



Simple Not Easy: a Phenomenological Study of School Counselor Clinical Supervision Experiences

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Abstract

Clinical supervision is a valuable practice for mental health professionals working in any therapeutic capacity (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). However, the application of supervision is not uniformly applied across counseling professions and contexts. School counseling supervision, for example, has been a topic of complexity and debate within the counseling profession, as professional identity and development needs differ. Current literature has largely centered on operationalizing the process of school counseling supervision through counseling theory and proposed models of supervision (Hilts et al. in *Journal of Counselor Leadership and Advocacy*, 9(2), 99–114, 2022). There is an identifiable gap in understanding the nuanced needs of school counselors and how to address those needs to make clinical supervision accessible and practical in the workplace. This interpretative phenomenological analysis study examines the experiences of seven practicing school counselors in the USA who engaged in ongoing peer-to-peer clinical supervision with author one. Results from this study include three superordinate themes that inform foundational concepts of effective school counseling supervision as “simple, not easy”: (1) counselor growth, (2) supervisor knowledge, and (3) sustainability. The practical implications of these findings are discussed, and recommendations are provided.

Keywords School counseling · Clinical supervision · Phenomenology · Qualitative · IPA

Providing mental health services, no matter the setting, is challenging; however, clinical supervision is one resource that mental health providers rely upon for professional support and guidance around the world (Peters, 2017; Schultz et al., 2021). According to Bernard and Goodyear (2009), clinical supervision is the catalyst between theoretical training and work. Supervision enhances professional

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functioning and assists counselors in progressing along a continuum of proficiency while supporting increasing clinical expertise (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Therefore, clinical supervision is a tool for maximizing counselor effectiveness throughout one's career (Neufeldt, 2007). Several studies across the globe have emphasized the value of clinical supervision in contributing to counselor wellness and positive client outcomes (Peters, 2017). However, when examining clinical supervision concerning specific counseling specialties, like school counseling, research is rather limited. This dearth in literature is counterintuitive, as school counseling is predominant within the counseling profession worldwide (Carey et al., 2020; Moyer, 2011).

School counseling is a complex therapeutic modality, and effective clinical supervision is of paramount importance. Bernard and Goodyear (2009) stated that mental health professions were more alike than different, and therefore, supervision specific to one profession is related to the specifics of other similar professions. However, a transnational factor analysis of school counselor responsibilities conducted by Carey et al. (2020) using the International Survey of School-Based Counseling Activities (ISSCA) revealed that in addition to traditional counseling services, school counselors, regardless of country, are also commonly expected to operate as systemic change agents (e.g., perform institutional advocacy, develop prevention and educational programming, and engage in administrative tasks). While cross-cultural differences certainly exist, such studies evidence the global pressure for school counselors to “do it all” (Fan et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2015). Given the hefty expectations associated with being a school counselor, effective clinical supervision should seek to address and acknowledge the distinctive realities that these providers encounter. As such, this study aimed to clarify supervision practices that support and enhance school counselors' clinical skills in the USA.

Clinical Supervision and School Counselors

Clinical supervision is vital for supporting skilled therapy, no matter where therapy takes place. According to Bernard and Goodyear (2009), clinical supervision is defined as a senior member assisting a junior member over time with a plan to meet goals and providing developmentally appropriate skills and abilities. Longanbill et al. (1982) stated that clinical supervision provided junior members of a profession with a focus on developing therapeutic competence. Clinical supervision provides challenges for supervisees' thereby influencing behavior through a complex system of planned interventions, training, and experience. Clinical supervision is “an intensive, interpersonally focused one-to-one relationship in which one person is designated to facilitate the development of the therapeutic competence in the other person” (Longanbill et al., 1982, p. 4). Clinical supervision is also an intervention with issues and theories, evaluation, and ultimately, the monitoring of not only the supervisee but also the care of the clients. Clinical supervision for counselors, no matter their experience level, is vital for the professional's growth and stability and clients' safety and well-being.

Dollarhide and Miller (2006) stated that supervision specifically focused on school counselors is more complicated than having an experienced school counselor provide guidance, education, and support for less experienced school counselors. The authors argued that supervision should focus on professional expectations and refining clinical skills due to the complexity of the school counselor role. Randick et al. (2018) added that the quantity and quality of supervision contributed to school counselor competence. This idea is supported by Rutter (2006) and Bultsma (2021), as clinical supervision plays a vital role in professional development. Bernard and Goodyear (2009) agreed that supervision contributed to a culture of professionalism in a school counselor work environment.

In addition to reinforcing competency and professional development, clinical supervision has also been credited as a tool for burnout prevention. Moyer (2011) looked at the amount of supervision received as a predictor for burnout and found that lack of supervision was a significant predictor for incompetence, hostile work environment, and devaluing client factors. Moyer determined that the amount of supervision was a significant predictor of overall burnout, stating, “Those who are feeling incompetent in their role, showing frustration with their school setting, or lacking compassion for students may benefit from increased supervision in addition to a better definition of their roles” (Moyer, 2011, p. 21). Holman et al. (2019) agreed, stating that school counselors who think they have little support or supervision are more likely to have a negative view of their job. Agnew et al. (2000) noted in their study of supervision for elementary school counselors that 97% of the respondents noted that supervision provided improved skills and increased professional validation. School counseling supervision is closely associated with overall career satisfaction (see, e.g., Bledsoe et al., 2019; Miserentino & Hannon, 2022; Neyland-Brown et al., 2019).

Practice expectations have roots in professional, ethical codes. The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014) does not mandate supervision. However, counselors must take reasonable steps to seek peer supervision to evaluate their efficacy as counselors (Section C.2.d-p.8). The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) Code of Ethics (2016) requires that school counselors “seek consultation and supervision from school counselors and other professionals who are knowledgeable of school counselors’ ethical practices when ethical and professional questions arise” (section B.3.h). The ASCA Model (2019) does not explicitly address the issue of supervision. However, an ASCA position paper (2021) stated that school counselor supervision includes personal and professional development of currently practicing school counselors focusing on knowledge and skills. This perspective is echoed in the International School Counseling Association (ISCA) standards of practice and mission statement (ISCA, 2021).

Obstacles to Supervision

Obstacles to school counselor supervision include (a) who is providing supervision, (b) school counselors’ willingness to participate in supervision, and (c) the focus of the supervision (Bledsoe et al., 2019, 2021). Supervision is often provided by

building administrators, other school counselors, senior school counselors, or district lead counselors (Holman et al., 2019). Rutter (2006) found that the demand for school counselor supervision exceeded the supply and that most supervision had an administrative instead of clinical focus. Peer supervision tended to be more clinically focused but suffered due to supervisors lacking formal training. Likewise, experienced school counselors needed more training and practice since graduation, leaving them out of their depth, especially in complex cases (Bultsma, 2021; Rutter, 2006). Page et al. (2001) surveyed 267 ASCA members and found that their supervisor was most frequently a principal (50%), guidance director (13%), or assistant principal (10%). The authors stated that only 13% received individual clinical supervision, most often from a guidance director (21%), professor of counselor education (12%), licensed counselor (28%), another school counselor (12%), or school psychologist (11%). Eleven percent of the respondents reported receiving group supervision, again provided most often by a guidance director (42%). Twenty-nine percent of respondents received peer supervision. In another study, Randick et al. (2018) found that 47% of the respondents received no supervision, while 39% received supervision only from a principal.

Perera-Diltz and Mason (2012) stated that one barrier to clinical supervision comes from school counselors and their view of professional training and responsibilities. The authors suggested that school counselors did not view themselves as clinical counselors and, therefore, do not require clinical supervision. Page et al. (2001) determined that only 20% of school counselors received some form of supervision. More than a decade later, Dollarhide and Miller's (2006) post hoc analysis of school counseling supervision studies found that 21 to 37% of school counselors did not see a need for supervision. Perera-Diltz and Mason (2012) stated that while 63% of school counselors in their study received supervision, the availability of school counselors willing to supervise other school counselors is limited. In addition, many master's level school counselors do not have the skills or training to provide supervision (Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2012).

Supervision Focus

Page et al. (2001) defined two types of supervision for school counselors. Administrative supervision includes a review of staff communication, planning, implementation, and evaluation of programs and clinical supervision, which focuses on relationship building with clients. Dollarhide and Miller (2006) added developmental program supervision as a third type that spotlights counseling program development. Moyer (2011) defined the components of school counselor supervision as timely feedback that includes strengths and areas of concern. Further, Perera-Diltz and Mason (2012) determined that clinical supervision focused on professional development and evaluation of services, and administrative supervision concentrated on job performance specific to the school. The researchers found that since 2000, clinical supervision practices have improved in school counseling but are less widely utilized than in other mental health

fields. A potential reason for supervision underutilization is that ongoing clinical supervision is not required for school counselors once they are licensed.

Supervisors assist school counselors with counseling methods for increasingly complex cases (Page et al., 2001). Models for school counselor supervision include peer supervision, group supervision, formal supervision, self-supervision, and intense self-reflection (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006). Wilkerson (2011) reviewed national surveys and found that 29% of school counselors receive peer supervision, while 13% receive clinical supervision. Unfortunately, Thomas (2005) determined that peer supervision suffered from inadequate or inappropriate supervision knowledge and experience by the participants. However, Thomas (2005) did support school districts partnering with university training programs. The author stated that school counselors' professional development increased, and the university training programs enhanced their understanding of current K-12 issues when engaged in a counselor-alumni-peer consultation model that blends peer supervision with outreach to university training programs.

Rutter (2006) also investigated a hybrid version of supervision where peer supervision is conducted in collaboration with a university faculty member. The author found that this form of supervision was collegial and collaborative when a university faculty member acted as a consultant. As such, the university faculty member provided minimal direction, allowing the group to explore their issues. Supervision contributes significantly to developing professional identity, and it is a concern that not all school counselors desire supervision. Lack of training in supervision practices and skills contributes to an insufficient appreciation for the benefits of supervision (Borders & Usher, 1992; Herlihy et al., 2002). New school counselors struggle to find time to engage in supervision as they learn the job, leading to professional isolation (Thomas, 2005). As a result, school counseling is compromised when adequate supervision is unavailable or exploited (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006). Another study by Dollarhide and Miller (2006) found that the role of supervision in developing professional identity has yet to be addressed consistently. These authors also noted other supervision challenges, including a focus on non-counseling-related tasks, no mandated district or state requirements, and a lack of funding for outside supervisors.

The current study grew from successful ongoing supervision with practicing school counselors. The researchers were initially interested in determining what factors contributed to school counselor self-reports of increased confidence in their skills and abilities. The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experiences of school counselors who were engaging in peer-to-peer supervision in the USA. The focus of this study was to examine the thematic essence of participants' subjective experience while engaging in school counseling clinical supervision, not to propose a clinical supervision model or to operationalize the supervisory process within counselor education.

Methodology

We used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the qualitative methodological framework for this study (Smith & Nizza, 2022). In health science disciplines like psychology and counseling, IPA is often used to investigate how individuals

make sense of their complex and subjective lived experiences (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Larkin & Thompson, 2011). The philosophical framework of IPA is contextualized through three significant phenomenology epistemologies (study of particular experience), hermeneutics (interpretation), and idiography (attentiveness to detail; Allan & Eatough, 2016). The hermeneutic process embedded in IPA requires self-interpretation of participants, researcher interpretation, and collective interpretation of the phenomena under study (Allan & Eatough, 2016; Smith et al., 2022, 2009). This depth of analysis is mirrored by the meaning-making process of counseling supervision and supervisor training in counselor education, leading the authors to determine the theoretical fit for this study. In alignment with the IPA framework, the authors of this study were concerned with understanding how school counselors experienced their peer supervision process provided by author one in individual and group contexts and unearthing the personal meaning-making of participant stories (Smith et al., 2009).

Research Team Positionality

The research team consisted of three individuals (first, second, and third authors); author one identifies as a white cisgender male, and authors two and three identify as white cisgender women. Authors one and two are counselor educators in the NCACES and RMACES regions of the USA, both from CACREP-accredited programs. At the time of the study, author one was a tenured full professor specializing in school counseling and supervised several school districts in the upper Midwest of the USA. Author two was an assistant professor specializing in qualitative methodology. Author three was a graduate student pursuing a master's degree in school counseling under the instruction of author one. In the production of this study, author one provided supervision to the study participants, author two conducted data analysis and theme construction, and author three assisted in the facilitation of data collection, recruitment, and interviewing protocol. All research team members took extensive measures to ensure research trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility (Maxwell, 2022). These measures included memoing, triangulation, and collaborating with an external auditor, a tenured full professor in social work, to verify the fit of the qualitative agenda and theme analysis (Maxwell, 2022; see acknowledgment).

Data Collection

The research team demonstrated a commitment to the conceptual research standards of trustworthiness, credibility, and authenticity (Maxwell, 2022) to establish methodological rigor and ethical adherence throughout this study. To further ensure ethical procedure and researcher integrity, Yardley's four key dimensions of qualitative research (e.g., sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance) guidelines were followed in data collection and analysis procedures (as cited in Yardley et al., 2020). Data collection methods in IPA are designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' personal experiences (Smith et al., 2022, 2009). Participants are encouraged to "tell their stories, to speak

freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56). The research team followed the qualitative steps of Smith et al. (2022) (1–7). These steps are as follows: (1) reading and re-reading [data emersion], (2) exploratory noting, [free association], (3) constructing experimental statements [emergent themes], (4) connection of experimental statements [abstracting and integrating], (5) naming personal experiential themes (PETs) [assigning participant specific themes], (6) continuing the next individual case [repeating steps 1–5 with each participant], and (7) PETs to group experiential themes (GETs) [cross-analysis to solidify shared themes of all participants].

Procedure and Participants

The research team utilized purposeful sampling to select public primary and secondary schools in a Midwestern state whose administration had established preexisting/current school counseling supervision contracts with author one. A research invitation email was sent to school counselors currently involved in supervision and who were interested in participating in the study. Participants were emailed consent forms and encouraged to ask questions for clarification. From this recruitment effort, seven individual school counselors consented to participate in this study, representing three separate (K-12) institutions. Of the seven participants, six identified as female. Six participants identified as White, and one identified as Other. Participant ages ranged from early thirties to mid-forties at the time of the study. Participants in this study had a spectrum of school counseling career experience varying from 2 to 13 years. All participants received their training from CACREP-accredited counseling programs (CACREP, 2016) in the USA (see Appendix 1 for Table 1).

Each participant engaged in a 60-min semi-structured qualitative individual interview (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) conducted by author three concerning the phenomenon under study, the lived experience of school counselors receiving clinical supervision. The individual interview questions are designed to capture the embodied experience of school counselors engaged in peer supervision. Questions included (a) “How would you describe your experience of peer supervision with author one while employed at this school district?”; (b) “How has your job performance changed due to participating in supervision?”; and (c) “What is your opinion on school counselor supervision?”. Individual interviews were followed by an optional 30–40-min group interview (Smith, 2004) to explore shared supervision experiences across school institutions. Questions from the individual interviews were utilized in addition to group processing questions such as (a) “Tell us about the strengths and weaknesses of current school counseling supervision practices?” and (b) “How has your job performance changed as a result of participating in supervision?”. There were three group interviews, and each group consisted of three to four participants based on school district and aimed to capture dimensional and nuanced participant responses in alignment with IPA best practices (Smith et al., 2009).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted through Zoom teleconferencing. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by author three. After transcription, audio recordings were permanently deleted to

ensure participant privacy and confidentiality. Participants could perform member checks (Smith et al., 2009; 2022) by reviewing their transcripts and making alterations if desired. Jenner and Myers (2019) note that live video interviewing is as effective as face-to-face interviewing in qualitative research when methodological rigor is followed and researchers practice reflexivity.

Results

Through qualitative analysis, three superordinate themes emerged concerning the experiences of school counselors who had engaged in clinical peer supervision provided by author one. These themes were identified through the double hermeneutic data interpretation process within IPA while utilizing Smith's qualitative steps (numbers 1–6; 2009) to guide the process. The research team constructed themes independently and collaboratively across and within cases to capture the depth of participant experience more fully. Direct quotes from participants were utilized in the construction, naming, and evidence of the following superordinate themes: (a) Counselor Growth, (b) Supervisor Knowledge, and (c) Sustainability. Subthemes are briefly discussed as supporting elements of the larger superordinate narratives shared by three or more participants. All themes are illustrated using quotes from participants' transcripts from individual and group interviews. Pseudonyms ensure participant privacy and clarify speaker voices (see Appendix 2 for Fig. 1).

Counselor Growth

The first and most vital of the superordinate themes, Counselor Growth, is centered on the personal and professional development of the school counselors in this study who received supervision. Our research team identified this theme as necessary due to the depth of participants' stories surrounding concepts of increased self-awareness and professional competency, paired with the ability to shift responsibility and set boundaries in the workplace. All participants identified these concepts as fundamental to remaining in the profession and within their school districts. Through individual interviewing and focus group discussions, it became evident that all school counselors regularly felt overworked and under-resourced despite institution or grade level. However, with access to supervision, participants had a space to unpack those frustrations, receive feedback, and identify strategies for personal empowerment.

Eve discussed the growth she had experienced because her supervision experience was “eye-opening” to how she was engaging with her clients and her school. She explained that she often found herself in situations where she was “fixing” problems for others, which contributed to her dissatisfaction. Supervision offered an opportunity to challenge the purpose of that behavior, which led to personal insight and increased her ability to think critically about how to get “unstuck.” Sharon, James, Tanya, and Laurie echo this sentiment. Eve shared,

I realized I was working harder than my students with little change. The output differed from the input; when I fixed it, I was not helping. Instead, I was enabling, which is common in the helping professions. I am now shifting my mindset about what help looks like, and I am more deliberate in how or when I intervene. And wow, I see the difference in my students and myself.

When asked about those differences, Eve said she witnessed significant long-term growth in her students by shifting the responsibility and enforcing boundaries. Additionally, she felt her leadership and clinical skills had significantly strengthened, contributing to her well-being as a school counselor. Tanya expanded on this by saying,

My supervision participation has impacted me because I no longer work harder than my clients. Focusing on where ownership of responsibility truly is allowed me to define my boundaries versus getting caught up in what everyone wants me to be as a school counselor. Letting go of some of those unrealistic expectations has improved my job performance and interactions with people.

Kim, who had the most experience as a school counselor of all the participants, discussed how supervision increased her self-awareness and changed her perspective on what works. She shared,

There are frustrations about being a school counselor, like repeatedly having the same conversations with clients, but putting it back on them has been helpful. It saved my patience and made my work more intentional. After 13 years, it is refreshing to try new things and do things a little differently.

In addition to boundary setting and shifting responsibility, participants expressed how supervision altered how they perceived their competency in working clinically and collaboratively. James, Laurie, and Sharon talked about how supervision influenced how they saw themselves as counselors, increased their competency, and provided a way to garner connections with others. Sharon specifically named how her confidence has blossomed through the supervision process and credits this to the group nature of supervision. She delineated,

I am more confident, and my competence is higher. We often had supervision on days when I was feeling down about my work performance or doubted myself. Meeting with the group allowed me to vent, question situations, and have a supportive sounding board with people who understand. I feel empowered to tweak the things that are not working for me and own the things that are. It has honed my ability to discern what is and is not part of my job. As a result, I am more well-rounded as a counselor now.

Supervisor Knowledge

As shown in Fig. 1, professional growth is linked with theme two, supervisor knowledge. All participants noted the importance of having a supervisor who identifies as a school counselor and understands the inner workings of school counseling and its

demands. Laurie, Tanya, Eve, Kim, and Kelsey shared that supervision was most helpful when the supervisor had experience and understanding of school counseling and was not embedded in their specific school systems. Laurie stated,

For me, it was a positive experience to have a space to talk about school counseling with school counselors. While it was a place to learn and improve our practices, I most valued the neutrality of having a supervisor who knew the work but was removed from the day-to-day struggles of our specific workplace (e.g., our school culture, climate, colleagues).

Kim stated, “It is so unique to have an outside person who truly understands school counselors’ various roles and functions. He listened, offered ideas, and challenged our thinking with his expertise. This dialogue undoubtedly helped me grow in my profession.” Sharon furthered this perspective and added the importance of having a protected and structured meeting time. She shared, “Whenever we discuss or talk about something, I get a completely outside view, which can be very helpful. I would also say that the consistent meetings have been a strength.”

These quotes illustrate the connectedness between themes one and two and the role of structure in both themes. For example, maintaining an ongoing, specific time for supervision; blending practical experience and knowledge supported by theory; and challenging participants to think critically about their individual roles and systemic contributions in the school setting allowed participants to reflect intentionally on their purpose and professional values as school counselors. Eve explained,

Supervision has helped us get back to our core belief system, and it has been great for all of us to stay on the same page. Working through a few case studies with each other has been positive, but author one asks us questions so we can process different situations ourselves.

Kelsey elaborates on this point by clarifying what the supervision process often entailed, “I’ve noticed in our meetings that he does not come in to fix things for us. Instead, he encourages us to work as a team to find a solution that makes sense for what we are establishing at our school.” However, while participants were clear that an outside perspective is helpful, the key component was to implement better what they already knew in their roles and systems.

Sustainability

Sustainability is grounded in optimism and action for the future. Participants revealed that the most impactful supervision work occurs on a system level. Specifically, the skills developed through supervision inform the larger school climate and culture. Participants voiced the importance of career longevity, reducing burnout through supervisory practices, and creating a common language within the schools. For example, many participants named how supervision influenced how they now interact with school colleagues (i.e., teachers, administrators, and staff). Sharon discussed how supervision impacted how she viewed herself within the larger school system and made her feel more empowered and

connected at work. She stated, “I would say that overall, being in supervision has changed my outlook on my job. I feel less alone and overall more positive about my job longevity. I feel more prepared to stay in the profession and not burn out.” Kelsey, Tanya, and James addressed preventing burnout through the continued practice of regular supervision. Kelsey shared, “Having intentional times to gather and troubleshoot connects us. Supervision has allowed us to stay in our jobs for the long run and reduced the unnecessary power struggles we engage in with our students and school personnel.”

James explained how the supervision process combated his isolation and the importance of continuing that practice to prevent burnout.

My caseload is about 700 students. That is a lot of kids to support. It is nearly impossible to support every single one of them as much as I would hope, but supervision has given me a lifeline. It has been a place to bounce ideas off of others and get support from my team when I feel overwhelmed.

James expanded on his commitment to supervision. He stated, “Having a protected, consistent, scheduled meeting time will be essential in creating a viable work environment for me and everyone else. It is a system thing now.”

Laurie also discussed how supervision had created a paradigm shift in conceptualizing her role within the larger context. In particular, she shared how her perspective has shifted when working with the school system at large, specifically teachers, staff, and administrators. Laurie explains,

I think the biggest shift....is probably about my colleagues, particularly my teacher colleagues. I am now more able to treat them as clients, think about them as clients, and approach them as clients. School counselors and teachers are treated as peers in the school setting, but our jobs are fundamentally different. As a result, everyone seems to have different expectations of each other. It gets sticky sometimes; it gets mucky. Through supervision, I can better interface with my colleagues, which has reduced some angst after interactions with colleagues.

This concept manifested for Tanya, as she explained that supervision had the most impact on a systematic level. She communicates,

While we gained professional skills to aid in working with students in our role as school counselors through supervision, it has rippled past that, bigger. We use many of our skills on a larger scale with teachers, staff, and administrators. The stuff is not actually about our student interactions; it is about our colleague interactions.

Overall, the theme of Sustainability illustrates how burnout prevention and system-level collaboration in school settings combine to inform school counselor career longevity. For effective school counseling clinical supervision to occur beyond graduation, sustainability issues must first be addressed within the supervisory relationship.

Discussion

Perera-Diltz and Mason (2012) stated that clinical supervision for school counselors is professionally vital but rarely implemented. Barriers to supervision include school counselors who do not view themselves as clinical counselors, do not see a need for supervision, and lack clinical supervisors with school experience (see, e.g., Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2012). Tang (2020) agreed, stating that frameworks for supervision exist, but formalized practices still need to be implemented for school counselors. Bledsoe et al. (2021) suggested that school counseling, while well-established as a professional counseling practice, struggles with identity issues, responsibilities, and a lack of supervisory support. As a result, clinical supervision for school counselors lags behind other mental health professionals. The current study recognized that well-researched supervision models had been successfully implemented with school counselors, but clinical supervision for school counselors continues to be lacking. What needed to be clarified was what encouraged school counselors to engage in supervision. The current study found three underlying beliefs about the supervision experience superseded any specific theory. In other words, the mindsets underlying successful supervision implementation seem simple but are challenging. The three main themes or attitudes foundational for successful supervision include (a) counselor growth; professional counselor development; (b) supervisor knowledge, especially relationship building; empirical knowledge; and sustainability of the changes in understanding and practice. Bledsoe et al. (2021) noted similar themes, including “challenges, support, knowledge, self-efficacy, improved professional identity, and improved counseling services (p. 4).”

Counselor growth proved to be the nexus for both personal and professional change. In the current study, personal and professional awareness led to decreased stress, increased focus on boundaries and expectations, and willingness to set professional boundaries with clients. These results align with previous studies. For example, DeKruuf and Pehrsson's (2011) research focused on self-efficacy among school counselor site supervisors. They determined that school counselors receiving supervision support consistently had higher self-efficacy scores. Bledsoe et al. (2021) noted that clinical supervision decreased role ambiguity, while supervision that supported setting boundaries and establishing therapeutic relationships increased school counselors' confidence in their skills and abilities. Like the current study, Bledsoe et al. (2019, 2021) found that a school counselor's professional growth balanced the client's needs and the counselor's wellness.

A knowledgeable and experienced supervisor provided opportunities to explore core belief systems, experiences, and knowledge related to clinical counseling in schools. Supporting school counselors' personal growth was connected to the supervisor not being an employee of the district. However, a district employee grounded in clinical supervision could successfully facilitate supervision without providing advice. In a similar study by Tang (2020), the researchers noted the vital role of supervision and support from professionals who understand and have experience with school counseling. Bledsoe et al. (2021) found that

participants reported the importance of clinical supervisors with a background in school counseling, not just counseling. These foundational supervisory skills and knowledge reinforced that school counselor-specific supervision increased school counselors' self-efficacy and connection to best practices. One of the underlying keys related to this theme is that the supervisor is essential as a catalyst but is not vital to long-term change.

Previous research reminds us that ignoring sustainability issues can create roadblocks to supervision. These include the costs of supervision, release time, and a paucity of trained supervisors familiar with school counseling (Bledsoe et al., 2021). Participants in the current study stated that supervision helped them create a professional environment that promoted career longevity and offset burn-out. Sustainable supervision promotes formal reflection, case conceptualization skills, problem solving, and decision-making. Supervision was most effective when coupled with focusing on personal and professional support, self-care, and a connection with someone more knowledgeable than themselves (Bledsoe et al., 2021; Neyland-Brown et al., 2019). This element of professional connection and care was reaffirmed in the current study. Sharon commented, "I would say that overall, being in supervision has changed my outlook on my job. I feel less alone." Kelsey agreed, adding, "When he leaves, we are not dependent on him for things to keep moving forward; we have built a stronger team within ourselves. When he has gone, we can still work effectively."

Limitations and Future Research

This qualitative research provided specific information from a small number of school counselors who successfully engaged in supervision. While the results provide the key to the supervision map, these outcomes only apply to some populations. In addition, participant homogeneity decreases the transferability of the findings.

Mixed-method and quantitative research studies could determine the continued examination of successful foundational themes. However, the need for more research on underlying themes required for successfully implementing school counselor supervision suggests that continued in-depth qualitative research is necessary first.

Other lines of research include the training and long-term application of supervision best practices in counselor education training programs. The research-focused master's level course work and supervision practice, coupled with the engagement of professional organizations and supervision, is vital to advance this long-standing issue. Once more research in these areas is available, it is possible to explore the connection between supervised school counseling practice and its impact on the relationship between school counselors and other school personnel in various educational settings nationally and internationally (Martin et al., 2015; Peters, 2017). There is a clear need for more international and cross-cultural studies relating to school counseling retention and supervision (Fan et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2015; Miserentino & Hannon, 2022).

Conclusion

This current study focuses on the underlying and foundational aspects required for school counselors to engage in clinical supervision successfully. The participants in our study had voluntarily continued in supervision, but the motive for continuing was unclear. We discovered that these foundational themes laid the groundwork for successful, long-term supervision, allowing integration into participants' everyday practice. These themes overlapped but generally began with counselor growth and a knowledgeable supervisor leading to long-term sustainability. These foundational themes parallel clinical work with clients where a knowledgeable counselor creates a relationship that leads the client to the long-term integration of skills. Once that relationship is established, supervision models can be layered to create a more in-depth experience. Previous research has primarily focused on developing models of supervision, with less attention given to understanding the foundational underpinnings of what makes supervision effective and accessible.

Appendix 1

Table 1 Participant demographics

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race	Years of experience	Institution pseudonym	Grade level
Tanya	F	L. 30 s	Other	5	Emerald	High school
Sharon	F	30 s	White	2	Crimson	Elementary school
Laurie	F	L. 30 s	White	5	Emerald	High school
Kim	F	40 s	White	13	Amethyst	Middle school
Kelsey	F	40 s	White	5	Amethyst	Middle school
James	M	E. 30 s	White	5	Amethyst	Middle school
Eve	F	L. 30 s	White	12	Amethyst	Middle school

Appendix 2

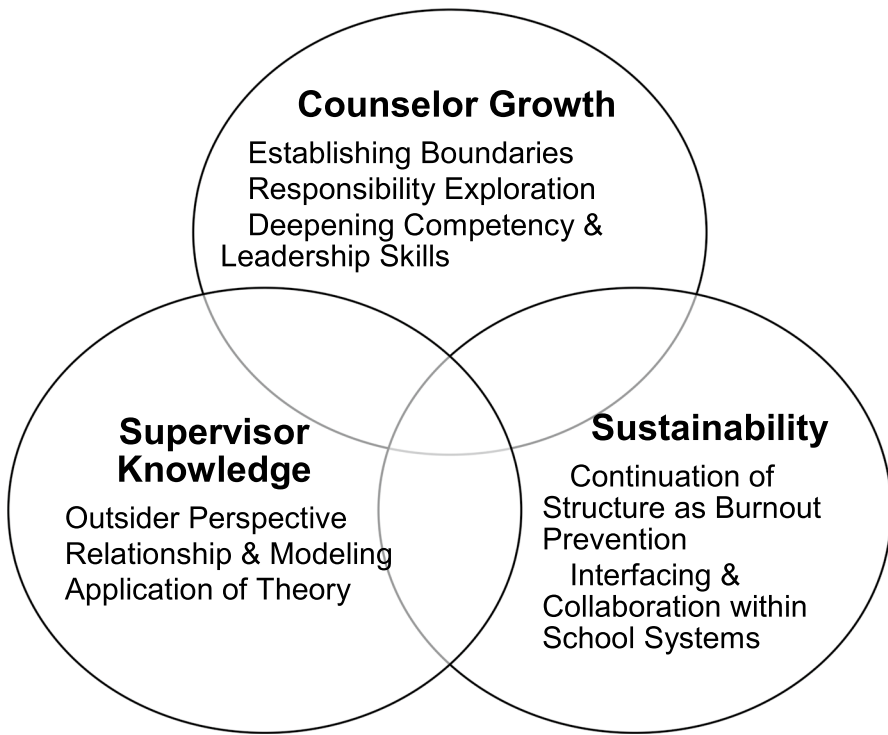


Fig. 1 Superordinate themes and subthemes

Declarations

Conflict of Interest We have no known conflict of interest to disclose, but we do have a non-financial interest statement: Author one is on the board for the journal and receives no compensation as a board member.

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