

**Volunteering in the Camp Setting as a Learning Tool:  
Graduate Students Share their Experiences**

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**Abstract.** Experiential learning in the field is central to the training of many helping professionals, and field education is the signature pedagogy for social work. Service-learning offers another opportunity for graduate students in the helping professions to get hands on training. Volunteering would also offer a hands-on learning experience but appears to be less common. This study interviewed 14 master of social work (MSW) students who volunteered at a healing camp for bereaved children and adolescents to explore their lived experiences. The study revealed both professional and personal themes, and these were compared to themes divulged by similar students participating in service-learning courses. Based on this study, the researchers concluded that volunteerism can be a valuable means for graduate students in the helping fields to experience personal and professional growth.

Experiential learning in the field has been central in the training of many helping professions such as counseling and education (Atkinson & Murrell, 1988; Burns & Danyluk, 2017). This emphasis on experiential learning is also evident in social work education, where both internships and service-learning projects are important ways for social work students to acquire skills in the profession (Bogo, 2015; Kropf & Tracey, 2002). Indeed, The Council for Social Work Education (CSWE) is a strong proponent of social work students volunteering in the field to learn about the profession and gain practice experience in real life settings (Council on Social Work Education, 2020). However, studies on graduate students' lived experiences in a volunteer setting other than service-learning and internship settings are scarce. This study explores the lived experiences of 14 graduate social work students as they spend a weekend volunteering at a healing camp for bereaved children and adolescents.

**Background**

Direct experiential learning has long been considered central to the training of various helping professionals such as counselors (Lee & Kelley-Petersen, 2018), educators (Burns & Danyluk, 2017), social workers (Kropf & Tracey, 2002) and nurses (Merritt & Murphy, 2019). Service-learning combines a community field experience with academics (Donaldson & Dougherty, 2011). Kolb (1984) viewed learning as a

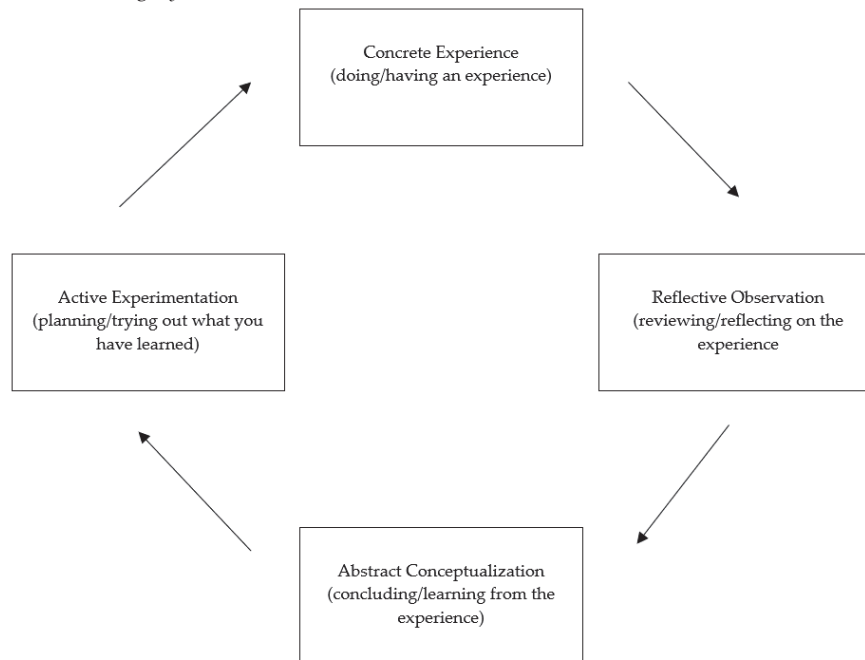
process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experiences. Learning is a continual process, and knowledge is created by reconstructing experiences into existing cognitive frameworks, which change the way a person thinks and behaves. The reconstruction of experiences is facilitated through a process of apprehension or comprehension. Apprehension is participation in the experience, and comprehension develops in abstract conceptualization that occurs outside of the actual experience.

For learning to occur, experiences must be transformed. This transformation happens through either extension or intention (Kolb, 1984). Extension is a process achieved by active external experimentation; intention is achieved through the reflections on the experience. To facilitate the process of taking an experience and transforming it into new ways of thinking and new behaviors, Kolb (1984) presents four stages in the learning cycle: concrete learning, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation (see Figure 1). Supplementing the classroom teaching, internships and service-learning with volunteering may be one way to aid in the learning cycle for students in the human services field. Volunteer experiences can foster the process of apprehension and comprehension while facilitating transformation through extension or intention.

**For learning to occur, experiences must be transformed.**

**Figure 1**

*Kolb's Learning Cycle*



*Note.* Adapted from “Kolb’s Learning Styles and Experiential Learning Cycle,” by S. A. McLeod, 2017, *Simply Psychology*, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html>. Copyright 2017 by Simply Scholar Ltd.

## Literature Review

Researchers examining the influence of service-learning experiences on graduate level counseling students have demonstrated the benefits of professional growth and skill acquisition for the participants (Lee & Kelley-Petersen, 2018; Midgett & Dumas, 2016). Counseling students participating in a service-learning project with refugee families reported increased appreciation for the needs of these families through the lens of their specific cultural context (Midgett & Dumas, 2016). Similarly, community counseling students experienced gains in their inclusion of social justice advocacy skills after participating in a service-learning assignment in a human development course (Lee & Kelley-Petersen, 2018). Using survey research methods Merritt and Murphy (2019), explored the potential professional benefits of service-learning for ten Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) students. These students worked in a service-learning clinic specifically for nursing students as a part of their advanced studies. Results of the study revealed general gains in participants' skills in diagnostic formulation and self confidence in working with diverse clinical populations (Merritt & Murphy, 2019). Additional support for the integral role of service learning was strengthened in a study of 42 graduate students taking a Psychology of Education course. Specifically, Stanke et al. (2019) used a quasi-experimental study design to evaluate students understanding and recognition of the benefits of service learning. Upon exposure to the pedagogical influences of service learning, study participants indicated increased recognition of the practical benefits of service learning for educators.

In social work, internships (Bogo, 2015) and assigned service-learning experiences provide students with beneficial exposure to similar but complimentary direct practice experiences (Kropf & Tracey, 2002; Lemieux & Allen, 2007). Some studies have examined the impact of service-learning among graduate social work students. In a quantitative study, 24 graduate social work students were enrolled in a service-learning class while serving as camp staff in various roles such as counselors, kitchen staff and photographers at a burn camp for children (Williams et al., 2002). A social work self-efficacy scale showed statistically significant increases in the students' perceived self-efficacy at the mezzo and macro levels, but not in micro practice skills. Forty-five students in a graduate social work program participated in a service-learning component of a course on diversity and oppression (Maccio, 2011). The service-learning project consisted of finding a gap in the services provided at their internship sites and then creating a service or product to fill the gap. The students' expectations of a positive service-learning experience were fulfilled, and service-learning was found to be beneficial to their overall social work education.

Qualitative studies on service-learning also show promising outcomes. A study of 21 graduate social work students participating in a burn camp that used journals, focus groups, and course evaluations revealed themes of students enhanced learning about self and the profession of social work (Williams & Reeves, 2004). Mitschke and Petrovich (2011) asked 28 graduate social work students to write a self-reflection paper after having partnered with a free community health clinic for Latino immigrants and Burmese refugees to produce low-literacy, multi-lingual resource brochures for these populations. Themes revealed included values analysis, where

students appreciated the opportunity to examine biases; knowledge application; increased awareness of cultural competence concerns and the challenges and resources available to this population; and increased motivation to serve. Students reported an increased sense of civic responsibility, motivation to serve, an understanding of the process and implementation of social work services and described these as personally challenging during the endeavor. In a study designed by Pierpont et al. (2001), 18 graduate social work students participated in a service-learning project interviewing families, service providers, administrators, planners, or consultants of a System of Care (SOC) program. Themes of learning from program participants and learning about policy were reported. The students saw the importance of client input in policy development and seeing the perspectives of clients and administrators. Berrick and Durst (2014) examined the experiences of 25 Title IV-E graduate social work students serving as Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) volunteers (Caliber Associates, 2004). Overall, students found this process to be positive, and they described it as a valuable learning experience.

While the literature regarding service learning in the education of helping professionals is significant, there is a noted gap in the literature addressing the role of volunteering as a part of education in these helping professions. While essential to professional preparation, typically service-learning involves the completion of courses for credit towards a professional degree and fall outside of a more traditional understanding of volunteerism as there is no expectation of overt or direct gain for the volunteer (Allen & Mueller, 2013).

The profession of social work has its roots in a tradition of service to vulnerable and marginalized people(s) and communities. For example, the early efforts by the “friendly visitors” could be viewed as altruistic volunteerism and in turn foundational to the evolution of professional social work practice (Gladden, 2018). One informative study did closely examine the experiences of volunteer undergraduate and graduate social work students in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. In their study, Plummer et al. (2008) determined that students who volunteered in these situations had strong commitments to the values of the social work profession.

Social work educators and practitioners have emphasized the importance of volunteer and service-learning activities by graduate students. However, service-learning opportunities are not offered at all graduate mental health programs. Since the number of nonprofits in the health and human services arena is increasing (McKeever, 2018), volunteering offers an additional opportunity for learning. Therefore, a closer examination of volunteering by graduate students is warranted. To contribute to this growing body of knowledge, the purpose of the current study is to describe in depth the lived experiences of MSW student volunteers at a healing camp for bereaved children. The primary research question posed in this study was what are the lived experiences made by MSW student volunteers at a healing camp for bereaved children?

### **Volunteer Setting**

The volunteer setting was an overnight weekend healing camp for children and adolescents who have lost a parent or sibling to death. The camp serves 30 children

ages 6-11 and 30 adolescents ages 12-18 at a time and is held with no repeat campers three times a year. While at camp, which uses a trauma-informed approach, the campers participate in typical camp activities such as a ropes course, canoeing, archery, and a talent show. In addition, the campers are divided into groups of 7-8 campers according to age and type of loss for participation in six trauma-focused grief counseling sessions. These sessions are led by a clinical social worker who is assisted by a co-leader, a Master of Social Work Student. The camp also provides a parallel experience for adult caregivers, typically a parent or grandparent, over the weekend, where they can process their own grief, learn about children's grief and support each other. The adult caregivers' group is also led by a clinical social worker. The camp is free of charge to all participants.

### **Methods**

In this study, 14 Master of Social Work students from a social work program with a clinical specialization in the Southeastern United States were interviewed to explore their experiences as volunteers at an overnight healing camp for bereaved children. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from the university by the research team: the founder of camp and director of the social work program (co-PI), a professor from the social work program who has volunteered several times as a clinical group leader (PI), and another professor specializing in child development in the same the social work program, who is not involved with camp (co-PI). Additionally, two graduate research assistants participated in the analysis of study data. This qualitative study, using the social work students' own words, contributes to the literature on social work education by presenting the impact the students' experiences had on both their educational and personal growth. The researchers used the case study design which bounded the sample from one year's three camp sessions by time and place (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The design allowed for a focus and the inclusion of multiple participant voices. The researchers posed the following questions to the participants: 1) What prompted you to sign up as camp volunteer? 2) What was it like to be a co-counselor at camp? 3) What was your greatest challenge? 4) What was your greatest personal benefit? 5) How, if at all, did your volunteering contribute to your social work education? The answers to the questions were analyzed with a focus on themes and categories verbalized by the participating students.

### **Procedure**

This study used a purposive sample. All students (15) who had participated in camp as volunteers over the past year were contacted by the researchers via email explaining the project and asking if they were willing to participate. Fourteen responded. One email was returned with an explanation that the address was invalid. Ten of the students had graduated from the program at the time of the interview, three were finishing up their second year and one their first year. All but one were in their second year of studies when they volunteered to participate as camp co-counselors.

Students who agreed to participate were sent a follow-up email to set a date and a time to meet. The research team held semi-structured interviews with

participating students after they had signed informed consents. Some of the participants were interviewed in a neutral setting (library, coffee shop, park), whereas others were interviewed in the researchers' offices.

The interviews lasted 40-50 minutes and were conducted over a two-month period. They were audio recorded and later transcribed by two graduate research assistants. After transcriptions, the audio recordings were deleted, and the transcriptions were stored in one of the researchers' offices in locked drawers. The researchers made field notes during the interviews that were also securely stored. Pseudonyms for the participants were used during transcriptions and analyses of the data. The researchers used the constant comparison method, probing for more information as it emerged in the interviews with subsequent study participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Although saturation of data (Polit & Beck, 2006) was reached after 8 interviews, the researchers completed interviews with all willing participants.

### **Participants**

All study participants (N=14) were female and ranged in age from 25 to 57 at the time of their participation in camp. Of these, nine were in their 20's, two in their thirties, and three in their fifties. Five were Black, eight White and one LatinX. Study participants were all graduate level social work students. One student was in their Generalist year of study while the remaining were second, Specialization year students at the time of volunteering. Volunteer applications screen out participants who have experienced a recent loss, but none of the students fell into this category. Students participated in mandatory camp training reviewing grief theories and trauma-focused grief interventions. Supervision and debriefing were provided ad hoc during the camp sessions and 7-10 days after the camp sessions.

### **Analysis**

The researchers included the PI and co-PI's and two graduate research assistants who used an inductive approach to reveal themes of the impact of volunteering at camp, finding a systematic interpretation of the interviews and field notes (Ezzy, 2002). Together the two graduate research assistants first transcribed, then reviewed the transcriptions and highlighted and color-coded responses that they felt were similar. The PI and co-PI's each used different copies of the transcripts, which they read and re-read. The PI and co-PI's looked for clusters, stressing consistencies and variations, to generate themes. The themes discovered by the graduate research assistants and the PI and co-PI's were compared by the researchers and coded. Large themes were then divided into various categories. Thus, because the researchers used both inductive and deductive analysis and both internal (PI and one co-PI) and external (one co-PI and graduate research assistants) researchers, trustworthiness was added to the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Patton, 2014).

### **Results**

The themes and categories drawn from the participant interviews are presented in terms of the impact the students' experiences as volunteers had on both

their educational and personal growth. Themes disclosed included *Challenges*, *Professional Growth*, *Career Choices*, and *Camper Transformation as Personal Benefit*. The theme of *Challenges* had three subcategories: *bearing witness*, *sleep deprivation*, and *disciplinarian vs therapist*. *Professional Growth* had five subcategories: *group dynamics*, *grief*, *suicide*, *being present*, and *skills application*. *Career Choices* and *Camper Transformation as Personal Reward* had no subcategories.

### **Challenges**

Most of the participating students experienced challenges during their volunteer work. These challenges included the categories of *bearing witness*, *sleep deprivation*, and *disciplinarian versus therapist role*.

#### ***Bearing Witness***

One of the most prominent challenges for the students, and expressed by all students, was bearing witness to the pain that the bereaved campers shared around their losses. Jenny, a young woman who lost her own mother when she was ten years old, stated, "It [listening to stories] was really emotional. It was very hard...it was hard not to get too emotionally invested. You kind of have to keep yourself at a distance". Tina, a young woman in her 30's with no previous intimate losses stated, even though camp turned out be exactly as she anticipated, bearing witness was a difficult task, "...having to listen and take in every story but not -re-traumatizing yourself by listening was challenging". She disclosed that she cried the whole way home after leaving camp Sunday afternoon. Processing these feelings with the camp director the following week was both needed and helpful to the student. Ellie, who denied having experienced loss, commented:

The stories are definitely hard sometimes. There's this one camper who her story was a violent murder of watching her father get decapitated and dismembered and those kind of stories are hard to hear in the moment, but its healing to that person and helpful to that person...

The fact that it was helpful for the camper to share the devastating process of her loss made it more bearable for the student volunteer to hear.

#### ***Sleep Deprivation***

Another challenge mentioned by the majority of the student volunteers was not getting enough sleep. Ellie stated, "It is just an emotionally draining weekend and then you also are not getting a lot of sleep, so sleep deprivation combined with just a lot of emotional overload is very tiring...". Ellie took the day after camp off from work to regroup, wash clothes, eat, and not talk to anyone. Ruth, a middle-aged woman who lost her sister as a teenager and subsequently three more siblings in quick succession, laughed when she shared it was difficult to have bath houses separate from the sleeping cabins but, "The worst part was just not getting enough sleep, but that's just the nature of working with high schoolers who are up late talking and giggling".



### ***Disciplinarian Versus Therapist***

Most of the students struggled with the concept of not being disciplinarians with the campers. They understood the concept of the trauma-informed care approach but found it to be a struggle not to intervene as a disciplinarian. Kate, a young student who came to camp to learn about grief and loss, commented that, "I guess when there was a point when I felt like I needed to do that [discipline], I felt I couldn't because it would ruin the rapport. So that's kind of difficult at times. But I understand why". Bella who is in her mid-50's had this to say about the difficulties of standing back and not be a disciplinarian:

...but a couple of them, a couple of the children were actually quite challenging to the point of endangering themselves and others so it's difficult at camp because we are not disciplinarians at camp, we are therapists and not really friends, we are there as support and it's difficult when they are out of control. I had one that was completely out of control. It is difficult to know where that line is to become that person, the enforcer or disciplinarian, or the one who needs to kind of say okay, like I get it, but this is not acceptable.

Bella sought help from the camp director with this particular child, and the child was excused from the following group session to assist the camp director with other duties. This assignment was so boring that they returned to group, and his participation notably improved.

### **Professional Growth**

Every student volunteer mentioned the learning that occurred at camp benefited their professional growth. The following subcategories impacted their professional learning: *group dynamics*, *grief*, *suicide*, *being present*, and *skills application*.

### ***Group Dynamics***

As volunteer co-counselors participating in group, it was not surprising that they reported learning a great deal about clinical group dynamics. Ruth, who at the time interned at a cancer clinic, expressed what she learned about important group dynamics:

I also learned just group dynamics and how to handle...one time he [group member] just overreacted in an angry manner to something that another kid in the group was saying...I mean it was over the top...so she [lead counselor] just never lost focus on the one kid who was talking because it was an important moment. So how to handle situations that were uncomfortable or maybe inappropriate...so this was really interesting to see a group with some challenges in it, where the behavior was challenging...I haven't had that at my internship....



Jenny agreed that camp provided opportunities for learning about group dynamics, “We are in groups class right now. It very much applied to what we learned recently...and that [camp] was a real-life application”.

### ***Grief***

By nature of volunteering at a healing camp for bereaved children and adolescents, the student volunteers stated they became aware of the grieving and bereavement process for children. Esther, a student volunteer in her late twenties, who disclosed that she has no personal experience with grief herself, said that “I’ve learned in this program that it’s important to distinguish between, ‘Oh, they are just acting out because they are kids’, and ‘Oh, they really are grieving and need some help’. Everyone is different, everybody grieves differently”. Kandi, a student volunteer in her mid-twenties, claimed, “I definitely learned about grief and it’s OK to talk about it. Talking about it means that you are in some form of moving towards and accepting what happened and being able to talk about it”.

### ***Suicide***

The volunteer students thought they received new and vital information about the complexities of suicide. Many of the students had a conventional view of suicide. They tended to blame the suicide victim for their actions without recognizing the complex and overwhelming pain the individual was experiencing. Kandi explained how what she had learned opened her eyes:

I’m surprised that I didn’t say it to begin with now that I know it, but I learned that it can be very offensive, and you really shouldn’t say a person “committed suicide”. And I hear that so much, but after it was explained to me that it’s “died from suicide” because it is caused by a mental disorder. I thought that was really important. I wish everyone in the world would know that it’s not “committed suicide” because committed suicide give suicide a negative connotation...so a lot of family members like to hush it, “oh don’t tell him that dad committed suicide”, or “she doesn’t need to know that”. So, it was really interesting to see that a lot of the kids’ paperwork says how their loved one died, and it will say suicide but in parentheses, “but she doesn’t know”.

Kate had a similar experience and found it useful in her work as a co-counselor:

One of the things I remember learning is how to get away from saying “they committed suicide”, and start saying that “they died from suicide”. And that whole conversation was interesting to have, because one of the kids in my group her father did die from suicide, so she just felt a lot of guilt like kids do and like “why would he do that”? and “I should have made him happy”. So being able to talk to them and be like “you know, he probably had depression and that is not something you can control”.

### ***Being Present***

Another important lesson learned from volunteering at camp included the skill of being present with clients. Karen, a second year MSW student volunteer, realized that she may have tried to rush things when working with the children:

Just being present with them in their moment and not trying to rush it...I learned patience. Being in this field, I want to help immediately...and being patient and letting people sit in silence and being comfortable in the silence when they are dealing with something or talking about something, that is really important.

Kristi, who after graduation ended up working in foster care, acknowledged an important lesson from camp about being present, "It's ok to not necessarily know what to say, but just be there and create that safe space and safe environment...to sit in silence".

### ***Skills Application***

The final subcategory under *Professional Growth* was *skills application*. Several of the student volunteers stated that they have been able to apply what they had learned at camp in their internships and other professional settings. Esther has used the skills she acquired at camp in her work at a children's hospital:

... a lot of times I will go into situations with a minimal consult for transportation, and it turns out "I don't have transportation because I was in a car accident, because my husband died". Just a spiral of things will come out. With camp I have been able to navigate those situations better...some people who are not getting these type of skills...they might kind of brush over it and not be able to talk to families about what they are going through.

Tina, who now works at a children's residential treatment facility, described how she was able to assist a young teenager, who had lost her brother, thanks to her experience at camp:

I will give an example of when I actually checked into my camp education. I had a case where the kiddo had lost her sibling and that was a huge part of why she was struggling emotionally with suicidal ideations...her acknowledgement [of her loss] happened around the one-year anniversary, so I wanted to do something for her...I asked her, "do you want to do a balloon release"...I drove to [grocery store]...then I asked, "Is there a message you want to release in the balloon"? and she lit up and we released the balloon in the middle of the parking lot at [treatment facility]. Afterwards we talked about whatever she wanted to talk about...and at the end she was like, "Ms. Tina, I have not shared that story with anybody, I appreciate you listening to the entire story", so I remember thinking this is camp, but one on one.

### **Career Choices**

The volunteer experience at camp also influenced the volunteers' future career choices. Although this was not true for all of the student volunteers, half of the participants mentioned this as an outcome of their camp experience. Reagan, who now works with oncology patients, stated, "I didn't even realize that I enjoy doing stuff with bereavement, maybe enjoy is the wrong word but you know. It [camp] definitely boosted my career interest because now I do a lot with bereavement". Esther reported similar feelings:

It [camp] has touched me in my work. Now I'm looking into doing hospice which I would never had imagined I would do, because I've worked seven years with kids in healthcare. I would never have thought about the late stages of life...they need somebody to be there...so in a lot of ways, it has really affected me.

### **Camper Transformation as Personal Reward**

All the student volunteers mentioned that they benefitted from the volunteer experience on a very personal level. Everyone stated that it was satisfying to watch the children transform during camp and know they had been a part of it. The transformation experience of the campers during their weekend at camp was most meaningful to the students. Tina had this to say about the transformations she witnessed in the children and how meaningful it was to her personally,

Seeing the kids at the end. There is a big difference between the kids on Friday versus the kids on Sunday. You can see there's a transformation in a matter of three days...not wanting to be there, especially the older kids. They look livid on Friday and by Sunday morning it's all smiles, all engagement, and they are thanking you for the whole weekend...that part is the most meaningful – you see a huge difference.

Bella felt a powerful and intrinsic reward as she witnessed the transformation the campers experienced and for having been part of it:

I have never ever, ever, ever in all my years as a mom, as a parent, as a person, or therapist even, seen such a quick transformation from such a distraught, down not good place to a place of hope and enlightenment. There's just a feeling of, it's almost like an empowerment...It is an amazing thing to see the kid who is a nasty, rotten, angry, confused child on Friday and see him on Sunday smiling and having friends. All that is just one of the most rewarding things I've ever done.

### **Discussion**

In this study the researchers wanted to answer the research question what are

the lived experiences of MSW student volunteers at a healing camp for bereaved children and adolescents? The study revealed professional and personal growth-related themes: *Challenges, Professional Growth, Career Choices, and Camper Transformation as Personal Benefit*. Subcategories under *Challenges* included *bearing witness, sleep deprivation, and disciplinarian vs therapist*. Subcategories under *Professional Growth* included *group dynamics, grief, suicide, being present, and skills application*.

Examining the lived experiences of these volunteers revealed a profound impact on their personal and professional growth. The MSW student volunteers were able to make connections and apply what they were learning in the classroom while simultaneously practicing new clinical skills. The students' learning was thus transformed through extension and intention (Kolb, 1984), where the students participated in active external experimentation taking part as co-counselors (apprehension) and internal reflection (comprehension) during de-briefings and in the follow up interviews. In the category of *skills application* and the theme of *career choices* an increase in self-efficacy was noted among the students, which is at the heart of direct experiential learning.

Findings in this study correspond with themes found in Williams et al.'s (2002) study, where students experienced an increased sense of self efficacy and growth. Interestingly, the current study revealed increased clinical practice skills, whereas Williams et al. (2002) found study participants did not report an effect on micro level practice skills. This may be explained by the fact that the camp in this study provided a clinical curriculum for its participants that the student volunteers helped deliver. The current study findings are similar to those of Williams and Reeves' study (2004). Their study found that students engaged in a service-learning project at a burn camp felt that they learned more about the nature of the social work profession. The student volunteers in the current study not only increased their clinical knowledge but also considered new practice arenas. The findings in the current study also parallel the results reported by Lee and Kelley-Petersen (2018), Merritt and Murphy (2019), Midgett and Dumas (2016) and Stanke et al. (2019), who revealed that service-learning lead to professional growth and/or skill acquisition among graduate counseling, nursing and education students. What this study does have in common with the service-learning experiences referenced in the literature is that both service-learning and volunteering are valuable educational experiences for graduate students (Lee & Kelley-Petersen, 2019; Maccio, 2011; Merritt & Murphy, 2019; Midgett & Dumas, 2016; Mitschke & Petrovich, 2011; Pierpont et al., 2001; Stanke et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2002; Williams & Reeves, 2004). The volunteer experiences reported by the participants profoundly impacted their professional identity development. Professionally, the students applied new skills in practice. Personally, the students learned to bear witness to and appreciate the profound impact grief, loss, and suicide had on the campers.

This combination of professional and personal growth experiences helped the students see themselves, their clients, and the social work profession in a new way. Their experiences fostered an exploration of themselves as professionals that impacted where they saw themselves in future practice, opening areas not previously considered. This professional development was not just beneficial for the bereaved children but meaningful for the students as well.

## **Limitations**

The students who participated in this study are enrolled in a Master of Social Work program, where two of their professors are involved with the camp – one is the founder of the camp, and one volunteers as a clinical group leader. Although the third professor is not involved directly in camp activities, it is possible that the students felt they needed to answer the researchers' questions in a way that reflected a positive attitude towards camp to please the professors or in hopes of a more positive grade. To mitigate this possibility, the researchers adhered to strict qualitative research methods.

Volunteer applications revealed that three of the students had previously experienced significant loss in their lives. However, these losses were not recent. It is possible these students experienced camp differently, whether in a positive or negative light. In this study, the participants were not asked about specific countertransference reactions. Even though countertransference did not emerge as a theme in the analysis and was not overtly evident in the group sessions with the children, a few students recognized this was an issue for them. Supervision with the lead counselors and the camp director immediately after group and after the weekend was helpful.

Although interviews provide in-depth information about the lived experiences of the social work students who volunteered at a healing camp for bereaved children and teens, only fourteen student volunteers participated in the study (N=14). The purposive but small sample of participants in this study makes the generalizability of study findings to a larger population questionable (Merriam, 2002). However, this study generated important additional information for the future study of social work students volunteering, and the process of natural generalization may become evident (Stake, 2000).

Finally, all of the student volunteers in this study self-identified as women and many were in their 20's. This may have impacted their experience of camp, but it was not specifically explored by the researchers.

## **Implications for Future Studies**

In this study all of the study participants were social work students, female, and predominately White. Future research with a more diverse population both regarding gender, ethnicity, and discipline would provide additional data for analysis and add to the limited body of research in this area. An outside researcher, one not connected to the school or camp programs, would also be a consideration.

Also, exploring the lived experiences of student volunteers while considering additional variables such as prior volunteer experience and familiarity with the population served would be of interest in the future. The types of emotional investment and motivations of the participants could reveal more nuanced findings and additionally informative study findings and conclusions. Future studies specifically examining the experience of student countertransference in similar practice settings would provide informative outcomes, enhancing the knowledge base in the area of study.

### **Implications for Education**

The results of this study have important implications for graduate education. Bereavement camps and other specialty camps are becoming more prevalent and popular as methods for support and intervention for a variety of populations (McClatchey & Wimmer, 2018). The specialty camp setting offers a meaningful healing experience for the camp attendees and professional growth experience for the student volunteers. For these students, volunteering in this and similar settings gives them a meaningful real-life opportunity to develop and practice skills they are learning in the classroom.

This integration of theory and practice is invaluable for students as they graduate from the role of student to that of professional social workers. As volunteers, students in this study experienced the four stages of Kolb's learning cycle (1984). Concrete learning occurred in orientation to the camp curriculum. Reflective observation was evident in supervision. Abstract conceptualization occurred in the classroom and orientation to a trauma-focused approach, and active experimentation took place in vivo during group sessions. Volunteering would thus serve as an additional opportunity for graduate students in human services professions to be further invested in the four stages of the learning cycle (Kolb, 1984).

Social work, education, nursing and counseling programs would do well to connect with specialty camps to offer their students this type of lived experience. Not all graduate programs offer service-learning projects, and the current study highlights the importance of providing and encouraging volunteering within the educational experiences of graduate students. Volunteer opportunities provide unique learning experiences for students. With the pressures and performance anxieties related to grades and academic pressures removed from volunteer experiences, students can focus on their learning. Students who participate in volunteer experiences can bring knowledge gained into the classroom in a variety of ways such as reflection papers or presentations to their class or cohort about their volunteer experiences. These presentations can be a way to share experiences and recruit future volunteers. Graduate programs, with the help of students, could provide and maintain information on volunteer opportunities for students in their communities.

While volunteer learning experiences are beneficial to students, the ability to volunteer while completing a full-time master's program is a luxury that not all students have. Many students are juggling employment and family responsibilities while attending classes and completing field internships hours and may not have the time or ability to volunteer.

It is important to note that volunteering does not involve completing class assignments or receiving grades. Therefore, when volunteering to complement their education, students need to have an opportunity to reflect on their experiences to transform their learning (Kolb, 1984). Debriefings and personal interviews can facilitate this process.

### **Conclusion**

In this study the examination of the lived experiences of MSW student

volunteers at a healing camp for bereaved children delineated important themes and distinct subcategories collected from the researchers' interviews of the study participants. These experiences are described from the point of view of students immersing themselves in an 'up close and personal' clinical experience that challenged their nascent professional practice skills and gave them an awareness of their own personal reactions to and understandings of grief, loss, and bereavement.

Our study suggests that meaningful social work education requires the student to practice the balancing act of gaining clinical experience while repeating the process of exposure to, and joining with, the client and their struggle (Hepworth et al., 2013). Clearly, serving as a witness to a child's unique bereavement journey was unexpectedly challenging and encouraged thoughtful introspection and reflection. By helping bereaved children reauthor and reframe their painful grief narratives, the students were able to accompany the children on a path to healing from tragic loss and a need to grieve. *Camper transformation as personal reward* and *being present* powerfully impacted the student volunteers in some similar but also uniquely personal ways.

The social work tradition of learning by doing is indeed central to the development of professional skill and identity (Hepworth et al., 2013) and is reflective in Kolb's learning theory (1984). Volunteering can provide graduate students in the human services field an additional opportunity to apply newly learned and developing skills.

The Council of Social Work Education (2020) is a proponent of students volunteering and states, "Volunteering is a great way to learn more about the field. Volunteer work can help secure scholarships and work-study programs because it demonstrates your dedication to the field". Graduate students, though frequently overwhelmed with the challenges inherent in the helping professions, may recall and reconnect with their initial interest in and growing commitment to their field by volunteering. Thoughtful reflection on the findings of this study points to the complex challenges of practical skill development while remaining authentically present with acutely vulnerable and traumatized clients.

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*“The story of human learning is a beautiful tale woven into the tapestry of our distant, our recent, and – indeed – our own personal past” (p. 5).*

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