

**Supervision of School Counseling Students: A Focus on  
Personal Growth, Wellness, and Development**

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### **Abstract**

Results of a grounded theory study exploring the experiences and processes of school counseling students' professional and personal growth are provided. The researchers used focus groups over a two-year period to better comprehend students their experiences of growth. Several themes emerged: defining personal growth, wellness, and clinical growth as a professional school counselor. Within each of these major themes several sub-themes exist. Given that this was a grounded theory study, a model regarding how school counselors' experience and process both professional and clinical growth is included. Finally, implications for school counselors working as supervisors of practicum and internship students are provided with the intent to help supervisors understand the developmental differences and needs for counseling students.

*Keywords:* personal growth, school counseling, supervision

## **Supervision of School Counseling Students: A Focus on Personal Growth, Wellness, and Development**

The authors begin this article with a description of personal growth, wellness, and counselor development and situate these in the context of supervision for school counseling practicum and internship students. Because the literature base is small regarding the implementation of supervision in the school settings, several counseling supervision models will be presented. Finally, the authors will describe the purpose, methods, and findings of a qualitative study that explored the experience and process of personal growth and wellness of school counseling students, and provide implications for supervisors in school counseling settings. Findings of this study support understanding and integrating counselor trainees' development, growth, and wellness within the context of school counseling supervision.

### **Personal Growth and Wellness**

Use of the term personal growth is ubiquitous in the counseling field; however, no single agreed upon definition exists for this for this term. In general, personal growth involves movement or change toward increased self-awareness, self-examination, and the understanding of one's impact on others. Despite a lack of agreement regarding a definition, since the 1950's research has consistently acknowledged that the personal growth of counselors is essential to their effectiveness with clients (e.g., Ametrano, 2014; Kern, 1996; Rogers, 1956) and counselors' professional development (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Because both earlier studies and more recent findings demonstrate the impact of personal growth on counseling students' professional growth (Christopher, Christopher, Dunnagan, & Schure, 2006; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Young,

Reysen, Eskridge, & Ohrt, 2013), counseling programs that are accredited by the Council of Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) have adapted their curricular format to include personal growth and wellness as an integral component for counseling students' professional development (CACREP, 2009). The concepts of personal growth and wellness are distinct but also intertwined. CACREP defines wellness as "a culturally defined state of being in which mind, body, and spirit are integrated in a way that enables a person to live a fulfilled life." (CACREP, 2009, p. 62). As the authors Burck, Bruneau, Baker, and Ellison (2014) acknowledged, a vast literature base exists on wellness in general and wellness as a paradigm by which counselors practice (i.e., [www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/counselor-wellness](http://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/counselor-wellness)), which distinguishes counselors' from other mental health professions. In their study on wellness in emerging counselors, Burck et al. (2014) found that while master's degree-level counseling students have a high level of wellness, many students reported distress comparable to counseling clients, students entered the counseling program with varying degrees of wellness, and students' wellness fluctuates over time and situation. These authors suggest, similar to findings in other studies on counselor wellness (e.g., Lawson & Myers, 2011), that when counselors take better care of themselves, they are more effective with their clients. In addition, this study acknowledged that practicum and internship site supervisors need to emphasize wellness with their students to facilitate counselor development.

### **Stages of Counselor Development**

In their seminal study, Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) illustrated their findings on counselor development through dividing them into six phases. The lay helper phase

occurs before the student enters a counseling graduate program. In this phase, students tend to give advice to others and speak from their own experience. The beginning student phase when students are in a counseling program is seen as exciting and challenging and students experience anxiety and apprehension. Students are characterized as needing support as their anxiety is calmed by positive feedback from supervisors and from normalizing their experience. During the advanced student phase, which is when students are in their counseling internship, students may exhibit caution and perfectionism. Their experiences in supervision have particular significance, as the supervisor may be target of the intern's anxiety. Supervision at this phase is usually experienced as positive, but conflicts may peak at this phase. Students typically may still be externally focused, but begin to increase their internal focus. The novice, experienced professional, and senior phases occur in order during post-graduation and also involve developmental changes, which are beyond the scope of this study.

When the results of the Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) study are assimilated with research regarding counselors' personal growth and wellness, professional development emerges as an experience that involves increased integration of professional self and the personal self. For supervisors of counseling students, understanding how personal growth and wellness are closely linked with professional development is essential to providing effective supervision.

### **Supervision Training for School Counselors**

Supervising school counselor trainees, including practicum students and interns, may be an expected job requirement for school counselors. However, few opportunities exist for school counselors to receive training in conducting supervision once they

graduate from counseling programs (Nelson & Johnson, 1999). As a result, most school counselors provide supervision without having received formal supervision training. Also, because school counselors often are not formally trained supervisors, they may not utilize established supervision models that provide a framework and structure for approaching supervision (W. B. Roberts & Morotti, 2001). Limited research exists regarding the supervision practices of school counselors who are supervising school counseling students (Kahn, 1999).

Studies by Peterson, Goodman, Keller, and McCauley (2004) and Littrell and Peterson (2005) demonstrated the importance of sufficient training for counseling students entering the school environment. As students switch from academic learning in their graduate program to clinical practice in schools, it is particularly important to attend to their developmental processes in both clinical practice and knowledge of the school system. School culture which consists of “understanding teachers, politics, protocols, relationships among school personnel, and school structures; adjusting to time and space constraints” is often unfamiliar to counseling students, especially those who have not taught in the school system (Peterson & Deuschle, 2006, p. 269). Inevitably, when school counselor trainees first enter a school they look to the current school counselors for guidance and advice on how to do it correctly.

As supervisors of school counseling trainees, school counselors typically provide supervision in three areas: administrative, programmatic, and counseling (E. B. Roberts & Borders, 1994). Administrative supervision is focused on attendance and punctuality, staff relations, and outreach to parents. Programmatic supervision aims to assist trainees in honing their skills in program development, implementation and coordination.

Counseling supervision is focused on enhancing trainees' clinical knowledge, ethics, and skills in working with individual students. While school counselors tend to have ample understanding of the administrative and programmatic components, more attention is needed regarding supervision approaches, which focus on the counseling skills of trainees. To "meet students where they are at" effective supervisors must understand where students are in their developmental process, both personally and professionally.

### **Models of Counseling Supervision**

Littrell, Lee-Borden, and Lorenz (1979) presented a model that emphasizes a developmental approach, which addresses the stages of the supervision process and the adjustment of roles (teacher, counselor, or consultant) specific to the stages. In this model, supervisors match their behavior to the development needs of the trainees. This model provides a framework for understanding the stages of the supervision process but does not discuss flexibility in roles or accommodate for the complexity of the supervisory relationship. An example of need for flexibility in the supervisory relationship was offered by Peterson et al. (2004) who suggested that some counselors may become comfortable in a particular role, but to provide effective supervision, it is important to identify the role that best fits the intern's developmental stage. For example, school counselor supervisors who are former teachers may be most comfortable in a teaching role, yet the student may have progressed to being a capable clinician who would benefit from making more decisions, and thus, having a supervisor who would assume a consulting role. Littrell and Peterson (2005) also developed a

specific school counseling model, although the focus was not on supervision of students.

Bernard's (1979,1997) discrimination model expands on the stages of the Littrell et al. (1979) model by providing opportunities to distinguish the different supervisor roles based on the needs of the supervisee. This model combines supervisor roles (teacher, counselor, or consultant) with three foci for supervision intervention, conceptualization and personalization skills). Any of the three roles may be used with each of the three foci depending on the needs of the trainee. This model can be identified as a social role model of supervision as it focuses on the roles that supervisors engage in during clinical supervision and was developed at a time when many supervisors were using counseling theory in supervision. This model is atheoretical in that it is not founded on any specific counseling theory, but focuses instead on the needs presented by the supervisee.

Luke and Bernard (2006) expanded the components of the Bernard (1979, 1997) discrimination model beyond counseling supervision to specifically address school counselors' roles in the school. In this model, the three foci are expanded: For example, intervention includes supervising skills such as conducting classroom lessons, coordinating with teachers, students understanding of the multiple roles of a school counselor. Conceptualization may involve the supervision of students' understanding of school activities that school counselors facilitate. Personalization skills emphasize the students' ability to conduct themselves professionally in a variety of situations, in addition to individual counseling. Supervisors' roles are expanded to assist supervisees' in developing their skills in the focus areas.

Nelson and Johnson (1999) proposed an integrated approach to supervision of school counselors. This model, which combines the Littrell et al. (1979) model and Bernard's (1979, 1997) model, meets the needs of school counselors providing supervision to interns. The integrated model focuses on providing supervision specific to the supervisee's counseling skill development. It integrates stages of the supervision process with the different supervisor roles. Nelson and Johnson (1999) posited that combining the two models above allows for increased flexibility and understanding of both the development of the supervisee and the roles of the supervisor. Expanding on Littrell et al. (1979) stages, Nelson and Johnson (1999) categorized a school counselor's internship into four stages: orientation, working, transition, and integration. This model suggested counseling students might not progress through all of these stages during their training.

Orientation, which occurs during the intern's first few weeks, sets the tone for supervision and the internship experience. During the orientation stage, both supervisor and supervisee clarify mutual expectations, including mutual respect and encouragement. In this stage, the sense of structure adds to a trainee's sense of security. Thus, it is useful for supervisor to assume both a teaching and counseling role. Supervising in a consulting role at this early stage may leave the intern feeling confused and anxious. During the working stage, the internship trainee starts interacting with students, teachers and parents. The intern may be conducting classroom activities and learning about school and classroom policies and procedures. It is appropriate during this stage that the interns take risks, thus the supervisor provides support and guides them as they try new things. The supervisor most likely assumes a teacher or counselor

role, however, the specific role the supervisor takes is based on what the supervisor believes the intern needs. In the transition stage, the intern gains confidence and experience and the supervisor adopts a more collegial role. Interns are encouraged to think for themselves. The supervisor is typically able to assume more of a consultant role, while maintaining the teacher or counselor role as necessary. The integration stage is the final stage where interns begin developing professional identity. Interns work more independently and have more confidence and in response to this progression, supervisors focus more on the consultation role. At this point, supervisors assist the interns in integrating their internship experience with their professional identity. While the supervisory relationship starts as an apprenticeship, if interns reach the integration stage, the relationship ends as partnership. Given the length of internship for most counseling trainees, many interns will reach not this stage during their master's degree training. This model is theoretical and we were interested in what students' developmental processes encompassed during their training.

Therefore, the research question guiding this study was: What are students' experiences and processes of growth, wellness, and development as they progress through a counseling program to better inform counselor training and supervision? This understanding provides valuable information when coupled with supervision models, so that educators and supervisors can effectively recognize students' level of growth and further facilitate students' development at various stages in students' training.

### **Method**

Grounded theory methodology was used to understand both the experiences and the processes of school counseling students' growth and development in a counselor

education program. Glaser and Strauss (1967) designed grounded theory as an approach for conducting qualitative research. This method, in which data are collected and simultaneously analyzed in order to construct a theory, facilitates further data collection and analysis to reach a point of saturation (Charmaz, 2006). Saturation is reached when new information is not emerging. The researchers of this study found that after three years of data collection no new information was emerging across focus groups. Strategies used for collecting data are flexible and serve the purpose of deriving a theory of the social or phenomenological topic being studied (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012). For the purpose of this study the researchers aimed to understand the experience and process of school counselor growth and development; therefore, the researchers implemented grounded theory methodology to understand this phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006).

### **Researcher Statement**

Both of the researchers are faculty members within the program that was studied. The area of study was of particular interest to both authors as one of the strengths of our program is the focus on the professional and personal growth and development of our students. Given that we both supervise clinical courses (e.g., counseling skills, practicum, and internship), we had a unique interest in understanding students' growth and development in order to enhance our supervision of counselors in training. According to Van Manen (1990) the focus of research topics should be of specific interest to the researchers. As researchers we hypothesized that growth, both professional and personal, would occur for students; however, this assumption was grounded in the extant literature on counselor development, as well as narrative

accounts of past students. However, we wanted to specifically understand how students perceived and understood their own growth at various points in the program.

Additionally, we were interested in students' description of critical learning experiences they gained from our counseling program. The themes ascertained during the course of this study have significantly influenced both authors as we have used this information to inform our own supervision, as well as shared the findings with internship site supervisors.

### **Participants**

After IRB approval was received to conduct this study, participants were identified as "new," "first year" and "second year" school counseling students enrolled in a CACREP accredited master's degree level counseling program at a university in the northwest region of the United States. Students voluntarily gave consent for participation in focus groups to be held at key developmental points in their counseling program. Focus groups were conducted separately for each group of students and were audiotaped. "New" students had begun their first semester of academic courses but had not entered clinical training courses. "First year" students had completed their skills training course and had not started practicum coursework. "Second year" students had completed a semester or more of their nine-month clinical internships. Given that this study was a qualitative investigation exploring students' growth and development, many of the same students participated in focus groups several times (new, first year and second year points) in order to better understand their developmental process. Research assistants transcribed focus groups from audiotape, and students' responses were coded (person A, B, C, etc.) so students' identities remained anonymous. Thus,

students were not identified nor tracked regarding their individual developmental processes.

The counseling program from which participants volunteered for this study is a relatively small program in the northwestern United States, with three tracks: school, mental health, and couple and family. At the time of study approximately 50 students were in the program. The program uses a cohort model, thus, students who are admitted in the same year progress through their programs of study together with the exception course work that is specific to their track (which is approximately three or four courses). Program duration is typically two-years (including summer sessions), full-time (at least nine credits a semester) and students range in age and experience in the mental health field.

### **Data Collection**

To gain an in-depth perspective on experience and process, focus groups provide an opportunity for rich discussion to emerge among participants (Creswell, 2007). Because the counseling program in this study uses a cohort model for training, the dialogue between students was a valuable method to facilitate meaningful recognition for students of their own experiences and developmental processes. The researchers came to this conclusion after using focus groups for a year and then using Survey Monkey instead of focus groups; believing that Survey Monkey would provide a venue for participants to give more detailed descriptions without the pressure of the group. However, the response rate to Survey Monkey was low and those who did respond did not provide enough detail to derive any data; therefore, a decision was made to return to the focus group format for the final year of data collection.

A total of six focus groups were conducted with school counseling students. In the first round of focus groups, five new students participated, five first-year students participated, and seven second-year students participated. In the second round of focus groups, six new students participated, two first year students participated, and two second-year students participated. Thus, a total of 27 students participated in the study.

Focus groups were conducted by two second-year master's degree level counseling student research assistants, who were trained by the first and second authors to facilitate focus groups. Both authors have training and experience in facilitating focus groups. The research assistant audiotaped and then transcribed all of the focus groups to maintain the anonymity of the speakers. The research assistants did not participate in the focus groups. The first author reviewed the focus group transcripts to ensure that the manner of asking questions was consistent across interviews.

The focus groups utilized a structured set of questions to maintain trustworthiness across cohort groups. The questions we asked students were:

1. How would you define personal growth/wellness? (What do you think comprises personal growth/wellness?)
2. Is there a difference between the two?
3. How would you describe your personal growth/wellness at this point?
4. How does the program (classes, supervision) affect your personal growth?
5. How would you define clinical growth?
6. How would you describe your clinical growth at this point?
7. How does the program (classes, supervision) affect your clinical growth?

According to Maxwell (2005), the key to validity when working with a qualitative research framework pertains to potential threats to researcher interpretation regarding

the phenomena under study. For this study the authors engaged with the phenomena of study over a two-year period. Additionally, the sources of data were enhanced by data collection occurring at three points during each year of the study. Finally, we employed a qualitative data analyst who specializes in grounded theory analysis to confirm the themes coded by the authors and research assistant. Use of a data analyst was intended to decrease bias by assuring that the authors were not misinterpreting the meaning of students' responses based on the authors' own experiences as faculty in the counseling program.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcripts were analyzed by both of the authors and a research assistant. First, the researchers and the research assistant analyzed the data independently. Second, the researchers and research assistant met over at least three meetings to discuss the themes that had emerged in our independent data analyses. Through an iterative process we were able to reach consensus regarding agreement on themes in the data. The research assistant was a student in the program at the time of the study, which provided an additional perspective that enhanced our discussion and provided additional confirmation of emergent themes. Third, a qualitative data analyst conducted data analysis using Atlas.ti qualitative analytic software, which confirmed the themes that the authors and research assistant had previously identified.

### **Results**

The following summary analysis presents the key findings of focus groups conducted with new, first-, and second-year students in a school counseling program.

Key themes that emerged from both levels of analysis across the focus groups are summarized and presented together with quotes that illustrate each theme.

### **Defining Personal Growth**

Students were asked to define 'personal growth. Broadly, students associated personal growth with self-improvement, self-reflection, and the appreciation of different perspectives. Additionally, students linked personal growth with life challenges, and described personal growth as an ongoing, dynamic process.

**Self-improvement.** One of the most common characterizations of personal growth was its link to positive change and self-improvement. One first year student described it as: "I think personal growth for me would be to better myself as a person, as a professional... just to better myself in general, to learn more, to adapt."

**Self-reflection.** Students also related personal growth with self-awareness and self-reflection, noting that growth results from a willingness to examine, question, and if necessary change one's perspectives, beliefs, or values. A new student stated: "With personal growth, I have a lot of room to grow. I'm thinking about things and me that I've never really thought about before... And about why I am the way I am." A second year student reflected: "I think it has to do with self-awareness. Self-awareness, especially as far as being able to acknowledge our values and how we work with them in a counseling relationship, but also in our personal relationships, and how those play out."

**Appreciating different perspectives.** Students related their personal growth to how one interacts with others, and the ability to understand, appreciate, and collaborate with those whose perspectives may be different from one's own. Students linked a better understanding of one's own perspective (resulting from the self-reflection

described above) to the ability to appreciate and work with others who may have different perspectives. A first year student stated:

“It’s understanding that other people are coming from a different perspective. They’re coming from a different place, and finding a way to work with them even through differences, being able to collaborate and communicate with one another effectively; being able to understand their differences.”

A second year student described:

“It’s also being able to look outside of yourself, also... as a part of personal growth. Because it’s one thing to recognize it within yourself, but ... everyone has a different perspective... even when having the same experiences... That’s a huge part of personal growth, being able to look outside [yourself].”

**Learning from life challenges/struggles.** Students related personal growth to the ability to learn from life’s challenges or struggles. Students explained that the process of overcoming and/or learning from life challenges often results in the gaining of important experiential knowledge that they characterized as growth.

Two new students spoke about this:

Student 1: “You’re going through life, and there’s a bump in the road, and you become “depressed” so that’s “negative.”

Student 2: “And something “bad” can come, but you still... learn.”

Student 1: “Yeah, I guess that’s what I mean, cause it’s all ... So, you’ve got your down-falls but you still grow and... yeah!”

Student 2: “And hopefully you’re getting improvement; whatever improvement you can get out of it.”

**An ongoing, dynamic process.** Participants, second year students in particular, emphasized that personal growth is not linear, but rather is a fluid, dynamic process. A

second year student explained that the level of personal growth can change on a day-to-day basis:

“The change and the growth is, I think, all over the place. I mean, there are some days, that I think I am hyper-aware of other people in my personal life, and how they’re feeling and maybe how I should interact with them, and there are other days, when I’m exhausted and I’m actually more critical of them, because I realize what’s going on, but I don’t have that energy to put that effort in.... So it’s hard, because I’m still in flux and depending on the day or the week.”

### **Defining Wellness**

As with personal growth, students were asked to define and describe the concept of ‘wellness.’ Students linked wellness to happiness, and also described wellness as holistic and unique to the individual.

**Achieving personal happiness.** When asked to define wellness, several students linked it closely to the achievement of happiness. Some used the terms wellness and happiness interchangeably, and indicated that they feel well when they are happy and unwell when they are depressed, stressed, or unhappy. A first year student acknowledged:

“With the idea of wellness... I just think it’s... overall achievement of personal happiness. It’s just to feel good about whatever you do and be[ing] able to evaluate where you’re at now and... hopefully add to that to your life, and maybe be a little bit more content or happy.”

**Holistic.** Students also indicated that wellness is holistic and encompasses components of mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional health. A first year student stated: “Wellness can be defined as a holistic approach between mind body and spirit...there are a lot of different aspects, like: physical, mental...spiritual.”

**Unique to the individual.** Students emphasized that there is no one singular definition of wellness, as it is defined in relation to a person and therefore unique to that individual. A first year student explained: “Wellness is... I think every person defines it themselves, so it’s different for everybody.”

### **Linking Personal Growth With Wellness**

Students were asked about the relationship between personal growth and wellness. They linked both to life challenges and struggles, and described wellness as a state of being and personal growth as a process.

**Linking life challenges with personal growth, wellness, and happiness.** Students linked both personal growth and wellness with life challenges, noting that personal growth often arises from life challenges or struggle, while wellness is linked to the happiness or contentment that result from overcoming or learning from a challenge or struggle. New students, in particular, emphasized the link between personal growth, wellness, and life struggles and/or challenges. These students indicated that they expected to be challenged in particular through the counseling program, also noting that associated opportunities for personal growth would be significant. A new student expressed:

“And I think that the whole idea of struggle is perfect for personal growth. The more we talk about it, the more it seems to fit with my personal life... It’s just every time I struggle, my wellness obviously goes down, but then my personal growth goes just out the roof... And then wellness is able to come back into the picture after I overcome those struggles.”

**Wellness as a state; personal growth as a process.** Students noted that while personal growth and wellness are related, the former is a dynamic, fluid process, while the latter is a state of being. A first year student commented:

“I think that the personal growth part comes in when... it’s identifying when you have a need and working intentionally toward that. So I think personal growth would mean change over time, but when it’s related to wellness... then being able to identify something that’s... not how you like it and making goals and being able to progress towards that goal.”

Another first year student stated: “Wellness, it’s a state, and personal growth is continuum.”

### **Impact of Program on Personal Growth**

Students spoke at length about the impact of the counseling program on their own personal growth. In particular, they noted that the ways in which the program encouraged them to challenge their own values, be self-reflexive, and promote positive interaction with others all helped to promote personal growth.

**Challenging values.** Students indicated that one of the most important ways the program has promoted their personal growth is through encouraging them to challenge their values. Students acknowledged that while this was a difficult process, they also recognized it as necessary for promoting growth. A new student stated: “It’s very... just [an] emotional rollercoaster, that I feel like I’m going through right now... with this program: just learning about our values, my values, where they came from... and ... it just makes me think of myself as [growing].”

A first year student reflected:

“I do feel like my personal growth, you know, has grown exponentially since being in this program, because of the things that we’re asked to do and ... I’m at

a point where I'm recognizing that it will be a constant thing throughout my life and I'll have to reevaluate my values (and things like that) because I'll have more experiences to integrate into that. I feel like there's been a lot of personal growth but also recognizing that I'll have to keep doing that in order to be a successful counselor, or a happy person."

**Promoting self-reflexivity.** Related to the challenging values theme, students explained that the ways in which the program has challenged their values has also encouraged them to be self-reflexive as to how their values and beliefs have influenced their character and decision-making processes. As elaborated in the self-reflection theme, students describe self-reflexivity as a key component of personal growth. A first year student acknowledged:

"I think the biggest part of that personal growth is recognizing all the things I did not know about myself... So I don't know that if I know those things now, or really got a handle on them, but I know now what I have to learn. I think, or better yet: I know some things that I have to learn. I know, like, many of components that are in that blind area but I don't yet really understand them... Um... But I'm excited about like learning them. And like this program does... encourages you to kind of do that, which I think is nice... Um... I was not expecting such an introspective experience... going into this program."

**Promoting interpersonal growth.** Students indicated that the personal growth they have achieved through the program has also improved their ability to relate to others. A second year student acknowledged: "I feel like I've become much more empathetic person. And that's probably a product of my theory, because I chose person-centered, and it's such a huge part of it."

**Learning skills to promote personal growth.** Students noted specific classes and exercises that they deemed particularly important for promoting their personal

growth throughout the program. In particular, students named their counseling skills class, a genogram exercise, a career exercise, and group counseling class as being influential on their personal growth. A first year student expressed:

“Definitely skills lab [where] you have to learn to accept feedback, and to not... integrate it....At times it was negative feedback... So I think: if you can learn to handle that and grow from it, instead of going home and...crying yourself to sleep...I think that definitely affected my personal growth.”

### **Defining Clinical Growth**

Both first and second year students were asked to define clinical growth. While new students expressed some uncertainty in defining clinical growth, they tended to relate it to the acquisition of a knowledge base and set of professional skills that they can apply to counseling sessions. These definitions were echoed by first year students, who added that competency in clinically applying theoretical knowledge and skills during counseling sessions was also a measure of clinical growth.

**Knowledge base.** Responses from new students and second year students illustrate the differences in students’ development in conceptualizing clinical growth and use of their knowledge base. A new student expressed:

“I think it’s... some kind of foundation and framework, some kind of knowledge base... that we brought from our readings, from our discussions, and from the whole program... that we can actually facilitate... Gaining some academic skills that we can use.”

While a second year student stated:

“That’s why the...focus on the theory integration... How are we going to be as professionals, and how will we be able not only to utilize the skills, but how are we going to apply it to the theory, how are we going to apply it to pretty much

everything that we've learned?...Cause I don't think clinical necessarily means skills that you use, but more the way you think about utilizing the information that you've gained over the courses in the program."

**Forming a professional identity.** A first year student admitted: "I never really envisioned myself being like a mental health counselor, and in my skills group, I kind of saw myself doing that."

**Feeling competent in counseling practice.** Second year students named competency as an important component of clinical growth, and defined it as an integration and application of theoretical knowledge and skills during counseling sessions. Second year students noted that experiential learning (via the internship program) was essential to attain competency.

**Defining clinical in terms of counselor roles.** Second year students also expressed some hesitancy in the use of the term clinical, explaining that it did not necessarily reflect the diversity of roles counselors are often expected to assume in a school setting. A second year student remarked:

"Yeah, I think there are so many different pieces, and I guess I got "stuck" on the language a little bit... And I don't know, maybe it is what we're talking about, when we say clinical. But I also think about those other roles, that we fulfill, and that whole debate: are we counselors first, or are we educators first? And what is the bigger picture of the school counselor?"

### **Impact on Clinical Growth**

**Providing a professional foundation.** Second year students indicated that going through the counseling program provided them with the framework, knowledge, and skills necessary to be a school counselor, both in terms of how they relate to students, as well as how they interact with other professionals in a school setting. A

second year student stated: “I think... that this training has prepared us how to interact with colleagues and other professionals because that’s something that my proficiency and my skills increased in... how to interact with teachers, and other school counselors, administration.”

**Gaining greater comfort in practical application of clinical skills.** Students in the second year of the program reported increased comfort in applying skills they learned throughout the program. They related their increased comfort to the opportunity provided through the internship program and the opportunity it provided to apply the theories and skills learned throughout the program.

**Gaining knowledge of the school environment.** Second year students also noted the importance of the internship program in giving them a “window” into working in the school environment. Some students admitted that prior to the internship, their understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the school counselor was limited, but the internship program greatly improved their working knowledge of the school as a system of which the counselor is one component. A second year student acknowledged:

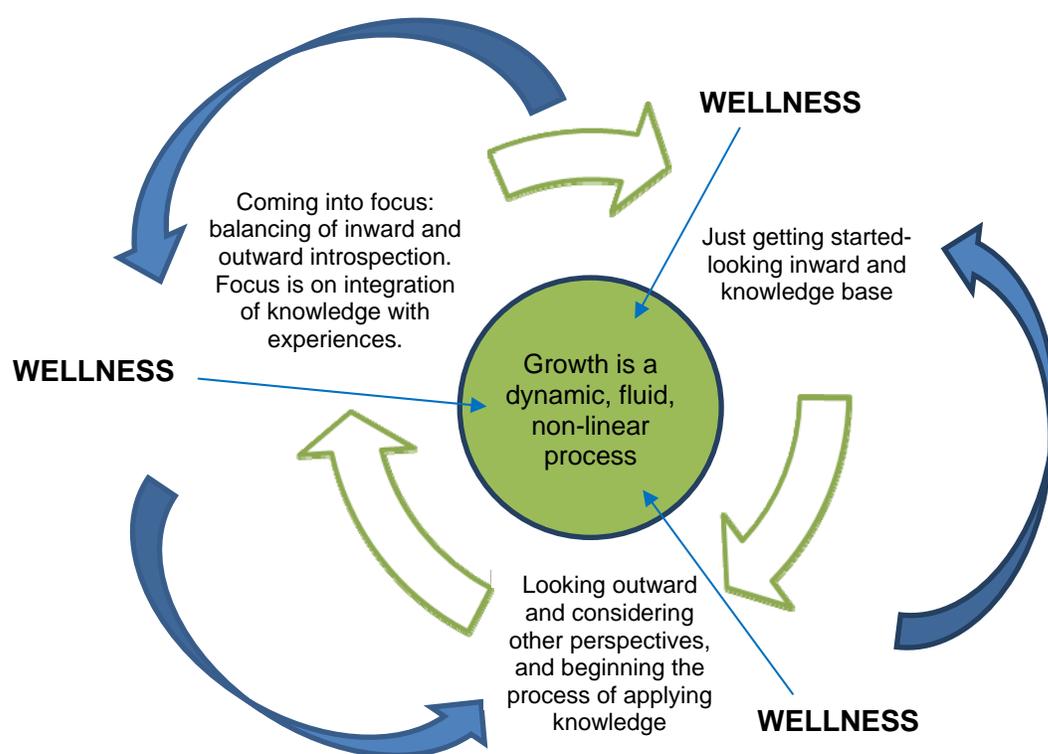
“You’re working within a community, if you look at school as a community... So maybe the school is a system, and then you’re working with other subsystems, or systems that are attached to that main system, you know... And then I can see that there may be many referrals, or getting resources for clients, but this, I think, for school counselors is for the most part, we might be trying to find these resources... in the community [with whom] to collaborate.”

### **Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory not only identifies themes, but also examines how those themes inform a process (Charmaz, 2006). For this study the experience of counselor

growth in a training program was explored. Figure 1 depicts an emergent theory for counselor growth and development during training.

New students indicated that they started the process by looking inward and their experience in the counseling program was new in that they had not previously self-they indicated that hearing others' perspectives and looking outward was helpful. This experience was facilitated in both the basic skills and the group counseling courses.



*Figure 1. Grounded theory diagram: Model of student growth and development*

By their second year students incorporated a more balanced perspective that encompassed both an inward and outward focus, in addition to integrating the knowledge base gained in the program. While students recognized that wellness envelops the entire growth experience, students noted their growth was greatest during personal challenges and critical incidents in the program (e.g., struggles with feedback,

life events, academic issues) during which their wellness was compromised. As one student reflected:

“The more we talk about it, the more it seems to fit with my personal life... It’s just every time I struggle, my wellness obviously goes down, but then my personal growth goes just huge, out the roof... And then wellness is able to come back into the picture after I overcome those struggles.”

In Figure 1, wellness is indicated by a circle moving in the opposite direction of growth but the arrows show that wellness directly impacts growth. Students indicated that while growth is fluid, wellness is a state of being that is directly influenced by the experience of growth and vice versa. This dynamic relationship seems to be an experience that students in this study began to recognize as opportunities to discuss their growth and wellness were provided.

### **Discussion and Implications for Supervision**

Results from this study provide insight into the personal growth, wellness, and developmental process of students in a school counseling program. New students began with a general awareness about personal growth and wellness but had not clarified their process, while first year students (who were six months more advanced in the counseling program) had already gained a clearer perspective of how both are important to their development as a counselor. Students also attributed the development of a sharper understanding regarding both of these concepts to experiences gained through their coursework in the counseling program. The integration of the concepts of personal growth and wellness into second year students’ professional development was evident as they provided richer and more comprehensive descriptions than the first year students. It also seems important that as students move through

counseling program, the second year is characterized by a broader view of the counseling program and the program's intent to have students grow both personally and professionally. Thus, changes in students' knowledge, understanding, and perspective may suggest developmental changes in the students, which are important to address in supervision. Supervisors will need to pay particular attention to practicum versus internship students' reflections, knowledge, and skills. Practicum students will typically need a supervisor who is in the counselor/teacher role (Stage 2; Nelson & Johnson, 1999), while an intern may be developmentally ready for a supervisor in a consultant role. The data suggest that as students moved through their training, their perceptions of their clinical abilities changed in direct correlation with their personal growth and wellness. However, it is also important to note that Nelson and Johnson (1999) also described the non-linear aspect of supervision with school counseling students. The students in this study similarly described this experience as they acknowledged their progress as fluctuating. Thus, supervisors should be prepared for fluidity and fluctuation through students' second year.

Students described opportunities within their coursework for self-reflection and self-reflexivity. Including reflective and reflexive opportunities in supervision extends the process of growth for students and helps them integrate this growth into a professional setting. While students have a foundation for their clinical growth, they need supervision to expand their skills. This may mean increasing their exposure to new situations and helping them work through navigating these events including: working with parents, addressing crises and other areas not covered in the coursework of school counseling programs.

Further, it is important for supervisors to discuss wellness with supervisees. This may include an initial discussion about transparency between the student and supervisor. Supervisors can evaluate the level of constructive feedback a student can manage in a particular supervision session based on the student's acknowledgement of his or her wellness. A supervisor may even use a student's wellness to gauge how that student is adjusting overall to his role in the school. When a supervisor understands a student's level of development and functioning in terms of personal and professional growth and wellness, and these are overtly discussed with that student, supervision likely will be more productive in terms of facilitating student growth.

### **Limitations**

While this study is the first to explore the intersection of supervision with school counseling students' growth, wellness, and development, several limitations must be considered. A larger number of student participants, perhaps gained by including other CACREP accredited counseling programs, may have increased the variation of and approached saturation of responses. Because focus groups were used, it was difficult to find times when all students could attend, thus the number of respondents was lower than was anticipated. In addition, second year students may have "lost steam" and after participating once or even twice, may not have wanted to participate in a third focus group. It may be that a future investigation would use multiple sites and/or have new students initially consent to participate several times throughout their program.

Most students participated in several focus groups so they were able to consider their own and their cohort's growth through the program through recalling their prior responses. However, this study did not explore the progression of individual responses

nor did we compare different cohorts' responses and how they were similar and different. Doing so would provide additional information about how students perceive their growth individually and as a cohort.

Student facilitation of focus groups was an asset to this study in that student facilitators were potentially more likely to elicit vulnerable and authentic responses from their student peers than an unfamiliar facilitator or a faculty member. However, as a result student facilitators were not able to participate in the focus groups and also their facilitating may have influenced the results through their close relationships with the participants.

Because our study occurred over a three-year period, we were not able to conduct a member check interview or confirmation of themes with student participants as many of the students had graduated by the time the data was analyzed. Member checking is an important process in qualitative research and specifically in using grounded theory methodology as it allows participants to confirm their processes and experiences before data is disseminated (Charmaz, 2006).

### **Future Research**

The counseling program in which this study was conducted places strong emphasis on mindfulness, personal growth, self-care, and well-being. Thus, the students who were interviewed were familiar with these concepts both in terms of their own experience and as focus areas with clients. We view this study as providing data upon which future studies can build. A study designed to conduct individual interviews with all students in a counseling program could yield different information than the results of this current investigation. Furthermore, a multi-site study might uncover

different findings, especially one conducted with students who are less familiar with these topics. In addition, findings from this study could guide new models for supervision. Finally, it would be beneficial to utilize the findings in this study to create an interactive training program with counseling students aimed at guiding students' development using a mindfulness, personal growth, and wellness focus. Students completing this program could then be evaluated to determine 1) the aspects of the training that significantly influence students' personal and professional development and 2) how students' process and ability to integrate these concepts while going through their training influences their professional skills and development at the end of their training.

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