

Practicum in Counseling: A New Training Model

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### Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of a new counseling practicum training model which was developed as part of a Professional Development School (PDS) program. Unlike the traditional counseling practicum, the university instructor and graduate students worked together in an elementary school setting for one day a week. All supervision was provided on-site and the students were given immediate feedback on their counseling strategies and skills. The study examined what differences, if any, existed in student and classroom teachers' perceptions of the PDS practicum versus the traditional practicum experience. Findings concluded that students in the PDS practicum were significantly more positive about their experience than those in the traditional settings. Results from teacher surveys did not reveal significant differences between practicum settings.

### Practicum in Counseling: A New Training Model

The counseling practicum is a required and integral course in every credentialed counselor training program (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2001). The practicum is a supervised experience in which counseling theory is applied to practice and it provides graduate students experiences in counseling with diverse clients in one-to-one interactions. Typically, these interactions are recorded on audiotape, and afterwards, students receive feedback from their course supervisors and peers through individual and group class meetings. The practice of skills in school and clinical settings is considered a necessary condition to develop professional competencies (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004).

All students in a credentialed counselor training program, such as CACREP, participate in the traditional counseling practicum model or perhaps a slight variation thereof. This model is standard practice for training students in counseling methodologies and techniques. In this model, graduate students are typically assigned to a professional setting where they meet with clients on a one-to-one basis. The students are required to meet with at least 4-5 clients weekly, for 40 contact hours over the course of the semester. Other activities may include developing and maintaining client logs, and developing tentative counseling plans and case notes for each client. In addition to direct client contacts at their respective sites, the graduate students must attend weekly classes and individual supervisory sessions with their course instructor on campus (Counseling and Psychological Services Department, 2005; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2001).

The subjects of this study included counseling practicum students from a graduate program in a medium-size, public university located in a rural area in the northeastern United States. The elementary school that hosted this study is one of four elementary schools in a small city within 15 miles from the university. Recently, the university and the elementary school developed a cooperative relationship as part of the Professional Development Schools (PDS) program. The PDS programs are collaborations between public schools and universities, where pre-service teachers, counselors and school psychologists learn "by doing" and university and public school faculty members together investigate questions of teaching and learning (Holmes Group, 1990). In this case, faculty from the School of Education and the counselor education department at the university and teachers and staff from the local elementary school collaborated to improve the education of future teachers, counselors and school psychologists.

Within the PDS program, a different model of counseling practicum training, unlike the traditional method of practicum, was developed in order to facilitate the graduate students' hands-on instruction. Theories of counseling, consultation, and group work, as studied at the university and their applications within schools were all addressed within the public school setting under the direct instruction of a university faculty member who was the practicum supervisor. The graduate students in the PDS model practicum did not divide their time between counseling sessions in their respective settings and the on-campus supervisory meetings and classes. Instead, all the students who participated in the PDS counseling practicum spent one day per week together at the PDS elementary school. They were given an empty classroom as a

home base for the day. The graduate students received all instruction and supervision in this private space. In addition, the practicum supervisor from the counselor education department spent the same day on site to conduct the group and individual supervisory meetings. The purpose of the availability of direct on-site supervision was to facilitate the integration of the students' learning objectives to the school environment and provide immediate feedback for the graduate students' individual counseling sessions and group leadership skills.

The rationale for developing this program is that graduate students often seem disconnected from the school environment when completing the counseling practicum course. They spend one day at their practicum site engaging in practice counseling sessions, but generally are unfamiliar with the staff in the building and are not aware of how schools attempt to meet the overall developmental needs of children. For instance, the more traditional training model does not focus on the diversity of roles and tasks required of school counselors and psychologists (Wood & Rayle, 2006). The PDS model facilitates students in becoming more fully integrated into the school environment by the active encouragement from the on-site practicum supervisor.

In addition, some graduate students may be hesitant to ask questions of their supervisor in their university supervisory meetings because the immediacy of a learning situation is over. Continuous and immediate feedback from the practicum supervisor and the other practicum students in the course shape the students' professional and personal behaviors. Students learned from each other as they discussed their work with children between counseling sessions. All of the participants ate lunch together at their home base so they had a chance to debrief and have case consultation on an on-going

basis throughout the school day. The constant interaction of all the participants contributed to the ongoing learning environment for the graduate students.

### Research Questions

This study sought to answer three broad questions, some of which included numerous sub-components.

1. Were there measurable differences between the two practicum models in terms of the graduate students' achievement of the counseling practicum course objectives?
2. Were there measurable benefits to the practicum students, above and beyond the course objectives, to the PDS model in comparison to the traditional counseling practicum model? In other words, how do the students respond in their ratings of the following items:
  - a. Overall quality of practicum experience
  - b. Perceived understanding of practicum students' roles and responsibilities by classroom teachers
  - c. Familiarity with school atmosphere
  - d. Amount of interaction with school staff (e.g. counselors, school psychologists, administration)
  - e. Amount of interaction with counseling clients in settings other than one-to-one sessions
  - f. Amount of collaboration observed between practicum supervisors and school personnel

- g. Relevance of information from supervisory meetings to practicum students' specific needs
3. Were there measurable differences in how classroom teachers in the traditional practicum sites and the PDS practicum site responded in their ratings of the following items:
- a. Overall satisfaction with counseling practicum experience
  - b. Fulfillment of a classroom need by counseling practicum program
  - c. Perception of classroom student enjoyment of counseling practicum experience
  - d. Reported improvement in student behavior after involvement with counseling practicum student
  - e. Amount of classroom teacher interaction with counseling practicum student
  - f. Amount of classroom teacher interaction with counseling practicum supervisor
  - g. Amount of communication between classroom teacher, counseling practicum student, and counseling practicum supervisor
  - h. Willingness to have counseling practicum students serve classroom students in the future

### *Hypotheses*

1. The hypothesis regarding expected outcomes to the first research question is that there will be no significant differences between the traditional counseling

practicum and PDS counseling practicum in terms of achievement of the counseling practicum course objectives.

2. The hypothesis regarding expected outcomes to the second research question is that there will be significant differences between the traditional counseling practicum and PDS counseling practicum in terms of student perception of their achievement of goals beyond the course objectives. Specifically, it is expected that the PDS practicum students will have more positive ratings of their practicum placement.
3. The hypothesis regarding expected outcomes to the third research question is that there will be significant differences between the classroom teachers' perceptions in the PDS site compared to teachers from other practicum sites. Specifically, it is expected that classroom teachers from the PDS site will have more positive ratings of the practicum experience.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 15 graduate students enrolled in counseling practicum, six students who were assigned to the PDS site and nine students who participated in the traditional practicum experience. Only those students whose practicum was at an elementary or middle school site were surveyed.

In addition, the sample consisted of 25 classroom teachers, 10 from the PDS site and 15 from other elementary and middle school practicum sites. All the teachers had children from their classroom who were seen for one-on-one counseling by the



practicum student. All student and teacher participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained.

### *Instrumentation*

Three surveys were developed for the study. The first student survey (Student Survey #1) was based on the course objectives in the Master Course Outline for Counseling Practicum (Counseling and Psychological Services Department, 2005). These objectives include using interchangeable responses, demonstrating physical attending skills, accurately identifying client concerns, and recognizing indicators of alcohol abuse. The students were asked to rate their acquisition of the 16 course objectives on a four-point Likert scale.

The second student survey (Student Survey #2) contained ten items that were developed to measure variables such as the student's overall opinion of their practicum experience and the amount of interaction with classroom teachers and other school personnel. Examples of items from the second student survey include "How would you rate the quality of your practicum experience?" and "How often did you interact with your clients' teachers(s)?" The questions were arranged on a four-point Likert scale. There was also a section for additional comments at the end of the survey.

The third survey (Teacher Survey) was for teachers and contained eight items that served to determine both their perceived benefit of the practicum program, as well as the amount of interaction between classroom teachers, practicum students and supervisors. Examples of questions include "How satisfied were you with the services provided by the counseling practicum students?" and "How often did you interact with

the counseling practicum student?" The questions were arranged on a four-point Likert scale. Like the student surveys, there was a section for comments.

### *Procedure*

The researcher met with each group of practicum students to explain the purpose and methods of the study and to request their voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained. The researcher collected the completed surveys.

In addition to the practicum students, classroom teachers were contacted to provide information. The supervisors of the practicum students in each building were asked to distribute the informed consent letter and the survey to the classroom teachers. The completed consents and surveys were mailed to the researcher.

### *Data Analysis*

After all of the surveys were collected, all data were entered into a spread sheet using Microsoft Excel© and the means and standard deviations for each group were determined. Also, t-tests were calculated for the means from each survey.

### *Limitations*

The size of the samples of practicum students (n=15) and teachers (n=25) was small which limits the power of the statistical analyses. In addition, while every effort was made to create student and teacher surveys with good face validity, the surveys were researcher developed and were not pilot-tested, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Also, the fact that the lead researcher is employed at the PDS practicum site needs to be considered. Because collaboration between practicum students and school staff is a variable being considered by this research, it is possible that prior

knowledge of the variables may have resulted in a change in behavior on the part of the lead researcher.

Because of lack of non-random assignment of practicum students to practicum sites, preexisting differences between students was not controlled by this study. Additionally, the impact of the site supervisor on the research outcomes was not controlled by the design. Both of these design limitations threaten the internal validity of the design.

### Results

The first hypothesis of this study was that there would be no significant differences between the traditional counseling practicum and PDS counseling practicum in terms of achievement of the counseling practicum course objectives. There were differences between groups and, consequently, this hypothesis was not supported by the data. Student responses on each survey item were combined and a mean score was calculated. The survey mean was used as an estimate of overall student achievement of the course objectives.

Table 1 contains the means and standard deviations of the Student Survey #1. The difference between the two means was statistically significant ( $t = 2.73, p = 0.02$ ).

*Table 1*

Students' Ratings of Practicum Outcomes

<b>Practicum Sites</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>
PDS Site	4.56	.003	6
Traditional	4.11	.015	9

The second hypothesis of this study was that there would be significant differences between the traditional counseling practicum and PDS counseling practicum in terms of student perception of their achievement of goals beyond the counseling practicum course objectives. The difference between the two means was statistically significant. Thus, the second hypothesis of this project was supported by the data. This hypothesis was tested with survey variables such as the student's overall opinion of his/her practicum experience and the amount of interaction with classroom teachers and other school personnel. Once again, student responses were combined and the mean score for the entire survey was calculated. The survey mean was used as an estimate of the students' overall rating of the practicum experience and the amount of collaboration and consultation that took place in the setting.

Table 2 contains the means and standard deviations of Student Survey #2. The mean responses for Student Survey #2, for the PDS and traditional counseling practicum sites, were 3.5 and 3.0 ( $t = 2.61, p = 0.01$ ).

*Table 2*

Students' Rating of Overall Practicum Experience

<b>Practicum Sites</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>
PDS Site	3.5	.001	6
Traditional	3.0	.003	9

The final hypothesis of this study was that there would be significant differences between the classroom teachers' perceptions in the PDS site compared to teachers from other practicum sites. Specifically, that the teachers at the PDS site would rate the

practicum program more favorably than teachers from other settings. This hypothesis was not supported by the data.

Table 3 contains the means and standard deviations of the Teacher Surveys. Twenty-five teacher surveys were returned, consisting of 10 surveys from the PDS site and 15 surveys from other elementary or middle school sites. The teacher survey measured the teachers' perceptions of the benefit of the practicum program, as well as the amount of interaction between classroom teachers, practicum staff and supervisors. Teacher responses were combined and a mean score for the entire survey was calculated. The survey mean was used as an estimate of the teachers' overall rating of the practicum experience.

The mean responses for the Teacher Survey, for the PDS and traditional counseling practicum sites, were 2.48 and 2.92 ( $t = 1.71$ ,  $p = 0.96$ ) respectively.

*Table 3*

Teachers' Ratings of Counseling Practicum Experience

<b>Practicum Sites</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>
PDS Site	2.48	.011	10
Traditional	2.92	.267	15

In addition to the quantitative data analysis, the teacher comments were examined as qualitative information. Comments were organized into categories depending on the theme of the comment. For example, teacher comments such as "There needs to be more communication" and "I would have liked to know a little bit about what kinds of activities were done with the children" were grouped together under the category "Increase Communication." Also, comments such as "Increase the

students' time on site to two days" and "Practicum Student should be involved in school more than one day per week" are categorized under "Increase Time on Site."

Table 4 contains the categories and frequency of teacher comments. Of the ten teachers from the PDS site, all ten contained additional comments. Of the 15 teacher surveys from other sites, 11 had additional comments.

*Table 4*

Teachers' Comments Regarding Practicum Experience

Categories	Frequency of Teacher Comments	
	PDS Site	Traditional Site
Increase Communication	10	6
Increase Time on Site	0	5

### Discussion and Summary

The results of the outcome comparisons between the practicum at the PDS site and the other sites were statistically significant for two out of the three hypotheses tested. Despite the previously discussed limitations in the design of this study, it is the opinion of the authors that these results have significant implications for the future practice and research of the counseling practicum.

The first hypothesis, in which there would be no significant differences between the sites in student achievement of the course objectives, was not supported. The PDS practicum students rated the extent to which their experience contributed to their acquisition of counseling skills as higher than students at other sites. This difference may be due to several factors. First, the perception of improved skill development may be attributed to the instructional milieu at the PDS site. As reported by Tyson (1997),

students in the PDS are able to observe and be taught by practitioners with expertise in education, while being able to engage in discussions with teachers, administrators and faculty. The structure of the PDS site, which allowed graduate students opportunities to consult with both university and school support staff, before, immediately after, and, sometimes as issues arose, may have been a factor in the development of this perception. In addition, on-site collaboration between practicum students, the university practicum instructor who is a certified school counselor, and the primary researcher who is an experienced school psychologist, may have contributed to the students' overall skill development.

The second hypothesis of this study was that there would be significant differences between the graduate students at the PDS and the traditional counseling practicum sites in terms of their overall satisfaction with the practicum setting, familiarity with the site, and perception of student-university faculty-school personnel collaboration. This hypothesis was supported by the data.

The higher means on Student Survey #2 from the PDS site suggest that students felt more positively about their experience than students at other sites. Also, the students reported more collaboration and consultation. Given that the university practicum instructor was on-site all day, the practicum students had consistent support and consultation services available to them. For instance, those difficult issues that practicum students often face (e.g. challenging the client, resistant teachers) could be addressed as they occurred, which was not the case with issues that arose in other groups. In cases where students at the traditional practicum sites could not speak with

their site supervisor to discuss a concern, they often had to wait for days until they met with their university instructor.

The implication of the more positive student ratings from the PDS site seems to be that the PDS practicum satisfies a student need that may be desirable to meet for students in all practicum experiences. The PDS structure allowed practicum students to communicate and collaborate frequently with university faculty and school faculty and staff. According to Bernard & Goodyear (2004), opportunities to receive a high degree of support and ongoing feedback from university staff and supervisors are important for pre-service counselors.

The third and final hypothesis of this study was that there would be significant differences between the classroom teachers' perceptions in the PDS site compared to teachers from other practicum sites. Specifically, that teachers from the PDS site would rate the practicum more favorably than teachers in other settings. This hypothesis was unsupported by the data. Overall, the results suggest that the classroom teachers at the PDS site did not see the practicum experience as positive as teachers in non-PDS sites. Supplemental qualitative information from the Teacher Surveys may illuminate these findings further.

#### *Supplemental Qualitative Information – Teacher Surveys*

While not specifically addressed by research hypotheses in this study, teacher comments provided some potentially valuable information regarding communication (or lack thereof) between the counseling practicum students and the classroom teachers. These issues may have contributed to the lower rating of the practicum experience by teachers at the PDS practicum site.



None of the classroom teachers at the PDS site felt that they had sufficient interaction with the practicum students. In fact, of the ten teacher comments, all ten indicated a concern regarding communication. The comments from teachers at the other sites, while certainly not with the singular focus of the PDS teachers, also indicated that communication was an area of concern. Of the 13 teacher comments, five referred specifically to this issue. For example, one teacher wrote that she didn't know the practicum students' names. In light of this information, it seems that opportunities to consult with classroom teachers should be built into the students' experience.

Another theme seen in the comments from teachers in traditional settings was the desire to have counseling practicum students spend more time at the site. Five of the 13 teacher comments addressed this issue. For example, one teacher wrote, "Practicum students should be involved with the school more than just one day a week." Comments like this may suggest a lack of knowledge on the part of teachers regarding the role, experience, and expectations of the practicum. Perhaps the university practicum supervisors need to provide more specific information to alleviate this concern. However, the comments regarding spending more time on site may also be indicative of an increased need for school counseling services, especially at the elementary and middle school level. The value of the practicum students' contribution to children in one day per week may highlight the need for full time counseling services within the schools.

### Summary

Within every counselor education program, the counseling practicum course helps lay the foundation on which pre-service counselors and school psychologists build

their counseling skills. Traditionally, these skills have been taught and developed in two separate settings: the on-site setting where the counseling is conducted, and the university setting where the supervision is provided. The interaction between the two sites is limited and often the learning experiences are discrete.

The new training model provides for a continuum of learning experiences, all under one roof. The practicum students at the PDS site had significantly higher ratings of their overall skill development, satisfaction with their practicum setting and communication between other students, their university supervisor, and school personnel. However, these differences were not seen from the classroom teachers' perspective. The need for improved communication between the practicum students and the classroom teachers was an expressed need.

The collaboration of a PDS school and a university counselor education program requires enthusiastic endorsement from both parties. The responsibility of the PDS school to find space to house this innovative program can be difficult. Also, accepting the influx of the entire group of practicum students into the school building on one day forces teachers and staff to be flexible physically and programmatically. Teachers must readily see student change for their sacrifices to be worthwhile.

On the other hand, the university practicum supervisor must adequately communicate the objectives of this new training model to the faculty and staff of the PDS school. It is suggested that a committee of interested teachers become involved in the planning process of such a program. Many of the inherent snags and misunderstandings may be avoided if more of the stakeholders are involved in the initial

planning. Further, on-going formative evaluation needs to occur. Receiving constructive feedback throughout the semester is vital rather than at the end of the experience.

After only its first semester of implementation, the new training model used at the PDS site seems to offer many promising practices for training counseling practicum students. The model is predicated on the belief that collaboration between school personnel and university faculty is critical (Abdal-Haqq, 1989). While the ultimate goal of a counseling practicum is the development of sound counseling skills, these skills do not develop in a vacuum. In the case of practicum students, consistent communication, collaboration and support with university faculty, practicum supervisors, school support staff and classroom teachers are integral and critical to their overall personal and skill development. With continued development and ongoing evaluation the new training model may realize its full potential as a place where students' counseling skills, collaboration and human relations skills can develop together.

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### Biographical Statements

Carlo Cuccaro, MS, CAS, is a school psychologist in the Fulton City School District in Central New York. He is also an adjunct instructor at the State University of New York at Oswego. The New York Association of School Psychologists recently named Mr. Cuccaro the School Practitioner of the Year.

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