities they allowed for indirect hours that may or may not have counted before the COVID-19 pandemic. Barry shared, "We came up with innovative ways for them to earn indirect hours by doing ASCA classes and [other] webinars, anything that CACREP would say OK to." He also discussed his university providing telemental health trainings in stating, "[The university] gave this specific training for telemental health. . . . It's a 3-hour class. They got a certificate for it, and we offered the class to supervisors as well." Greg commented, "It was indirect stuff like finishing up school counseling–related projects that they've worked on [at their sites], building curriculum for them [site supervisors, and] helping them work on websites. . . . We also give them indirect hours for any professional development online." Participants also discussed activities supporting K–12 students and families that counted toward indirect hours. David noted,

> They had the opportunity to do these parades, where they joined the teachers, and they paraded through town and got to see families. . . . I think that rises to the level of being part of the school community.

Preparedness

The participants discussed preparedness of the SCITs in light of the COVID-19 disruption. Greg shared, "I think one of the benefits of having to kind of

scramble to find indirect hours is that I think our students are better connected to the resources that are out there." Additionally, Erika stated, "I do think they're more prepared. I think that they were thrown a huge curveball, and [they showed] professionalism, a positive attitude, patience, perseverance, and tenacity. I think they were really creative in how they met their goal."

Participants described how the COVID-19 pandemic caused them to rethink how they trained SCITs for virtual school counseling experiences that supported K–12 students and families. Participants discussed the need for telemental health training. Barry shared, "I think we need to be training students on telemental health, but they need to be working with clients face-to-face to learn how to work with clients." Alisha discussed incorporating more technology in preparing SCITs stating, "Going forward, we need to be more intentional about the multiple technologies that we might use not only in higher education, but in K–12 schools and really being, you know, on top of our game." Participants also reported using technology to increase access to K–12 students and families. Bianca stated, "As a result of this past semester, I will absolutely be including more about how to reach students through various means not just in person. I also want to focus a great deal on access, that's a huge issue."

Gatekeeping

Participants discussed various aspects of gatekeeping, specifically the role of gatekeeping at the internship level and their responsibilities during the pandemic. Participants shared how they depended on site supervisors more for evaluation. Monica remarked, "Instead of me being able to go to the site, I was depending a lot on the site supervisors." Additionally, Bianca shared, "This semester we didn't get the videos, and we didn't get the time with the students to really parse out what their skill set is, and that's made it very, very difficult to place them." Some participants also reported feeling conflicted about implementing gatekeeping procedures during the pandemic and described negative emotions associated with holding SCITs accountable during such a stressful time. Alisha noted,

> You don't want the students to be disadvantaged because of a pandemic . . . but you want to make sure that . . . the product that you're putting out there is trained at the highest level to go out and practice and work with . . . our children.

In further discussing gatekeeping, David shared, "You [school counselors] can't just rush to virtually meet with every student that needs your services without having a protocol in place in case of an emergency. . . That was the gatekeeper piece." Some participants also referenced the importance of gatekeeping early in the program. Myra explained, "We develop several gatekeeping measures on the front end of our program. If they make it to the end of the program, we are confident in their capabilities of becoming a professional."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore school counselor educators' lived experiences navigating practicum and internship for SCITs during the

COVID-19 pandemic. We have not experienced a global pandemic in a century, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will likely have lasting effects on school counseling and the preparation of SCITs. Participants shared how the uncertainty related to the pandemic created a different learning experience with new and unique stressors for school counselor educators and SCITs, including lack of training on telemental health and the process to obtain education in this area for educators and students. Through embracing creativity and flexibility, the participants reported all but one student were able to complete their practicum and internship requirements, with the one student's internship placement being terminated because of the school district discontinuing school counseling services.

The theme of supporting SCITs, which encompassed a need to ensure SCIT accountability during the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, aligns with research focused on the influence school counselor educators have on SCITs' success (Borders et al., 2012; Huber et al., 2010; Jordan, 2007). The support SCITs received during COVID-19 may have contributed to SCITs choosing to remain in practicum and internship during the disruption. In a previous study on counselor education doctoral students, Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) found the quality of faculty and student relationships was a factor in determining whether students completed the program. Thus, strong student-faculty relationships and communication is crucial for student success when challenges arise in the training programs. The COVID-19 pandemic increased a need to strengthen student-faculty relationships.

Participants in our study shared how they made decisions concerning a virtual practicum and internship experience for SCITs, which included obtaining support through networking with other school counselor educators. Additionally, consistent with the literature (e.g., Dollarhide & Miller, 2006), the participants indicated that collaboration and communication with site supervisors was vital to the practicum and internship experience of SCITs. Although research on collaborative practices between counseling programs and site supervisors is limited, there is some research supporting the collaboration. Specifically, Dean et al. (2018) examined collaborative gatekeeping practices and found fieldwork provides counseling programs an opportunity to establish necessary procedures and best practices for collaboration with site supervisors.

The process of working with site supervisors begins before placing students by verifying that site supervisors are qualified to supervise graduate students (ASCA, 2018). However, the transition to virtual school counseling, caused by the pandemic, created a need for school counselor educators to consider site supervisors' ability to supervise SCITs using telemental health within a virtual school counseling program. Additionally, the pandemic affected how school counselor educators provided supervision. Participants said that because they were unable to complete site visits, they became more dependent on the site supervisor to observe and evaluate the student interns at the site. Thus, the pandemic increased the need for a collaborative relationship and communication.

The themes of preparedness and gatekeeping emphasized participants' commitment to ensure a quality clinical experience for SCITs in the virtual

activities they approved, as well as making sure SCITs met the requirements for earning a professional school counseling certification. The *ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies* (ASCA, 2019b) outlines counselor educators' role in preparing SCITs. Specifically, counselor educators ensure SCITs graduate with the knowledge and skills to establish a comprehensive school counseling program that aligns with the ASCA (2019a) National Model. The intersectionalities of preparing SCITs and gatekeeping practices in school counselor education highlight the ethical considerations participants considered in allowing telemental health activities during practicum and internship. The ASCA (2016) and ACA (2014) ethical codes both address school counselors' ethical use of technology. Specifically, the ASCA (2016) code of ethics includes standards on technology and digital citizenship (Standard A.14) and virtual/distance school counseling (Standard A.15). Additionally, the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* includes standards on distance counseling and technology (Section H). ASCA (2017) also provides a position statement addressing the role of virtual school counselors and the use of technology to promote student engagement in a virtual school setting. Participants experienced some frustrations scrambling to prepare SCITs to adjust quickly to a virtual environment caused by the pandemic, while teaching about and ensuring that SCITs followed ethical standards for virtual counseling. Thus, school counselor educators should consider ways to integrate ethical considerations for virtual school counseling within the school counseling preparation program. This includes considering the effects of equity and access for students who do not have access to virtual learning.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

One limitation to our study is that the COVID-19 disruption was ongoing during data collection. Our understanding of participants' responses may have varied based on the information they had available at the time. We collected data during the spring 2020 semester, which was the first semester of counselor training affected by the pandemic; educators may have responded differently in subsequent semesters during the pandemic. Future research may focus on examining the effectiveness of the adaptations from the perspectives of faculty, site supervisors, and SCITs, and the possible continued integratation of these adaptations into standard practices. Another limitation is participants voluntarily agreed to participate, and they may have navigated practicum and internship during the pandemic differently than other educators who did not participate in the study. Many of the participants also reported strong connections with other school counselor educators; therefore, their experiences may differ from educators who do not have much support from others. Furthermore, school counselor educators' ability to balance aspects of their professional and personal lives during the pandemic may also have affected their ability to provide support to their students.

A follow-up study could focus on elaborating on the disruption of COVID-19 across multiple semesters and continued decision-making processes. Additionally, future research may focus on the lived experiences of SCITs during practicum and internship during the pandemic, and their perceived level of preparedness

in becoming a school counselor. Researchers may also explore the experiences of school counseling site supervisors during the pandemic. Moreover, researchers may quantitatively examine the constructs identified in this study. Finally, future research may focus on the long-term effects of the pandemic on school counseling and SCITs' practicum and internship experiences.

Implications for Counselor Education

The COVID-19 pandemic may have a lasting influence on counselor preparation. This includes school counselor educators navigating practicum and internship experiences, as well as general programmatic recommendations. Specifically, our findings highlight the importance of collaboration and support among educators to make decisions that best support SCITs. Often, school counselor educators work in isolation within their counselor education program. Our study participants shared about their use of groups (e.g., interest networks, Facebook groups, ASCA forums, state school counseling associations) for support and information, emphasizing the importance of networking with others.

School counselor educators shared a variety of activities that they allowed SCITs to count as practicum and internship hours during the pandemic. In deciding which activities to consider for clinical experiences, it is important to review university policies, as well as professional ethical codes. Following the pandemic, school counselor educators may consider continuing to use virtual activities with SCITs to facilitate a comprehensive school counseling program virtually. They may also consider increasing the number of required practicum hours. Participants discussed counting extra hours earned during practicum toward students' internship experiences, as long as CACREP continues to allow this practice. Several participants shared that this helped SCITs to meet their required internship hours. Many of the participants also expressed they required SCITs to earn 150 hours during practicum before the COVID-19 pandemic, as this enabled them to be more marketable and build connections with the counselors and students at their site.

School counselor educators may consider integrating telemental health practices into their program, including education and clinical experiences. This may include infusing telemental health training within foundational school counseling courses. A common activity in a foundational school counseling course is to have SCITs create a classroom guidance lesson for elementary and secondary settings. Educators can infuse technology in the activity by requiring SCITs to record the lesson and distribute it to class through an electronic platform to practice providing virtual classroom guidance lessons. SCITs may also benefit from learning how to present trainings and workshops virtually to prepare for the consultative role school counselors have regarding staff development. Additionally, school counselor educators can integrate platforms such as a virtual counseling office, Zoom, Google Meet, and GroupMe to prepare SCITs to use creative approaches to connect with students and families when in-person meetings may be challenging for them. Participants shared ways in which the virtual school counseling

experience provided more access to parents and some K–12 students who may not have otherwise connected with the school counselor or the intern. It is also crucial for educators to develop policies and protocols for training SCITs and site supervisors to use virtual platforms ethically, which includes maintaining professional boundaries, confidentiality, security, and privacy.

Incorporating telemental health trainings and technology into school counseling preparation programs may prepare SCITs for virtual school counseling positions. Similar to Osborn et al. (2014), we recommend school counselor educators consider allowing SCITs to complete practicum or internship hours in a virtual school setting. In addition, school counselor educators could invite a guest panel of virtual school counselors to speak to their students about their experiences as virtual school counselors implementing the ASCA (2019a) National Model. This is important to consider as there are over 278,500 students enrolled in virtual schools across 34 states (Molnar et al., 2017). Virtual schools (e.g., Connections Academy, K–12) offer a full online K–12 curriculum to students, and they employ virtual school counselors to serve students.

Our study participants shared the methods they used to validate SCITs' experiences, to reduce their anxieties, and to guide them through the beginning of a national crisis. School counselor educators may consider using these strategies to increase SCITs' access to information and further strengthen student-faculty relationships, while also being mindful of maintaining appropriate boundaries. It is important for school counselor educators to consult their university's digital policies on student communication when considering implementation of alternative forms of communication, as well as to consult the ethical codes of the counseling profession. Alternative communication may include offering virtual, in addition to in-person, community meetings for SCITs. Virtual community meetings may provide opportunities for SCITs to connect with one another and with faculty when they struggle with attending in-person meetings. School counselor educators could also increase their office hours, provide virtual office hours through Zoom or Google Meet, or use community chat apps (e.g., GroupMe) to share information and celebrate accomplishments within their group supervision classes for SCITs in practicum and internship. Thus, counseling professionals may use various strategies to improve SCITs' experiences following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

Practicum and internship experiences are an important component of the educational process for SCITs. The COVID-19 pandemic created unique challenges for school counselor educators and SCITs, requiring creative problem-solving. Although not ideal, this problem-solving process provided for the development of unique strategies (e.g., virtual lessons, virtual student and parent meetings) that may remain beneficial for SCITs following the COVID-19 pandemic in developing skills and serving K–12 students in a high-paced technological society.

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