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School counseling students' service-learning experience during the pandemic: Implications for training in community partnerships

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ABSTRACT

We present a partnership between our school counseling program and a pandemic learning pod for K-2 students. We conducted a focus group with participating school counselors-in-training (SCITs) ($n = 3$) and interviewed key stakeholders ($n = 14$) to explore SCITs' learning experiences. Themes from inductive thematic analysis included learning by doing, collaboration with other professionals, expectations and consistency, and advocacy. Implications from the experience extend to training in community partnerships, leadership, advocacy, and future research.

KEYWORDS

Advocacy; community partnerships; leadership; learning pods; school counseling; service-learning

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated educational disparities experienced by K-12 students from disadvantaged backgrounds (DeArmond et al., 2021; García & Weiss, 2020; McElrath, 2020). K-12 students generally experienced challenges engaging in online learning, social isolation, and declining mental health (Jones et al., 2021). The "opportunity gap" that had existed for students from disadvantaged racial and socioeconomic groups only widened during the pandemic (Díaz Lara et al., 2021; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2020). In a report on the impacts of the pandemic on K-12 education, the U.S. Department of Education (2021) described the amplified barriers the pandemic had on students of color and English learners (ELs). Students of color were more likely to experience higher levels of food insecurity, lower access to mental health services, and greater challenge accessing technology for distance learning. EL students were more likely to engage in distance learning with a lack of caregiver supervision and work with teachers and staff not properly resourced or trained in distance learning, especially within rural school districts.

Many school counselors also had to adapt, learning to use new software and programs to provide remote services, increasing collaboration with other professionals, and offering social-emotional learning in virtual classroom lessons to address mental health (Limberg et al., 2022). For some school counselors, however, role ambiguity, privacy concerns in virtual environments, and more non-counseling activities (e.g., checking attendance) continued in the following year (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021; Villares et al., 2022). The need for wellness checks, greater parental support, and working with community partners stood out as lessons for many from the experience of the pandemic (Strear et al., 2021). Many school counselors faced potentially drastic changes to not only their program delivery but also their roles in schools and reliance on collaboration and partnership.

School personnel like school counselors stood to benefit from help from their local communities. With universities in a liminal space where new ways of interacting within the community could arise (Porter et al., 2023), preservice programs for education personnel could fill such practice gaps and

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create unique community partnerships with schools. Such experiences, construed as service-learning, could offer a unique training opportunity in practices involved in community partnership through concrete lived experience (Peters & Vereen, 2020). However, service-learning opportunities may well remain underutilized in counseling training programs (Farrell et al., 2020; Havlik et al., 2016; Langellier et al., 2020; Lloyd-Hazlett et al., 2022). School counselors-in-training (SCITs) could emerge from such learning experiences with stronger confidence for promoting and engaging in community engagement (Um & Wood, 2023). Our interprofessional group, who had implemented a free full-time volunteer-led K–2 learning pod for historically underserved students, investigated how the partnership came together (Porter et al., 2023) and, for this study, how this service-learning experience impacted participating SCITs. We conceptualized this partnership as a school-family-community (S-F-C) partnership: collaborative relationships and interactions among schools, families, and the broader community to support and enhance students' educational experiences and outcomes (Bryan & Griffin, 2010; Stanley & Kuo, 2022). S-F-C partnerships rely on leadership, collaboration, and advocacy skills for success. We also recognized the unique service-learning experience in which SCITs engaged. These approaches have shown a pathway for equity-minded, leadership-driven systemic change (e.g., Bryan et al., 2020; Griffin et al., 2021). S-F-C partnerships require a degree of self-efficacy that SCITs might gain from concrete mastery experiences (Bryan & Griffin, 2010; Epstein, 2018).

K-12 Students' academic, social, and emotional needs during the pandemic

While adjusting to virtual learning platforms for remote teaching and learning, educators, students, and parents encountered numerous obstacles they did not know how to address: teachers' unfamiliarity with learning tools, the district's capacity to provide socio-emotional support for students, and the infrequency of teacher-student and teacher-family collaboration (Huck & Zhang, 2021). Remote teaching and learning required careful planning for online schooling to function, including teacher preparation and training, new strategies for student achievement, and more effective communication with students and their families (Cardullo et al., 2021; García & Weiss, 2020; Huck & Zhang, 2021). Required school closures and the abrupt transition to digital learning platforms were unprecedented. During these mandatory school closures, teachers were forced to transition to remote teaching with little preparation, design instructions, or familiarity with teaching tools. The absence of prior training led to a diminished sense of self-efficacy and difficulties motivating students.

Districts also placed a pervasive emphasis on the well-being of their students despite a general lack of funding (DeArmond et al., 2021). State and federal funding to promote more secure and encouraging environments for students based on social-emotional learning skills served as the driving force behind this emphasis (DeArmond et al., 2021; Kaplan-Rakowski et al., 2021). One survey with more than 20,000 students showed that 50% of them reported depression, stress, and anxiety that were detrimental to remote learning (DeArmond et al., 2021). Teachers encountered new challenges addressing student well-being. Cardullo et al. (2021), interviewing a sample of teachers, detailed themes of the emotional uncertainty in assessing and interacting with younger students and working with at-risk youth, especially for those younger students with a lack of access to technology. Moreover, the pandemic widened opportunity gaps, with low-income students more vulnerable than their more affluent peers to have inconsistent access to the devices and internet access required for remote learning (García & Weiss, 2020). Reduced learning time can impede student learning and the development of the whole child; and without proper support, some children are more likely to become disengaged and drop out.

Educational inequality among minority-serving schools

Minority-serving schools often lacked resources to support effective online instruction (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2020). Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students were not only more likely to engage in remote learning than their White counterparts but were also less likely to have

access to the internet for online learning and twice as likely to have no live access to teachers (Dorn et al., 2020). Financial instability, food and housing insecurity, and inadequate access to health insurance, medical care, and adult supervision – challenges exacerbated by the pandemic – also impacted BIPOC families more (Agostinelli et al., 2022; Wilke et al., 2020). Students' motivation and concentration levels, performance on school assessments, and overall social and emotional health languished as a result (García & Weiss, 2020).

Students from immigrant and refugee backgrounds also struggled with school closures. Less than half of English learners (ELs) logged on for virtual classes (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). ELs were more likely to face school-family communication barriers and their parents and caregivers – often deemed essential workers – were less likely to provide or arrange consistent supervision for their children for at-home learning (Reza, 2020; Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). Adapting to online learning led to an increased challenge for meeting students' academic and social-emotional learning needs.

Students at the elementary levels (K-5) experienced these barriers and challenges more acutely, with guidance for school districts prioritizing digital literacy support for K-5 ELs (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). K-5 ELs, in one described experience in a local school system in Ohio, lost opportunities for differentiated instruction on reading and literacy, as teachers lacked the synchronous time and space to differentiate instruction (Sayer & Braun, 2020). Delany-Barmann et al. (2021) described the specific challenges parents of rural multilingual students in elementary schools during the pandemic. Specific challenges included accessing technology (e.g., accessing Google Meets or Microsoft Teams), child-care, and social isolation (e.g., getting help understanding a teacher's instructions). These challenges, Delany-Barmann et al. surmise, require districts and local and state leaders to work with families to meet students' needs. Indeed, successful interventions addressed these areas and others impacting ELs during the pandemic. Buxton et al. (2023) adapted their existing grant-funded collaboration among five Oregon school districts to address ELs needs during the pandemic. Examining survey data from administrators and teachers related to family and community engagement, researchers found an increase in reported confidence among participants on several items, including making connections between bilingual students' cultures and concepts they were learning, collaborating with community members, and providing culturally and linguistically relevant instruction. Heineke et al. (2025) observed among three Midwestern school districts, relied on enhanced communication, a prioritization of student well-being, e.g., schools distributing iPads, teachers' using emotional check-ins, and valuing cultural and linguistic strengths (e.g., using Google Translate and other technologies to engage with students in taking risks with language learning). Community partnership and systemic collaboration characterize much of the successful response to the learning barriers experienced by ELs.

Learning pods – structured learning environments offering stability and opportunities for socialization among small groups of children – gave select groups an alternative space for schooling during the pandemic (Horn, 2021; James, 2021). Private learning pods with ample resources emerged. Wealthier, more privileged families were more likely to participate (DiPerna & Kristof, 2020) in these pods, and funding and instructional staff for these pods could often come from local public schools (Moyer, 2020, Natanson, 2020). A form of "opportunity hoarding" (James, 2021) benefited the children of privileged, predominately white families and excluded others. Learning pods prioritizing equity through community partnership could leverage resources for those children and families faced with an unprecedented need for educational support.

Leadership, advocacy, and school-family-community partnerships

Professional guidance and scholarship on effective S-F-C partnerships – and what makes personnel like school counselors more apt to implement them – quickly zeroes in on the essential roles of leadership and advocacy practices. The American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2022), in a position statement on school–community partnerships, stated clearly that school counselors should be recognized as "school-based leaders" who "initiate, facilitate, and advocate" with other key stakeholders to meet each student's individual needs. A more recent definition of leadership, befitting

this study's context, recognizes that school counselor leaders "creatively find ways to meet the diverse needs of the whole student in a rapidly changing society" (Mason et al., 2023, p. 1). S-F-C partnerships recognize that the involvement and engagement of schools, families, and the community are essential for a well-rounded and effective educational environment (Stanley & Kuo, 2022). Partnerships empower stakeholders to create strength-based environments that are safer and more inclusive and can increase students' academic success and resilience (Henry & Bryan, 2021). Geesa et al. (2022) further touted interprofessional partnerships for improving role perceptions, acquiring grant funding, and expanding services.

An examination of what school counseling leadership practice entails reveals the explicit link between partnerships and leadership and advocacy skills. Young and Bryan (2015) established five areas of leadership practice. *Interpersonal influence* concerns creating relationships with key stakeholders and school leaders to influence school culture (e.g., "I promote positive change for all students."). *Systemic collaboration* refers to school counselors creating buy-in within partnerships to further programming goals (e.g., "I actively work with stakeholders to implement comprehensive school counseling programs."). *Resourceful problem solving* related to school counselors working in multidimensional contexts to ensure all students receive resources and programming (e.g., "I search for innovative ways to improve student achievement."). *Professional efficacy* points to the essential ingredients of confidence and self-efficacy to leadership practice (e.g., "I am a change agent."). *Social justice advocacy* refers to school counselors identifying and addressing inequities in their schools and districts ("I respond to social justice inequities that may affect the future of students' academic achievement.").

Each of these leadership practice areas connect to essential aspects of S-F-C partnerships. School counselors' involvement in S-F-C partnerships relies on facilitating a collaborative school climate (e.g., working across professions to achieve goals), influencing principal expectations (e.g., aligning the school counseling program vision and initiatives with the school's overall vision), responding to time constraints (e.g., delegating roles in partnerships), and having adequate partnership-related training in their graduate-level programs to establish self-efficacy in partnering (*interpersonal influence*, *systemic collaboration*, and *professional efficacy*, respectively) (Bryan & Griffin, 2010). Leadership practices, especially the systemic collaboration involved in partnership, align with the ASCA National Model and program implementation (Mason et al., 2023). Betters-Bubon and Schultz (2017) used this leadership framework to assess an S-F-C partnership and noted a clear connection between leadership skills and advocacy outcomes. Specific outcomes from the intervention included increased student and family voice and participation in schooling as well as greater cross-cultural understanding between families and school staff. S-F-C partnership model in practice can address inequities, promote social justice, and close achievement and opportunity gaps (Bryan et al., 2020; Henry & Bryan, 2021). Henry and Bryan (2021) found that student perspectives on the S-F-C partnership (Just Love) highlighted positive changes in perceived school climate, adult support, and knowledge of supports and resources. S-F-C partnerships involving school counselors, in short, attain best outcomes when those school counselors employ sound leadership practice.

Cultivating leadership and community partnership skills during school counselor training

While advocates for the school counseling profess have promoted school counselors as leaders extensively, others have focused on how to foster essential leadership training throughout a school counselor's development. School counselors need to identify and cultivate their leadership skills as well as measure their change agent practices (Kneale et al., 2018). Michel et al. (2018) created the "listen, evaluate, advocate, disseminate" (LEAD) model to build leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change skills through an action research project assigned during the SCITs' internship. SCITs in this study learned through concrete experience about using data to inform programming and creating collaborative relationship with other school personnel. LeBlanc and Borders (2021) investigated integrating leadership training into pre-

practicum curriculum within a pilot study that including assessing SCITs self-efficacy. SCITs had two key assignments related to presenting to pre-service principals on the school counselors' roles and creating action research proposals based on their required observational fieldwork in schools. The authors found encouraging results within the small sample, including an increase among SCITs' confidence to act as leaders and value of creating a shared vision. Others have focused on the value of supervision of leadership within internship: from the intentional ways counselor educators can engage with SCITs in leadership development through supervision (Li & Peters, 2022) to specific models for supervision that focus on leadership (Hilts et al., 2022; Peters & Luke, 2021).

With leadership practice essential to S-F-C partnerships, studies (e.g., Beck et al., 2017; Geesa et al., 2022) have also supported the value of intentional integration of partnerships into curricula. SCITs stand to develop self-efficacy within partnerships, especially in serving communities of color. Harris et al. (2018) surveyed school counselors' personal and environmental factors and their involvement in partnerships with families of color. They found school counselors' self-efficacy about partnerships to be a significant predictor of perceived involvement in partnerships with families of color. In other words, school counselors who saw the difference created by partnerships and its importance were more likely to engage in those behaviors. They recommended from their finding immersion experiences within SCITs' practicum and internships that exposed them to partnerships with families of color. Dogan et al. (2021) found among a sample of school counselors and principals agreed that S-F-C partnerships are important yet also agreed that further training in them would be necessary. Again, the authors suggested a renewed focus on leadership training so that school counselors feel confidence in leading S-F-Cs.

Service-learning

Service-learning offers one pedagogical orientation for integrating mastery experiences with partnership into curricula. Service-learning benefits students and the community by improving "academic performance, personal values, efficacy, social activism, civic engagement, and overall self-efficacy" (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2012, p. 1). Students' participation in service-learning can result in increased awareness, exploration of prejudice, connection to communities, and multicultural competency (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2012). Stewart-Sicking et al. (2013) described students' transformative process through service-learning as moving through feeling overwhelmed by complex systems to adjust their expectations of themselves within their profession, with more awareness on the importance of multicultural competencies, social justice, and advocacy.

Service-learning significantly enriches both school and university communities by aligning with their distinct missions and benefiting students (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2012; Bryan & Griffin, 2010; Stanley & Kuo, 2022). Universities contribute research-driven expertise to K-12 staff, offering updated skills and professional development opportunities (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2012; DeArmond et al., 2021). Integrating service-learning into counseling programs enhances students' comprehension by bridging theoretical knowledge with practical applications (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2012). As within the S-F-C partnership framework, service-learning offers chances for counseling students to learn about and experience leadership and advocacy skills: social justice advocacy, interprofessional collaboration, and the leveraging of resources for creating better programming. Moreover, SCIT participation in service learning allows space for concrete consideration of abstract concepts (e.g., social justice, advocacy) and increases SCITs' self-efficacy and professional identity development (Lloyd-Hazlett et al., 2022; Stewart-Sicking et al., 2013). The call to incorporate knowledge and skills related to leadership, advocacy, and community partnerships echoes in both S-F-C partnership and service-learning literature, creating a pathway for counselor educators to create experiential learning opportunities in these areas.

Purpose of the Study

Our interprofessional group, a collection of faculty at a university in the southeastern United States, leveraged partnerships among our university, a local school, several community organizations, and many families to create a learning pod for students who needed help with adult supervision during virtual school hours. Most of the students identified as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and were multilingual learners, groups that nationally lacked educational resources during this time (Dorn et al., 2020; Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020).

Seven SCITs enrolled in a counseling practicum volunteered to participate in this partnership. After the pod closed in March 2021, we wanted to understand better what the participating SCITs took from the experience into internship. We also wanted to include other stakeholders' perceptions of SCITs' learning experiences in the pod – those who had direct and frequent interactions with SCITs. The literature on S-F-C partnerships suggested implications for experience in leadership and advocacy-related skills. Nonetheless, we made no presumptions in our inquiry on how students would frame their learning experience, especially given its rapid construction to a critical community need. Our team also wanted to investigate what implications this service-learning experience could have for our school counseling curriculum in the future. As a result, we applied a general qualitative framework (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Percy et al., 2015) to better understand SCITs' learning experience from both SCITs' perspectives and those with whom they worked and partnered. We organized our inquiry around the following questions:

(1) *How did SCITs perceive their service-learning experience participating in facilitating a learning pod for underserved K-2 students through community partnerships?*
(2) *How did key stakeholders who created and implemented the learning pod perceive students' service-learning experience?*

Method

Social constructivism serves as our epistemological grounding (i.e., knowledge builds from the participants' experiences) (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Hays & Singh, 2012). This philosophy underpins our approach as we (the researchers) were more interested in the views, values, beliefs, and feelings of participants rather than gathering facts and describing acts (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Namely, we are concerned with how SCITs – and those involved in this educational experience – understand, value, and feel about the experience. We recognized the bias and different cultural experiences and identities that informed participants' voices; thus, we aimed to understand the subjective reality of participants. We also adopted a critical orientation to our inquiry: one that reflects participants' experiences to examine the constitution of social reality (Bryne, 2022; Hays & Singh, 2012). Our theoretical framework draws on S-F-C partnership and service-learning literature to understand articulate key elements of the learning experience SCITs had, in addition to information on K-12 education during the pandemic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We grounded our lines of inquiry (i.e., our focus group questions) in the spirit of openness and did not presume specific takeaways.

Generic qualitative research

Generic qualitative research (also called *basic qualitative research*, *interpretative qualitative research*, or *a qualitative research study*) often eludes precise definition (Waalkes et al., 2024). Percy et al. (2015) provided a definition of GQR suitable to our study: "[GQR] investigates people's reports of their subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences, of things in the outer world" (p. 78). In short, Percy et al. notes, GQR is suitable when the researchers are interested in participants' "takes" on a certain subject. Our research questions centered on SCITs' learning experience within the

learning pod (construed as the "things of the outer world"), as described by SCITs and relevant stakeholders.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) present this type of research as having fundamental qualitative aspects: a focus on meaning, understanding, or process; a purposeful sample; data collected through interviews, documents, and/or observations; analysis that is inductive and comparative; and findings that contain rich descriptions presented as themes or categories. More specific qualitative approaches provide "extra layers" to qualitative inquiry that GQR, in its lack of adherence to specific methodological guidelines, does not have (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, we want to outline not only why we chose GQR but why other methodologies did not suit this study. Bellamy et al. (2016), exploring the question of when GQR is most suitable, created a detailed path to choosing GQR that we followed. Our study does not seek to generate theory (grounded theory), examine participants' inner dimensions (phenomenology), nor pursue an expansive level of depth (case study).

Waalkes et al. (2024) provide three categories for why researchers would choose GQR: practicality and creating change, flexible bending of methods, and innovation. Our study – an interdisciplinary effort that brought together a variety of stakeholders – focused on multiple prospectives around an emergency act (i.e., creating and implementing the learning pod) within our community during the pandemic. We needed a practical framework that allowed us to report findings to a wide audience without the restrictions of formal methodologies. We also note action research, which does engage participants in solving practical problems, did not fit because the research process did not align with the entire cycle of actions taken from the learning pod's conception to its conclusion (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The flexibility embedded in GQR allowed us to justify an in-depth analysis of two different data sources (SCIT focus groups and stakeholder interviews) and coherently integrate them into data analysis. Furthermore, we took care to describe how data collection and analysis, positionality, and trustworthiness align with our epistemological foundation (social constructivism) and critical orientation. Finally, our roles as researchers were necessarily blurred and involved with our participants. While other methods emphasize the boundedness of the researcher role, GQR does not, allowing for research that can promote advocacy and inform practice.

Reflexive thematic analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) positions the researchers' subjectivity as a resource rather than a limitation, prioritizing reflexive engagement with theory, data, and interpretation. Since we sought to capture multiple viewpoints on learning (i.e., from graduate students and other stakeholders involved in the pod), reflexive TA suited our purposes in its recognition of flexibility and accessibility in the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexive TA is flexible in terms of its adaptability to different research paradigms and orientations (in our case, one that is constructivist and critical) (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Bryne, 2022). We sought to view and analyze data through an inductive lens: void of a preconceived framework that prioritized the communication of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Bryne, 2022). We (first and second author) aimed to interact with the data in a way that "generates" themes that tell a story about the participants' subjective experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexive TA also addresses our considerations around qualitative inquiry and saturation, as we used our interpretative judgment to determine that we met the purpose and goals of our analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive TA flexibly meshed with our research paradigm, orientation, methodology, and pragmatic considerations for analysis.

Background on the learning pod

Porter et al. (2023) provide a thorough rendering of the pod's implementation and creation as well as the context and environment in which this pod and other learning pods were situated. We offer a more condensed rendering of context surrounding the learning pod as well as the SCITs connection to it. The local community – a rural area in the southeastern U.S. – has a long history as a refugee

resettlement community and a place for immigrants from across the world, with over 70 languages spoken in the local public school district (Garcia & Carnock, 2016; Williams, 2024). Data collected at the state level from the 2019–2020 about the partnering public elementary school reflects that most students were from an economically disadvantaged background, identified as English language learners and were racially and ethnically diverse (Virginia Department of Education, 2021). Conversations with the school district and the childcare center led to a target group of K-2 students to invite to the pod. We prioritized and identified children of essential workers within this school, specifically ELs to help with language acquisition. We also invited children who needed additional support and struggled with emotional regulation that might benefit from more structure and social interaction. More than 80% of students were Spanish speakers and less than 25% were White. The male-to-female ratio was roughly 3:1.

Parents in the community, deemed as essential workers, had limited access to reliable and daily childcare. Acknowledging this need led to the creation of a free, full-day learning pod. Through a memorandum of agreement (MOA) with a local church, the school district, and the childcare center, the pod operated in the church space for free and garnered some assistance for part-time employees from the local school district. The need for additional support was left to volunteers. Faculty and student volunteers went through an orientation protocol that included COVID-19 guidelines and information on roles and responsibilities with the children. Nine people served as supervisory volunteers of both student volunteers and children. Undergraduate students (25 in total) comprised the main volunteer force. The school day at the pod included enrichment activities such as outdoor play, reading circles, and socio-emotional learning (SEL) activities occurring in between online instruction. Students who attended the learning pod were predominantly Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), with the majority identifying as male. Most students were multilingual learners (ML), with Spanish being the predominant home language. The school district designated the local feeder school, and that school's administration worked with families to determine students' eligibility. Student enrollment varied (range = 9–20).

Our school counseling program, with the help of our service-learning office, agreed to work with the pod in December 2020 for the following spring. Given the pod offered additional supportive services, including SEL activities, SCITs could inhabit a natural position within the pod's programming. One faculty member (first author) served as faculty supervisor for students and regularly visited the pod. SCITs also collaborated with supervising partners and the faculty supervisor to impact day-to-day programming and advocate for students' needs. SCITs checked in with both supervising partners as well as the faculty supervisor, who participated in a weekly advisory meeting for the pod's operation. SCITs went through the appropriate orientation, and we drafted an informed consent (English, Spanish, and Arabic) sent to the parents and officials at the school. Seven SCITs volunteered on a regular basis. Several of the SCITs also conducted an assignment for a group counseling class to their work at the pod. A former teaching supervisor also provided on-site guidance to students around classroom management. The pod ended operation in March 2021 on the return to in-person instruction.

Researcher positionality

Throughout the data analysis of the focus group and interview transcripts, the research team consistently and intentionally invited discussion around our bias and positionality and made efforts to account for them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To aid transparency and trustworthiness, we offer relevant aspects of our positionality. The first and second authors analyzed the entire data set. The first author is a cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class male of White/European descent who is a school counselor educator and worked as the practicum supervisor of the SCITs. He has also published and presented on training in leadership and advocacy in preservice school counseling. The second author is a cisgender female of Asian descent who is a licensed therapist and doctoral student in a counseling program. She conducted the focus group with SCITs and participated in analyzing the results in total.

Within debriefing meetings, the first author discussed his dual role as researcher and supervisor of the experience, and the second author discussed not having background in school counseling. These biases emerged in our conversations and helped us produce richer interpretations of the data while avoiding talk of consensus (Bryne, 2022). We also discussed our roles as faculty (first author) and doctoral student (second author) and brought awareness to possible power dynamics. The third author is a cisgender female of African-American descent who is a middle school counselor and a licensed therapist. She brought practical school counseling experience in reviewing and drafting multiple aspects of the manuscript and conducted an audit of our analysis of SCITs' experiences.

The remaining authors all serve as university faculty. The fourth author is a White cisgender female, and the fifth author is a White cisgender male. The sixth author is a cisgender Latina, bilingual in English and Spanish, and came to the United States from Colombia, and seventh author, a White cisgender female, is trilingual in Russian, Czech, and English and came to the United States from Russia. The first, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh authors participated in the design and implementation of the learning pod and shared observations about the learning pod through the stakeholder interviews.

Participants

All SCITs participants who took an active role at the learning pod were invited to participate in the focus group. These students were all enrolled in a section of school counseling practicum and were invited to volunteer with the learning pod for direct elementary student experiences. All students were also enrolled in a group counseling class, which presented opportunities for group and guidance counseling services. Seven students were invited, four agreed to attend, and three participated. All students identified as White or Caucasian and female. Students' ages ranged from 23 to 35 years old. Using purposive (quota) sampling (Robinson, 2014), we invited all participants who participated in the design or implementation of the learning pod to take part in individual interviews. We set inclusion criteria by stakeholder groups interviewed: university faculty and staff, school personnel, childcare consultants, childcare center director and employees, and partnering community organizations. Fourteen stakeholders took part in the interviews, conducted by the first, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh authors. Twelve of the stakeholders interviewed chose to speak about SCITs' learning experiences, with several more involved than others. We did not have permission from the partnering school district to interview family members of students. Table 1 provides a list of stakeholder groups

Table 1. Participant information by category.

Category	Pseudonyms	Relevant Background Information
SCITs	SCIT 1 SCIT 2 SCIT 3	• Age range: 23–35 years old • All identified as female, White/Caucasian • Enrolled in school counseling practicum and group counseling courses
University Partners (UP)	UP 1 UP 2 UP 3 UP 4 UP 5 UP 6	• Representing university programs and departments related to counseling, sociology, education, and criminal justice • Community partnerships and service-learning experience and expertise • Some partners had direct work with SCITs • Experience and expertise with diverse populations, including those who have immigrated or speak English as a second language
Community Partners (CP)	CP 1 CP 2 CP 3 CP 4 CP 5 CP 6	• Childcare practice, administration, and policy experience and expertise • Supervising university students experience and expertise • Church leadership experience and expertise • Leadership in nonprofit work • Volunteer with experience with families and community partners • Some partners had direct work with SCITs • Experience and expertise with diverse populations

Note.This table provides information organized by stakeholder category. The authors created pseudonyms based on category, and collective personal and professional experiences and expertise were compiled for each group. Only background information relevant to the learning pod was included.

with pseudonyms, organized within three categories, and relevant background information for each category: SCITs, university faculty (UP), and community partners (CP). Heaton (2022) provided a survey of methods for using pseudonyms in qualitative research. We chose a coding system that maintained anonymity for this piece within each stakeholder group.

Data collection

We obtained IRB-approval at our institution before conducting both focus groups and interviews. We used focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015) to attain students' actual perspectives during their service-learning experience. The second author, who had no evaluative or prior relationship with students, facilitated the focus group with a structured question list and prioritized capturing group consensus as much as possible. Prior to facilitating the focus group, the second author discussed the facilitation process with the first author. We discussed her assumptions around school counseling and focus group facilitation to ensure integrity with the facilitation process. The focus group, lasting approximately one hour, took place in the fall semester after students completed their spring practicum experience. The structured question guide included prompts around SCITs' experience at the learning pod (e.g., What were the lessons you have learned through the pod experience?), their current internship experience (e.g., In what ways have lessons you have learned in the pod experience showed up in your internship experience?), and their future participation in S-F-C partnerships (e.g., What opportunities do you see for participating in future school-family-community partnerships as a school counselor?). The second author transcribed verbatim afterward. The interview team conducted one to one-and-half hour interviews with stakeholders in the modality of their choice (in-person or Zoom), which included interviewing one another. We only collected background information from each stakeholder about their professional and personal experiences and expertise relevant to the pod. We used a semi-structured interview approach with questions around three categories: process and implementation, benefits and challenges, and lessons learned. The question list contained specific questions about students' experiences. For this study, we considered only answers to questions about students' experiences and not responses pertaining to the creation and implementation of the learning pod. We transcribed the interviews we each conducted, reviewed for accuracy, and conducted member-checking to promote accuracy. Participants offered no substantive changes or edits.

Data analysis

We applied a reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for data analysis. The first and second authors conducted thematic analysis in several stages. First, we read and re-read transcriptions of both the focus group and interviews and delineated which section of each interview pertained to student experiences. We discussed a systematic way of coding the data, which involved using functions in Microsoft Word to color-code the text and generate an initial list of codes across datasets. This approach allowed for a more in-depth, "hands-on" approach with a smaller dataset, while we used some features of Word to organize codes and share findings with each other. Codes emerged through an inductive process directly from the data. Our coding process, aiming to produce iterative themes, remained open and organic, without any coding framework (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). To that end, we separately coded each data set and collated the data around our codes into possible themes. We then met and first discussed our coding experiences and any assumptions we believed could impact our discussion. The first author discussed his position as counselor educator and his preexisting relationships with the SCITs and their training program. The second author discussed her newness to qualitative research and disentangling from searching for the "right" answer to code and thematic development versus her authentic rich description of her analysis and process. Our discussions stimulated an iterative process that, through successive meetings, allowed us to revise categories and themes. Agreed-upon themes cut across student and

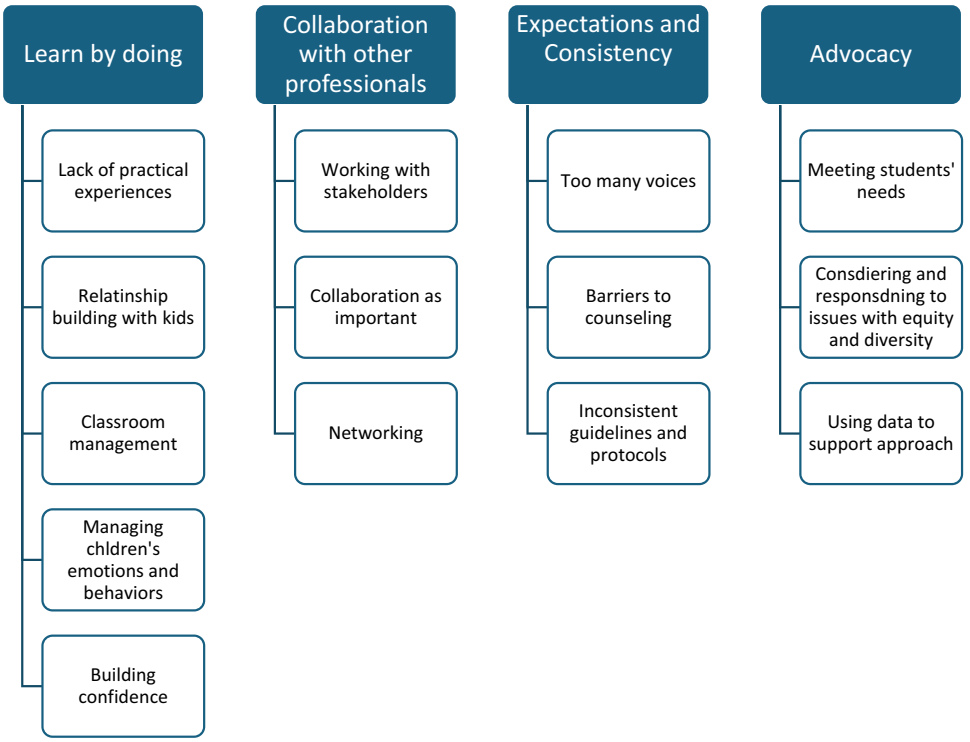

Figure 1. Final thematic map. *Note*: The blue boxes reflect the four major themes. Categories of coding follow under each major theme.

stakeholder experiences. For example, we discussed how our specific codes from each data set fit into a larger thematic "map" that included both data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Figure 1 illustrates a final product of a thematic map that guided our conversations as it was continually revised. We also sought to clarify and scrutinize each theme, determining if any themes represented one or both data sets. As disagreements or differences in perspectives arose, we relied on our initial thematic map to ground our discussion, especially to consider if our initial themes "work" to accurately represent our coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Much of our differences centered on codes related to collaboration and SCIT's observations on learning. For example, we decided "learn by doing" more accurately reflected data than an initial theme ("experiential learning"). Collaboration, we noted through conversation, fit more accurately as a theme all its own than it did under other areas, such as learn by doing or advocacy. We also debriefed early on about classroom management and discerned SCITs learned much about managing students' emotions and behaviors outside the "classroom" environment (i.e., times reserved for remote learning).

Consensus building also impacted how we approached saturation, i.e., the point where no other major themes emerged, and we could add no new information or details to existing ones (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). More specifically, our process aligned with meaning saturation, one where we looked at our final thematic map and findings and confirmed the absence of any other variations (Peters, 2023). We (first and second authors) considered causal factors (i.e., accomplishing our aim to exhaust analysis with more boundaries and limited data sets, our limited experience with qualitative analysis), contextual factors (i.e., our shared in arriving at consensus for saturation), and intervening conditions (e.g., not having access to some voices, like parents of K-2 children) (Peters, 2023). For example, the first author, toward the end of the process, brought up including a theme on "mattering." After extensive debrief over multiple sessions, we both agreed that there was not enough clear evidence

between the two datasets to warrant its inclusion (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Once we agreed on themes and their fit holistically, we chose examples that illustrated the themes for our narrative report.

Trustworthiness

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) provide steps for addressing trustworthiness, which we used as guidelines in our process. We conducted member-checking (i.e., sending interview transcripts back to participants for review). We developed triangulation by having multiple investigators collect and analyze interviews. Additionally, we used two data sources, which provided a degree of triangulation and included our own observations as part of the stakeholder group interviewed. The interview team debriefed weekly, and the first and second authors debriefed bi-weekly throughout the focus group and data analysis process. Conversation topics included our own positionality in the project and addressing bias, which better helped us bring our awareness to issues that could impact our interpretations of the data. We also created a Research Positionality statement to disclose important topics addressed in our debriefings. We relied on an auditor (third author) who had no role in the data collection or analysis. The auditor reviewed the focus group transcript and ensured that findings from the data analysis reflected SCITs' comments. This process aided the clarity and cohesion in presenting the findings.

Our actions in demonstrating trustworthiness toward saturation included critical conversations and debriefings as well as consideration of the auditor's feedback.

Results

Two RQs guided our inquiry presented in this study: 1) How did SCITs perceive their service-learning experience participating in facilitating a learning pod for underserved K-2 students through community partnerships? and 2) How did key stakeholders who created and implemented the learning pod perceive students' service-learning experience? These two questions framed our investigation of two different data sets. The synthesis entailed in our analysis produced meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021) illustrated by four themes: learning by doing, collaboration with other professionals, expectations and consistency, and advocacy.

Learning by doing

SCITs sought to volunteer at the learning pod because they had anticipated challenges accessing direct, in-person experiences at their practicum sites. "It was hard to practice a lot of the counseling-type skills that we were taught," SCIT 2 noted. The learning pod provided opportunities for graduate students to apply what they had learned in counseling classes. All SCITs discussed what they were able to observe at the pod that was unavailable to them at site. SCITs engaged academically, observing classroom behaviors, and socially engaged in the classroom and recess. Several stakeholders (e.g., UP 1, CP 1) emphasized the limitations of online learning for students in field placements and the importance of working with students in person, both to obtain formative learning and to bring critical issues out of the discussion and into reality. As UP 1 noted, it was a "reality check" for graduate students.

All SCITs shared aspects of their learning related to building relationships with young children. SCIT 3 stated that they received a "really in depth look at their behaviors with other kids one on one," while another noted the importance of goal setting around school-related behaviors (e.g., sitting down on cue, directing attention to adults). Students at practicum sites did not have access to these types of experiences because lockdowns frequently resulted in limited or no in-person contact. SCIT 2 reflected on her opportunity to "meet the kids where they were at": "the biggest thing I've learned is . . . being the support that the kid needs in that moment, and not necessarily what our expectation of their support would need to be." SCITs also had the opportunity to meet the children in their

neighborhood: "we can literally see their houses from the site," SCIT 1 reflected. Students learned and discussed that support came with challenges. Confronting the children – "trying to make sure the kids were not hurting each other," SCIT 2 noted – left SCITs with questions of how to respond. Overall, students appreciated the opportunity to form a more in-depth and longer relationship with the children because they were able to be with them much more frequently than in the regular school setting. Other stakeholders (UP 1, UP 2) interviewed noted similar opportunities for students to build relationships with the children in the pod. Adults gained insight into the children's lives (e.g., what they did during the week or weekend, how they felt) and had classroom time with them. Several university and community stakeholders noted the "human connection" afforded to children by adults in the community at a time when those relationships were not present. Students, according to CP 2, came to build "awareness" to the issues children faced individually and as a community during the pandemic.

SCITs reflected on learning skills related to classroom management – learning experiences, they noted, not readily available to them at practicum sites. "We [did not] often get a lot of time in classrooms . . . so I really enjoy[ed] behavior observation and classroom management styles and just being able to try new things in that area," SCIT 1 stated. Students had the freedom to try new approaches to management and experience the challenges and failures that accompany those trials. SCIT 1 compared the learning experience to a "playground," a space with limited expectations where students could try approaches and learn from their mistakes. UP 3 and UP 6 spoke to students' capacity to move beyond "exposure" to building confidence in practiced skills related to management.

All SCITs discussed their experience learning how to manage children's emotions and behaviors. SCITs described the opportunity to observe at first. "Usually, we had so many helpers . . . [we had] an opportunity to just watch and observe and debrief a little bit as we went so that helped with interventions," SCIT 1 noted. SCIT 3 reflected on learning more about their own internal response to managing children's behaviors, how to "handle a classroom, how to keep your cool when kids are driving you nuts and not listening, how to maintain that voice that helps them continue to listen." Students saw a breadth of behaviors and interventions, such as intervening with acts of aggression toward adults and other children and helping children to ground and calm. Several stakeholders agreed that students saw problematic behaviors in the real world, especially managing children engaging in online learning. They observed students' learning in terms of seeing real challenges and management skills in practice, with UP 5 noting that the experience took them beyond the "textbook" for "typically developing children." These behaviors, CP 3 noted, often show up in normal circumstances as well, outside of a pandemic. Students expressed gratitude for learning unconventional skills early in their academic journey, contrasting with typical practicum experiences. They valued the extensive one-on-one interactions and acknowledged the multidisciplinary nature of their tasks, akin to real-world counseling scenarios post-graduation.

SCITs also discussed how their confidence grew from their volunteer experiences. SCITs reported working on managing children in crisis and in the classroom, understanding what precipitates problematic behavior, and growing more comfortable working with elementary-aged students. Multiple university and unity stakeholders reflected that students gained from "exposure" to the experiences at the pod and the increased comfortability with situations and challenges that do not have clear answers.

Collaboration with other professionals

SCITs expressed several beneficial aspects to collaborating with other professionals at the pod. Practicum did not afford much opportunity for collaboration during the pandemic, as SCIT 3 noted. The pod experience offered an opportunity to "bounce ideas off of other people." Another student discussed taking note of the steps stakeholders took to implement and run the pod, citing it as a good experience for the future. In turn, stakeholders, SCIT 2 observed, "valued our experience and our lens of things and really wanted to give us as much opportunity as possible to do whatever we

wanted." SCIT 1 saw the pastor, who "knew all the kids by name," interact with and contribute to the pod. Stakeholders, like CP 6, mentioned elements of collaboration that all volunteers happened to see: a "shared vision" among stakeholders; a "positive relationship with the school"; and understanding each other's role.

SCITs also noted how the network of stakeholders banded together to offer a variety of services. SCITs and stakeholders were able to be creative to fix the problems through sharing ideas, resources, and network with and collaborating with other professionals. "[Our network] is part of the day to day," SCIT 3 stated. "It has to be because there are so many different out of the box creative ways that we can help these kids." SCIT 1 commented on the essential nature of collaboration within school counseling and its reflection in their work at the pod:

> We don't typically handle all the things on our own. We have administration, social workers, CPS [Child Protective Services], teachers and parents and family and friends and the school board . . . so I think it was really interesting to see what it can look like and what awesome things can happen out of that different collaboration and stakeholders.

SCIT 1 also saw everyone "working toward the same goal" and expressed feeling they were "on the same page." CP 6 noted that the pod was one of the "most collaborative efforts that I've seen in the 40 years of working within education and childcare."

Expectations and consistency

SCITs encountered several impediments in learning from the pod experience related to their own expectations and experiences with consistency with policies and stakeholders. SCIT 3 compared working together with stakeholders as a "double-edged sword," with the experience sometimes feeling like it had "too many cooks in the kitchen." Expertise in managing young children in educational settings was also lacking. SCITs also expected more opportunities to practice counseling skills (e.g., social-emotional learning, more individual work), but, as SCIT 2 noted, "lots of days it felt like daycare or babysitting" and created challenges to apply what they learned in class at times. While a few adults represented specific fields (i.e., teaching, school counseling, nursing), fewer had experience managing children. Frequent staffing changes led to role confusion among the adults, which, according to one student, led to an exacerbation of certain behaviors among the children. Constant onsite supervision and consultation also proved challenging, with a regular need to "directly report to or debrief with really quickly or consult right there" not consistently present, SCIT 1 observed. Many university and community stakeholders noted similar concerns, noting the "chaos" caused by shifting staff, the challenge of supervising staff, and the bevy of new faces.

Consistency among policies and protocols also impacted students' experiences. SCITs highlighted routine as a key factor for children with high needs and commented that the children were new to school and did not know what school was like or should be. However, behavioral expectations were not posted or normed in the beginning, and the structure of their days were not conducive to group or classroom lessons. Another SCIT remarked how they felt children were thrown into a room for online learning, with everyone just trying to get them through the day. Some children stayed at the pod all day while others left early, which created limitations for what students could plan for children. Stakeholders shared similar thoughts on consistency-related issues, such as the lack of structure early on, the inconsistent instruction for volunteers, and the need for posted and explicit expectations for children. Stakeholders, such as UP 2, CP 3, and UP 6, also discussed how navigating risk presented challenges for students. Situations involving overly "aggressive" or "physical" children or deemed "too risky" could have overwhelmed students.

Advocacy

SCITs discussed lessons learned about advocacy for children. Students applied ideas about advocacy and counseling theory to their experiences in the pod. SCIT 1 mentioned seeing "attachment issues" manifest among certain kids, which impacted how they experienced inconsistency both at the pod and at home. SCIT 3 reflected on the importance of grant funding and pursuing partnerships; these steps create services for kids that would not otherwise be present in schools. Students witnessed the challenge of advocacy in practice through the pod, with SCIT 2 noting, "It's harder to convince people who aren't seeing it every day and who aren't involved in it directly, that this is something that needs to happen, and especially in areas that are divided on certain issues." SCIT 3 echoed those challenges and pointed to data as a key to "back you up" and show effectiveness. Students observed collaborators "advocating beyond the school building" and meeting children where they live. "Without [the pod]," SCIT 2 argued, "those kids would have fallen through the cracks."

Stakeholders also reflected on SCITs' experiences with advocacy. CP 4 discussed the opportunity volunteers had to forge relationships with children and communities of color to appreciate differences and dispel "mistrust of White people." CP 5 also noted the relationships that SCITs were able to make with families, as they picked them up while living near the church. UP 4 described the learning experience in terms of service and equity:

> Every single [student] that entered the space reflected very positively about the opportunity to serve in a community with a community endeavor, in a time where everyone was so isolated from one another. And you know, you can't really talk about the sociology of education very well, unless you're really on the ground, being able to see some of the issues and the everyday struggles connected to equity.

SCITs attained the "ground experience" of advocacy through direct support to children within the community they inhabited.

Discussion

In this study, we framed our inquiry into the impact of service-learning through an S-F-C partnership on practicum-level SCITs during the pandemic around two research questions, one around SCITs perception of their service-learning experience and the other around key stakeholders' perceptions of those experiences. Findings offered insights into SCITs' learning experiences that concern not only counseling core competencies but also aspects of community partnerships and, by extension, leadership and advocacy. SCITs had experience offering direct counseling services and played an active role in the operations and ongoing development of the pod. As such, they reported practice gains and experience with core functions of school counseling. The learning pod provided a space to work directly and build relationships with K-2 students, in accordance with school counseling professional standards (American School Counselor Association, 2019). They practiced skills related to classroom management and managing student behaviors and emotions.

While no SCITs or stakeholders explicitly mentioned "leadership," aspects of their experience align with literature on leadership practice (e.g., Young and Bryan's (2015) areas of leadership practice). SCITs encountered atypical experiences with students mired in ambiguity because of the unique circumstance of the pandemic and the learning pod, which prompted creative problem-solving (Resourceful Problem Solving). Additionally, SCITs discussed working through real-word problems and developing "awareness" of this group's lived experience (Farrell et al., 2020; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017; Stewart-Sicking et al., 2013). According to those SCITs in the focus group, their confidence grew from these experiences, which promoted the application of theory into practice (Havlik et al., 2016) and allowed them to envision their roles as change agents (Professional Efficacy). Confidence in partnerships, notably found in working with communities of color, grows when professionals, including SCITs, can see the difference created by partnerships; they also become more likely to engage in community partnerships in the future (Dogan et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2018). Findings also suggest the impact of learning about partnership through concrete experience with and around

collaboration. Witnessing the collaboration among different partners brought students an understanding into how partners agree to work together, and taking on active roles in these collaborative efforts showed the impact of shared vision and decision-making (Interpersonal Influence and Systemic Collaboration) (Henry & Bryan, 2021; Mason et al., 2023).

Social justice advocacy, an area of leadership practice (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017), S-F-C partnerships (e.g., Bryan et al., 2020), and service-learning (Farrell et al., 2020; Lloyd-Hazlett et al., 2022), stood out in the findings. SCITs reflected explicitly on learning about advocacy through this partnership. SCITs acknowledged the benefit of the pod for children who would lack access to supervision and other school-related services during the pandemic. They saw equity disparities firsthand and took part in steps to address those through the learning pod. They also emphasized the importance of collecting and using data to support advocacy efforts. These lessons connect to issues within their future work, such as navigating large caseloads and students' complex needs as well as supporting students through adversity and measuring the impact of their change practice (Kneale et al., 2018; Henry & Bryan, 2021). SCITs understood students better in their local context (client worldview) and developed relationships and groups based on the students' needs they discovered (counseling and advocacy interventions at the community level) (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). SCITs learned about social barriers and cultural considerations of students in the local community, saw a bridge develop between "counselor" and "counselor-advocate," and learned about community resources (Farrell et al., 2020; Langellier et al., 2020; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). Fears et al. (2023) also emphasized the importance of understanding the rural community and its resources for advocacy efforts. Partnerships with community remain an essential ingredient for advocacy and systemic change (Henry & Bryan, 2021), including the rural community in which these SCITs work (Fears et al., 2023). Moreover, immersive experiences in the community, also salient to the SCITs in the study, provided opportunities to learn through exposure and interaction (Dogan et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2018). Leadership and advocacy identity formation rely heavily on formative experiences such as those found in community partnerships (Betters-Bubon & Schultz, 2017). SCITs recognized the value of partnerships with community and considered the inherency of advocacy to the learning pod partnerships.

The SCITs' learning experience also contained challenges, including frequent staffing changes, inconsistent opportunities for consultation, and disruptions to planned activities and interventions. Arman and Scherer (2002) found clarity of site supervision role and responsibilities as an area of need – a finding that SCITs' feedback would appear to echo. SCITs noted considerable challenges in understanding their own and others' roles at the pod. Role perceptions serve as a similar barrier in schools. Bryan and Griffin (2010) noted the considerable effort needed by all stakeholder groups to spend time clarifying roles in S-F-C partnerships. They also noted the considerable time constraints that impact school counselors in managing all their other counseling duties while juggling community partnerships. During the pandemic, practicing school counselors also experienced role confusion, a perceived lack of support, and constraints on their capacity for intervention and programming (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). SCITs, in a sense, balanced parallel concerns, fulfilling practicum and course responsibilities in the ever-shifting environment the pandemic created. Supervision remains a key activity to enhancing SCIT leadership and advocacy practice (Hilts et al., 2022). Additionally, these findings point to the particular role site supervisors can play in SCITs' role development, which requires the supervisor to display a great degree of intentionality and modeling of leadership and advocacy (Storlie et al., 2019). Site and university supervisors can intentionally facilitate connections to leadership and advocacy theories and practices with their real-time experiences in such partnerships.

Limitations

We acknowledge specific limitations to our study. Our approach does not include other data sources (e.g., entrance/exit surveys, researcher journals). The learning pod, designed and implemented as a crisis response for a group of children and families needing supervision, was not originally conceived as an object for study, so all data collection was post hoc. Our sample of SCITs does not include each

student involved, though three of the four regular participants engaged in the focus group process. The group of SCITs lacks broader representation (i.e., only White and female students). Moreover, our study did not explore other aspects of identity among students and partnership beyond variables such as race and professional orientation. Tools such as Social Identity Maps (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019) could strengthen capturing the complexities of social location for all involved in critical qualitative research. Certain stakeholder groups, most notably parents, are not represented in the interview sample, due to our limited interactions with families, as demarcated by the school.

Lessons for our program

We have gathered valuable insights from our inquiry into how to improve our current programming and promote sustainable partnerships among our program, local schools, and the surrounding communities. We are also seeking to strengthen partnerships with local school districts to better support and expand opportunities for service-learning. We are encouraging students in their summative assignments during their internship semesters, which are rooted in action research methodology, to consider community partnerships. Lessons from this project have enhanced how we guide students through such projects. More generally, concerns outlined in the theme Expectations and Consistency provide lessons in how we might process and attend to these learning experiences with their students, such as allowing more space for formative SCIT feedback. Impactful partnerships (e.g., Griffin et al., 2021) may become more accessible and familiar to SCITs as they enter full-time practice.

Implications for counselor educators and SCITs

Several implications and considerations for counselor educators infusing leadership and partnership training into their curricula stem from this study. This study lends further support to including more pre-service service-learning activities in the curriculum and opportunities to support students' leadership and advocacy development (Arman & Scherer, 2002; LeBlanc & Borders, 2021; Lloyd-Hazlett et al., 2022). The literature on leadership development in counselor training points to the potential impact of immersive experiences. Immersion experiences provide opportunities for SCITs to learn about the communities they inhabit and serve as well as building skills suited for specific groups (e.g., communities of color, Harris et al., 2018). Beck et al. (2017) suggested how such connections with the community can bolster advocacy efforts for specific groups (e.g., LGBT-inclusive programming in schools). Engagement in the community can build skills and raise students' awareness through encountering community members who are culturally dissimilar (Fulton & Shannonhouse, 2014). SCITs may also pursue opportunities through ancillary education experiences that expand their leadership and partnership capacities. Counseling associations, including Chi Sigma Iota (CSI), present one natural gateway for both counselor educators and counselors-in-training from any specialty area to ally with the community and build professional identity in leadership and advocacy practice. Storlie and Wood (2014), interviewing faculty advisors of CSI chapters, found that activity in the organization facilitated a sense of advocacy, social justice, and service.

The partnership under study also, by definition, involved a variety of stakeholders from different professional backgrounds. Counselor educators should consider strengthening university–community partnerships through training opportunities (e.g., supervision professional development and action-oriented research endeavors) that impact communities (Bryan & Griffin, 2010; DeArmond et al., 2021). SCITs and counselor educators alike could pursue opportunities for strategic advocacy at different systemic levels (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017), understand how creative school programming can have broader impact (Mason et al., 2023), and the possibility of political advocacy (Lopez-Perry & Whitson, 2022). Such efforts expand school counselor training in leadership and advocacy.

The findings also illustrate the need for clear structure and expectations for supervising SCITs in practicum and internship community partnerships. Consulting models for supervising school counseling leadership (e.g., Hilts et al., 2022; Peters & Luke, 2021) may help counselor educators navigate

the more ambiguous elements encountered in experiences like these. For example, within Model for Supervision of School Counseling Leadership (MSSCL) (Hilts et al., 2022), a supervisor could *teach* SCITs about the connection between leadership and community partnership, *counsel* to build awareness in an immersive experience within the community, and *consult* as SCITs encounter unique issues in the experience.

Indeed, when considering leadership and professional identity development, such social experiences within the community may be an essential ingredient in graduate training (Peters & Vereen, 2020). Counselor educators can intentionally supervise students to participate in and lead professional activities in the larger community.

In total, counselor educators should consider a comprehensive curriculum development strategy that embeds leadership and advocacy principles. We recommend the inclusion of community-based practicum and internship experiences that bridge theory and practice, providing opportunities for students to develop partnership skills in real-world contexts. In addition to foundational coursework that provides training on working with vulnerable populations (e.g., culturally competence, trauma-informed care, and foundations in leadership and advocacy practice), coursework should emphasize the development of collaborative skills necessary for effective partnerships with educators, religious leaders, and community organizations, fostering leadership in community-wide initiatives. For example, a dedicated module exploring the leadership role of school counselors could incorporate several examples of partnerships in practice (e.g., Betters-Bubon & Schultz, 2017; Bryan et al., 2020; and this study) to promote ideas for action. Finally, capstone projects (e.g., Michel et al., 2018), supervised projects during practicum and internship, or additional endeavors could allow SCITs, counselor educator, school partners, and communities to showcase their ability to lead and advocate for systemic change.

Future research

As much of the research for this project was done post-hoc, future researchers could intentionally develop a project around how S-F-C partnerships impact SCITs capacity for leadership – perhaps using Young and Bryan's (2015) School Counseling Leadership survey to include quantitative analysis. Other research could explore how internship experiences could intentionally infuse the efforts of the university into S-F-C partnerships, especially as university partnerships can rely heavily on networking and navigating liminal spaces (Porter et al., 2023). Additional research could explore supervisory experiences of community engaged efforts during practicum, following guidance of leadership models (e.g., Hilts et al., 2022; Michel et al., 2018). Qualitative research could help relay collective experiences of both supervisors and SCITs for the opportunities and challenges of service-learning and community partnerships during practicum and internship. Grant writing and pursuits for local and federal funding can further support goals of counselor education programs and meet important social and community needs Carlson (2018). Community-engaged, service-learning Initiatives can extend how counselor educators scaffold learning and impact their community in meaningful ways.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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