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# An Exploration of Practicum Students' Experiences of Meaning-Making Through Altruism

Debra Paige Lewis

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AN EXPLORATION OF PRACTICUM STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF MEANING-  
MAKING THROUGH ALTRUISM

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**ABSTRACT****AN EXPLORATION OF PRACTICUM STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF MEANING-MAKING THROUGH ALTRUISM**

Debra P. Lewis  
Old Dominion University, 2018

Finding meaning in one's work as a counselor has been demonstrated as an important step in the development of altruism, an essential component of counselor effectiveness. Previous studies in counselor education-related research involving program outcomes focus on the core skills of counseling such as knowledge, skill building, self-appraisal and self-efficacy. Yet little investigation has concentrated on the internal rewards of the clinical experience, such as the meaning found in or the altruism development derived specifically from the practicum or internship. This dissertation research took a phenomenological approach to explore the meaning-making and altruism development of counselor education practicum students providing social and emotional support to adolescents identified as at-risk. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to understand former practicum students' conceptualization of meaning through work and thoughts related to personal altruism development. The themes illuminated through the study suggest that students found challenges in the experience, were able to collaborate toward successful outcomes, related the impact of the experience to working with at-risk adolescents, were able to describe the personal meaning derived from the practicum, and reflected on personal altruism development. Implications for counselor educators and supervisors and suggestions for future research are provided.

*Key Words:* altruism development, meaning, practicum, counselor education

Dr. Kaprea Johnson (Chair/Methodologist)  
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Dr. Christine Berger (Member)

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the background of the study, the problem statement, and the purpose of the study. Research questions are identified to guide the research, as are the key terms used throughout. The conceptual framework used to view the work is summarized, and finally the assumptions, limitation and delimitations are addressed.

### **BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

Counseling is a collaborative endeavor between counselor and client sought by clients to assist in accomplishing goals, provide solutions to problems, increase effective communication and coping skills, provide self-development assistance, and promote mental health (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). Programs within the field of counselor education provide training and preparation for counselors. Counselor education programs are often accredited in order to ensure that professional standards are met and maintained. The accrediting agency for counseling is the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Not all counselor education programs are accredited, but for the purposes of this study the research focuses on a CACREP accredited program. For most specialties, a CACREP accredited program requires a 60-semester credit hour preparation program and covers the following areas: counseling orientation and ethics, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, and the counseling and helping relationship (CACREP, 2016). Also pivotal to a counselor's education is the completion of a practicum and internship experience, which gives the learner an opportunity to apply theory and counseling skills while under direct supervision (ACA, 2014). Practicum is the initial entry into the counseling field and consists of a 100 clock-hour experience (CACREP, 2016). In this

introductory exposure to the clinical area, the practicum student is given the chance to serve under supervision in a *portion* of the roles that are expected from a staff member. In contrast, an intern would be provided with the opportunity to perform *all* of the roles and expectations of the staff member under supervision (CACREP, 2016). The practicum gives the counselor-in-training time to ease into the clinical area and work on the core skills of counseling before entering the internship, where expectations are higher.

The most often cited counselor education-based research related to practicum and internship focuses on the core skills of counseling. Most recently, topics such as student self-appraisal (Fong, Borders & Effington, 1997), self-efficacy (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2013; Keim, Goodrich, Crofts & Walker, 2015; Mullen, Uwanmahoro, Blount & Lambie, 2015; Tang, et al., 2004), knowledge and skill building, and enhancement of making connections have been investigated (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2013). Self-appraisal is important in building confidence in abilities to accomplish tasks. A seminal study by Fong et al. (1997) looked at the cognitive development of 43 students over the course of a 72-semester-hour CACREP accredited program. Results indicated that students did not demonstrate an improvement in self-appraisal until after completing a practicum experience. Tang et al. (2004) found similar results while investigating 116 counseling students across six different counselor education programs. Results indicated self-efficacy was related positively to the number of courses, hours of internship, and amount of clinical instruction received. Self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (1977) as one's ability to succeed at tasks, is also important to the developing counselors as they learn new skills and gain confidence. More recently Keim et al. (2015) addressed self-efficacy in a study with 29 students participating in practical training related to group work. Students were assigned to clinical sites in community service and client advocacy areas. Impacts were measured, and

indicated a significant increase in confidence in skill attainment over the semester. Skill attainment was also addressed in a study by Alvarado and Gonzalez (2013), who chose an innovative setting for research: the pre-practicum. The researchers collected data from 16 counselors in training who were required to develop activities for children, adolescents and families, which encouraged social and emotional wellness. Results collected from reflective journals indicated not just skill attainment but also increased connection to the community, cohesion with classmates, an increase in understanding of program development, and insight into the counseling profession. In summary, much of the literature cites self-efficacy and skill attainment when investigating counselor education program benefits, yet little investigation has focused on the internal rewards of the clinical experience, such as the meaning derived from the practicum or internship experience.

Meaning is defined as learning from experiences with others within a specific space and time (Engestrom, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). Finding meaning has been explained by the noted psychiatrist and founder of Logotherapy, Victor Frankl, as an essential motivating force in life (1976). The concept of finding meaning through work is important to address in the counselor-in-training as it serves as a key factor in career development, whereas lack of meaning is associated with career burnout and lower job satisfaction (Limberg, 2013; Malachi-Pines & Yafe-Yanai, 2001). Meaning can also be related to empathy, one of the key components of counseling (Rogers, 1989). Rogers referred to empathy as feeling and experiencing the actual meaning of the client (1989). Empathy, so essential to building the therapeutic relationship, acts as a precursor to altruism, or the desire to help others (Goleman, 2006; Smith, Keating, and Stotland, 1989). Empathy and altruism are important to the student entering a practicum or internship, as they are considered to be essential counselor competencies (Swank et al., 2013).

Altruism has been referred to as “the purest form of caring-selfless and non-contingent upon reward” (Robinson & Curry, 2005, p. 68). Altruism development has been addressed in the counseling literature and presents valuable implications for the counseling field. Research has cited that counselors-in-training perceived a positive relationship between altruism and counselor effectiveness (Swank et al., 2013). Furthermore, participating in meaningful acts of altruism was found to be an essential component of self-care and wellness for the practicing counselor, both factors in maintaining effectiveness as a professional counselor (Limberg, Schermann, Fox & Robinson, 2018). In addition, life experience was addressed as counselors-in-training reported the belief that counselor development and life experience were directly related to altruism level (Swank et al., 2013). Although these findings are important to the counseling field, there are gaps in the literature addressing altruism and meaning specifically related to practica or internships. Much of the counselor-education related research addressing meaning and altruism involves either professional counselors or counselors-in-training. In the literature referring to the latter, the participants are identified as counselors enrolled in a counselor education program, and not specifically in a practicum or internship. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature that specifically addresses the meaning or development of altruism as a component of counselor education, which is viewed as essential to the growth of the counselor. Filling this gap might aid in the understanding of practicum students’ perceptions, and provide insight into the personal meaning and altruism development found during their initial clinical experience.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Although counselor education research describes program outcomes related to self-efficacy (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2013; Keim et al., 2015; Mullen et al., 2015; Tang et al., 2004), self-appraisal (Fong et al., 1997), skill attainment, skill building, and ability to make connections (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2013), it is not known whether or how meaning is developed from the practicum experience for the counselor-in-training. Meaning is important to the developing counselor because it can affect job satisfaction and prevent career burnout (Limberg, 2013; Malachi-Pines & Yafe-Yanai, 2001). More importantly, finding meaning in one's work as a counselor is an essential step in the development of empathy and altruism (Goleman, 2006; Smith et al., 1989), key components of an effective counselor (Swank et al., 2013). This study addresses the gap in the literature related to the experiences of former practicum students' meaning-making and altruism development, and aids future counselor education curriculum development in the areas related to practicum and internship.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to explore and describe the personal meaning and altruism development of counselor education students associated with a practicum site providing social and emotional support to at-risk adolescents. This study addresses former practicum students' perceptions of and the meaning derived from the experience as it relates to altruism development. For the purposes of this study, meaning is defined as learning from experiences with others within a specific space and time (Engstrom, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). Meaning is related to empathy and altruism, essential qualities of an effective counselor (Laska, Gurman & Wampold, 2014; Rogers, 1989). Counselor education literature lacks a focus on the practicum or internship student. This study is an attempt to

explore former practicum students' personal development of altruism and the meaning associated with the experience in order to provide information that may be helpful to counselor educators.

### **THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions guide this investigation:

1. How do participants perceive and describe the practicum experience in terms of altruism development?
2. How do participants describe the personal meaning derived from the practicum experience?

### **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

The following key terms relate to this study:

*Adolescent*: divided into early adolescence between ages 10 and 14, and middle adolescence – females typically reach this point at age 15, males at approximately age 17 (Vernon, 2009). For the purposes of this study, adolescence is defined as the years between the ages of 10 and 15.

*Altruism*: defined in relation to counseling as “the purest form of caring – selfless and non-contingent upon reward” (Robinson & Curry, 2005, p. 68).

*Altruism Development Model (ADM)*: developed by Curry, Smith and Robinson (2009) to guide altruism development in the helping professions.

*At risk*: refers to the at-risk student as “a set of presumed cause-effect dynamics that place an individual child or adolescent in danger of future negative outcomes” (McWhirter, McWhirter,

McWhirter, and McWhirter, 2013, p. 8); can be used interchangeably with the term under-resourced.

*Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP):* the accrediting body for the counseling profession.

*CARE Now:* a character and resilience education program created by two faculty members in a southeastern university while collaborating with a local urban school system setting and the city, in order to provide social and emotional support to adolescents (CARE Now, 2015).

*Counselor education:* the field of counselor education prepares students to partake in a collaborative relationship with the client (ACA, 2014). The counselor education field involves training students to apply theories of counseling for the personal, social, educational and vocational development of their clients (National Center for Education Standards, 2010).

*Meaning:* defined as learning from experiences with others within a specific space and time (Engestrom, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978).

*Meaning-making:* may be defined as looking for a more favorable perspective of an experience or situation (Park, 2013).

*Positive Behavioral Support Intervention:* Positive Behavioral Interventions Supports (PBIS) is a method of achieving social, emotional and academic improvement through managing student behavior proactively (McIntosh, Ty, & Miller, 2014).

*Practicum*: “an opportunity for the student to perform *some* the activities that a regularly employed staff member in the setting would be expected to perform” (CACREP, 2014, p. 20).

*Socio-emotional learning*: this model of character development includes social support topics such identifying one’s own emotions, listening and communicating effectively, cooperating, managing conflict peacefully, building healthy relationships, and showing ethical and social responsibility (Elias, 2009).

*Socio-emotional support*: with a variety of definitions related to socio-emotional support available, this study described socio-emotional support as the attending to students’ emotional and social concerns, while providing active listening and empathic response (Yeager, 2017).

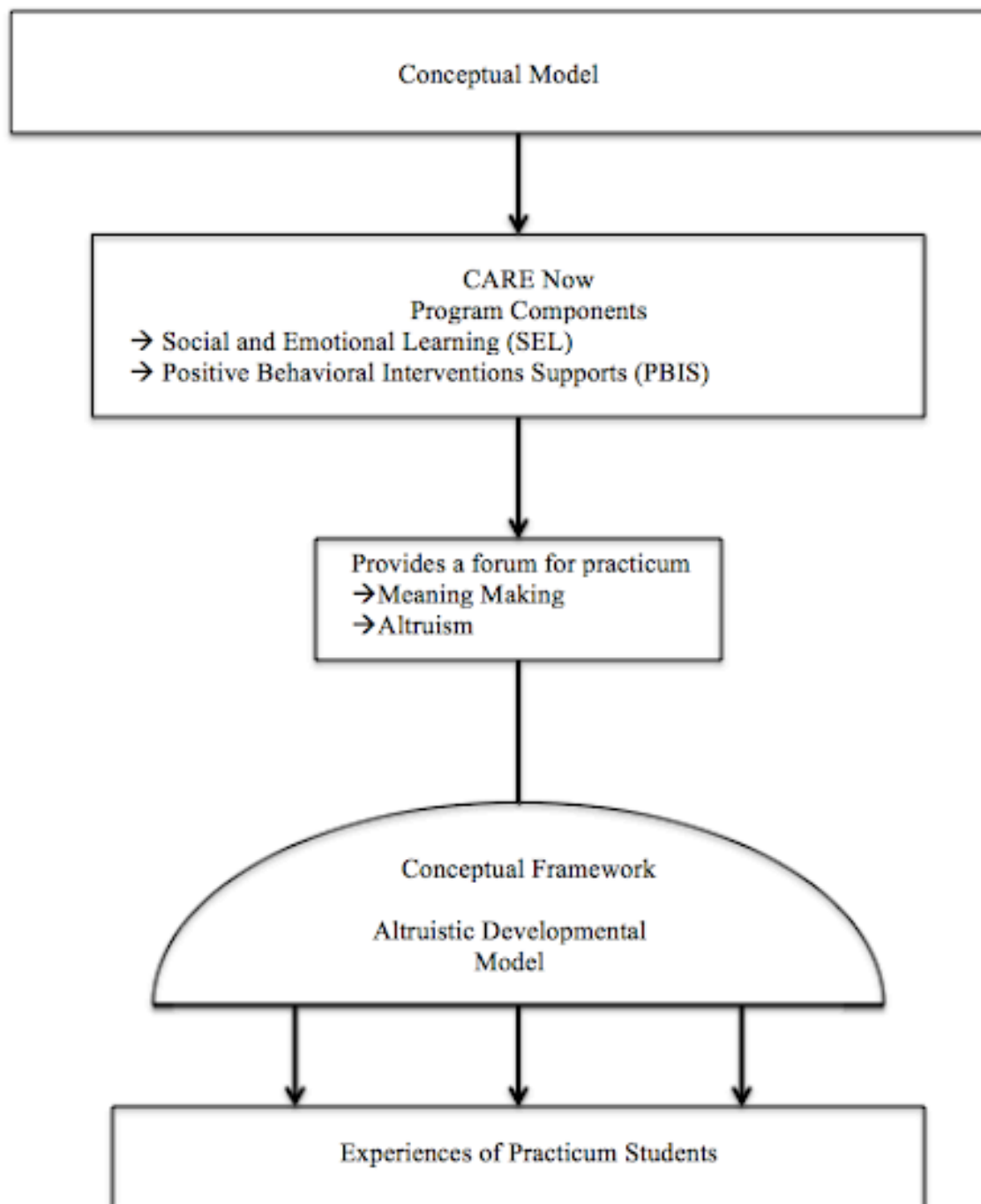
*Social Learning Theory (SLT)*: originated by Bandura (1977). SLT has been used to study individual reactions to specific environmental and behavioral factors.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK SELECTED**

The researcher chose the Altruism Development Model (ADM) to guide this study (Curry et al., 2009). Altruism has been defined as when one gives to another without regard to receiving any personal reward (Eisenberg et al., 1999). Adapted by Curry, Smith and Robinson (2009), the ADM was originally cited by Robinson and Curry (2005) in a less detailed form. The ADM can provide a lens through which to view altruism development in practicum students by referring to four domains: biological, cognitive, social learning, and religious/spiritual.



Curry, Smith and Robinson's ADM (2009) is addressed in more detail in Chapter Two of this proposal. Below is a model illustrating the salient concepts of this study (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Conceptual Model

### **ASSUMPTIONS**

Participants of this qualitative, phenomenological study are assumed to be able to answer and discuss interview topics honestly and factually. It is assumed that participants have a reliable memory of the experience of their practicum and time to reflect on their role. The researcher assumes that participants fully describe their experience as a means of sharing in order to benefit future practicum programs, especially those providing social and emotional support.

### **LIMITATIONS**

Limitations affecting the research might center on the time evolved between participants' practicum experience and the interview process, due to lack of funding for the program and the course of study for the researcher. Additional limiting factors related to sampling are possible as an inability to contact a portion of the former practicum students might affect findings. Causal inferences are not made as they are outside the scope of qualitative research. In keeping consistent with phenomenological methods, generalizability is limited, and not subject to application of findings to individuals, sites, or places outside of those within the scope of study (Creswell, 2014). Although Shenton (2004) recommends random sampling for qualitative studies to increase credibility and decrease researcher bias for participant selection, this type of sampling is not feasible due to the limited number in the population.

### **DELIMITATIONS**

The researcher chose to explore students' perceptions of practicum and the meaning associated with the experience. Because the setting of the study is within the confines of a program for adolescents providing social and emotional support, it is not within the scope of this study to specifically address program effectiveness or the methods used to provide the social

and emotional support. Specific data regarding the adolescents in the program is not reported, as it is not feasible to obtain access to school records and the adolescent participants of the program involved. The criteria for the selection of participants also determine the sample size, as inclusion criteria must be met.

### **SUMMARY**

In summary, this chapter begins with the background of this study, explaining counselor education in the context of a CACREP-accredited program. The practicum experience, the initial exposure to the clinical area of professional counseling, is essential to the education described for the developing counselor. Research indicates external outcomes of counselor education programs such as promotion of self-efficacy and self-appraisal, an increase in skill attainment, and confidence in skill building. Yet, little research discusses the meaning counselors-in-training obtain from the practicum experience. Meaning is essential as it serves as a precursor to empathy and altruism, which are core counselor competencies and related to maintaining effectiveness as a counselor. This study is designed to fill the gaps in research related to exploring former counseling students' perceptions of personal altruism development and the meaning associated with the practicum experience.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

This chapter describes the setting of the program studied, Character and Resilience Education Now (CARE Now). It addresses program components of Social and Emotional Learning and Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports and the at-risk population served. The field of counselor education is defined, followed by a review of the literature presenting the most cited outcomes. The concepts of meaning and altruism development are also explained. And finally, the conceptual framework from which to view the proposed research is introduced.

#### **PROGRAM SETTING: CARE NOW**

CARE Now is an acronym that stands for Character and Resilience Education. The CARE Now program was originated by university faculty, and applied a combination of the theory-based models Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to address needs of at-risk adolescents in an urban location in the southeastern United States. The overarching goal of CARE Now is to support students identified with low academic achievement, insufficient coping skills, and those needing support developing social and emotional skills (CARE Now, 2015). The components of CARE Now were designed with the intention of integrating both counseling practicum and internship students and undergraduates from the Human Movement Science department into the program. Counselors-in-training assigned to this site were given opportunities to apply counseling knowledge and theory while developing counseling skills. The practicum students facilitating program goals were provided with the opportunity to present weekly guidance lessons, lead group and brief individual counseling sessions, and act as advocates during after-school programming, reinforcing goals learned during the school day (Hill, Milliken, Goff, Gregory &

Gomez, 2013). Graduate students chosen as participants in this study completed a 100-clock-hour student practicum as guided by the accrediting body for counseling, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016). Before beginning the practicum experience, students were trained in the program components of both Social and Emotional Learning and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports during a 35-hour orientation. During the semester, daily on-site and weekly university supervision was provided while completing the practicum. Settings for practicum and internship can play a critical role in the students' successful completion of counselor education programs (CACREP, 2016). The CARE Now program described above provided one setting for accomplishing an essential piece of counselor training.

### **Program Components of CARE Now**

Social and emotional learning is the process of acquiring and gaining the ability to utilize the skills necessary to become socially and emotionally competent. An individual identified as socially and emotionally competent is able to manage the social and emotional areas of life such as forming and maintaining healthy relationships, solving problems, possessing the ability to manage learning, developing self-awareness, self-management, and making responsible decisions (CASEL, 2009; Elias, Ferrito & Mocerri, 2015; Elias et al., 1997). Practicum students assigned to the CARE Now program were able to provide both didactic and experiential learning opportunities related to social and emotional learning when working with the adolescents. Each week practicum students presented a 30-minute guidance lesson to all adolescents participating in the CARE Now program related to program goals. The guidance lessons also allowed for practical application of the tenets of social and emotional learning, and addressed topics such as healthy relationships, pro-social behavior, commitment, cooperation,

initiative, independence, effective communication, problem solving, trustworthiness and honesty (CARE Now, 2015). Additional reinforcement of these topics was provided to the students during small group discussion, brief individual sessions, and intentional program activities. Practicum students were encouraged to continually process and reflect on the adolescents' experiences in order to add to the depth of the learning experience (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2014).

An additional program component of CARE Now is the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model. PBIS was developed in an effort to create a framework for prevention of antisocial behavior among youth (Walker et al., 1996). This framework provides education and reinforcement of pro-social behavior and rewards positive behaviors, with the intended effect of creating a school climate where appropriate behavior is the expected norm. PBIS consists of measures including teaching, modeling, and cueing in a consistent manner in response to undesirable behavior (Cook, et al., 2015; Sugai & Horner, 2015). The major components of PBIS are based on the US Public Health Service's conceptual model of prevention in the sense that it intervenes at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels (Walker et al., 1996). The primary level is utilized as a means to prevent problem behavior through support to students in all settings. Secondary and tertiary intervention is provided in order to target students with problem or high-risk behaviors. The secondary tier intervenes by working within small groups to assist students who are identified as high risk. Tertiary support works individually with students who have more severe behavioral concerns and are unresponsive to secondary measures (Sugai & Horner, 2009; Loukas, Suzuki & Horton, 2006). The practicum students referred to in this study in the CARE Now program worked with the adolescents at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels to address student needs. Each week

the practicum students presented guidance lessons related to program goals of character and resilience education. Small groups were used as a forum for discussion of student concerns or to address issues such as bullying, problem solving, and academic concerns. Students were provided with individual support as needed for instances when more attention was necessary, or when they were identified as at-risk (Hill, Milliken, Goff, Clark & Gagnon, 2015). Given that practicum experiences in counselor education provide a setting for practical, supervised application of learning, the CARE Now program became a rich environment, serving both the local community and counselor education program.

### **AT-RISK OR UNDERRESOURCED YOUTH**

The overarching goal for the practicum site referred to in this study was to address the needs of at-risk adolescents. The terms *at-risk* and *under-resourced* are sometimes used interchangeably, however more recent research refers to the latter term (Eiraldi, Wolk, Locke & Beidas, 2015; Krodel, Becker, Ingle & Jakes, 2009; Lindsey, Chambers, Pohle, Beall & Lucksted, 2013). For the purposes of this study, the researcher uses the term at-risk in order to remain consistent with the program goals of the setting used. McWhirter et al. (2013) define at-risk student as “a set of presumed cause-effect dynamics that place an individual child or adolescent in danger of future negative outcomes” (p. 8). At-risk youth have little access to external advantages such as those related to education, support systems, mentors, or finances (Krodel et al., 2009). Additional resources lacking include access to mental health services (Eiraldi et al., 2015; Elmore & Gaylord-Harden, 2012; Lindsey et al., 2013), nutrition (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2017) and parental/family support (Elmore & Gaylord-Harden, 2012). This absence of essential resources can have grave implications for children and youth.



Lacking necessary resources can lead to a negative spiral of events as illustrated by the following statistics. It is approximated that 1 in 5 children and youth have a diagnosable mental health disorder, yet 75%-80% of children and youth do not receive services (National Center for Children in Poverty [NCCP], 2018). Children and youth affected by poverty are less likely to receive mental health services, putting their ability to succeed in school at risk. Additional negative outcomes include involvement with the juvenile justice system (NCCP, 2018), sexual risk taking and substance abuse (Peterson, Buser & Westburg, 2010) and early exposure to victimization and community violence (McMahon, Coker & Parnes, 2013). Based on the US Census Bureau's most recent survey, an estimated 43.1 million Americans are living in poverty, with an overall poverty rate of 12.7% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). It is estimated that 21.3% of the children in the US between the ages of 5 and 17 live below the poverty level. The percentage of children living in low income and poor families varies by race and ethnicity, with Hispanic children comprising the largest share at 36% followed by Black children at 24% (Koball & Young, 2018). For the same year, a substantially higher overall poverty rate was reported within the community addressed in the current research, at 21% for the total population and a rate of 31% for children between the ages of 5 and 17 years (U. S. Census Bureau, 2016). The percentage of children qualifying for the USDA National School Program for free and reduced lunches in the same community was 76% (VDOE, 2017). Given these striking statistics, the CARE Now program addressed the needs of this underserved population by providing emotional support through the practicum experience for counselors-in-training. The researcher seeks to understand the experience of providing support through the lens of the practicum students' perspective while working closely with this group of students.

## COUNSELOR EDUCATION

The field of counselor education prepares students for partaking in a collaborative relationship with the client. Counselors-in-training are prepared to help the client with some of the following goals: assisting in identifying personally targeted goals and potential solutions, building coping and communication skills, encouraging the learning of self-esteem, and supporting behavioral change, all areas commonly addressed in counseling (ACA, 2018; NCES, 2010). The counselor educator focuses on the training and preparation of counselors. The accrediting body for the counseling profession, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), requires the entry level practitioner to have completed preparation in a minimum of 60 semester credit hours for most specialty areas (CACREP, 2016). The curriculum of a CACREP-accredited counselor education program covers the following areas: counseling orientation and ethics, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, and the counseling and helping relationship. CACREP describes the practicum and internship experience as part of professional practice, which “provides for the application of theory and the development of counseling skills under supervision” (2016, p.15). Not all counselor education programs are accredited through this agency, however, the research proposed in this study focuses on a program that received this approval.

### **The Practicum Experience**

Counselor training is a complex process, which involves assisting the counselor-in-training to build clinical knowledge, skill and competence (Mullen et al., 2015). Preparing counselors for competent training includes providing a forum for reflection and experiential activities (McAuliffe & Erikson, 2014) and time for development of personal self-awareness (Granello &

Young, 2012). Although there are many methods and opportunities for the counselor-in-training to apply newly acquired knowledge to counseling situations through classroom experience, the practicum and internship are critical to a counselor's training (ACA, 2014). Internship and practicum experiences may appear differently across disciplines, however, in the counseling field, "they consist of supervised clinical experiences designed to enhance the professional skills of students in counseling programs" (Pitt, 1992, p. 197). To differentiate between the counseling practicum versus internship, CACREP (2014) offers clarity by defining internship as "providing an opportunity for the student to perform *all* the activities that a regularly employed staff member in the setting would be expected to perform" (p. 20), whereas "the practicum student is provided the 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). Practicum parameters in the counseling education field are governed by CACREP (2016).

### **Effects of the Practicum and Internship Experience on Counselors-in-Training**

In counselor education, much of the practicum and internship experience-based research is associated with strengthening essential components important to the counseling profession. Core competencies such as demonstration of basic counseling skills, case conceptualization, and components of ethical and professional counselor behavior should be present upon the completion of practicum and internship (CACREP, 2016). These skills are highlighted as core skills because they are part of counselor development and are an integral piece of the professional counselor identity (McNeill, Stoltenberg & Romans, 1992). Over the last 20 years, practicum and internship experience-based research has looked at student self-appraisal (Fong et

al., 1997), self-efficacy (Mullen et al., 2015; Tang et al., 2004), knowledge and skill building, and enhanced ability to make connections (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2013; Keim et al., 2015).

One highly studied measure of competence for counselors-in-training is self-efficacy, or the self-belief that a specific task can be accomplished (Bandura, 1977). A seminal study by Fong et al. (1997) assessed counseling students' cognitive development over the course of a 72-semester-hour CACREP-accredited program in the southeastern US. A final sample of 43 participants completing the program indicated that students did not show an improvement in self-appraisal (self-confidence) until after participating in fieldwork through practicum. Measurements through use of the Stress Appraisal Scale (Carpenter & Suhr, 1988) suggested that practical experience was necessary in order to increase baseline levels of self-appraisal. The work by Fong et al. (1997) proposes that one of the benefits of practicum and internship experience is an increased feeling of self-confidence or self-appraisal.

Similar results when investigating self-efficacy and self-appraisal were indicated more recently in an investigation of 116 graduate students in counselor education programs throughout the mid-western area of the United States across six different counselor education programs. Researchers studied self-efficacy and its relationship to those students attending CACREP-accredited vs. non-CACREP- accredited programs. Tang et al. (2004) included 48% of participants from CACREP-accredited programs and 52% from non-accredited programs, with an average participant age of 32 and an average of 2 years of work experience. The Self-Efficacy Inventory (Friedlander & Snyder, 1983) was administered, and results indicated self-efficacy to be positively correlated with number of courses completed, internship hours completed, and amount of clinical instruction received (Tang, et al., 2004). Results of this study indicated that length of internship hours and other prior experiences related to counseling, such

as practicum or other clinical time related positively to student self-efficacy. This finding partially supported the previous work of Fong et al. (1997) favoring the strengthening of the clinical internship and practicum experience for counselors-in-training.

Research by Keim et al. (2015) demonstrated additional support for self-efficacy for counselors in practical training involving group work. Participants consisted of 29 students registered for an introductory course focusing on group stages, facilitation, and group types. Clinical application was employed by assigning the student to a task group related to community service in the form of social justice and client advocacy. The task groups assisted recently released inmates with transition through providing childcare while parents attended counseling, while also assisting with housing concerns. The impact of the experience on the class goals and objectives was measured using two instruments: the Core Group Work Skills Inventory-Importance and Confidence (Wilson & Newmeyer, 2007) and the Group Climate Questionnaire (MacKenzie, 1983). Findings indicated that the participants experienced a significant increase of confidence in skills, supporting the results of Fong et al. (1997) and Tang et al. (2004). Additional findings from the work of Keim (2015) cited an increase in counselor-in-training engagement, which may point to the development of empathy toward the client and an increase in the understanding of the importance of group counseling. These results support the premise that experiential learning activities set within the community provide benefits for both the community and the student, and reinforce the previous evidence demonstrated by Fong et al., (1997) and Tang et al. (2004) of increasing confidence and self-efficacy in counseling skill through the practical experience of practicum and internship.

In addition, Alvarado & Gonzalez (2013) cite further benefits of experiential learning for counselor education taking place outside of the classroom. The researchers investigated 16

counselors-in-training in a seldom-studied venue: the pre-practicum area. The authors investigated data from students who were required to develop activities for children, adolescents and families to encourage social and emotional wellness. A qualitative grounded theory approach, using the constant comparative method, was used to identify emerging themes through data collection and analysis from students' reflective journals. Results indicated the following core themes: connection to community, instilling a feeling of cohesion with classmates, increased skill attainment, enhancing flexibility in work, development of an understanding of program development, and gaining insight into the counseling profession (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2013). The expected themes of connection to community, skill enhancement, and feelings of connectedness to peers were reported, yet unexpected outcomes such as clarifying the concepts related to program development and gaining an overall perspective of the counseling profession added value to this study.

In summary, the literature highlights outcomes of practicum and internship in the counseling field. The most cited benefit of practical experience is the development of self-efficacy and self-appraisal. Additional research indicates that practicum, internship and other types of field work completed prior to graduating from a counselor education program produces an increase in skill attainment, as well as a feeling of connection between counselor and client, and counselor and community. While research indicates various external benefits of both practicum and internship in the counseling profession (Alvarado, & Gonzalez, 2013; Keim et al, 2015), little has been cited in the research investigating internal benefits, such as the meaning derived from the practicum or internship, or the development of altruism in the counselor-in-training.

## THE MEANING, EMPATHY AND ALTRUISM CONNECTION

Meaning-making was described by Victor Frankl (1976), as “the primitive motivational force in man” (p.154). Developing an awareness of exploring the meaning one associates with work and life can be important to those participating in practicum and internship, not just personally, but also as a key factor in career development, as the lack of finding meaning through work is associated with higher levels of career burnout and lower job satisfaction (Limberg, 2013; Malachi-Pines & Yafe-Yanai, 2001).

Meaning can also be viewed from the perspective of how it relates to empathy, one of the foundational elements of the counseling profession. Empathy has been described as the ability to experience another’s point of view, almost as if one was walking in their shoes (Adler & Proctor, 2014). When one experiences empathy one is feeling and experiencing the actual personal meaning of another (Rogers, 1989). Rogers defined empathy as “one of the most potent forces of change that I know” (Rogers, 1989, p. 136). Empathy development is essential to building the therapeutic relationship between client and counselor and is considered a key factor in humanistic counseling (Elliot, Bohar, Watson & Greenberg, 2011; Laska, Gurman & Wampold, 2014). Furthermore, empathy acts as a natural stepping-stone toward altruism in the sequence of the development of the counselor-client relationship; that is, after empathy comes the innate reaction to desire to help the client, thus causing an altruistic response (Goleman, 2006; Smith et al., 1989). Altruism has been defined in relation to counseling as “the purest form of caring, selfless and non-contingent upon reward” (Robinson & Curry, 2007). Empathy and altruism are significant, as they are both key counselor competencies (Swank et al., 2013).

## Altruism Development

Viewing altruism from a counseling perspective presents important implications to the counseling profession (Curry et al., 2009; Swank et al., 2013). For example, counselors-in-training perceived a relationship between counselor effectiveness and altruism (Swank, et al., 2013). Additionally, finding and participating in meaningful acts of altruism has been cited as an essential component of self-care and wellness, both critical factors in maintaining effectiveness as a counselor (Limberg et al., 2018). Furthermore, counselors reported the belief that counselor development and counselor life experience are directly related to altruism level (Swank, et al., 2013). The perception of counseling students' views related to altruism was explored by Swank et al. (2013). Researchers conducted a qualitative grounded theory study in order to formulate a theory of altruism development. Participants were 19 counselors-in-training from a master's level, CACREP-accredited university program located in the southeastern United States. Data from Curry, Smith and Robinson (2009) were compared with the seminal works of Robinson and Curry (2007), resulting in an emerging framework of studying altruism development. The four biological, cognitive, social learning and religious/spiritual domains were addressed. Semi-structured interviews, demographic questionnaires and field notes were collected. Data analysis revealed the following in relation to the domains described in the ADM (Curry et al., 2009):

- *Biological*: counseling students perceived altruism to be innate and genetic-based.
- *Cognitive*: although participants were reminded of their altruistic acts, modesty was identified as an emerging theme.
- *Social Learning*: results identified that altruism is a learned phenomenon and developed through observation and engagement with others.



- *Religiosity and Spirituality*: varied opinions resulted in a consensus describing religiosity and spirituality as an influence and a desire to engage in altruistic acts.

In addition to the four domains identified in the ADM, researchers also studied participants' perceptions of the counseling profession and altruism. In the last domain, participants indicated that personal beliefs regarding the counseling profession were directly related to altruistic desires.

In a related study, Limberg et al., (2015) conducted a cross-cultural exploration of perceptions of altruism in counseling students. Using a consensual qualitative research methodology (combining phenomenology and grounded theory design), six domains related to the ADM were identified: biological, cognitive, social learning, religious/spiritual, counseling and empathy. Twenty-two counselors-in-training participated in this study and were purposively selected based on the following sampling criteria: each participant was a student in a counseling program and possessed a strong command of the English language. Additionally, researchers ensured participants were from varying cultures. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted after consent and demographic questionnaires were collected. The semi-structured interview consisted of 17 open-ended questions. Results were described in terms of domains identified prior to data collection, largely based on the work of Curry et al., (2009).

In the *biological* domain, which describes altruism as genetically determined, the majority of participants believed a genetic predisposition for altruism existed but that it could be cultivated over one's lifetime. The *cognitive* domain, which posits that altruism is learned as one develops or matures, revealed 18 out of the 22 participants felt that adulthood brought with it a desire to become altruistic. Interestingly, there is also evidence to support a modesty or self-effacing bias in those demonstrating altruism (McGuire, 2003). Limberg et al. (2015) also found

that 18/22 participants also minimized their acts of giving. Through the domain of *social learning*, all 22 participants identified that they had come to know and understand altruism through interactions with others and the modeling each received. Data from the *religious and spiritual* domains suggest that religion or spirituality can provide a basis for acting in altruistic manner, but did not suggest that altruistic gestures originated from of a sense of obligation. And finally in the domains of *counseling and empathy*, Limberg et al. (2015) found that 18 out of 22 participants reported that altruism was the motivating factor for entering the counseling profession and that their personal sense of altruism added to their counseling effectiveness. Nineteen out of 24 respondents described a connection between altruism and empathy. Neither work referred to above by Limberg et al, (2015) or Swank et al., (2013) described participants as counselors during practicum or internship, which may support the need for further research related to altruism development during this phase of the counselor education program. Such information might provide valuable insight into altruism development as it relates to the practicum experience, in order to learn how to best infuse its principles, ideals and components into the counselor education curriculum.

Research indicates similar results related to altruism outside the field of counselor education. A study of altruism development applied in an inter-professional service-learning curriculum addressed the needs of the homeless population in the mid-western United States. Specifically in this geographical area, 280,000 jobs were lost in the years spanning from 2003 to 2013, and the percentage of families identified below the poverty level reached 40% (Smith, 2013), while the national poverty level was approximately 13-15% during a similar time frame (US Census Bureau, 2012). Chrisman-Khawam, Abdullah & Dhoopar (2017) collaborated with doctors from a family medicine residency, coining the name Doctors-on-the-Street (DOTS).

DOTS originally formed a volunteer initiative to improve inter-professional care for the homeless population. Eventually the program evolved into an elective course for inter-professional learners with the goal of improving mental health care within the primary care setting. Undergraduate healthcare students from pre-medical, nursing, pharmacy, social work and clinical psychology, and graduate students from medical school and residency programs were recruited to take part in a curriculum geared toward improving students' Homeless Information Quotient, or the ability to understand the homeless population. Chrisman-Khawam, Abdullah and Dhoopar (2017) collected narrative data from 42 student learners and 12 inter-professional volunteers. Findings demonstrated greater empathy and an improved knowledge base and comfort level with the homeless population. A major theme emerging was the participants' development of a greater sense of meaning from the experience. Additional themes of connectedness to individuals and community, finding their compassionate side and a need to be more present were found. Participants relayed the magnitude of altruistic acts and the joy and gratitude each experienced through the experience of providing care and offering empathy (Chrisman-Khawam et al., 2017). This study does not reflect findings in counselor education literature regarding increase in skill attainment, competency or self-efficacy development, but it does, however, focus on meaning-making, empathy and altruism. The narrative descriptions collected indicate that for many participating in the DOTS program, the experience was life-changing.

Similarly themed findings related to altruism development were reported in a multiple case study design by Snyder, Yanchar & Gantt (2017). Researchers explored the learning experiences of six individuals who identified as undergoing a shift from learning for self-interest vs. learning to benefit another. Participants were recruited through criterion sampling with the

main requirement of having experienced an internal awareness of a change from feeling selfish to a more selfless intent. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in order to increase the researchers' understanding of the phenomenon. Six themes were common throughout the 12 interviews: humility, communal learning, an emphasis on the success of others, becoming more self-confident, becoming a more effective learner, and becoming more other-centered (Snyder et al., 2017). Authors of this study have identified the last theme, "becoming more other-centered" (p.273) as a thread throughout the study.

Concluding comments summarized the results by noting that the successful learner associated the experience with making opportunities available for others so that they might change their lives in a positive way (Snyder et al., 2017). The findings related to becoming more other-centered corroborated those of Chrisman-Khawam et al. (2017) and Limburg et al., (2015) described above. All of the studies also support the goals of a counselor as defined by the ACA (2014), which includes assisting clients in accomplishing goals, providing solutions to identified problems, identifying coping skills and enhancing communication skills – all tools that may result in helping clients help themselves. In summary, Snyder and associates identified this transformation as a gradual change in participants' way of thinking, which was explained as the effect of becoming involved with others so that others might help themselves.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The researcher chose Curry, Smith & Robinson's Altruism Development Model ([ADM]; 2009) to guide the exploration of the practicum experience of the participants. The ADM provides direction for understanding the development of altruism for counselors-in-training. Eisenberg et al. (1999) explained altruism as giving to others free from any personal advantage. Robinson and Curry (2007) and Dovidio (1991) initially identified three hypotheses related to altruistic behavior after exploring the bystander effect referring to the 1964 stabbing of Kitty Genovese, where little action was taken in spite of many observing the deed (Latane & Darley, 1969). The first hypothesis is related to biology, in that not only are humans more likely to help those that they are biologically related to (Okasha, 2003), but that there is also a tendency toward helping others in an altruistic fashion inherent in our genetic makeup (Eisenberg et al., 1999; Limberg et al., 2018). Secondly, altruism may be derived from the cognitive realm, based on earlier research by McGuire (2003), which found that those with a strong empathy makeup tend to minimize the cost of giving to others while emphasizing the benefit to the receiver. Tying into Bandura's social learning theory (1977), Curry, Smith and Robinson's (2009) third facet of the ADM, social learning, suggests that altruism is learned through modeling, as witnessed through engaging with parents, teachers, and other significant people in one's life (Limberg, et al., 2015). Social learning may have occurred on two levels in this study: faculty and supervisor to practicum student, and practicum student to adolescent. On the one hand, the participants in this study served as role models for the adolescents identified as at-risk, as the former applied the tenets of social-emotional learning and PBIS throughout their interactions with the adolescents. On the other hand, the participants received modeling from faculty and site supervisors during their practicum experience. The findings of Curry et al.

(2009) confirm the importance of role modeling, vicarious experience and personal efficacy in altruistic behaviors. Curry et al. (2009) identified a fourth category, religious/spirituality, through their work within the Quaker community studying altruism. Later, Limberg et al. (2015) studied altruism development in counselors-in-training cross-culturally, adding to the initial work of Curry et al. (2009) by including categories of empathy and counseling domains. Most recently, Limberg et al. (2018) sought to investigate the phenomenology of altruism from the perspective of counselors in Scotland. Implications indicated a need for further exploration of the influence of culture in relation to altruism development. Referring to the biological, cognitive, social learning, religious/spiritual, empathic, and cultural domains within the counseling field, the ADM can serve as a lens to view the practicum students' self-report of altruistic acts as they explore their past experience in providing social and emotional support to the at-risk adolescent population referred to in this study.

### **SUMMARY**

In summary, this chapter began with a description of the setting of the program providing the backdrop for the study, CARE Now. The program components of Social and Emotional Learning and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports were addressed, as was the at-risk population. The field of counselor education was defined, followed by a review of the literature addressing the most cited outcomes of counselor education programs. The concepts of meaning and altruism were explained. Finally, the Altruism Development Model, the framework from which to view the research, was addressed.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

This chapter describes the research design and rationale of the study. The qualitative paradigm and phenomenological method are addressed, as are the data sources, data collection procedures, and data analysis. The researcher's role and trustworthiness as they relate to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are described. Finally, ethical procedures including informed consent and those involving the Institutional Review Board (IRB) are noted.

### **AIM OF STUDY**

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the personal meaning and altruism development former counselor education students associated with a practicum site providing social and emotional support to at-risk adolescents. The practicum site studied was a middle school located in the southeastern United States that provided social and emotional support to at-risk adolescents through programming. Meaning is important because it is connected to altruism development, which is essential to counselor effectiveness.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND RATIONALE**

Chapter Two documents a considerable amount of research related to the external benefits received from internship and practicum experiences, such as increase in knowledge and skill, improved self-efficacy/confidence, and improved self-appraisal (Fong et al., 1997; Mullen et al., 2015; Tang et al., 2004). However, little research refers to internal rewards associated with counselor education programs, such as exploring the meaning associated with and/or the development of altruism derived from the practicum experience (Curry et al., 2009; Swank et

al., 2013). Furthermore, studies investigating the development of altruism, specifically during the practicum and internship experience, are even less cited in the literature.

Since empathy and altruism are essential characteristics of an effective counselor (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2016) a study investigating practicum students' perceptions of personal development of altruism is valuable. By conducting this study, the data obtained can provide insight into the development of altruism during the practicum experience so that counselors-in-training may receive optimal training in counselor effectiveness. Additionally, the researcher hopes to uncover information adding to the quality of social and emotional support provided to the at-risk adolescent population. The researcher chose a qualitative, phenomenological design to study the lived experience and meaning found from participating in practica.

### **THE QUALITATIVE PARADIGM**

Research traditions such as qualitative inquiry may be defined through the identification of philosophical assumptions or worldviews in order to better plan and conduct research (Creswell, 2014). Identifying the integrated relationship between philosophical worldview, research design, and research methods is necessary in the planning of research because of the manner in which they relate to each other to produce a solid research study (Creswell, 2014). The philosophical worldview proposed in this study is social constructivism, which assumes that there is no universal truth (Hays & Singh, 2012). Social constructivism focuses on the social constructs of the research participants. Social constructions are those products of the meaning and sense-making activities that society engages in as a consequence of interaction with other human beings (Lincoln, 2007). Knowledge is formed through interactions between participant and researcher, with emphasis on the cultural and historical descriptions relayed by the participant (Creswell, 2014). The social constructivist paradigm can be viewed through the



overlapping core philosophies of science (ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetoric, and methodology) to describe the relationship between researcher and participant, shaping the scientific research method (Hays & Singh, 2012). Ponterotto (2002) describes the philosophy of science as the foundation for understanding knowledge. Ontology, or the nature of reality, is described through the lens of the social constructivist as the existence of multiple realities, which are subjective and dependent on contextual factors (Hays & Singh, 2012; Ponterotto, 2002). Social constructivists posit that the process of knowing, or epistemology, is actively constructed between researcher and participant and is essential to the exploration of the participants' lived experience (Hays & Singh, 2012; Ponterotto, 2002). The researcher's values and assumptions are addressed through the philosophy of axiology. Acknowledgment of researcher values and biases are a key component in this research study and are identified and bracketed later in this chapter. Still another core philosophy of science to consider is rhetoric, or the language used in the final presentation of the study. Considering that this research proposal relies heavily on the relationship between researcher and participant and the subjective voice of the participant, reporting the results in a more personalized manner using the second and third person can be important to the presentation of the material (Ponterotto, 2002). Lastly, the core philosophy of methodology describes the process of inquiry chosen for the study (Hays & Singh, 2012) and includes selecting the research paradigm and research questions and methods (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative research involves drawing meaning from words. For some, these narratives can be more convincing to the reader than numbers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative inquiry seeks to uncover the participants' subjective meaning and context (Hays & Singh, 2012). It is a method of studying the meaning individuals or groups associate with or assign to a

social topic or problem (Creswell, 2014; Hays & Singh, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and describes everyday activities for individuals and the personal meaning found.

### **THE QUALITATIVE METHOD AND RESEARCH APPROACH**

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the perceptions of and meaning and altruism development associated with the experience of a practicum for students in a counselor education program. Practicum students were placed in middle school math classes to provide social and emotional support through delivery at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of intervention. Each practicum student was also required to spend one or two afternoons a week volunteering in an after-school program at the same location. It is important to research this group in order to better understand the process and meaning of practicum students providing socio-emotional support to at-risk middle school students.

#### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology, the method chosen for this study, is defined by Patton (1990) as focusing on the question, “what is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?” (p. 69). Hays & Singh (2012) state, “the purpose of phenomenology is to discover and describe the meaning or essence of participants’ lived experiences, or knowledge as it appears to consciousness” (p. 50). Creswell (2014) describes phenomenology as looking at the lived experiences individuals recount about a specific concept. A phenomenological research design was employed in this study to learn more about the experience of completing a practicum experience while working closely with at-risk middle school students. Consistent with phenomenology, the researcher will search for the essence or meaning of the experience central to the memory image and meaning of the shared phenomenon.

Phenomenological design allows for gaining insight related to perceptions, thought and feelings through rich and thick descriptions. Using the phenomenological method allows for bracketing, or any former understanding by the investigator to be put aside as participants provide the data for a pure, fresh look at the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). This approach will place value on the participants' subjective experience (Hays & Wood, 2011) of working with at-risk adolescents, in the hope of gaining insight into participants' reflections related to altruism development. Additionally, the phenomenological approach provides a framework from which to shape the research questions. It is also the researcher's hope that additional information will be gained through data collection that may strengthen the impact of practicum and internships in the counseling and human service professions.

### **THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions guiding this investigation were as follows:

1. How do counseling students perceive and describe the practicum experience in terms of altruism development?
2. How do the practicum students describe the personal meaning derived from the practicum experience?

### **THE RESEARCHER'S ROLE**

For the purposes of this study, the researcher was the principal source of data collection and analysis, with the exception of two additional, qualified coders. Participants were informed of the nature of the study and an informed consent to record was submitted and signed and dated by participant and investigator.

The researcher's work experience includes teaching as an adjunct instructor and as a graduate teaching assistant for undergraduate students in a Human Services program at the same

university setting where the participants received their master's degree in counseling. The researcher also previously supervised master's students in the program studied. The researcher acknowledges that her work experience through witnessing adolescents lacking social and emotional support throughout numerous years may influence her biases. Furthermore, at the time of this study, the researcher is a 58-year old doctoral candidate who may bring beliefs, values and preconceived notions of social and emotional support, adolescents, and counselor education to the study. Additionally, the primary researcher identifies as a white, middle-class woman with three children which may also cause the study to become susceptible to cultural bias. These biases will be bracketed throughout all phases of the research.

### **VERIFICATION**

Trustworthiness is defined as the vigor of a qualitative study and consists of tools used during the research to ensure reliability and validity (Creswell, 2014). When these measures are integrated through each phase of the research, the research can be constantly checked (or verified) for vigor and corrected early in the research process (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olsen & Spiers, 2002). The author recognizes the responsibility of ensuring trustworthiness in this study and addresses each of Guba's constructs (1981) as follows:

*Credibility:* The author seeks credibility, or to ensure the believability of the study, through providing frequent debriefing sessions with committee members, member checks, use of multiple coders, and statements of the researcher's background and experience. Incongruence among coders will be addressed through consensus meetings and through measuring interrater reliability. Furthermore, the researcher will provide a reflective journal to note initial and continual impressions of each data collection session. This may be a self-evaluative tool to

check techniques used during the interviews. The reflective journal will also serve as a form of data collected in order to triangulate the data.

*Transferability:* To promote transferability, the researcher will use sufficient textual information during fieldwork regarding sites and interviews so that the situations can be transferred to like-situations (Shenton, 2004). In addition, thick descriptions will be encouraged while interviewing (Hays & Singh, 2012).

*Dependability:* Dependability, or the ability to reproduce the research with the same effect, will be enhanced through application of a concept originated by Shenton (2004), utilizing the research design as a “prototype model” (p. 71). The researcher will fully describe the plan, the details of the fieldwork, and provide reflection of the process, so as to create a guidebook to follow for future investigation.

*Confirmability:* Confirmability refers to ensuring that the results are directly originating from the data and the participants’ direct responses (Shenton, 2004). This construct will be addressed through recording researcher bias and predispositions early in the study, and ongoing note-taking in the reflective journal.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

### **Participants**

The population of interest in this study included all practicum students who spent one full semester at CARE Now completing requirements for their practicum. The researcher hoped to understand the descriptions provided through the participants’ lens in order to seek the individual and collective experiences of the studied phenomenon (Hays & Wood, 2011). Purposive sampling was employed to select participants using the following criteria: length working in the program of study (one semester); consistency working (at least 2 days/week);

and successful completion of the semester (passing grade or satisfactory evaluation). An initial demographic instrument validated the above requirements. The researcher also made a fervent attempt to include a multiculturally diverse sample within the process of purposive sampling with respect to age, race, ability, sexuality, culture, class, ethnicity, gender and education (Brown, 2011). Purposive sampling of 5-12 members was made, representing the inclusion criteria met by each participant at the moment of selection. This ensured similar experiences regarding the studied phenomenon (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Snowball sampling was used when needed in order to ensure a rigorous sample size. Creswell recommends the studied group to consist of 3-10 participants in order to enhance understanding of the human experience of the group (2014). After gaining approval from Old Dominion University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), recruitment of participants was obtained by reviewing a list of former practicum students and contacting each through email, phone or social media in the form of private messaging through Instagram and Facebook. A total of 15-30 possible former practicum students was contacted. An incentive of entrance in a drawing for two \$50.00 gift cards was offered.

Consistent with phenomenology, the researcher collected data through in-depth face-to-face interviews. In the event where this was not possible due to distance or extenuating factors, Skype, FaceTime or phone interviews was performed. In addition, *photo elicitation interview* (PEI), or the introduction of photos as a means to enhance recall of the context of the phenomenon and increase the comfort level was introduced before the interview session. Epstein, Stevens, McKeever & Baruchel found that PEI in various formats challenges participants, triggers memory, identifies new perspectives and enhances rapport when used during the research interview (2006). Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted. A

follow-up email or phone conversation was made in order to clarify and check the information from the initial interview.

### **Data Recording**

To study the essence of the lived experiences of the practicum for the participants, the researcher used interpretive phenomenology analysis (IPA). Larkin and Thompson (2012) cite IPA as an approach with a specific interest in studying how people make sense of a phenomenon. This method allows for emphasis placed on the voice of the participant in order to make sense of an experience (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009). The interviews were recorded through audio methods with permission of all participants. Items included in the interview protocol included: identification of researcher, introduction of past photos of the CARE Now program to elicit memory (Epstein, et al., 2006), and a list of demographic and open-ended interview questions with probes for follow-up. An expert in the field of qualitative research reviewed the interview questions. These topics were chosen in order to obtain data reflected from the participants' description of their practicum, as they related to altruism development and meaning associated with the experience.

### **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

1. Describe a memory from your practicum. Describe a memory where you felt you made a difference/felt good about your interaction with a student. Describe a memory when you felt that your actions were not working.
2. Name one word to describe your practicum experience.
3. How does your counseling differ now compared to when you were experiencing your practicum?

4. Finding meaning in life has been described as *learning from experiences with others within a specific space and time* (Engestrom, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). How would you describe meaning-making in life? In work? Do you feel the meaning you may have derived from life or work experience has changed over the course of time since you've graduated? And if so, can you share how?
5. Describe how you feel when you become aware that you've helped someone.
6. Altruism has been described as *the purest form of caring, it is selfless and non-contingent upon reward* (Robinson & Curry, 2005). Can you describe a memory during your time in practicum that you felt like you were providing care in an altruistic way? Do you feel that you can describe yourself as altruistic at the present time? At work? In your personal life?
  - a. How do you feel when you think of working with the adolescents during your practicum? Please describe.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

The goal of a qualitative data analysis is to make sense of data or texts (Creswell, 2014). Prior to data collection, the researcher will provide a description of the personal experience studied in order to assist in identifying *epoche* or the identification of prior explanation of the experience, bracketing researcher values and assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). In line with phenomenology, the following procedures will also be applied: *essence*, the moving back and forth between participants' descriptions of the experience; *textual and structural analysis* to describe the content of the participants' response and the manner in which it is expressed; and *horizontalization* to identify large categories, clusters of meanings, and larger themes (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2014; Padilla-Diaz, 2015).



Interview data were collected and transcribed. A professional coding service was employed to obtain transcripts. A coding team of three qualified coders individually pre-coded the data manually, highlighting rich passages and underlining significant quotes using the open coding method. The coding, or the labeling of data (Hays & Singh, 2012) was done one phrase or sentence at a time for each interview. A constant comparison method was maintained throughout the process in order to look for similarities and differences in the data. The first cycle of the coding process focused on identifying codes with sub-codes when necessary. The second cycle of coding chunked the data and identified themes or patterns. Throughout the process a codebook was created listing all codes, sub-codes and patterns noting examples or direct quotes from the data (Hays & Singh, 2012). A consensus meeting was held to determine agreement among coding team members regarding the codes cited, and the interrater reliability quotient was calculated as needed. All members of the coding team recruited for the coding portion of this study had previous experience with coding qualitative data and had completed advanced (doctoral or masters) level courses in qualitative research. Each step assisted in developing depth, in the hope of identifying the meaning participants associated with the experience, and how it related to altruism development in former counselors-in-training.

### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Careful thought should be given to addressing ethical issues in research, as they are important in protecting participants and enhancing the integrity of the research study (Israel & Hay, 2006). Monitoring and ensuring professional ethical standards was conducted in all phases of the research and adhered to the ACA Code of Ethics (2014). Prior to collecting data, the researcher obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Old Dominion University. After approval, participants were contacted and made aware of the purpose of the

study. They were asked to sign an informed consent containing a detailed description of the study, the data collection method, time commitment necessary, confidentiality throughout the study, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Additional written consent was requested to obtain permission to record each interview. During the interviews the researcher avoided leading questions, and maintained interview protocol. Moreover, integrity in reporting the results was ensured during the data analysis.

### **SUMMARY**

This chapter described both the design and rationale of the research study. The qualitative paradigm and phenomenological method were addressed, as were the data sources, data collection procedures, and data analyses. The researcher's role was explained, as were the ethical procedures including informed consent and approval from the Institutional Review Board.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

This phenomenological study examined the experiences of practicum students in a counselor education program at a site providing social and emotional support to at-risk adolescents. Although counselor education research has addressed program outcomes related to skill attainment (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2013), self-efficacy (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2013; Keim et al., 2015; Mullen et al., 2015), and self-appraisal (Fong et al., 1997), there is little research regarding reflective components of the counselor education process, such as meaning associated with or altruism development related to the practicum experience. Meaning and altruism development are important in future counselors, as they are essential steps in the development of empathy and altruism (Goleman, 2006; Smith et al., 1989), both key components of an effective counselor (Swank et al., 2013). The purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of knowledge related to former practicum students' altruism development and the meaning associated with the experience. Through this research, the author hopes to aid in future counselor education curriculum development related to practicum and internship experiences.

This study was guided by two research questions:

1. How do participants perceive and describe the practicum experience in terms of altruism development?
2. How do participants describe the personal meaning derived from the practicum experience?

## Review of Data Collection and Analysis

The primary researcher utilized individual interviews with former practicum students who had completed their practicum experience at one consistent site providing social and emotional support to at-risk adolescents. The interview protocol consisted of nine demographic questions and eight main interview questions with sub-questions as prompts for follow-up. On consultation, the research team believed that saturation was reached by the fourteenth interview. This was determined by noting that there was an absence of new theme development in the data. Audio recordings were transcribed, and a follow-up phone call or email exchange was conducted with twelve of the fourteen participants. None of the participants expressed that they desired to add any further comments to their interview. Two participants declined the follow-up by phone or email.

The research team consisted of the primary researcher, one doctoral student and one masters student, all having extensive research and coding experience, and all having successfully completed graduate courses in qualitative research. Each team member bracketed personal assumptions before beginning the process of coding. The research team met mid-way during the interview process to begin the development of the codebook, to consensus code and identify themes and subthemes; the team also met subsequently on four occasions to continue the same process of consensus coding, identification of themes and completion of the final codebook. Members of the research team communicated daily during data collection and coding phases of the study. Horizontalization of the data produced from the codes resulted in clusters of themes and subthemes resulting in the following five superordinate themes: *challenge to overcome, ability to collaborate, impact, meaning, and thoughts related to altruism.*

## Demographic Information of Participants

Participants included 14 counselors who had previously completed their practicum in counselor education at CARE Now. Of the 14 participants, 11 identified as female, and three as male. The participants' ages ranged from late 20s to late 30s. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality. All but one of the participants were currently employed in the field of counseling. Eight out of the 14 participants were working with children or youth, four with young adults and two with adults. One participant expressed a desire to work with children as a school counselor, but was unable to find employment in her geographical area. Five participants self-identified as Black or African American, six as White, one of Mixed Race and two Asian. (See Table 4.1 for summary)

Table 4. 1 Demographic Data of the Participants

Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Beliefs	Population Presently Working With	Current Position
Didi	F	30s	AA/NH	S/R/F	Children	Counselor, Behavioral Supervisor
Alex	F	30s	Mixed/Portuguese	None	Adults	Graduate Assistant
Cece	F	30s	White	S	Adolescents	Career Counselor
Dellin	F	20s	B/AA	S/R/F	Children	School Counselor
Sonny	M	20s	B/AA	S	Young Adults	Academic Advisor

Jenn	F	30s	W	S	Adults	Counselor
Tyler	F	20s	W/Sicilian	S	Children/Adults	Clinical Program Director, Children
Derrick	M	20s	B/AA	S	Children	Counselor
Kelsey	F	20s	AA/AA	S	Young Adults	Counselor
Chad	M	30s	W/Irish	S	Children	Mental Health Counselor
Lee	F	30s	Asian/Japanese	S	Children	School Counselor
Hannah	F	20s	Asian/Asian	S	Children	Academic Advisor
Mari	F	30s	W/Italian	S	Young Adults	Academic Advisor
Jana	Cis-Gender F	30s	W/Jewish	S	Adults	Academic Advisor

B-Black      W-White      AA-African American      NH-Non-Hispanic  
 S-Spiritual      R-Religious      F-Person of Faith

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS

**Didi.** Didi identified as an African American, Non-Hispanic female in her thirties. She described herself as spiritual, religious and a person of faith. She is currently working full time as a supervisor for counselors working with children. She plans on resigning from her

supervisory position to a counseling position next month in order to create a more effective work-life balance.

**Alex.** Alex identified as a racially mixed female in her thirties of Portuguese descent. She described herself as agnostic. Following her practicum, she worked with children for several years as a counselor. She is currently employed in a college setting while she is working toward her Ph.D.

**CiCi.** CiCi identified as a White female in her thirties working full time as a career counselor. She described herself as spiritual and explained that she had taken a few turns in her career path, but is certain to have found her niche in working with high-school students as they prepare to graduate.

**Dellin.** Dellin is a female in her late twenties. She self-identified as a Black, African American, spiritual being. She is currently working as a school counselor in an elementary school while attending a doctoral program part time.

**Sonny.** Sonny self-identified as a Black male in his late twenties currently working in administration while attending a graduate program. He defined himself as spiritual.

**Jenn.** Jenn self-identified as a White female in her thirties, currently working full time as a counselor with adults. Although she prefers to work with children, she was unable to obtain employment in her geographical location that exactly suited her preferences. She described herself as spiritual.

**Tyler.** Tyler identified as a White female in her late twenties of Sicilian descent, who is spiritual. She consistently worked with children since completing her practicum and is currently employed as a Clinical Program Director.

**Derrick.** Derrick self-identified as a Black, African American male who is spiritual, religious and faithful to God. He is currently working as a mental health counselor for children.

**Kelsey.** Kelsey identified as an African American female in her late twenties who is spiritual. She is currently counseling young adults.

**Chad.** Chad is a White male in his late thirties of Irish descent. He identified as spiritual and is currently working as a mental health counselor with children.

**Lee.** Lee is a female in her thirties who identifies as Asian and of Japanese ethnicity. She defined herself as spiritual and is working full time as a school counselor.

**Hannah.** Hannah is a female in her late twenties who identified as Asian. She is spiritual and working with young adults as an academic advisor.

**Mari.** Mari is a female in her late thirties who identified as White and of Italian ethnicity. She defined herself as spiritual and is working full time as an academic advisor.

**Jana.** Jana identified as a cis-gender female in her thirties who identified as White, Jewish and spiritual. She is working part time as an academic advisor.

## **Themes**

The research team identified five superordinate themes during the data analysis phase:

*challenges to overcome, ability to collaborate, impact, meaning, and thoughts related to altruism.*

## **List of Themes and Subthemes**

1. Challenges to Overcome
  - 1.1 Challenges with students
  - 1.2 Challenges with teachers
  - 1.3 Challenges with peers
2. Collaboration
  - 2.1. Students



- 2.2. Adults
- 3. Impact
  - 3.1 Impact related to population
- 4 Meaning
  - 4.1. Meaning through others
  - 4.2. Meaning through self
- 5. Thoughts Related to Altruism
  - 5.1 Altruism related to personality
  - 5.2 Altruism related to actions

## SUPERORDINATE THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

### 1. Superordinate Theme One: Challenges to Overcome

All fourteen participants spoke about the multiple challenges faced during their practicum experience. Three subthemes were identified under this category: *challenges with students*, *challenges with teachers/staff*, and *challenges with peers*.

1.1. **Challenges with Students.** Seven participants expressed feeling challenged at times with the student population. Cici stated:

The first couple of sessions of after-school were difficult for me because it was my first time working with students of this age group. Like I said before, I was in higher education before that, so I worked with older students and adults.

Working with this age group was somewhat intimidating at first. And especially in a group setting, like the small groups that we were helping with, especially for the homework hour. It happened to be a little bit more disciplinary, and that is not at all where my comfort zone is.

At times, the difficulty centered on unfamiliarity, but at other times, the challenge focused on behavioral issues of the students. Tyler stated, “maybe four out of five days were frustrating, especially the kids with defiant disorders or some of the kids on the spectrum.” Alex also described a difficult situation, “I remember helping a kid with A.D.D. who was being very disrespectful.” Sonny spoke of a similar challenge:

There was a student who on Fridays wouldn't take his ADHD medication, so was very, very energetic and didn't listen... was kind of disrespectful. After we would kind of just get through to him and get him to do what he was supposed to be doing to do his swim lessons. Felt like we weren't making progress, because there were multiple weeks where he didn't get to participate because of his behavior. Even if we had worked on it, he wasn't showing any progress.

Additionally, Sonny explained a situation that began as challenging, but improved over time:

There were two students who were very constantly disagreeing with each other and not getting along. I think, me working with the other advocate, our role in that was to keep them separate and kind of the issues they had been dealing with over the semester. It felt like I was really helping when one of the students started to distance himself from the other and came to one of us to express frustration... it was nice to see that instead of him just going straight to some sort of conflict.

Jana shared a like experience:

I remember in the classroom where I spent most of my morning there was a particular group of girls that presented with more behavioral issues than the rest of the class, like three or four of them. In supervision I got a lot of tips on how to engage them because they were a little more challenging. I just remember at a certain point in the school year,

we just clicked, from things being dark, to a light going off. We were able to form this trusting bond where they were able to pull me aside and tell me when they were having a hard day or that they had had a hard night at home. I remember the work being so valuable. It was personal and professional growth and interpersonal growth that you can't replicate, you know? It was very special.

Jenn responded similarly, describing a difficult situation where a student experienced behavioral issues, but through her work was also able to make progress:

I feel like there was one particular student that I probably worked the most closely with. I feel like he was struggling with some behavioral issues in class. A lot of it was due to the personality of the teacher, but we would just go for walks around the school during class and it just felt good to kind of let him just have an outlet to talk about things if he needed to or just take a break from the teacher.

Later, Jenn described the teacher as “intimidating”, which was voiced by the student.

Participants encountered some unfamiliar, challenging situations during their practicum, and through the resiliency described above were often able to turn a difficult situation into a positive outcome. Although Jenn identified addressing a challenge with a student, at the same time she was also working through a challenging situation with a teacher, which was also stated by Dellin.

**1.2. Challenges with Teachers.** Some participants expressed having difficult experiences with the teachers they were working alongside. Dellin described a challenge that she and another practicum student worked through which ended very positively:

One of the more frustrating things, I think, was two teachers that were really difficult to work with. Me and one of my good friends had those two teachers.

So, in the beginning the more difficult part was really trying to... it wasn't like it was the kids against the adults, but that we were there to help the kids, and that I was a resource for her rather than someone that was there trying to take her place. I wasn't there for negative reasons, I was there to help, and that I didn't have the alternate motives within the program of CARE Now. But I think, with that particular teacher, it was really difficult. Once I was able to get past that point, and she understood my role with the kids, it was a lot easier, but... it was almost as if they thought we were spying on them. And at the end, she was a totally different person. I remember we were very therapeutic in our approach with how we responded to the kids, and at first she didn't want us taking the kids out of the room, but once we got into understanding of what we were there for, she's like, "Oh do you want to take a walk with Ms. D?"

Through modeling social and emotional support and reinforcing her position in the classroom, Dellin was able to clarify her role so that the teacher became aware of the ultimate goal of a positive outcome for the adolescent. Chad described a similar experience which he was unable to overcome:

We had some conflict with the teachers there. They didn't understand our role and how we were not there to be teacher's assistants. They really tried to put us in a box. Some of the teachers were more receptive to us than others, but overall, the teachers were a challenge.

Hannah shared similar experiences that ended in a different way: acceptance by the teacher and students:

There were times that I felt as if I wasn't wanted in the classroom. It wasn't mean, but it was more so like "this is my class, I got this, I don't really need you here." That's really the extent of it. I think it was more of not understanding my role and not understanding or just not knowing me because by the end of the school year, I had a gift from the teacher and she had the class put together this book for me, so I think it was more of a "I don't know her, so I don't trust her" issue.

Lee shared:

There was an awkward situation with a teacher. We were just supposed to go in each morning to provide support to the kids, but one day after lunch, I walked in to my classroom when there was a substitute for the teacher who was in a meeting and I found the sub asleep at the teacher's desk. It wound up reporting it and they no longer used that sub, but I felt bad for the kids.

Lee then shared an additional occurrence describing a challenge with another teacher:

This was another awkward situation with one of the teachers. The teacher came to me one day and gave me a note. And the note was asking me if one of the other practicum students and I were dating. And the note had a little check yes, or check no box, kind of like almost an elementary school student passing a note situation. But the practicum student and I were just good friends, it was just awkward dealing with this teacher in the future, but as it turned out she was asking me out... after that I tried to remain very professional with the teacher and to be honest tried to keep my distance, I said that I wasn't interested in dating her... and told the appropriate people.

Each of the participants spoke of a challenge presented to them involving a teacher during their practicum that most practicum students were able to respond to appropriately through consulting

with supervisors. Many of the challenges focused on role confusion of the practicum student in the classroom, while there were other single instances of challenging situations that the practicum student addressed concerning professionalism.

**1.3. Challenges with Peers.** One participant described a situation with a peer working in the after-school program. Didi stated:

I know that there was some conflict... between the CARE Now after-school people from another department... they felt like they were the people who were in charge of certain things. I remember there was some head-butting that happened with a client, one of the kids who was very, very dramatic. He felt like one or two of the people from the other department were unfairly singling him out of something and I had to confront one of them in order to advocate for him.

Didi was able to address the conflict and formulate a cohesive plan for the adolescent, with the end result of creating a more therapeutic environment for the student. Kelsey also shared challenges working with peers such as paraprofessionals:

A couple of times, some of the others assisting the teacher in the classroom, and we all had different approaches and that made it kind of hard. I was trained to be strength-based but a lot of the others were more disciplinarians and it was hard to agree on how to treat the students.

For these participants, working with peers from other disciplines whose goals were not consistent with the CARE Now program goals led to confusion resulting in challenging work conditions.

**2. Superordinate Theme Two: Collaboration.** Ten participants described collaborating with students, adults or both in an effort to initiate or continue with a plan for follow-up for the

benefit of the student. Five of the participants spoke of an instance where they collaborated with students, and four participants talked about collaborating with adults. Five of the participants described working both collaboratively with students and adults.

### **2.1. Collaboration with Students.** Participants spoke about collaborating with the students.

Didi shared:

It's a population I enjoy. I like working with kids, period. Being around them, being around that age, is really great. The experience, especially in the after-school program where we really got to spend like a couple of hours with them was... it was fun! And also, I think the way it became almost a team of sorts. And so I could interact with my own group and the other students as well. It was just a great experience.

Tyler also described working closely with a student:

I had one particular kid that through working with him he raised his grades from all Es to a C average. I remember that specifically, he went from no interactions with after-school activities, and then he joined the basketball team, he just all the way around lifted himself up, which was awesome.

Kelsey shared:

There was an 11-year old in the classroom and he kept falling asleep and the teacher would get pretty mad at him so I was able to talk to him and learned he wasn't able to get any sleep because he was hearing gunshots a lot at night, and also was caring for his younger sister who was two. He would babysit her a lot and shared that his mom had a lot of different boyfriends. Because of all the worrying about his mom and taking care of his sister most nights, he didn't sleep very well. After a few weeks, I found that he loved cars and was also good at drawing. I worked with him to motivate him to look at some

books on drawing cars and he at least found some joy in that, and motivated him to do better at school, almost to give him a reason to finish school.

These participants were able to collaborate with the students in a way that motivated the adolescents toward taking some positive steps in their lives.

**2.2. Collaboration With Adults.** Participants shared the experience of collaborating with other adults they worked with during the practicum experience. Dellin described consulting with another practicum student.

A student told the other intern about issues she was having, being in her church. She wore skirts all the time because that was part of her religious belief. The intern asked the student if it was okay if she shared her situation with me, knowing that I had background in what she was going through. During that time, I was able to talk about the strength that being different and being diverse brings with it, and not really just looking at it from the aspect of, “Why do my mom and dad make me wear skirts?”

Together the two counselors-in-training, one a practicum student and one an intern, were able to create a safe environment where the student could turn her concerns into more positive ways of coping and thinking. A similar account was given by Sonny:

There were two students who were constantly disagreeing with each other and not getting along. I think, me working with the other advocate, our role in that was to keep them separate and the kind of issues they had been dealing with over the semester. I felt like I was really helping when one of the students started to distance himself from the other student and came to one of the advocates to express the frustration. He finally came to us instead of going straight to some sort of conflict.

Working collaboratively with another team member resulted in positive behavioral changes for



the student described above. Jana also described working with an adult in the role of teacher in a collaborative way:

There was a teacher who really cared. I just remember that he would not lose his temper. That makes it sound worse that it was... but he was more easily agitated when the students would do their thing. So forming an alliance with him was really critical because we sort of had an understanding from day one. He really respected what we did. But coming from such a different background and expertise from each other, I just remember developing this sort of understanding where I felt like he was able to gain skills from me. When he was going there, being agitated, he would say to me, “why don’t we step out for a second”, and he was able to cool down. I saw all these different key players gaining different skills in how to manage the kids. You know, things get tense... so it was a challenge... but kind of working together through situations like that to find alternative repertoires and ways of doing things was good.

These participants were able to join together with other adults or peers in order to help the adolescents in an effective way. It was often a complex process of the practicum student providing consistency and modeling.

**3. Superordinate Theme Three: Impact.** A majority of the participants described statements regarding successes, breakthroughs and seeing progress in student-related or self-related goals.

Didi shared:

I guess, I think I feel validated, like the work and the time put in is worth it because very rarely you know that you’ve helped someone. You can put the efforts in and you can work with a person for a while, but not necessarily know if all of it has benefited them at all. So when you actually have the days you know that you’ve helped the person, it’s

kind of a motivation to continue to do it. Because there's a lot to do out there.

Didi's comments illustrated the impactful experience of working with adolescents, specifically referring to situations when positive results were obvious. Tyler described similar sentiments concerning how she felt when she knew she had helped a student: "It made me more motivated definitely, it validated me and made me more capable to do my job, and more confidently."

Likewise, Cici shared how her practicum affected her:

And also just as learning to become a professional in this field, it was one of my first interactions really kind of working with an actual client or student. And it just felt like a really positive moment. She seemed to open up to me about good things in her family, things that she struggled with at home and in the classroom, some goals that she had for the future. And it just felt like a really nice moment and validation for this is where I'm supposed to be.

Later, Cici also shared, "I'm usually so genuinely surprised when they come back. It sounds weird but if I hear back from a student and it's like so heartwarming to see, oh wow, I had an impact on you and you're doing great things!" For these participants, the practicum experience added a feeling of validating their career choice and increased their motivation to continue on their chosen path.

**3.2. Impact Related to At-Risk Population.** Half of the participants spoke about interactions related to working with the adolescents identified as at-risk. Kelsey shared:

One time there was a situation where one of the students had a really hard time focusing and he was teased a lot. The other kids called him, "roach" because the kids saw bugs crawl out of his backpack and he didn't really have anyone to turn to for that and he didn't have any friends. He had pretty bad hygiene and then I started to talk to him and

he began to trust me just I think from having lunch with him and walking down the hallway with him and talking. He talked about his home life and what that was like and we talked about hygiene and what he knew about that. I was able to have him agree to talk with the school counselor and school nurse, and we came up with a team approach that he was happy with. That really made a lasting impression.

Lee also shared:

I feel like I learned so much from them, even how to be empathic. A lot of time, especially with that population, there's really not another person there that's willing to listen and empathize with those kids, so giving them that is important to me.

Hannah spoke similarly:

I feel like the kids taught me more than I taught them. It was a great experience for me just outside of the experience part, but more like the life lessons just in general. It was such a learning experience for me. The kids from CARE Now, I felt like they dealt with a lot of being misguided and being from the less fortunate areas of the city. The kids that I work with now, their behaviors are more acute but they also have a lot of mental health problems as well.

Chad shared:

I worked with a transfer student who had a lot of trouble fitting in. And we talked about how he didn't have a dad when he was growing up and other men that he could look up to. We had lunch together often and in the end I found mentors for him at the school and he actually joined the basketball team. Those kids made a footprint on my life and showed me how they... how little they had and how I can make a difference... We had the luxury of spending a lot of time with the kids that were identified as high-risk. So, I

went above and beyond even to the point of going to the kids' sports events and their dances and just being there for them.

Mari communicated:

It just really broadens your perspective of the challenges that you know, they face and if you only expose yourself to your world, you really don't see the challenges and other people's struggles. I don't know, it was really eye opening to see some of those kids with ankle bracelets on and like, wow. It made me feel like the school counseling job wasn't enough, it needs to be systemic, like there's bigger changes that need to be done.

In the previous quote, Mari refers to a boy who wore an ankle bracelet from the juvenile detention center for surveillance as she described working with this at-risk adolescent. These participants shared comments specifically related to the impact of working with at-risk adolescents and ways that the experience affected their future work.

**4. Superordinate Theme Four: Meaning.** Many participants described meaning found during their practicum experience. The research team identified two subthemes of *meaning associated through others, and meaning found through self*.

**4.1. Meaning Through Others.** Five participants expressed finding meaning through working with the adolescents during the time spent in practicum. Derrick shared, "I felt that sort of joy, internal joy and satisfaction when I realized that I'd done something that was actually helpful. I would say I made meaning out of it by trying to find the positive in the situations, just trying to find the bright side."

Dellin expressed similar sentiments:

If I had been effective with one student... I feel that I was being impactful, and so that is one thing that helped me bring meaning to life is by helping others. So the service

component is a way. One of the ways and then in life, I'm spiritual so I do pray, and ask God to direct my path, and the things that I'm doing.

Jenn also expressed finding meaning “through how I'm able to interpret the relationships, and how I can best help someone, or what I can learn from them or how I can affect their life in a meaningful, positive way.” Cece shared, “...having a sense of community and togetherness with my fellow human race, and helping others in some way, shape or form... that was what I needed to do to find meaning.” Tyler also described finding meaning through working with the adolescents from her practicum, “I bounced my experiences off of other counselors and learned from them. I kind of tried to see how I influenced the kids and bring it to now... and how I influence others. To me that's the meaning of life.” These participants each spoke of finding meaning through helping others through their work, witnessing effectiveness in their actions, joining with others to build up the community, and by learning that small actions could positively influence those they worked alongside.

**4.2. Meaning Through Self.** Two participants spoke of finding meaning from within.

Sonny said, “I think it comes from a personal sense of accomplishment. Whatever the identifier is... what accomplishments in life... like when I got an award... that's my meaning... once I've achieved, that's how I am able to find happiness.”

Cici described meaning, both from the practicum and in her current work:

Meaning always comes from an inner sense of fulfillment. I've gone in such a roundabout tipsy, turvy way to kind of find my position or my niche in this world. And when I was much younger, I thought I needed to find a creative outlet and where my decision about my profession would be. And then as I grew older, I realized that I didn't have to be the totality of what my profession was. Then I realized I was in a field that

wasn't conducive to all the other aspects of my life like wanting to have a family, wanting to help others. I learned my need to help others was not fulfilled so I found and changed professions.

Each of the participants found meaning through the students at CARE Now or through an internal sense of fulfillment or accomplishment. Some of participants related meaning to their personal view, or to how they defined meaning at the moment, while others described taking a journey while searching for meaning.

**5. Superordinate Theme Six: Altruism.** All participants spoke about their beliefs related to altruism. The research team identified two themes under altruism that were related to helping others without expectations: *altruism related to personality and altruistic actions*.

**5.1. Altruism Related to Personality.** Twelve participants stated the belief that they were altruistic by nature. Cici shared:

It's just such a big part of who I try to be every day. When I give to others in any capacity, I give because I want to give, I don't want anything in return. Not even a thank you or a recognition in any way. If that comes, wonderful. And when I hear back from students and they thank me for helping them in some way, I am genuinely surprised because I just don't want any of my students to feel like they have to come back and thank me, I don't need anything in return. I give and I do for others simply because I want to and that's enough for me.

A similar sentiment was stated by Dellin:

When I work with kids and do things, I really try to give it my all or give it 100% because my philosophy is that's the only time I'm interacting with the kids, for about eight hours during the day, I want to give them the best and give them the best me... I

want to pour out myself to them.

Mari shared:

I didn't want to get anything out of it, I mean I felt like the practicum was good exposure and helped me understand and find mentors. It's always been my nature, even in my former career in corporate, I was still in a helping role.

Mari further described her former career. Although in the corporate realm, she chose a position where she focused on helping others make choices. She spoke of the process of choosing a second career as a school counselor and coming to the realization during the practicum that she wanted to help youth in a more systemic way. Mari found meaning through her work with the at-risk adolescents and later chose to work as a mental health counselor for adolescents.

These participants described altruism as a part of their identity, ways in which they viewed themselves and their experience with developing personal tendencies to give back to the community.

**5.2. Altruism Related to Actions.** Eight participants spoke of engaging in altruistic actions during their practicum. Tyler shared:

I knew it wouldn't really benefit me any, but just putting that little seed in their head would do something along the lines for them, and it was something they would get a positive meaning out of which they didn't really have a lot of. It's all about the little things.

Derrick spoke of a similar experience: "I felt like that was more altruistic because of the fact that I was engaging with him beyond what I was told was necessary and I put a lot more effort into it."

Sonny also shared thoughts regarding altruistic actions:

There would be times where I would have to pull the student out of the classroom and just take her down to the CARE Now room. We'd walk around the school. We'd just talk about things. I knew that she didn't really want to do it, I knew that wouldn't change her behavior, because there so much more going on. It was just what you would have done. It wasn't necessarily for the benefit of the student as much as it was for the benefit of the other students in the class and for the teacher to get the work done that they needed to do. It was for the good of the group.

Jana spoke of experiences she described as altruistic:

You keep showing up, with this unconditional positive regard, regardless of whether they wiggled out in class or whatever happened. I do remember a kid, he was the most challenging to connect with overall, but I knew that he found me a caring figure. I sensed that, you know, like you can sense it. But they're still non-compliant, generally. There was a time where I was actually able to take him out of class in a way that was not forced, that de-escalated him and made it less disruptive for the rest of the class. Because that was his M.O. with like to start disrupting and falling back in his chair and all sort of crazy things. You know, wild stuff. I was able to pull him aside and he was compliant with doing so, we had a mini convo. It was nothing too deep, but it really moved me, honestly, it really touched me because it made me feel like I could connect with Jay, that I'm doing something, it was a matter of mutual respect.

Each of the participants spoke candidly about how they viewed altruism, sometimes as it related to their innate ability, and in other instances how it related to their actions. The participants were provided with a definition of altruism and were then able to connect the idea with either an altruistic act they were involved in during the practicum experience or as part of their genetic



makeup.

### **Summary**

The fourteen participants interviewed shared personal examples of their experiences of the practicum. They reflected on the time spent on-site and how that may have affected their current practice. Participants also revealed thoughts related to meaning and altruism. Once interviewed the research team identified five superordinate themes of *challenges, collaboration, impact, meaning, and altruism*. Subthemes were identified in all five of the superordinate themes to further break down the themes according to the interpersonal groups referred to by the participant.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to examine the meaning former counselor education students associated with the practicum experience, as well as to explore the development of altruism. Although counselor education-related research has examined program outcomes related to skill attainment (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2013), self-efficacy (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2013; Keim et al., 2015; Mullen et al., 2015), and self-appraisal (Fong et al., 1997), there is an absence of counselor-related research focusing specifically on meaning and altruism during practicum and internship.

This phenomenological study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge related to practicum students' altruism development and meaning associated with the experience of providing social and emotional support to at-risk adolescents. Meaning and altruism development are important for a future counselor, as they have been identified as important steps in the development of empathy and altruism (Goleman, 2006; Smith et al., 1989), both key components of an effective counselor (Swank et al., 2013). Results found in this study and information identified may aid in future counselor education curriculum development for the practicum and internship experience.

This study was guided by two research questions:

1. How do participants perceive and describe the practicum experience in terms of altruism development?
2. How do participants describe the personal meaning derived from the practicum experience?

The author conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 former practicum students, all assigned to one site providing social and emotional support to at-risk adolescents. The research team analyzed the data from the interviews and five superordinate themes were illuminated: *challenges, collaboration, impact, meaning, and altruism*. This chapter will provide an overview of each of these themes describing the data, implications, limitations and future recommendations for research. Many of the articles used in this chapter are school-counselor related, as mental health counselor-related literature focusing on schools is rare. Additionally, considering the scarcity of existing literature, some articles chosen may be dated. However, the author feels the literature chosen is relevant to the topic discussed.

### **Challenges to Overcome.**

Challenges in their role and within interactions with students, teachers, and peers were a significant theme that all fourteen participants identified. Participants described feeling challenged by the student population, which resulted in feeling intimidated, unfamiliar, frustrated and out of their comfort zone. At the same time, participants reported that the experience was fun, joyous, impactful and a motivating force for them to learn more. These findings are consistent with the early stages of the Integrated Developmental Model ([IDM], McNeill, Stoltenberg & Romans, 1992). The IDM recognized four developmental levels counselors-in-training progress through, with three markers to assess during each level: self-awareness, motivation and autonomy. The participants' self-identification of feelings associated with early practicum are consistent with Level One of the IDM, which highlights limited self-awareness, anxiety, high motivation to learn, interest in the field, and dependence on supervisors for advice and direction. McNeill et al. (1992) also describe Level Two development, where counselors-in-training begin to develop empathy and an increase in focus on their work related

to successes and failures. Participants of this study frequently described successes and failures, which may be explained by the prior work history of the majority; nine out of 14 worked in the counseling and helping fields before entering the counselor education program, adding to the explanation for rapidly moving from Level One to Level Two.

Findings also appear to be congruent with the work of Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003), who included 100 American counselors/therapists at varying levels of experience in a qualitative, cross-sectional, longitudinal study. The researchers reformulated their original 12 themes (1992) into a more streamlined version of six phases of counselor development according to the following phases: *lay helper*, *beginning student*, *advanced student*, *novice professional*, *experienced professional* and *senior professional*. The participants' descriptions of practicum experiences in the present study appear to be consistent with Ronnestad and Skovholt's (2003) first two phases: *lay helper* and *beginning student*. Participants in the beginning phases of a practicum describe feelings that parallel the *lay helper*-phase focusing on helping others, trying to identify and resolve problems, and providing emotional support based on personal experience. Some participants spoke of "just talking and walking", "providing an outlet", being "unsure of their role" and learning from other life experiences: all descriptive of the pre-student phase of *lay helper*. Most participants voiced comments describing the end of their semester as feeling "vulnerable", "anxious" and "dependent on supervisors", behaviors consistent with the second or *beginning student*-phase of Ronnestad and Skovholt's Lifespan Model (2003).

Participants also described challenges with teachers. The former practicum students shared issues described as lack of trust by some of the teachers. Participants of this study stated examples of teachers being unfamiliar with the practicum student's role, mistaking the

practicum student for a teacher's assistant or para-professional. Both of these topics were briefly addressed in the school counselor literature, although much of the research was dated, and only a handful of current literature was found. Peterson, Goodman, Keller & McCauley (2004) examined the subjective experience of 26 school counseling interns with and without teaching experience. Results obtained from the non-teacher group, the group most comparable to the participants examined in this study, identified three themes related to challenge and difficult adjustments: respect, classroom skills, and the school culture. Peterson et al. (2004) identified participants or counselor interns struggling to gain respect and credibility in their new role through attributing the difficulty to lack of experience in a school setting. Feeling lost in the classroom, conducting guidance lessons, and managing classrooms were prominent comments provided by counselors-in-training. Additionally, the non-teacher group voiced a deficiency in understanding the school culture, and found it helpful to learn about the pressure teachers faced in order to complete academic material on time. This information helped the counselors-in-training understand the contextual factors in the school environment in order to work more effectively together (Peterson, et al., 2004). Several participants in this present study shared similar comments, explaining that once the role was clarified between counselor and teacher, a trusting bond was formed between the two, leaving both able to work in a united way toward helping the adolescents more effectively.

Similar results were found more recently by Cholewa, Goodman-Scott, Thomas & Cook (2016), who studied another perspective from which to view the topic: teachers' perceptions and experiences consulting with school counselors. The researchers conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of 17 elementary school teachers and identified three themes: school counselors' prioritizing of relationships, school counselors taking initiative, and school counselors'

specialization. When viewing the concerns through a teacher's lens, findings indicated that establishing counselor-teacher relationships was important in building trust and making connections. Additionally, when teachers noted a strong relationship between the counselor and student, teachers were more inclined to seek out the counselor (Cholewa et al., 2016). This behavior was modeled in the current study, where practicum students, in spite of having initially tense relationships with the teachers, forged ahead and developed therapeutic relationships with the adolescents, which in many instances facilitated the formation of a trusting relationship between practicum student and teacher, all for the benefit of the adolescent.

Cholewa et al. (2016) also noted that school counselors took the initiative to engage with the teachers. This is consistent with findings in the present study, where practicum students addressed the issue with the teacher in order to clarify their role in a respectful and collaborative manner. Practicum students reported after a period of several days to weeks that through modeling their role, and through communicating with teachers, the latter were more inclined to engage with the practicum students and became more supportive of their role in the classroom. Participants noted that after they were able to define their role, they felt more valued and respected by the teacher. Participants also stated feeling challenged by interactions with peers at their practicum site, which included students in various programs of study unrelated to counseling. Findings stated that after applying the same methods of role clarification and modeling positive behavior and social-emotional support to the at-risk adolescents, peers were more accepting of their role. In some cases, their peers began to interact with the adolescents using similar supportive language and methods used by the practicum student.

**Ability to Collaborate.**

Collaborating with students and adults was also a prominent theme identified by the participants. Practicum students collaborated with students in a group setting and individually, which is consistent with PBIS, one of the CARE Now program's foundational approaches. During the orientation practicum students were familiarized with the tenets of PBIS, where intervention was provided at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. At the primary and secondary levels, participants collaborated with at-risk adolescents in large and small groups. At the tertiary level, participants collaborated individually with the students. Participants described working collaboratively as a team with the adolescents in the after-school component of the program. Other participants spoke of individual collaboration with students such as developing a trusting relationship with a student that may have resulted in making meaningful changes in behavior and outcomes.

Counselor educator-related research describes that when working with adolescents, one might consider the need to differentiate between the growing child and the young adult. Recognizing the transformation the adolescent is undergoing is key to understanding the adolescent and measures such as providing a safe space for them to freely share may be therapeutic. Clients in the age group may be unmotivated, ambivalent, moody and resistant to change. One method of collaborating with adolescents is through Motivational Enhancement Therapy ([MET], Miller, Zweben, DiClemente, & Rychtarik, 1995). Counseling sessions with adolescents in a school setting using MET can be brief and effective for students of all levels of motivation and readiness for change. It has been found to be particularly helpful for students that may initially seem resistant and ambivalent, common traits of the adolescent population (Lawendowski, 1998). Peterson (1995) cites tips for ways in which to counsel adolescents,

which are consistent with many of the collaborative interventions and interactions reported by the practicum students as they worked with the at-risk adolescent population. Peterson's recommendations include: "letting adolescents know you are willing to just plain listen, being accessible, using questions sparingly, trying not to be defensive, showing empathy, giving praise, giving positive feedback and giving them the responsibility to do the work needed" (1995, p.269). The end goal is described as having the adolescent feel genuinely understood and respected, reinforcing the idea that they can grow to be capable of setting limits, and learning new skills and perspective taking (Davis & Lambie, 2005). Peterson's (1995) recommendations are consistent in their description of how the practicum students describe interactions with the adolescents in the program.

Peterson's (1995) recommendations were also consistent with social and emotional learning, another of the foundational components of the CARE Now program. Practicum students described helping students work through social and emotional concerns such as form and nurture healthy relationships, learn to problem solve, develop an awareness of feelings and manage those feelings, and engage in responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2009; Elias et al., 2015; Elias et al., 1997). Practicum students described collaborating with the adolescents in both didactic and experiential learning experiences in order to produce positive outcomes.

Participants also described collaborating with adults such as peers or other stakeholders, with the goal of seeking resources for and supporting a particular student. A majority of the counselor education literature related to collaboration in a school setting is specifically geared toward the school counselor due to the nature of the setting. In the last two decades, school counseling has moved from an expert consultation model toward a more collaborative consultation model (Cholewa et al., 2015). The American School Counselor Association



(ASCA) lists competencies to ensure school counselors are adequately meeting the needs of students. Possessing the ability to partner with parents, teachers, administrators and other stakeholders for the student's success is one competency that is addressed (ASCA, 2012). The practicum students spoke of working through personal conflicts and miscommunications and came together collaboratively in order to deliver social and emotional support to the adolescents.

### **Impact.**

A majority of the participants commented on the impact of their actions with the adolescents. Successes, breakthroughs and general statements regarding progress were shared. Half of the participants described the impact of working with the at-risk population. Interestingly, none of the participants described increases in skill attainment, self-efficacy or confidence when asked to describe their practicum experience. Most often, the words "impactful" and "validated" were used. This is consistent with the work of Alvarado and Gonzalez (2013) who explored the experiences of counselors-in-training with the pre-practicum. Using a grounded theory approach, participants identified expected themes related to skill attainment, but additionally themes of connectedness to peers and an increased sense of and perspective of the counseling profession. The participants in this study repetitively spoke of validating career choice, feeling more connected with other practicum students or interns at the site, and making a difference in how they viewed the community. Many of them said they intentionally sought out working with adolescents identified as at-risk when searching for their first job after graduating.

Furthermore, half of the participants attributed the personal impact felt during their practicum to working with the at-risk population. Participants related the impactful experience

to the everyday workings of their role: being in the classroom on a consistent basis with the same students each day, eating lunch alongside many of them, and working in the after-school program. The extended time spent with the students may have provided a wider lens from which to view the adolescents than would normally be the case in a school situation, and possibly played a part in an accelerated formation of a mutually, trusting relationship between the counselor and student. Participants described the adolescents they worked with as lacking social support, guidance, mentoring, financial resources, and consistency to name a few. Participants also spoke of the experience of working with at-risk adolescents as “eye opening.” These thoughts are reminiscent of the findings of Keim et al., (2015) who suggested that experiential activities in counselor education set within the community can be beneficial for both the community and the student.

### **Meaning.**

Another prominent theme identified was meaning found through the practicum experience. Participants described learning through others or through the self during this initial clinical exposure, such as finding meaning through practicum by learning that small actions could affect the adolescents positively, witnessing how helping others could add to their personal joy and learning the satisfaction through working as a team. Several participants described learning a multitude of life lessons from the adolescents, and spoke of the joy found in helping the students. One participant shared that “it made me see the bright side,” and spoke of learning the gift of gratitude. These findings were consistent with studies that positively link work and well-being (Siedlecki et al., 2013). When one finds work significant, personal growth and contributing to society can add meaning to one’s life (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). Alternatively, lacking meaning through work was connected to career burnout and lower job

satisfaction (Limberg, 2013; Malachi-Pines & Yafe-Yanai, 2001). For these reasons, it is important to address meaning found in work in counselor education when preparing for a practicum and internship.

Although some participants found meaning through working with others, some found personal meaning from the practicum and defined it as accessing meaning from within. One participant spoke of associating meaning with personal accomplishment and finding ways to fulfill that need. Others spoke of an inner sense of fulfillment that grew with her development professionally as she worked to find her career niche. Two participants related their personal conception of meaning to values learned through parenting and setting life goals. These statements are consistent with statements made by Rosso, et al. (2010) asserting that meaning found through the self can be viewed through one's values, motivations, and beliefs which in turn can influence self-perceptions of the meaning found through work.

It is also noteworthy that thirteen of the fourteen participants described themselves as spiritual in the demographic questionnaire. When presented with a definition of meaning and how they might apply that to the practicum, many of them responded by relating meaning to their spiritual or religious beliefs. Lips-Wiersma (2002) found that individuals often define meaning in terms of spirituality or religion as they discover meaning and life purpose. One participant spoke of relating personally to meaning by helping others as a service component and asking God to direct her path. Although the concept of meaning was perceived in a variety of forms, a common identified theme was the manner in which they viewed meaning, i.e. often through the eyes of the adolescents they supported.

### **Thoughts Related to Altruism.**

One of the most prominent identified themes was altruism, as all participants shared their thoughts related to caring in a selfless manner. Subthemes of altruism related to personality and actions taken were identified by the research team. All participants shared an example of altruistic measures they personally carried out during their practicum. Most described themselves as altruistic, sharing that they felt as if having altruistic tendencies was part of their genetic makeup. However more than half stated feeling uncomfortable referring to themselves as altruistic and attributed the uncomfortable feeling to a desire to be humble. This is consistent with the findings of Swank et al., (2013) who provided descriptions of identified domains, particularly in relation to the *biological* domain, accounting for the belief related to a genetic component and the *cognitive* domain relating to the modesty bias which is descriptive of minimizing one's acts of altruism. Interestingly, those participants sharing that they had children of their own reported feeling that parenting was the point at which their sense of altruism became clearer and more defined, also consistent with findings of Swank et al., (2013).

An overwhelming majority talked about becoming more other-centered and concerned with the success of the adolescents at their practicum site. Descriptions of becoming more other-centered were presented as: "feeling validated knowing you had helped a child," years later, still having the ability to communicate detailed memories of the experience of connecting with an 11-year old boy, knowing that a safe space was created for some, "looking for that little bit of growth and knowing the baby steps is my reward," and achieving internal joy from the work were all examples of the participants' descriptions of altruistic behavior. These examples are consistent with findings related to altruism in counselor education-related research (Curry et al., 2009; Limberg et al., 2018; Swank et al., 2013). Interestingly, the findings in this study were

most consistent with the non-counselor education-related research by Snyder et al. (2017) which examined experiences of service-learning in participants who self-identified as moving from a place of self-interest to desiring to become more other-centered. Participant descriptions were parallel to Snyder et al., major themes of humility, communal learning, emphasis on success of others, becoming more self-confident, and becoming more other-centered. One reason may be the nature of the site described in the current study, which was associated with a service-learning component from the Human Movement Science (HMS) department and shared many of the same learning styles. Burnett, Hamel & Long (2004) describe service-learning as integrating classroom instruction with community service-learning work. In addition, practicum students at this site had constant supervision by on-site directors and the university faculty and were set up in a classroom-type environment. On-site directors were available for frequent processing of self-awareness, reflection, counseling skills training and learning from peers – all foundational to the supervision model and learning environment of the studied practicum site.

### **Implications for Counselor Educators and Supervisors**

The results of this study suggest implications for counselor educators and supervisors, starting with the powerful impact found related to meaning-making and altruism development, especially for those working with at-risk adolescents. Some of the participants stated that they learned more from the students than the students may have learned from them. Recognizing the impact of their clients can be empowering for counselors (Jordan, 2017). Participants referred to acquiring life lessons during the practicum experience and were able to connect the impact felt with the meaning found in working with at-risk students. The participants shared that the experience of working alongside the adolescents became meaningful through small acts of support that eventually led to more significant positive changes in the adolescents. The meaning

found in the experience was reported as both an innate tendency toward altruistic behavior and the manner in which they cognitively framed their actions. This relates to both the biological and cognitive ADM themes, where Curry, Smith and Robinson (2009) define areas of altruism development. Additionally, participants reflected on the connection between their personal spiritual and/or religious development and their desire to help others. This also supports the ADM (2009) in relation to the spiritual theme represented in the work of Curry, Smith and Robinson. The participants continually connected meaning to altruism. When asked about meaning found in the experience, most responses indicated a connection between the two concepts of meaning and altruism. Participants both reported that helping others or possessing altruistic tendencies was an inherent part of their personalities, and that they actively conceptualized altruism as a way of being. Furthermore, most expressed a tendency to minimize their actions, also consistent with the ADM (2009). Helping the at-risk population was important to the participants as they shared their experiences of interacting with the students.

Developing a self-awareness of meaning found in an experience is important to understanding some of the challenges affecting the at-risk adolescents such as oppression, lack of financial and emotional support, living in areas where conflict and violence may be high, and worrying over basic needs such as housing and food. Counselor educators and supervisors can assist counselors-in-training to reflect on initial clinical experiences such as practica to encourage personal growth beyond the expected learning of skill attainment and application of knowledge (Autry & Walker, 2011; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Shepard & Brew, 2013).

Counselor educators and supervisors can provide opportunities for reflecting on the impact clients may leave on them. Bridging the gap between theory and experiential activities can encourage counselors-in-training to create meaning out of their own personal challenges (Furr &

Carroll, 2003). Finding meaning in an experience can encourage career satisfaction and decrease burnout. Counselor educators and supervisors can create opportunities for reflection and growth such as those described by Shepard and Brew (2013) through use of an experiential creative-arts-based activity to guide and stimulate discussion during the final days of their practicum. Shepard and Brew formulated a practicum assignment based on the question, “If the universe sent you a particular client to teach you something, what did you learn from that person?” (2013, p. 448). The practicum students in this study were asked to use methods from the creative arts such as a drawing, painting, poetry or song to answer this question and address the personal meaning attached to the experience. The primary researcher in this study recommends additional forms of accessing reflective thought achieved through reflective journals, dance, or demonstrations of an alternative creative activity such as gardening, painting, pottery, or any other activity chosen by the counselor-in-training in order to stimulate expression of feelings related to the experience. For follow-up, the counselor educator or supervisor may process the activity in a group format in order to encourage peer learning through sharing.

Providing the counselor-in-training with the applicable skill set and knowledge regarding the specific population in advance of their practicum work is another implication identified through this research. The primary goal for the former practicum students in this specific site was to provide social and emotional support for the adolescents. Hence, providing explicit information related to the at-risk adolescent and methods of providing social and emotional support would be beneficial. Many described the realization that they were in a unique position working with these students, in that they could offer them support in a way that no one else in the school setting could provide. This may have been one reason for the rather quickly formed connections between counselor-in-training and student described by

participants. They also shared feeling motivated to continue their work with the students when they sensed making “baby steps” or small areas of progress. Witnessing the positive changes was described as important in the early stages of working with the adolescents. Counselor educators and supervisors can help counselors-in-training understand the importance of setting attainable goals that lead to larger ones, and to conceptualize themselves in a facilitative role working toward change by creating opportunity, rather than to be responsible for or managing the change in the student (Snyder et al., 2017). Other attainable goals for the counselor educator or supervisor to address with the counselor-in-training might include providing general empathy, building on listening skills, and offering unconditional positive feedback. Additionally, reinforcing the concepts of building a vocabulary of ‘feeling words’ or emotions for the adolescent and developing the use of empowering language, such as through the use of “I” statements can also be ways in which counselor educators and supervisors may assist the counselor-in-training in working with the at-risk adolescent.

A similar implication for counselor educators and supervisors is the question of adequate preparedness for the counselor in settings comprising at-risk adolescent population. The at-risk student is faced with additional stressors of adolescence possibly related to a lack of access to support systems, education, mentors (Krodel et al., 2009), mental health services (Eiraldi et al., 2015; Elmore & Gaylord-Harden, 2012; Lindsey et al., 2013), and nutrition (VDOE, 2017), to name a few. It can be overwhelming for the practicum student to assess and intervene in situations that are multi-faceted and complex. Several participants in this study felt unprepared for working with this population, given the many challenges faced by the adolescents, in spite of the 35-hour orientation and after completing a majority of the credit hours required in the counseling education program. Some participants also expressed feeling



unprepared to work with the students diagnosed with mental health concerns. Implications for the counselor educator point to infusing the curriculum with course content related to at-risk populations, including experiential activities to reinforce theoretical concepts. With respect to this study, information that may benefit the population and result in positive outcomes could be included in the curriculum related to children and adolescents identified as at-risk. This would translate to mental health diagnoses prevalent in this age group, the possible options for providing support through counseling skills and referrals, and the use of interventions such as cognitive behavioral therapy, solution focused therapy, and other methods that may benefit the population and result in positive outcomes. Taking such actions may improve the counselor-in-training's feelings of preparedness for working with this population.

Many of the participants shared challenges working with teachers, centered on the teacher's understanding of the practicum student's role in the classroom. Although teachers had been provided with information and attended meetings explaining the role that the counselor-in-training was to fulfill, there was a tendency for the teachers to conceptualize the practicum students' role as those more familiar, such as teacher's aid, para-professional, or student teacher. Participants spoke of working through the role confusion throughout the semester, having obtained feedback from supervisors and peers. All participants described working through the confusion related to the mental health counselor's role in the classroom in positive ways. However, in similar situations counselor educators and supervisors would be wise to preemptively check-in frequently with teachers and other school personnel to confirm the understanding of the practicum students' role in the classroom. Implications for future practicum students working in similar programs may be to provide ongoing formative

evaluation, in order to continue to update orientation for practicum students and to inform school faculty and staff of counselor-in-training goals.

The third implication for counselor educators and supervisors focuses on choosing approved sites for practica. Counselor educators may wish to consider setting parameters to encourage consistency in the experience provided. Currently CACREP standards do not address specifics for practicum settings (2016). However, traditional settings may not offer adequate exposure to culturally diverse experiences and contexts to consider when counseling clients. The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) were developed based on the original Multicultural Counseling Competencies ([MCC], 1992) in order to infuse multicultural and social justice competencies into all areas of the counseling profession (Ratts, Singh, Butler, Nassar-McMillan & McCullough, 2016). These MSJCC describe the range of intersectionalities that may exist between counselor and client, a concept that has emerged since the origination of the MCC. One way to address current educational needs of the practicum students and provide a more consistent practicum experience would be to incorporate a service-learning approach into the curriculum. “Service-Learning is one pedagogical approach to multicultural training that addresses many of the critiques directed at conventional models by exposing trainees to the experiential realities of diverse community setting” (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). Service-learning enhances growth in the cognitive, behavioral and affective areas for counselors-in-training (Lee, Roisen & McWhirter, 2014). This is important so that counselors-in-training can develop self-awareness, understand the clients’ worldview and the counseling relationship from a multicultural and social justice perspective, and identify counseling and advocacy interventions (Ratts et al., 2016). Participants spoke of how their ways of thinking had changed due to the experience, and that the ability to connect with the students

and teachers was enhanced. Many attributed the change to the communal sense of learning inherent in the program setting.

Participants shared that the setting provided ample time for reflecting on and processing their daily experiences with the students, and was helpful in accelerating their personal learning. Sharing the experience in what was described as a huge classroom each day with peers and site supervisors facilitated learning and created a safe and trusting learning environment. The primary role of site supervisors was to provide supervision for the practicum students and interns, which was said to be extremely beneficial to learning and appreciated by participants. Counselor educators and supervisors can plan service-learning activities by setting objectives and assignments related to service-learning goals, emphasizing constant reflection and making connections between theory and practice (Perkins & Brumfield, 2009). Supervisors and counselor educators may consider networking with service-learning programs in the local areas in order to maintain current knowledge of the available agencies.

The fourth implication for counselor educators and supervisors is to highlight the importance of collaborating with peers, teachers, supervisors, and families. School counselor-related literature emphasizes the importance of consulting with adult stakeholders, including parent/caregivers, teachers and administrators to assist students' achievement and facilitate systemic change (ASCA, 2012). Although all participants related that they had collaborated with teachers and peers during their practicum experience, only one participant stated having collaborated with families of the adolescents. Counselor educators and supervisors may want to encourage collaborating with parents and guardians in order to facilitate a more inclusive approach to supporting the adolescents and more effective communication.

Another implication identified through the demographic question was the uncertainty between race and ethnicity. The primary researcher used open-ended questions when inquiring about race and ethnicity. Open-ended references were chosen to avoid the need for participants to self-categorize (Brckalopez, Zilvinskis & Haeger, 2014). However, the research team noted confusion among participants regarding both questions, “Which race do you most identify with?” and “Which ethnicity do you most identify with?” This is important information for faculty and supervisors so that a distinction can be emphasized between ethnicity and race. On an individual level one’s ethnicity may become watered down, as one gets farther away from the generation of immigration (Marger, 2015). This may be one reason for the confusion shared by participants. Whatever the reason for the confusion, it is important to ensure that counselors-in-training are able to identify differences between the two concepts, as there is a need to understand how race and ethnicity affect how clients conceptualize their world (McAuliffe, Kim & Park, 2008).

Another implication for counselor educators and supervisors is the possible connection between spirituality and altruistic tendencies. The Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC), a division of the ACA, has set forth competencies to address spirituality in the profession (2009). These competencies were written in conjunction with the ACA Code of Ethics (2005) in order to “recognize diversity and embrace a cross-cultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural constructs” (p.3). During the demographic questioning, all but one participant defined themselves as spiritual. Counselor education-related research found that those referring to themselves as spiritual were found to behave more altruistically and had the tendency to feel greater compassion than those not identifying as spiritual (Saslow et al., 2013).

Additionally, spirituality was found to be a potent predictor of altruism and empathy (Huber & MacDonald, 2012). CACREP (2016) refers to the topic of spirituality as part of the counseling curriculum, as it relates to social and cultural diversity to include “the impact of spiritual beliefs on clients’ and counselors’ worldview” (p. 11). Those counselor education faculties involved in curriculum development may consider infusing topics related to spirituality throughout counseling curricula to encourage students to reflect on their own spirituality as they progress through the program. Awareness of one’s own sense of spirituality may also provide a clearer view of working with clients who identify as spiritual.

### **Limitations**

The research team recognized several limitations to this phenomenological study. There is a potential for researcher bias, despite remaining conscious of the possibility throughout the study. The primary researcher acknowledged her previous experience in working within the program with the at-risk population referred to in this study, and frequently recorded her personal reflexivity to address improved credibility. Additionally, the researcher noted personal bias as a White, middle-class woman with three children, which was reflected on throughout the research process. Consensus coding, frequent consensus meetings and debriefing was ensured, and on a few occasions, the interrater reliability ratio was computed as necessary when coding (Hays & Singh, 2014).

Data collection was based on self-report, bringing to light a possibility that participants may have reported with a social desirability bias, responded in a way that others may find favorable, or answered sensitive questions in a manner that they believed the primary researcher wanted to hear (Lavrakas, 2008). Social desirability bias may be a limitation in this study due to the existence of a previous working relationship between the primary researcher and the

participants. Having shared a working environment with the researcher, it may be more likely that the participants reported socially desirable facts related to altruism. It is also important to note that the amount of time between the practicum experience and the research interview may have affected the reporting of data. The primary researcher emailed photos of the CARE Now site between one to two days prior to the interview to help with recall, however the date of completion of the respective practica ranged from 2013-2016, with the majority completed between 2015 and 2016. One participant expressed having difficulty in remembering details, but increased recall after receiving the photos sent before the interview. Member checking was done after the interview in the form of a follow-up phone call or email, however a few participants did not respond and all who responded said they had no additional comments or thoughts.

Additionally when asked meaning-making related questions, most participants answered by making reference to their beliefs related to altruism. When follow-up questions were used as probes, participants tended to repeat similar responses related to altruism. The participants seemed to make the connection between the definition of meaning, that is learning from an experience, and the product of their learning, the desire to help others, which was connected in the interviews as the act of altruism. This may have been a result of faulty questioning on the part of the primary researcher, despite having included definitions of both meaning and altruism in the interview protocol.

Another limitation was in the use of purposive sampling. At times it was difficult for the primary researcher to contact former practicum students. Snowball sampling was helpful in contacting a number of participants.

## **Future Research**

The results of this study suggest future research that could be conducted in order to further explore the many facets associated with the practicum experience for the counselor-in-training. There was little material available related to practicum students in general. Much of the research available described the participants as counselors-in-training, which ranged from entry level to pre-practicum, pre-internship or post program. There is a lack of research solely pertaining to the practicum experience, particularly in the realm of both meaning found through the experience and personal altruism development. To explore altruism development specifically related to spirituality could produce results supportive of supplementing the counselor education curriculum with more detailed and developed course materials.

Additionally, the effectiveness could be investigated of combining practicum with a service-learning program in the community, especially with one dedicated to at-risk youth. Practicum students placed in this type of setting can provide the emotional and social support that has been found to be associated with lowering levels of at-risk behavior in youth (Peterson, Buser & Westburg, 2010). Many community programs lack the resources of a counselor, and for some, a counselor-in-training with a trained on-site supervision could help fill the gaps in the need for support, basic counseling and mentoring. Participants shared that working with at-risk adolescents was a powerful experience, and that for most the impact was attributed to working with students identified as at-risk. It would be beneficial to investigate the effects of using a service-learning program in the community, which might benefit both members of the community and the practicum student.

Studies might also be conducted to investigate the various formats used for practica. Often practicum sites differ dramatically in the orientation, role, expectations and supervision

provided. Some sites may have one practicum student, while others may have a dozen or more from the same program. It may be valuable to look at the learning outcomes utilized from various programs. Participants in this study reported their placement in the practicum site with a larger group of peers to be beneficial to their experience. Many reported a sense of communal learning, constant sharing with peers, supervisors, teachers and other professionals, and an awareness of an environment fostering learning and reflection. It is not known if the type of setting described might result in more positive learning outcomes, however results may lead to an exploration of whether more defined guidelines to ensure consistency in sites may be helpful in the development of practicum sites for counselor education programs.

Finally, future research comparing the perspectives of practicum or internship students immediately following their practicum or internship with those of past graduates at various points throughout their career as counselors may provide insight into additional ways of infusing curricula to better prepare counselors for future practice. Conducting research with past graduates may add value to a study, given time to reflect on previous training and current practice, and may provide insight into areas for counselor education curriculum development.

### **Summary**

This study examined the meaning counselor education students associated with the practicum experience, and explored their development and thoughts related to altruism. Fourteen practicum students shared their perspectives related to the meaning found from the experience of providing social and emotional support to at-risk adolescents at the same program site. Five superordinate themes were identified: *challenges, collaboration, impact, meaning, and altruism.*



The results of this study describing the challenges faced by practicum students were consistent with early counselor developmental phases cited by McNeill et al. (1992) and Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003). They ranged from anxiety, limited self-awareness, dependence on supervisors and providing emotional support based on personal experience, to a secondary phase of developing empathy and increasing self-awareness and autonomy.

Participants also shared experiences referring to collaborating with teachers, other adults in the school and working with the adolescents in a collaborative way. The identified implications referred to applying program setting foundational elements of PBIS and social and emotional learning while working with the adolescents, while simultaneously modeling behaviors of both adolescents and adults. Further implications stressed developing effective communication and rapport with stakeholders such as teachers, parents, guardians, administrators and other adults at the setting to facilitate a partnership geared toward student success.

The impact of the practicum shared by participants was related to the adolescents at the program setting and was described as validating career choice and encouraging of connectedness. In particular, counselors-in-training related the impact to working with the at-risk adolescents. Implications also discussed alternate ways of choosing practicum sites which foster early development of internally gained benefits of training such as meaning-making from work and development of altruistic tendencies.

Many participants' descriptions of altruism were consistent with Swank, Ohrt and Robinson's (2013) Altruism Developmental Model, the conceptual framework guiding this study. In particular strong connections with Swank et al.'s (2013) domains of biological and

cognitive areas were shared, as participants described conceptualizing altruism as being part of their genetic makeup and ways in which they personally come to understand altruism.

CHAPTER VI  
MANUSCRIPT

AN EXPLORATION OF PRACTICUM STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF MEANING-  
MAKING THROUGH ALTRUISM

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study took a phenomenological approach to explore counselor education practicum students' (n=14) experiences with providing social and emotional support to adolescents identified as at-risk. The primary researcher sought to study the meaning and altruism development through semi-structured individual interviews, exploring ways in which former practicum students conceptualized meaning through their practicum work and ascertained thoughts related to personal altruism development. Findings suggest that students found challenges in the experience, were able to collaborate toward successful outcomes, identified the experience as impactful, were able to describe the personal meaning derived from the experience, and were able to reflect on thoughts related to altruism. Implications for counselor educators and supervisors and suggestions for future research are provided.

*Key Words:* altruism development, meaning, practicum, counselor education

## Introduction

The completion of a practicum experience is pivotal to a counselor's education. This is the initial entry into the counseling field that gives the learner an opportunity to apply theory and counseling skills while under direct supervision (ACA, 2014). In this introductory exposure to the clinical area, the practicum student is given the chance to serve in a *portion* of the roles that are expected from a staff member under supervision. In contrast, an intern would be provided with the opportunity to perform *all* of the roles expected of the staff member under supervision (CACREP, 2016). The practicum gives the counselor-in-training time to ease into the clinical area and work on the core skills of counseling before entering the internship where expectations are higher.

The counselor education-based research related to practicum and internship cited most often focuses on the core skills of counseling. Most recently, topics have been investigated such as student self-appraisal (Fong, Borders & Effington, 1997), self-efficacy (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2013; Keim, Goodrich, Crofts & Walker, 2015; Mullen, Uwanmahoro, Blount & Lamble, 2015; Tang, Addison, LaSure-Bryant, Norman, O'Connell, & Stewart-Sicking, 2004), knowledge and skill building and enhancement of making connections (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2013). Much of the literature cites self-efficacy and skill attainment when investigating counselor education program benefits, yet little investigation has focused on the internal rewards of the clinical experience such as the meaning derived or the development of altruism from the practicum.

The concept of finding meaning through work is important to address for the counselor-in-training as it serves as a key factor in career development (Limberg, 2013; Malachi-Pines & Yafe-Yanai, 2001). Meaning can also be related to empathy, one of the key components of

counseling (Rogers, 1989). Empathy serves as a precursor to altruism, or the desire to help others (Goleman, 2006; Smith, Keating, & Stotland, 1989). Both empathy and altruism are important to the student entering practicum and internship as they are considered to be essential counselor competencies (Swank, Ohrt & Robinson, 2013).

Altruism has been referred to as “the purest form of caring – selfless and non-contingent upon reward” (Robinson & Curry, 2007, p. 68). Altruism development is addressed in the counseling literature and presents valuable implications for the counseling field. Research shows that counselors-in-training perceive a positive relationship between altruism and counselor effectiveness (Swank, Ohrt & Robinson, 2013). Furthermore, participating in meaningful acts of altruism was found to be an essential component of self-care and wellness for the practicing counselor, both factors in maintaining effectiveness as a professional counselor (Limberg, Schermann, Fox & Robinson, 2018). In addition, life experience was addressed as counselors-in-training reported the belief that counselor development and life experience were directly related to altruism level (Swank et al., 2013). Exploring the meaning counselors-in-training connect with early counseling experiences, such as the time spent in practicum, may contribute to the knowledge base related to counselor effectiveness, self-care, wellness and counselor development.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study (n=14) was to explore and describe the personal meaning and altruism development of counselor education students associated with a practicum site providing social and emotional support to at-risk adolescents. Much of the counselor education-related research addressing meaning and altruism involves either professional counselors or counselors-in-training. However, there is a lack of research that specifically addresses the meaning or development of altruism derived from the practicum

experience, a component of counselor education that is viewed as essential to the growth of the counselor. The current study sought to understand this phenomenon. The following research questions were addressed: “how do participants perceive and describe the practicum experience in terms of altruism development?” And “how do participants describe the personal meaning derived from the practicum experience?”

## **Literature Review**

### **The Meaning, Empathy and Altruism Connection**

Meaning-making was described by Victor Frankl (1976), as “the primitive motivational force in man” (p.154). Developing an awareness of exploring the meaning one associates with work and life can be important to those participating in a practicum and internship, not just personally, but also as a key factor in career development, as the lack of finding meaning through work is associated with higher levels of career burnout and lower job satisfaction (Limberg, 2013; Malach-Pines & Yafe-Yanai, 2001).

Meaning can also be viewed from the perspective of how it relates to empathy, one of the foundational elements of the counseling profession. Empathy has been described as the ability to experience another’s point of view of the world, almost as if one was walking in their shoes (Adler & Proctor, 2014). When one provides empathy one feels and experiences the actual personal meaning of another (Rogers, 1989). Rogers defined empathy as “one of the most potent forces of change that I know” (Rogers, 1989, p. 136). Empathy development is essential to building the therapeutic relationship between client and counselor and is considered a key factor in humanistic counseling (Elliot, Bohar, Watson & Greenberg, 2011; Laska, Gurman & Wampold, 2014). Furthermore, empathy acts as a natural stepping-stone toward altruism in the sequence of the development of the counselor-client relationship; that is, after empathy comes

the innate reaction to desire to help the client, thus causing an altruistic response (Goleman, 2006; Smith et al., 1989). Altruism has been defined in relation to counseling as “the purest form of caring, selfless and non-contingent upon reward” (Robinson & Curry, 2007, p.68). Empathy and altruism are significant, as they are both key counselor competencies (Swank et al., 2013).

### **Altruism Development**

The perception of counseling students’ views related to altruism was explored by Swank et al., (2013). Researchers conducted a qualitative grounded theory approach in order to formulate a theory of altruism development. Participants were 19 counselors-in-training from a master’s level, CACREP-accredited university program located in the southeastern United States. The data were compared to the seminal works of Curry, Smith and Robinson (2009) and Robinson and Curry (2007), which resulted in an emerging framework for examining altruism, The Altruism Development Model (ADM). Four domains were identified: altruistic, biological, cognitive, social learning and religious/spiritual.

In a related study, Limberg, Ohrt, Barden, Ha, Hundley & Wood (2015) conducted a cross-cultural exploration of the perceptions of altruism in 22 counseling students. Using a consensual qualitative research approach, six domains related to the ADM were identified: biological, cognitive, social learning, religious/spiritual, counseling and empathic. Individual face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Results were described in terms of domains identified by Curry et al., (2009). The areas related to the biological, cognitive, social learning, and religious/spiritual domains were supported. In addition, themes related to counseling and empathy were illuminated, whereby the majority of the participants reported altruism to be a motivating factor to enter the counseling profession.



Research indicates similar results related to altruism outside the field of counselor education. A study of altruism development applied in an inter-professional service-learning curriculum addressed the needs of the homeless population in the mid-western United States. Chrisman-Khawam, Abdullah & Dhoopar (2017) collaborated with doctors from a family medicine residency to form a volunteer initiative to improve inter-professional care for the homeless population. Chrisman-Khawam, et al. (2017) collected narrative data from 42 student learners and 12 inter-professional volunteers. Findings demonstrated greater empathy and an improved knowledge base and comfort level with the homeless population. A major theme emerging was the participants' development of a greater sense of meaning from the experience. This study does not reflect findings found in counselor education literature regarding increased skill attainment, competency or self-efficacy development; however, it does focus on meaning-making, empathy and altruism. The narrative descriptions collected indicate that the experience was life-changing for many participants.

Similarly themed findings related to altruism development were reported in a multiple case study design by Snyder, Yanchar & Gantt (2017). The researchers explored the learning experiences of six individuals who identified as undergoing a shift from learning for self-interest vs. learning to benefit others. Participants were recruited through criterion sampling with the main requirement of having experienced an internal awareness of a change from feeling selfish to a more selfless intent. Through semi-structured interviews, six themes were identified: humility, communal learning, an emphasis on the success of others, becoming more self-confident, becoming a more effective learner, and becoming more other-centered (Snyder et al., 2017). The authors identified the theme, "becoming more other-centered" (p.273) as a thread throughout the study. These findings related to becoming more other-centered corroborated

those of Chrisman-Khawam et al. (2017) and Limburg et al. (2015) described above. Each of the studies also support the goals of a counselor as defined by the ACA (2014), which includes assisting clients in accomplishing goals, providing solutions to identified problems, identifying coping skills and enhancing communication skills – all tools that may result in helping clients help themselves. In summary, Snyder and associates identify this transformation as a gradual change in participants' way of thinking, which is explained as the effect of becoming involved with others so that others might help themselves.

### **At-risk or under-resourced youth**

The overarching goal for the practicum site referred to in this study was to address the needs of at-risk adolescents. Mc Whirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, and McWhirter (2013) refer to the at-risk student as “a set of presumed cause-effect dynamics that place an individual child or adolescent in danger of future negative outcomes” (p. 8). At-risk youth have little access to external advantages such as education, support systems, mentors, or finances (Krodel, Becker, Ingle & Jakes, 2009). Other resources lacking include access to mental health services (Eiraldi, Wolk, Locke & Beidas, 2015; Elmore & Gaylord-Harden, 2012; Lindsey, Chambers, Pohle, Beall & Lucksted, 2013), nutrition (VDOE, 2017) and parental/family support (Elmore & Gaylord-Harden, 2012). This absence of essential resources can have grave implications for children and youth.

Lacking necessary resources can lead to a negative spiral of events as illustrated by the following statistics. It is approximated that 1 in 5 children and youth have a diagnosable mental health disorder, yet 75%-80% of children and youth do not receive services according to the National Center for Children in Poverty ([NCCP] Koball & Young, 2018). Children and youth affected by poverty are less likely to receive mental health services, putting them at risk of

failing in school, and further negative outcomes such as involvement with the juvenile justice system (Koball & Young, 2018), sexual risk taking, substance abuse (Peterson, Buser & Westburg, 2010), and early exposure to victimization and community violence (McMahon, Coker & Parnes, 2013). Based on the US Census Bureau's most recent survey, an estimated 43.1 million Americans are living in poverty, with an overall poverty rate of 12.7% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). It is estimated that 21.3% of the children in the US between the ages of 5 and 17 live below the poverty level. The percentage of children living in low-income and poor families varies by race and ethnicity with Hispanic children comprising the largest share at 36% followed by Black children at 24% (Koball & Young, 2018). For the same year, it is estimated that a substantially higher overall poverty rate was reported within the community addressed in this research at 21% for the total population and a rate of 31% for children between the ages of 5 and 17 years (U. S. Census Bureau, 2016). The percentage of children qualifying for the USDA National School Program for free and reduced lunches in the researched community was 76% (VA Dept. of Education, 2017). Given these striking statistics, the program serving as a site for this study addressed the needs of this underserved population by providing emotional support through the practicum experience for counselors-in-training. The researcher seeks to understand the experience of providing support through the practicum students' perspective while working closely with this group of students identified as at-risk.

## **Methods**

### **Conceptual framework and tradition**

The researcher used the Altruism Development Model (ADM) to guide the research practice (Curry, Smith & Robinson, 2009). The ADM provides direction for understanding the development of altruism for counselors-in-training and provided a basis for

the researcher to ask reflective questions. The theoretical approach used to explore the meaning found and altruism development of practicum students was phenomenology. By definition, phenomenological studies “discover and describe the meaning or essence of participants’ lived experiences and knowledge as it appears to consciousness” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 50). The phenomenological research design was employed in this study to learn more about the experience of completing a practicum experience while working closely with at-risk middle school students. Consistent with phenomenology, the researcher will search for the essence or meaning of the experience central to the memory image and meaning of the shared phenomenon.

### **Sampling, participants, and setting**

Fourteen participants were recruited using purposive sampling based on the inclusion criteria. All had completed a practicum at a common site between the years of 2012-2016; a majority had completed the semester between 2015 and 2016. More current dates were unavailable due to loss of funding for the program. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants using the following criteria: length working in the program of study (one semester); consistency working (at least 2 days/week); and successful completion of the semester (passing grade or satisfactory evaluation). To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms. Participants’ ages ranged from late 20s to late 30s. All but one of the participants worked in a counseling-related field. In terms of racial/ethnic identification participants responded as follows: six identified as White, two as Asian, eight as Black or African American, and one as Mixed Race.

## Data collection

Following a review of the informed consent document, demographic questions related to age, gender, race/ethnicity, spiritual beliefs, and current job position were gathered. Individual interviews were conducted with each participant. A fervent attempt was made to perform the interviews face-to-face or in a web-based format in order to explore the interactive data emerging from the interviews in light of the interpersonal nature of the topic under study, and to allow for development of detail (Hays & Singh, 2012). When this was not possible due to distance or extenuating factors, Skype, FaceTime or phone interviews were conducted. The semi-structured interviews contained questions with probes for follow-up related to the research questions. In addition, *photo elicitation interview* (PEI), or the introduction of photos as a means to enhance recall of the context of the phenomenon and increase comfort level was introduced before the interview session. Epstein, Stevens, McKeever & Baruchel found that PEI in various formats challenges participants, triggers memory, identifies new perspectives and enhances rapport when used during the research interview (2006). A follow-up email exchange or phone conversation was conducted in order to clarify and check the information from the initial interview. Individual interviews supported the understanding of the lived experiences of the participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). The interviews ranged from approximately 20 to 40 minutes. Interviews were recorded by the primary researcher and transcribed using a professional transcription service. Sample questions from the interview protocol follow: “describe a memory from your practicum,” “describe a memory where you felt you made a difference/felt good about your interaction with a student,” “describe a memory when you felt that your actions were not working,” and “how would you describe the meaning of your practicum experience?”

## **Trustworthiness**

The researcher integrated measures of trustworthiness to ensure reliability and validity using Guba's constructs (1981) of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. First, multiple coders were involved in the coding of the data and identification of themes and subthemes. Member checks and a statement of the researcher's background and experience were made and the interrater reliability was calculated (.7 or above) in order to address incongruence of coding when necessary. In addition, the researcher recorded self-evaluative thoughts during the entire research process in the form of a reflective journal. Full descriptions of the details of the fieldwork and ongoing reflection were made in order to guide future investigation and enhance dependability and credibility. Transferability was addressed through use of sufficient textual information during fieldwork so that the situations could be replicated. Additionally, thick descriptions were encouraged during the interview process. Confirmability was ensured through recording of researcher bias and predispositions early in the study and ongoing note-taking in the reflective journal.

## **Data analysis**

The goal of qualitative data analysis is to make sense of data or text (Creswell, 2013). Prior to data collection, the primary researcher and team provided a description of the personal experience studied in order to assist in identifying *epoche* or the identification of prior explanation of the experience, bracketing researcher values and assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher determined research questions and outlined methods of trustworthiness. Several interviews were conducted before the analysis phase of the research took place. This allowed the researcher to review the data and make slight adjustments in the interview protocols to reflect the development of emerging themes. Once transcribed, a coding team individually pre-coded

the data manually, highlighting rich passages and underlining significant quotes using open coding. Coding was performed one phrase at a time. A constant comparison method was maintained throughout the process.

### **Results/Themes**

Five themes with corresponding subthemes were illuminated by the data describing the practicum experience for the participants: *challenges to overcome*, *ability to collaborate*, *impact*, *meaning*, and *thoughts related to altruism*. Each is reviewed below with examples provided. Please see Table 1 for codebook descriptions.

#### **Challenges to overcome**

Each participant expressed challenges throughout the practicum experience that they wished to overcome. Three subthemes were identified referencing the population related to the challenge: students, teachers, and peers. One participant describes a challenge working with students: Cici stated:

The first couple of sessions of after-school were difficult for me because it was my first time working with students of this age group. Like I said before, I was in higher education before that, so I worked with older students and adults.

Working with this age group was somewhat intimidating at first. And especially in a group setting, like the small groups that we were helping with, especially for the homework hour. It happened to be a little bit more disciplinary, and that is not at all where my comfort zone is.

Additionally, participants noted feeling challenged with the teachers they worked closely with in the classroom. Chad shared:

We had some conflict with the teachers there. They didn't understand our role and how we were not there to be teacher's assistants. They really tried to put us in a box. Some of the teachers were more receptive to us than others, but overall, the teachers were a challenge.

Another participant described sharing a similar experience with a teacher, which ended positively. Hannah stated:

There were times that I felt as if I wasn't wanted in the classroom. It wasn't mean, but it was more so like "this is my class, I got this, I don't really need you here." That's really the extent of it. I think it was more of not understanding my role and not understanding or just not knowing me because by the end of the school year, I had a gift from the teacher and she had the class put together this book for me, so I think it was more of a "I don't know her, so I don't trust her" issue.

Each of the participants describing a challenge with a teacher during practicum were able to respond appropriately and work through the challenge positively by the end of the semester.

Challenges were also described when working with peers. Kelsey shared a challenge when working with a para-professional assigned to the same classroom:

A couple of times, some of the others assisting the teacher in the classroom, and we all had different approaches and that made it kind of hard. I was trained to be strength-based but a lot of the others were more disciplinarians and it was hard to agree on how to treat the students.

Each participant described a solution applied to overcome the challenges faced in the practicum environment.



## Collaboration

Most of the participants shared situations where they were able to collaborate to formulate and follow through with a plan to benefit the student. The collaboration was identified according to population: students and other adults in the work environment. Tyler shared:

I had one particular kid that through working with him he raised his grades from all Es to a C average. I remember that specifically, he went from no interactions with after-school activities, and then he joined the basketball team, he just all the way around lifted himself up, which was awesome.

Participants also collaborated with other adults at the site. Dellin stated:

A student told the other intern about issues she was having being in her church. She wore skirts all the time because that was part of her religious belief. The intern asked the student if it was okay if she shared her situation with me, knowing that I had background in what she was going through. During that time, I was able to talk about the strength that being different and being diverse brings with it, and not really just looking at it from the aspect of, “Why do my mom and dad make me wear skirts?”

Together the two counselors-in-training, one a practicum student and one an intern, were able to create a safe environment where the student could turn her concerns into more positive ways of coping and thinking. Another participant spoke about collaborating with a teacher. Jana shared:

There was a teacher who really cared. I just remember that he would not lose his temper. That makes it sound worse that it was...but he was more easily agitated when the students would do their thing. So forming an alliance with him was really critical because we sort of had an understanding from day one. He really respected what we did. But coming from such a different background and expertise from each other, I just

remember developing this sort of understanding where I felt like he was able to gain skills from me. When he was going there, being agitated, he would say to me, “why don’t we step out for a second”... and he was able to cool down. I saw all these different key players gaining different skills in how to manage the kids. You know, things get tense... so it was a challenge... but kind of working together through situations like that to find alternative repertoires and ways of doing things was good.

These participants were able to join together with other adults or peers in order to help the adolescents in an effective way. It was often a complex process of the practicum student providing consistency and modeling.

### **Impact**

Most participants shared specific statements about successes, breakthroughs and noticing progress in their work with the students. The theme was further broken down into general impact noted and the impact participants related to working with the at-risk population. Cici shared,

And also just as learning to become a professional in this field, it was one of my first interactions really kind of working with an actual client or student. And it just felt like a really positive moment. She seemed to open up to me about good things in her family, things that she struggled with at home and in the classroom, some goals that she had for the future. And it just felt like a really nice moment and validation for this is where I’m supposed to be.

Later, Cici also stated, “I’m usually so genuinely surprised when they come back. It sounds weird but if I hear back from a student and it’s like so heartwarming to see, oh wow, I had an

impact on you and you're doing great things!" Participants also spoke about the impact related to working with adolescents at-risk. Kelsey said:

One time there was a situation where one of the students had a really hard time focusing and he was teased a lot. The other kids called him, "roach" because the kids saw bugs crawl out of his backpack and he didn't really have anyone to turn to for that and he didn't have any friends. He had pretty bad hygiene and then I started to talk to him and he began to trust me just I think from having lunch with him and walking down the hallway with him and talking. He talked about his home life and what that was like and we talked about hygiene and what he knew about that. I was able to have him agree to talk with the school counselor and school nurse, and we came up with a team approach that he was happy with. That really made a lasting impression.

Hannah spoke similarly:

I feel like the kids taught me more than I taught them. It was a great experience for me just outside of the experience part, but more like the life lessons just in general. It was such a learning experience for me. The kids from CARE Now, I felt like they dealt with a lot of being misguided and being from the less fortunate areas of the city. The kids that I work with now, their behaviors are more acute but also have a lot of mental health problems as well.

Participants shared comments specifically related to the impact of working with at-risk adolescents and ways that the experience affected their future work.

### **Meaning**

Meaning was related to learning from the experience of the practicum, through others or through the self. Participants expressed finding meaning through working with the adolescents

during the time spent in practicum. Derrick shared, “I felt that sort of joy, internal joy and satisfaction when I realized that I’d done something that was actually helpful. I would say I made meaning out of it by trying to find the positive in the situations, just trying to find the bright side.” Dellin expressed similar sentiments:

If I had been effective with one student.... I feel that I was being impactful, and so that is one thing that helped me bring meaning to life is by helping others. So the service component is a way. One of the ways and then in life, I’m spiritual so I do pray, and ask God to direct my path, and the things that I’m doing.

Cici shared, “.... having a sense of community and togetherness with my fellow human race, and helping others in some way, shape or form... that was what I needed to do to find meaning.”

A few participants expressed finding meaning from within. Sonny said, “I think it comes from a personal sense of accomplishment. Whatever the identifier is... what accomplishments in life... like when I got an award... that’s my meaning... once I’ve achieved, that’s how I am able to find happiness.”

Cici explained connecting meaning from her early career to her current work:

Meaning always comes from an inner sense of fulfillment. I’ve gone in such a roundabout tipsy, turvy way to kind of find my position or my niche in this world. And when I was much younger, I thought I needed to find a creative outlet and what my decision about my profession would be. And then as grew older, I realized that I didn’t have to be the totality of what my profession was. Then I realized I was in a field that wasn’t conducive to all the other aspects of my life like wanting to have a family, wanting to help others. I learned my need to help others was not fulfilled so I found and

changed professions.

Each of these participants found meaning through the students they worked alongside, or through an internal sense of fulfillment.

### **Altruism**

All participants spoke about their beliefs related to altruism. Two subthemes illuminated during the analysis of the data described helping others without expectations, and were related to participants' personalities and altruistic actions. Mari shared:

I didn't want to get anything out of it, I mean I felt like the practicum was good exposure and helped me understand and find mentors. It's always been my nature, even in my former career in corporate, I was still in a helping role.

Cici also shared thoughts about her innate nature:

It's just such a big part of who I try to be every day. When I give to others in any capacity, I give because I want to give, I don't want anything in return. Not even a thank you or a recognition in any way. If that comes, wonderful. And when I hear back from students and they thank me for helping them in some way, I am genuinely surprised because I just don't want any of my students to feel like they have to come back and thank me, I don't need anything in return. I give and I do for others simply because I want to and that's enough for me.

Additionally, most participants related altruism to the actions taken during practicum. Tyler stated:

I knew it wouldn't really benefit me any, but just putting that little seed in their head would do something along the lines for them, and it was something they would get a positive meaning out of which they didn't really have a lot of. It's all about the little

things.

Derrick stated a similar experience: “I felt like that was more altruistic because of the fact that I was engaging with him beyond what I was told was necessary and I put a lot more effort into it.” Jana spoke of experiences she described as altruistic:

You keep showing up, with this unconditional positive regard, regardless of whether they wigged out in class or whatever happened. I do remember a kid, he was the most challenging to connect with overall, but I knew that he found me a caring figure. I sensed that, you know, like you can sense it. But they’re still non-compliant, generally. There was a time where I was actually able to take him out of class in a way that was not forced, that de-escalated him and made it less disruptive for the rest of the class. Because that was his M.O. with like to start disrupting and falling back in his chair and all sorts of crazy things. You know, wild stuff. I was able to pull him aside and he was compliant with doing so, we had a mini convo. It was nothing too deep, but it really moved me, honestly, it really touched me because it made me feel like I could connect with Jay, that I’m doing something, it was a matter of mutual respect.

Each of the participants spoke candidly about how they viewed altruism, sometimes as it related to their innate ability; in other instances it related to their actions. Each participant was provided with a definition of altruism and was then able to apply that to an example from their practicum experience.

### **Discussion**

Participants described the many challenges faced in their interactions with students, teachers, and peers during the practicum experience. These challenges resulted in feeling intimidated, unfamiliar, out of their comfort zone and frustrated. At the same time, participants

reported that the experience was fun, joyous, impactful and a motivating force for them to learn more. These findings are consistent with the early stages of the Integrated Developmental Model ([IDM], McNeill, Stoltenberg & Romans, 1992) and Ronnestat and Skovholt's Lifespan Model (2003), both representing phases of counselor development. Although the participants described high self-motivation, they were also experiencing challenges in skills, roles, and functioning in an environment that was new to most of them.

One challenge in particular mentioned by many participants was that of learning to clarify their role as they navigated the school environment. Although program administrators presented the role of the practicum student to the teachers and administration, there was a frequent need to reinforce the role of the practicum student in the classroom as a source of social and emotional support for the students. Participants noted that after they were able to define their role, they felt more valued and respected by the teacher. Other methods used by the practicum students was to encourage collaboration among other practicum students, teachers and other professionals they came in contact with throughout the day.

It is interesting to note that many participants attributed the personal impact felt during their practicum to working with the at-risk population. They related the impactful experience to the everyday workings of their role: being in the classroom on a consistent basis with the same students each day, eating lunch alongside many of them, and working in the after-school program. The extended time spent with the students may have provided a wider lens from which to view the adolescents than would normally be the case in a school situation and perhaps played a part in an accelerated formation of a mutually, trusting relationship between the counselor and student. Participants described the adolescents they worked with as lacking social support, guidance, mentoring, financial resources, and consistency to name a few. Participants

also spoke of the experience of working with at-risk adolescents as “eye opening.” These thoughts are reminiscent of the findings of Keim et al., (2015) who suggested that experiential activities in counselor education set within the community can be beneficial for both the community and the student.

Meaning was described as learning through others or through the self during the practicum. Participants expressed finding meaning through practicum by learning that small actions could affect the adolescents positively, witnessing how helping others could add to their personal joy and satisfaction through working as a team. Several participants described learning a multitude of life lessons from the adolescents, and spoke of the joy found in helping the students. One participant shared that “it made me see the bright side,” and spoke of learning the gift of gratitude. These findings were consistent with studies that have positively linked work and well-being (Siedlecki, Salthouse, Oishi & Jeswani, 2013). When one finds work significant, personal growth and contributing to society can add meaning to one’s life (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). For these reasons, it is important to address meaning found in work in counselor education when preparing for practicum and internship. Although some participants found meaning through working with others, some found personal meaning from the practicum and defined it as accessing meaning from within. One participant spoke of associating meaning with personal accomplishment and finding ways to fulfill that need. Another spoke of an inner sense of fulfillment that grew with her development professionally as she worked to find her career niche.

It is also noteworthy that in the demographic questionnaire, thirteen of the fourteen participants described themselves as spiritual. When presented with a definition of meaning and how they might apply that to the practicum, many responded by relating meaning to their



spiritual or religious beliefs. Lips-Wiersma (2002) found that individuals often define meaning in terms of spirituality or religion as they discover meaning and life purpose. In the current study one participant spoke of relating personally to meaning by helping others as a service component and asking God to direct her path.

Altruism was described by all participants as related to caring in a selfless manner; some connected altruism to their innate personality, others to the type of actions taken with the adolescents. All participants shared examples of altruistic measures they personally carried out during their practicum. Most described themselves as altruistic, sharing that they felt as if having altruistic tendencies was part of their genetic makeup. However, more than half stated feeling uncomfortable referring to themselves as altruistic and attributed the uncomfortable feeling to a desire to be humble. This is consistent with the findings of Swank, Ohrt and Robinson's (2013) description of the identified domains, particularly in relation to the *biological* domain, accounting for the belief related to a genetic component, and the *cognitive* domain, relating to the modesty bias which is descriptive of minimizing one's acts of altruism. Interestingly, those participants that had children of their own reported feeling that parenting was the point at which their sense of altruism became more clear and defined, which is also consistent with findings of Swank et al. (2013).

## **Implications**

The results of this study suggest implications for both counselor educators and supervisors. The first implication is the powerful impact found in working with at-risk adolescents. Some said that they learned more from the students than the students may have learned from them. Recognizing the impact of clients can be empowering for counselors (Jordan, 2017). Participants referred to acquiring life lessons during practicum work and connected the impact felt with the meaning associated with working with at-risk students. Developing self-awareness of meaning found in an experience is important to understand some of the challenges that affect at-risk adolescents, such as oppression and social injustice (Butler-Byrd, Nieto, & Senour, 2006). Counselor educators and supervisors can provide opportunities to reflect on the impact clients may leave on them. Bridging the gap between theory and experiential activities can encourage counselors-in-training to create meaning out of their own personal challenges (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Providing an outlet for reflection through creative experiential activities such as drawing, writing, painting, poetry or song to record early learning experiences such as a practicum can be helpful to analyze the potential impact of one's clients.

A further implication for counselor educators and supervisors is the question of adequate preparedness for the counselor in settings that comprise the at-risk adolescent population. The at-risk student is faced with additional stressors of adolescence possibly related to a lack of access to support systems, education, mentors (Krodel et al., 2009), mental health services (Eiraldi et al., 2015; Elmore & Gaylord-Harden, 2012; Lindsey et al., 2013), and nutrition (VDOE, 2017), to name a few. It can be overwhelming for the practicum student to assess and intervene in multi-faceted situations.

The third implication for counselor educators and supervisors focuses on choosing approved sites for practica. Counselor educators may wish to consider setting parameters to encourage consistency in the experience provided. Currently CACREP standards do not address specifics for practicum settings (2016). However, traditional settings may not offer adequate exposure to culturally diverse experiences and contexts to consider when counseling clients. One way to address current educational needs of the practicum student and provide a more consistent practicum experience would be to incorporate a service-learning approach into the curriculum. “Service-Learning is one pedagogical approach to multicultural training that addresses many of the critiques directed at conventional models by exposing trainees to the experiential realities of diverse community setting” (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010). This is important so that counselors-in-training can develop self-awareness, understand the clients’ worldview and the counseling relationship from a multicultural and social justice perspective, and identify counseling and advocacy interventions (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler & McCullough, 2016).

The last implication for counselor educators and supervisors is the possible connection between spirituality and altruistic tendencies. During demographic questioning, all but one participant defined themselves as spiritual. CACREP (2016) refers to the topic of spirituality as part of the counseling curriculum, as it relates to social and cultural diversity to include “the impact of spiritual beliefs on clients’ and counselors’ worldview” (p. 11). Those counselor education faculties involved in curriculum development may consider infusing topics related to spirituality throughout counseling curricula to encourage students to reflect on their own spirituality as they progress through the program. Awareness of one’s own sense of spirituality may provide a clearer view of working with clients who identify as spiritual.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations were recognized throughout this phenomenological study. There is a potential for researcher bias, despite remaining conscious of the possibility throughout the study. The primary researcher acknowledged her previous experience of working within the program, with the at-risk population studied in this study, and frequently recorded her personal reflexivity to address improved credibility. Additionally, data collection was based on self-report, bringing to light a possibility that participants may have responded with a social desirability bias, in a way that others may find favorable, or answered sensitive questions in a manner that they believed the primary researcher wanted to hear (Lavrakas, 2008). It is also important to note that the amount of time between the practicum experience and the research interview may have affected the reporting of data. Another limitation was due to the use of purposive sampling. At times it was difficult for the primary researcher to contact former practicum students. Snowball sampling was helpful in contacting a number of participants.

### **Future Research**

The results of this study suggest future research that might be conducted in order to further explore the many facets associated with the practicum experience for the counselor-in-training. There is a lack of research solely pertaining to the practicum experience, particularly in the realm of both meaning found through the experience and personal altruism development. Research exploring altruism development specifically related to spirituality could produce results supportive of supplementing the counselor education curriculum with more detailed and developed course materials related to spirituality.

Additionally, the effectiveness could be investigated of combining practicum with a service-learning program in the community, especially those dedicated to at-risk youth.

Practicum students placed in this type of setting can provide the emotional and social support that has been found to be associated with lowering levels of at-risk behavior in youth (Peterson et al., 2010). It would be beneficial to investigate the effects of using a service-learning program in the community, which might benefit both members of the community and the practicum student.

### **Conclusion**

The impact felt through working with the at-risk adolescent population was the most salient theme identified in this study. Participants describing the social and emotional support provided to the adolescents during their practicum experience related to finding meaning in their work, the ability to reflect on the development of their altruism, and ways in which they view their professional life. Participants spoke of gaining self-knowledge from their work with the adolescents. There was a clear recognition of the impact the adolescent clients left with them, even several years later.

Also notable was the finding that an overwhelming majority of the participants identified as spiritual or religious. Participants found meaning through work as it related to their belief system as noted by Lips-Wiersma (2002) as most of us define meaning in terms of spirituality or religion during our discovery of meaning and purpose.

As expected, participants identified the many challenges faced in their practicum, all of which were consistent with currently used models of counselor development (McNeill et al., 1992; Ronnestat & Skovholt, 2003). Counselor educators and supervisors can refer to these models when supporting novice counselors. Moreover, all participants described themselves as altruistic, however, many found it uncomfortable labeling themselves as such. This is consistent with the modesty bias identified by Swank et al., (2013). Counselor educators and supervisors

can provide creative outlets to reflect on the components of the practicum experience, in order to reinforce and facilitate development of a self-awareness of the multiple ways in which counselor development unfolds.

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## APPENDIX A

## CODEBOOK DESCRIPTIONS

<b>Superordinate Themes Subthemes</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>n=14</b>
<b>Superordinate Theme 1: Challenges to Overcome</b>	Difficulties identified that participants desired to improve upon, or events contributing to difficulties	14
Subtheme 1.1. Challenges with students	Describes working with students toward positive outcomes	7
Subtheme 1.2. Challenges with teachers	Describes working with teachers toward positive outcomes	5
Subtheme 1.3. Challenges with peers	Describes working with peers toward positive outcomes for students	4
<b>Superordinate Theme 2: Ability to Collaborate</b>	Describes working with students or student collaborating with others	10
Subtheme 2.1 Collaboration with student	Describes working with students or students collaboration	5
Subtheme 2.2. Collaboration with adults	Describes working with other adults such as peers or other stakeholders	5
<b>Superordinate Theme 3: Impact</b>	Specific statements about successes and breakthroughs, general statements about seeing progress	11
Subtheme 3.1: Impact related to population	Specific statements related to impactful interactions related to the at-risk population	7
<b>Superordinate Theme 4: Meaning</b>	Statements about learning from experiences with others, specifically	9

	related to practicum	
Subtheme 4.1. Meaning through others	Statements regarding learning through others from the practicum experience	5
Subtheme 4.2. Meaning through self	Statements regarding learning about the self from the practicum experience	4
<b>Superordinate Theme 5: Thoughts Related to Altruism</b>	Statements regarding caring in a selfless manner	14
Subtheme 5.1 Altruism related to personality	Statements regarding caring in a selfless manner attributed to own characteristics	12
Subtheme 5.2. Altruism related to actions	Statements regarding caring in a selfless manner attributed to action taken by practicum student	8

**APPENDIX B**  
Letter of Invitation

Sample Participant Request

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a doctoral candidate in Counselor Education and Supervision At Old Dominion University and conducting research on practicum students' experiences related to meaning and altruism development. I am specifically seeking those who completed practicum at CARE Now. If you are willing to participate in this study, I would like to interview you in person, online via Skype or Facetime, or by phone.

The interview will last approximately 25 to 45 minutes during a time that is convenient for your schedule, and in a place that is private and confidential. I am most interested in your thoughts and experiences regarding your practicum experience, particularly those related to the meaning you may have found in the experience and how you view ideas related to altruism. I will take reasonable steps to keep the information private, such as using pseudonyms and removing identifying information, keeping the interview confidential. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications but you will not be identified.

If you would be interested in participating, please let me know. At that time, I will email an informed consent form for you to sign and contact you to schedule an interview. I appreciate your consideration and time.

Sincerely,  
Debbie Lewis, M.S.Ed., NCC  
Doctoral Candidate  
Department of Counseling and Human Services  
Old Dominion University  
[dlclark@odu.edu](mailto:dlclark@odu.edu)  
757-478-5313

**APPENDIX C**  
Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age?  
Under 24   24-34   35-44   45-54   55-64   over 65
2. How would you describe yourself in terms of race?
3. How would you describe yourself in terms of ethnicity?
4. To which gender identity do you most identify? Would you describe yourself as spiritual/a person of faith/religious/none of the above?
5. What is your current employment status? FT   PT   Unemployed   Student   Self-employed  
Unable to work   Retired
6. What year did you complete your practicum?
7. How many students over the course of your practicum would you estimate that you encountered?   Worked closely with?   Did you work with families of the students?
8. If currently working, what is your position?   What population do you work with?   How did you choose this population?
9. Did you work before you entered the masters program, and if so, for how many years and in what position?

## **APPENDIX D**

### **INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT**

#### **OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY**

**PROJECT TITLE:** An Exploration of Practicum Students' Experiences of Meaning-Making through Altruism

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The purposes of this form is to give you information that may affect your decision whether to say YES or NO to participation in this research, and to record the consent of those who say YES.

#### **RESEARCHERS**

Kaprea F. Johnson, Ph.D. ~ Old Dominion University ~ Department of Counseling & Human Services, RPI

Debbie Lewis, Phd Candidate Old Dominion University ~ Department of Counseling & Human Services, Investigator

#### **DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY**

This study will explore counseling students experience with practicum.

If you decide to participate, then you will join a study involving research of practicum experiences in helping students develop altruism. If you say YES, then your participation will last for no more than 40 minutes.

#### **EXCLUSIONARY CRITERIA**

Not have completed practicum at CARE NOW, which is a specialized site through ODU held at local public school.

#### **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

**RISKS:** If you decide to participate in this study, then you may face a risk of discussing topics that may be emotionally difficult. The researcher tried to reduce these risks by not asking questions that would be too personal or too painful to answer. And, as with any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified.

**BENEFITS:** Adding to the body of knowledge on counselors' experiential activities.

#### **COSTS AND PAYMENTS**

The researchers are unable to give you any payment for participating in this study.

#### **NEW INFORMATION**

If the researchers find new information during this study that would reasonably change your decision about participating, then they will give it to you.



**CONFIDENTIALITY**

The researchers will take reasonable steps to keep private information, such as interview questions, confidential. The researcher will remove identifiers from the information. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications; but the researcher will not identify you. Of course, your records may be subpoenaed by court order or inspected by government bodies with oversight authority.

**WITHDRAWAL PRIVILEGE**

It is OK for you to say NO. Even if you say YES now, you are free to say NO later, and walk away or withdraw from the study -- at any time. The researchers reserve the right to withdraw your participation in this study, at any time, if they observe potential problems with your continued participation.

**COMPENSATION FOR ILLNESS AND INJURY**

If you say YES, then your consent in this document does not waive any of your legal rights. However, in the event of harm, injury, or illness arising from this study, neither Old Dominion University nor the researchers are able to give you any money, insurance coverage, free medical care, or any other compensation for such injury. In the event that you suffer injury as a result of participation in any research project, you may contact Kaprea Hoquee, Ph.D. at 757-683-3321, the current IRB chair Old Dominion University, or the Old Dominion University Office of Research at 757-683-3460 who will be glad to review the matter with you.

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT**

By signing this form, you are saying several things. You are saying that you have read this form or have had it read to you, that you are satisfied that you understand this form, the research study, and its risks and benefits. The researchers should have answered any questions you may have had about the research. If you have any questions later on, then the researchers should be able to answer them.

If at any time you feel pressured to participate, or if you have any questions about your rights or this form, then you should contact Dr. Laura C Chezan, the current chair of the Darden College of Education's Human Subjects Committee, at lchezan@odu.edu or 757-683-7055 or the Old Dominion University Office of Research, at 757 683 3460.

And importantly, by signing below, you are telling the researcher YES, that you agree to participate in this study. The researcher should give you a copy of this form for your records.

<b>Subject's Printed Name &amp; Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
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**INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT**

I certify that I have explained to this subject the nature and purpose of this research, including benefits, risks, costs, and any experimental procedures. I have described the rights and protections afforded to human subjects and have done nothing to pressure, coerce, or falsely entice this subject into participating. I am aware of my obligations under state and federal laws, and promise compliance. I have answered the subject's questions and have encouraged him/her to ask additional questions at any time during the course of this study. I have witnessed the above signature(s) on this consent form.

<b>Investigator's Printed Name &amp; Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
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**Debra Paige Lewis**  
 Old Dominion University  
 4301 Hampton Blvd., Suite 2100  
 Norfolk VA 23529  
 dpaigelewis@gmail.com  
 757-478-5313

## **EDUCATION**

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**Ph.D. in Education**-Specializing in Counselor Education and Supervision,  
 Old Dominion University, August 2018

**M.S. Ed. in Counseling**, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, December 2010

**M.S. in Nursing**, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1983  
 • Concentration in Women's Health

**B.S. in Nursing**, University of Alabama, Huntsville, Alabama, 1981  
 • Concentration in Maternal and Family Care

## **SELECTED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

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**Resident-in-Counseling, Virginia**-expected date of licensure, December 2018

**Old Dominion University, Adjunct Instructor** January 2011-present

- Instructor for Human Services, Hybrid format, 2 way and video streaming, Online and Face to Face, Trained new faculty for online courses
- HMSV 440-Fund Raising-Spring 2012, 2013
- HMSV 440W- Program Evaluation-Spring 2012, 2013, online
- HMSV 343-Human Services Methods- Fall 2013, online
- HMSV 368- Field Observation-Fall, Spring 2013, 2014, online and face-to-face
- HMSV 339- Interpersonal Communication- Spring 2014, Summer, 2014, Fall 2014, Spring, 2015, Summer 2015, online
- HMSV 468- Internship-Summer 2014, 2015, online and face-to-face

**Old Dominion University, Graduate Teaching Assistantship**-January 2016-present

- HMSV 468 –Internship-2016, 2017, 2018, online
- HMSV 444-Psychoeducational Groups Fall, 2017; Spring 2018
- COUN 634 Advanced Counseling Techniques-Summer 2018
- COUN 644 Group Counseling- Fall 2017, Spring 2017
- COUN 844 Advanced Group Counseling- Fall 2018