

Running Head: PERSPECTIVES ON COUNSELLING PRACTICUMS

Counselling Practicum Placements
The Counsellor Educators' Perspectives

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Statement of the Problem

Currently in Canada there are 27 university counsellor educator programs at the Masters Degree level (CanLearn Interactive – Find it! 2002). High quality supervised practicum placements are essential to professional counsellor education. Pitts (1992) defines the practicum placement as:

Practicum and internship consist of supervised experiences designed to enhance the professional skills of students in counselling programs. CACREP (1988) defined practicum as “provid[ing] an opportunity to perform, on a limited basis and under supervision, some of the activities that a regularly employed staff member in the setting would be expected to perform” (p.28)...In each case “a regularly employed staff member is defined as a person occupying the professional role to which the student is aspiring” (CACREP, 1988, p. 29). As part of the learning experience, practicum and internship students generally have a host-supervisor at the placement site and also receive supervision at the counselor education department. The supervision at the department is conducted by faculty and consists of both individual and group supervision meeting weekly (Pitts, 1992, 196).

In the practicum setting students are truly able to link theory to practice and they are usually expected to fulfill a minimum amount of practicum hours to graduate. Custer (1994) states it is indeed the obligation and responsibility of faculty members and the university to ensure that those who graduate from their programs are competent to the public (in Jordan, 2002) thus making the issue of practicum training an important one for educators and students alike. Despite its importance in counsellor education and training, no research exists regarding how this is actually played out in terms of outcomes or challenges faced in acquiring such high quality

practicum placements. The purpose of this research is to better understand and uncover the needs, barriers and facilitative factors regarding counselling practicum placements from Canadian counselling educators' perspectives in this unexplored and critical area in counsellor education.

Rationale

The most obvious reason for pursuing this research is because there are currently no Canadian studies regarding practicum placements for master's level counselling psychology students. Most of the research to date has focused on isolated pieces of the practicum program such as: methods of training and teaching counselling skills in practice (e.g. Sexton, 2000); supply and demand issues for doctoral level internships (e.g. Keilin, Thorn, Rodolfa, Constantine, & Kaslow, 2000); quality of supervision (e.g. Johnson & Stewart, 2000); and program evaluation and accreditation standards (e.g. Canadian Counselling Association, 2003).

Sexton (2000) notes that the work of counselling affects the lives of many and counsellors are entrusted with promoting client welfare and protection from harm. Thus, the role carries a "significant ethical, societal, social and professional responsibility to provide the most effective treatment" (218-219). It is in the counsellor education programs that "professional counsellors draw upon to meet these expectations and responsibilities" (218-219). Ultimately, for the student and the profession alike, high quality training carries significant implications for both and thus any research in this area would be beneficial to educators and students alike.

From a licensing perspective, this research on practicum experiences and counsellor educators' perspectives is also important. The Canadian Counselling Association (2003) states, at a minimum, students should: obtain 100 hours of supervised practice to foster the development of counselling skills and they must also complete a final 400 hour supervised practicum with half

of those hours in direct client contact and with a minimum of one hour supervision weekly and 1.5 hours of group supervision weekly. Most counsellor educators and programs strive to achieve standard practicum conditions and hours for students to fulfill. Barriers to achieving such conditions in practicum placements affect students and counsellor education departments alike and are worthy of exploration given the potential implications.

A thorough literature review revealed only one relevant article by Pitts and Miller (1990). Pitts and Miller posit the practicum from a systems perspective, in particular, they conceptualize the practicum/internship program from Caple's (1987a, 1987b) self-organization paradigm which "emphasizes the necessity for openness to growth and change" (Pitts & Miller, 291). From this "systems" perspective, one can categorize numerous issues, barriers, and/or facilitative factors in placing students successfully in practicum sites. Barriers and/or facilitative factors may arise from the students themselves, the practicum sites, the counselling program itself, and the surrounding socio-political and cultural context. We wish to anchor our research from this perspective while exploring these barriers and facilitative factors from a counsellor educator's perspective. Perhaps as our data unfolds, we will be directed in new and different areas of research.

Given the rationale for the research (no existing research and the importance of the practicum experience in developing competent, ethical practitioners), our primary research questions are: What are some of the issues and barriers in obtaining high quality practicum placements in Canadian contexts? What are some of the facilitative factors? How do Canadian counsellor educators perceive the current state of such professional training? How do counsellor educators assist students in obtaining high quality practicum placements? What recommendations and

perspectives do they offer regarding the gaps, issues and trends for the future in obtaining and maintaining high quality professional training for students in their programs?

Methods and Procedures

In our research, we will distribute a web-based survey to Canadian counsellor educators. The survey itself seeks descriptive information in the following areas: demographics, the nature of securing practicum sites, the type of practicum experience expected and achieved, the types of clients and client issues students generally work with, video taping policies, factors which enhance or inhibit high quality practicum placements, and other general issues and recommendations. The research utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in the analysis of survey responses.

The invitation to participate, the consent form and the survey are included in Appendix A, B, and C respectively. The survey will be distributed electronically through the Canadian Counselling Association (CCA) website with a follow up reminder notice if required. Members from the Counsellor Education chapter, who are likely to have expertise and experience in managing and coordinating the practicum placements, will be invited to participate in the survey thus making this a purposive, theoretical and homogeneous sample. Currently, there are about one hundred or so members in this chapter representing a potentially large sample of counsellor educators across Canada.

If members are interested, they may select the link to our cover letter, our informed consent form and the survey itself. In our consent form, participant rights are clearly delineated and their anonymity/confidentiality is guaranteed in three ways (a) IP addresses are not tracked, (b) all data will be assigned a participant number and any identifying information will be deleted from the surveys, and (c) access to the database will be limited to the researchers and password protected.

If participants agree to the terms, they can select the submit button. It is estimated that the survey will take about 30 to 45 minutes to fill out since many of the questions are open ended. After completing the survey, the participant has the option to provide an email address separately (not linked to the survey data) if they would like a copy of the study results.

The completed survey is then submitted electronically to the University of Calgary, education department databank where we have set up an account and address. Access to the database will be limited to the researchers and password protected. Conveniently, our data will then be organized and “dumped” into an Excel format so that we may analyze the results. It should be noted that this project has already received ethics approval from the University of Calgary Ethics Review Board.

The quantitative results will be analyzed using frequency analysis and descriptive statistics. If there is enough regional disparity, we could possibly stratify the sample to compare the results. We will employ the inductive approach when analyzing the open-ended questions in our survey. As the data is collected, we expect thematic categories of analysis to emerge along with themes and trends. Again, if there are large amounts of data, a computer software program such as NUDIST will be used to analyze the data. This code based theory builder will help us “make connections between codes to develop higher-order classifications and categories” (Mertens, 1998, 350). True to any constructive/interpretive approach, the categories will remain flexible and change over time (we assume a not knowing position). Ultimately, the goal is to aggregate the results into thematic units, which can be meaningful at a national or provincial level, while incorporating the rich and unique individual contexts, perspectives and voices of each counsellor educator. Throughout this process, we will be carefully documenting our procedures and methods of analysis and addressing the issues of credibility (internal validity) and confirmability

(objectivity) with the use of peer debriefers. It should be noted that if the number of surveys returned and/or the length of the responses is extremely large, the student and the supervisor will negotiate on how to best limit the data analysis to maintain the project work within the one year scope.

Implications

The results of this research have implications for counsellor educators and the profession as a whole. Potentially, the identification of barriers and facilitative factors for counselling practicum placements will provide a uniquely Canadian perspective on the use and current status of the practicum in counsellor education, while at the same time (due to the survey design) honour the rich and varied voices of the participants. The results of this research may also provide information about common gaps, trends and issues to be addressed and/or facilitative factors and other recommendations, which can be shared with other counsellor educators in addressing the professional training component of their programs. We hope to conceptualize the results from a systems or Caple's (1987a, 1987b) self-organizing paradigm perspective as a means to consider the subsystems in which the barriers exist. Depending on what is found, some of the university, placement sites and broader socio-economic-political cultural barriers and/or facilitative factors reported may bring about further research or generate new policies and guidelines on how to cope with and meet internal/external pressures and demands. The responses regarding barriers, "disequilibrium/equilibrium", and enhance conditions could have positive implications for students, the counsellor education program, the profession as a whole and ultimately society. Counsellor educators can draw upon these results for their own counselling education programs in coordinating and ensuring high quality practicum placements. Finally, there may be

implications for related fields that also require professional training and practicum placements

such as nursing and social work.

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