




## Experiential Learning of School Counselors-In-Training to Work With English Learners

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### Abstract

While the need for school counselors to support ELs is prominent, school counselors believed they were not well prepared to effectively work with EL students. To inform and strengthen our practice, we engaged in a practitioner inquiry study to understand the lived experiences of school counselors-in-training (SCITs) in an experiential learning activity to work with English Learners. Three themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of classroom observations, SCITs' reflection journal entries, and transcripts of a focus group: (a) SCITs' perceived challenges, (b) strategies used to overcome challenges and (c) how this experiential training benefited their future work as a school counselor. This study provides implications for our own practice, other counselor educators, school counselor practitioners, and policymakers.

**Keywords:** *school-counselors-in-training, experiential learning, English Learners (ELs), practitioner inquiry, qualitative data*

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## Introduction

English Learners (ELs), defined as students who are receiving English language services or are enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESOL) programs, represent a rapidly growing subgroup of students in the United States education system (Cook, 2015). As of 2017, EL students represented 10.1% (5 million students) of U.S. total student population—rising from 8.1% or 3.8 million students in 2000 (Cook, 2015; Hussar et al., 2020). EL students experience a variety of challenges in U.S. schools related to not only learning a new language, higher dropout rates, and lower college attendance rates (Soland & Sandilos, 2021), but also psychological distress (Pagan-Rivera, 2014) and school adjustment difficulties (Shi & Watkinson, 2019; Pagan-Rivera, 2014). Social-emotional wellbeing is of extreme importance when aiming to promote EL students' academic achievement and enhance their psychological wellbeing (Castro-Olivo, 2014).

The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) Professional Standards and Competencies outlined the mindsets and behaviors school counselors need in order to meet the diverse needs of preK–12 students in U.S. schools (ASCA, 2019a). School counselors are expected to demonstrate cultural responsiveness by collaborating with stakeholders to create a school and community climate that embraces cultural diversity and helps to promote the academic, career and social/emotional success for all students (ASCA, 2019b). Therefore, school counselors are well positioned within U.S. schools to address EL students' unique needs including social emotional needs (Castro-Olivo, 2014; Cooper, 2016).

While the need for school counselors to support ELs is prominent, school counselors often believed they were not well prepared to effectively work with EL students (Shi & Watkinson, 2019; Paredes, 2010). EL students did not perceive their school counselors as accessible, nor have they received adequate services from school counselors (Vela-Gude et al., 2009). Hence, it is critical to provide the training and preparation that school counselors need to effectively work with EL students (Burnham et al. 2009).

The lead author is a counselor educator in a CACREP-accredited program who teaches graduate-level school counseling courses and conducts school counseling research related to working with English Learners and immigrant students over ten years. There is a critical need for the lead author's counselor education program to address the increasing needs among SCITs to work with EL students. To assist with planning such training, we reviewed the school counseling and counselor education literature and found very limited information on what types of training and preparation can be provided to school counselors-in-training to enhance their competency in this area (Johnson & Cain, 2019)? To add to the current literature on school counselors' training related to working with ELs and to inform our practice on providing such training to our students, we engaged in a practitioner inquiry study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) to describe the lived experiences of four SCITs who were provided with an experiential learning opportunity in a summer program to work with EL students.

## Literature Review

### School Counselors' Work with English Learners (ELs)

School counselors provide both direct (e.g., classroom guidance lessons, group counseling, and individual counseling) and indirect (e.g., collaboration with stakeholders and consultation) services for EL students and actively advocate on behalf of ELs and their families (Auslander, 2018; Steen et al., 2018). Research shows positive findings on school counselors' services with ELs, suggesting that school counselors are meeting the diverse needs of EL students. For example, school counselor-led groups are found beneficial for ELs' academic achievement (Shi & Steen, 2010; Steen et al., 2018), classroom behaviors (Shi & Steen, 2010), self-esteem (Shi & Steen, 2012) and school adjustment (Steen et al., 2018). Also, when school counselors collaborate with other stakeholders, counseling interventions tend to have positive effects on ELs' academic progress and their social

emotional well-being (Auslander, 2018). For instance, school counselors' partnership with the community has shown to create positive change and increase parent engagement for EL students (Cooper, 2016). When collaborating with teachers in the classroom, school counselors help to build EL students' literacy skills and social-emotional skills (Cook, 2015).

However, the literature shows inconsistent findings on school counseling services based on EL students' perspectives. Using national longitudinal data, Shi (2018) found only half of immigrant 9th graders talked with school counselors about options after high school, 20% of immigrant 9th graders talked with school counselors about math and other courses, and only 10% of them used school counseling services for careers and jobs. The least commonly used school counseling services rated by 9th grade immigrant students was related to personal problems (Shi, 2018). Furthermore, in Vela-Gude et al.'s (2009) study, EL students found their school counselors were unavailable and only accessible early in the school year to discuss scheduling. Also, EL students reported receiving insufficient advising, inadequate college preparation, and limited access to counselors for help with personal concerns (Vela-Gude et al., 2009).

### **School Counselors' Competence in Working With ELs**

A few researchers have investigated school counselors' experiences and their self-efficacy with EL populations (Shi & Watkinson, 2019; Burnham et al., 2009; Johnson & Cain, 2019; Johnson et al., 2016). This emerging literature showed that school counselors found themselves inadequate in working with ELs (Shi & Watkinson, 2019; Burnham et al. 2009; Johnson & Cain, 2019) and their efficacy levels differed significantly based on school counselor race/ethnicity, U.S. region, and size of EL population in their schools (Johnson et al., 2016). Specifically, school counselors who are Black, multilingual, live in the southern and western regions, and work in schools with medium and large EL populations, reported higher self-efficacy scores than those who are White, monolingual, living in the Midwest and work in schools with small EL populations (Johnson et al., 2016).

Furthermore, school counselors identified language barriers as a major struggle when working with English Learners (Shi & Watkinson, 2019). Some strategies to overcome language barriers included using Google Translate and a teacher liaison for translating during counseling sessions. However, they did not perceive these approaches effective in building relationships with ELs. We can conclude from the existing literature that school counselors were experiencing challenges in their work with ELs, and they did not have the preparation and tools to sufficiently serve the EL student population.

### **School Counselors' Training and Preparation to Work With ELs**

To address the needs of better preparing school counselors to work with ELs, researchers started to explore different ways to provide the training and education counselors may need. Yet, scarce information exists in the literature on this topic. An earlier study by Burnham et al. (2009) provided an immersing summer program that connected school counselors-in-training with EL students to enhance SCITs' multicultural sensitivity. They discovered that early field experience can lead to a positive influence on multicultural sensitivity among SCITs. More specifically, this immersing experience helped school counselors-in-training recognize the importance of advocating for EL students and apply concepts such as teamwork, collaboration, making data-driven decisions, and removing barriers to success. Also, SCITs learned that there was no one-size-fits-all strategy for students from culturally diverse backgrounds, as many of them come from very different cultural backgrounds with very different previous academic preparation and are at varying stages of language acquisition.

A most recent study by Johnson and Cain (2019) examined how a workshop about English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching strategies could influence the utilization of these approaches by SCITs during classroom lessons with EL students. The results showed modeling ESL strategies alone did not yield

statistically significant differences in the types of strategies implemented by SCITs. However, participants did become more aware of the needs of English Learners and actions that could promote classroom engagement. Specifically, participants described using visual support, providing language support, and doing role plays and demonstrations as useful strategies to promote engagement in classroom lessons. The existing literature highlighted the need for more research on the training and preparation of SCITs to better prepare them to work with EL students.

## Purpose of the Present Study

The purpose of this practitioner inquiry was to inform the lead author's practice as counselor educator within a CACREP-accredited program to better prepare SCITs to work with EL students. We utilized experiential learning as an approach in a summer program hosted by a non-profit Catholic charity organization and hoped to describe and understand SCITs' experiences in this program and how the experience could help enhance SCITs' self-perceived competence in working with ELs. By understanding SCITs' experiences, we could make informed decisions about how we might expand the project and offer it to more students and how we might improve upon the way we integrate experiential learning into future preparation and training of our SCITs. Specifically, this study was guided by the following questions:

1. What challenges did school counselors-in-training (SCITs) experience in working with EL students in the summer program?
2. What strategies did SCITs use to overcome those challenges?
3. What experience during this experiential learning did SCITs perceive as beneficial for their future work with ELs?

## Methods

We engaged in a practitioner inquiry study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) to describe the lived experiences of our students and examine the implementation of an experiential learning activity within the context of our practice. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argued that practitioner inquiry provides practitioners with the knowledge to add to the overall discourse on teaching pedagogy through examining one's own practice. Although not intended to generalize knowledge, "practitioner inquiry as stance is grounded in the problems and the contexts of practice in the first place and in the way practitioners collaboratively theorize, study, and act on those problems in the best interests of the learning and life chances of students and their communities" (p. 123). In this study, we intended to address some critical problems that emerged in the context of our practice and then utilize the findings to inform our practice as counselor educators to advance our students' knowledge and skills, as well as benefit the population our students will serve in K–12 schools.

## Participants

Four SCITs from a school counseling program at the first author's institution were hired to work as interventionists to address social-emotional needs for EL students at a community-based summer program. This summer program was hosted by a non-profit Catholic charity organization located in an urban community in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The small sample size of this study was a result of the following major factors: (a) this research was funded by a grant at the lead author's institution and the grant required that the researchers collaborate with community partners to address and meet the needs of the underserved in the community and prioritize the actual needs and limitations in the community agency, (b) the hosting community agency was only able to enroll four cohorts of English Learners in that summer when this program was held and only needed four interventionists for the four classrooms. During the program, SCITs utilized their knowledge and skills in counseling to focus on classroom culture, behavior management,

relationship building, and the social/emotional well-being of ELs in the summer program. These four SCITs also shared authorship in this article considering the contributions they made in data collection, data analysis and writing, and preparation of this manuscript.

Two of the SCITs were African American female, one was Caucasian male, and one was Hispanic female. The Hispanic SCIT was bilingual and a native Spanish speaker, and the other three were native English speakers but could speak a few phrases in Spanish. Age range among the SCITs was from 25 to 32 with an average of 28.5. All SCITs in this study were enrolled in a master's school counseling program at a private institution. To qualify for the school counselor intern's position in this project, SCITs must have completed the following three courses and hold a 3.7 GPA or higher: Introduction to School Counseling, Theories in Counseling, and Techniques in Counseling, so that they would have basic knowledge and skills in school counseling before participating in this study. Also, SCITs went through a selective interview process held by the first author and the director of the summer program. The final decisions were made in consideration of students' academic preparation, aspirations, and passion to learn and work with EL youth, past experiences in this field, and their language and cultural background. These four SCITs share the same career goals and interests in working with EL students, while differ from each other in gender, ethnicity, and experiences. According to Kitzinger (1994), who proposed contextual constructionism in focus group methodology, having a homogenous group may inhibit discussion. Hence, having this non-homogenous group of four SCIT participants in this study could help generate rich qualitative data about their experiences and perceptions.

### **Procedure and Experiential Training Components**

Before participating in the five-week summer program, all SCITs received pre-trainings provided by the lead author. The pre-training included (a) assigned readings on theories and best practice in working with EL population; (b) four virtual training sessions with the first author to reflect on the readings and share their lesson plans on social emotional skills; (c) staff meeting with the hosting organization to learn about the summer program.

During the summer program, SCITs were assigned into four different classrooms organized by age and English proficiency level of EL students. Each classroom was equipped with one English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher to teach English lessons, a SCIT/interventionist to focus on social-emotional needs, and a youth worker volunteer who assisted the teacher and SCIT in the classroom. There were 15 to 20 EL students in each classroom.

The SCITs were expected to (a) observe EL students' classroom learning, behaviors in and out of classroom, social interactions with teacher and peers; (b) coordinate and consult with the ESL teacher on guidance lesson planning, development, and implementation based on EL students' needs in the classroom; (c) teach two guidance lesson on social emotional skills tailored to address the most urgent social/emotional needs of their students, and (d) provide ongoing social emotional support to EL students in their classroom individually or in small groups. The first author observed all the classroom lessons and provided feedback to SCITs on the design and delivery of the lessons during weekly supervision sessions. SCITs also used the weekly supervision sessions to reflect on their work with EL students and receive feedbacks to enhance their work.

### **Data Sources and Collection**

We used three qualitative data sources to understand and describe SCITs' experiences with EL students in the summer program: classroom observations of the two guidance lessons, SCITs' reflection journal entries from each week of the program, and focus-group transcripts. The lead author observed each SCITs' two guidance lessons. A total of eight classroom observations were completed and notes from these observations were shared in the weekly supervision meetings with the SCITs to improve their awareness and practice. At the end of each week during the 5-week program, all SCITs submitted their journal entries to the lead author who

served as the supervisor. These weekly journal entries captured the general experiences and their reflections from each week.

At the end of the program, all SCITs participated in a focus-group interview, which was held in person, audio-recorded, and professionally transcribed. The focus group lasted 1.5 hours and was led by the first author. Despite the drawbacks of reliability and validity related to dynamics, focus groups provided a space for all four SCITs to share their experiences, which could help normalize the challenges they encountered and allow them to support each other. Having a pre-existing relationship may facilitate a more naturalistic interaction among the focus-group participants (Kitzinger, 1994). To account for the threat of group dynamic, the lead author encouraged SCITs to use independent thinking and freely share their perceptions and experiences.

The lead author developed the focus group questions based on the research questions in this study and sought expert review from the director of the Catholic charity organization, who has expertise and extensive experience working with immigrant youth and English Learners in the community. The lead author used the following open-ended questions to guide the conversation in the focus group:

- What were the most interesting experiences you had working with the EL population this summer?
- What were some of the challenges in working with this student population?
- What did you learn from this experience?
- How do you feel this experience has helped to prepare you to work as a school counselor?

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was addressed in several ways. First, we discussed assumptions and generated a strategy for bracketing those assumptions before reviewing the qualitative data. Authors held certain biases and assumptions about the experiences of working with EL students. For example, we assumed that the experiential learning opportunity provided by this research project would be beneficial to school counseling students' competence and growth in working with EL students and they would also experience some challenges in this learning experience. However, we had no preconceived ideas as to the specific benefits and challenges SCITs would experience or perceive.

Next, we engaged in member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by asking participants to review the findings to improve clarity and accuracy. All participants responded and none provided corrective feedback. We then coded observation notes, focus-group transcripts, and reflection journal entries separately and met during biweekly meetings to reach consensus on a single list (Creswell, 2013). To ensure blind review among co-authors, a research assistant outside of this research team assisted with assigning the journal entries to the authors who didn't generate that journal entry. To address dependability, we created a codebook and kept an audit trail throughout the data planning and analysis process.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

The qualitative focus-group interview data in this study were collected from four SCITs who provided in-depth and rich descriptions and reflections on their experiential learning activity experiences in working with EL students. All authors participated in the qualitative data analysis, which was based on a modified version of Bhattacharya's (2017) qualitative analysis approach. Each researcher reviewed each source of data individually using the research questions as a guide. We immersed ourselves in the data, reviewing transcripts and data several times and writing memos prior to the initial coding of data. During the second time reading through the data, important passages/phrases were highlighted to generate themes for each question from each interviewee's responses. Then, all researchers met and compared the themes found by each other and formulated answers that could answer each research question.

When analyzing the qualitative data, all authors were aware that their background knowledge and past experiences might have influenced the interpretation of the data. The lead author is a counselor educator at a university located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. She is an Asian American middle-aged female with nine years of experience as a counselor educator and over 10 years of experience conducting research on counseling ELs and immigrant youth. The first author spoke English as a second language. The other four co-authors (two African American female, one white male, and one Hispanic female) were school counseling students enrolled in the same school counseling program as the lead author. The Hispanic female student author is bilingual and speaks Spanish as her native language. The other three student authors were monolingual and only speak English. At the time of the data analysis and writing, the White male and Hispanic female student authors had graduated and started working as professional school counselors in public schools. They offered additional perspectives on how the data could be interpreted.

## Results

Analysis of the data uncovered three major themes related to participants' experiences in this experiential training to work with ELs: (a) Challenges, (b) Strategies, and (c) Gains and Benefits from this Experience.

### Challenges

SCITs experienced several major challenges: (a) language barrier, (b) building trusting relationships with ELs, (c) self-doubts, and (d) role confusion. Language barrier was reported as one big challenge by monolingual SCITs; while for the bilingual SCIT the concern regarding language was more related to how much Spanish should be used in teaching or interacting with ELLs. A monolingual SCIT shared her struggle with language barrier, "the language barrier is so huge. I can only imagine the impact of that in schools, and trying to even connect with the teacher, and then if they have a teacher that doesn't even try, then it's like they're just sitting there hanging out." While the bilingual SCIT commented on her experience with language in a different way:

I am bilingual. So how much Spanish should I have in my lesson became a question. I talked about it with the ESOL teacher, and she said, "Yeah, you're here for social emotional learning. If you need to switch back to Spanish, do it. Obviously, I'd prefer it if you did it in English, but if they're not going to get the lesson otherwise ...."

Another major challenge was building trusting relationships with EL students and it could be related to language difference or lack of experience working with a population due to gender or age difference. As shared by one SCIT:

Speaking to the students who are reserved was hard, too, because I think that couples with the language challenge. I want them to know that I hope them to open up and this is a safe space to open up, but I don't know how to communicate it to them other than just saying, "Hey," or at least giving them a high five to start off, and then trying to build upon that high five. But sometimes we just couldn't even get past the high five because of the language barrier.

She went on and explained, "Also, I wasn't used to working with teenagers. I've been with elementary schoolers for the past seven years." A female SCIT shared the challenge she experienced with male EL students:

The girls in my class were a little bit more receptive. The boys sometimes would just shake their head and be like, "No." Like, "Just stop. Don't even try," I'd be like, "I'm trying, here." We would just laugh.

Similarly, a male SCIT shared his experience with female ELs:

Obviously, it was easier for me to interact with the boys, because I am a boy. I was trying to push my boundaries with being able to go and interact with the girls in the group, which was not necessarily the easiest thing.

Another big challenge was the lack of self-confidence and feelings of inadequacy, as shared by one SCIT:

I think they could sense the nervousness and my lack of self-confidence with approaching them. Just walking up to them, that was a big challenge, establishing my presence with them.

Similar experience from another SCIT with low confidence, as shown from her reflection journal, “Coming into it I felt a little inadequate, because I just finished my first semester in school counseling. I have some knowledge about school counseling under my belt, but what does that mean in a summer program?”

Lastly, SCITs experienced challenges related to school counselors’ role-confusion and trying to establish school counselor’s role among EL students. As one SCIT stated:

Talking about first-day challenges, I struggled with defining my role in the room. I don’t know what the experience of these students has been with counselors, but I remember when I was about to give the survey, and, just, I had a hard time explaining to students what counselor is in Spanish.

Not only EL students but also ESL teachers had confusions about school counselors’ role. One SCIT commented:

Communicating that I am a school counselor was a challenge, because even the ESL teacher would see me as a teacher’s aide. I had to take some confidence in myself and have a conversation with him, and just say, “I am not teaching English. I’m here to address their social emotional needs. It was hard to say that to him. I’m not sure if he even grasped it after I said it.”

## **Strategies**

SCITs shared some of the strategies they utilized to overcome the challenges and barriers. For example, two main strategies SCITs used to reduce language barriers were (a) using visual tools and body language and (b) showing their own vulnerability. As one SCIT described her experience:

The language barriers, it forced me to realize how important visuals were. Pictures are helpful; they can pair the visual with whatever it is in their home language, that can help them learn English quicker, I think.

Another SCIT commented on how she showed her own vulnerabilities in order to encourage EL students:

The more I tried, and I was asking them, “How do you say this and this”? They would tell me, and then I would try to speak it, and then they would laugh, but it would be okay because they were also trying to speak English, too. That definitely helped them. Knowing that I don’t speak Spanish but I’m trying also really helped.

When experiencing challenges in building trusting relationships, SCITs used the following strategies: (a) being more present and actively engaging with students and (b) using non-verbal cues or games to communicate. One SCIT gave an example of her experience in connecting with students,

I found that the more I was just present, the more they were able to open up. I’m just sitting there, and just, “Hey, how’s it going?” All of a sudden, that was the only opening they needed. Their resilience, the immediate connection they wanted to make with you.



Games and non-verbal cues were used to build relationship with EL students, as one SCIT described:

Verbal communication isn't the only way to connect with someone. As soon as you get past that, it's far more effective. The UNO game and the drawing was good. Listening to some of their music helped with one of my quiet students. It's okay to just sit there, or just offer them a game. We don't have to be talking the whole time.

For self-doubts, SCITs tried pushing themselves out of their comfort zone and helping students understand a counselor's role. As one SCIT stated:

Being able to push those boundaries and say, "Hey, I'm here to help." I think that's such an important thing for me to realize, and probably for all of us to realize, is that when they know that we're here to help, then it becomes a completely different dynamic and you become something else.

Also, peer support and collaboration with the ESL teachers and program directors helped SCITs overcome the challenges of self-doubts, as one SCIT mentioned, "The other counselors, my peers, were encouraging, and so was the ESL teacher in my classroom. Getting closer with her really helped me to keep going." Another SCIT shared her experience with gaining positive influence from the program director:

By week three I was pretty discouraged, and I wasn't really feeling it anymore because I was like, "This is not going well." I'm very harsh on myself inwardly, on how I judge situations. But [name of the program director] was really important, just, her energy, and smiling. She just seemed so happy. That really helped me, like, "Okay, we're going to try again another day. Hopefully something good will happen."

Lastly, SCITs made a concerted effort to educate both EL students and ESL teachers about what a school counselor's role is, which might have helped some students who otherwise might not be interested in counseling services. As one SCIT stated, "they have no idea who a counselor is. Unless a counselor is there introducing themselves and explaining their role, they wouldn't understand. If we don't reach out or seek out this population, they will be missed, and they will be underserved."

### **Gains and Benefits From This Experience**

SCITs shared several gains from their experience working with EL students: (a) SCITs gained confidence in working with EL population through different activities; (b) SCITs learned it is important to examine their own assumptions and biases; (c) SCIT had a deeper understanding of collaboration with other stakeholders, such as ESL teachers, classroom volunteers, and the directors of this summer program.

Through working with EL students in this summer program, SCITs gained confidence with a student population that they generally would feel less prepared to work with, as described by an SCIT:

It's definitely helped the confidence level. I feel like if I didn't have this pre-experience, like if I was just starting at school next year, this is probably a population I would just shy [away] from because I don't know what to do. Or, just, it would take me a longer time to get acquainted with the population. It's definitely given me the confidence to know that "You can do this. You've done this before."

Another SCIT shared how her confidence level was boosted through the experience with trying out different counseling techniques, "It's also made me more comfortable as a counselor as a whole in doing things other than traditional techniques. It's gotten me confident with play therapy." Besides confidence, SCITs also expressed their gains in self-awareness:

I feel so much more aware. This is just one population, so I had mostly the Spanish students. I can only imagine about the students from Afghanistan, or the students that may be coming from Africa. Just, the different types of students and just being so much more aware. I think that will really help me once I'm in the school as a counselor, because I won't let those students fall underneath the radar, because I know that they're there and I understand what their position may be. I just feel more obligated to just check on these students and see what's going on.

Similarly, the bilingual SCIT shared her perceptions on how this program helped her check her own assumptions, "It removes some of those stereotypes or barriers that I had coming in here, and then, now, I feel like I would be in a better position to not just call myself a school counselor but feel actually comfortable in the role of what that means." She went on and explained:

Not assume that everybody speaks Spanish. Not assume that, because they speak Spanish, they don't speak English. A lot of them were choosing what's convenient for them, so they wouldn't have to interact with you in English. Then pushing myself to know, "Okay, they can do this in English," and actually they'll be better for it, because they'll be able to engage with their counselor in the future, who may or may not speak their language.

Lastly, SCITs had a deeper understanding of a school counselor's role related to collaboration:

It definitely taught me about not just putting myself out there but preparing myself with working with other experts in the building. I think I have the mentality that I can do it all on my own, so realizing that it's better if I ask the question, like, "Hey, what do you think of this?" I think we all learned to lean on each other, especially with lesson planning.

This collaboration could be related with better and more accurate understanding of other professionals' role and responsibilities, as shared by another SCIT:

I have so much more respect for English language learner teachers. I knew they had a tough job. I already knew that. But now that I've actually been around it every single day, it's even harder. Because they don't have mainly Hispanic in their classes. They have different children from different parts of Africa or the world.

Similarly, an SCIT commented how this experience helped him learn the importance of collaboration with other professionals in the building:

Having good, structured collaboration is super important because.... Not only with keeping me in check, but also being able to structure lessons and structure the way we organize and adapt to the program. While structuring lessons, I was able to reach out to other counselors, other people in the program, to help to how to really present certain lessons to certain kids.

## Discussions

### Integration Into the Current Literature

#### Challenges

In this study, SCITs reported hardships in building rapport with EL students and the main barrier that hindered their relationship building was language. This finding is supported by previous literature that identified language as a major challenge for school counselors when working with ELs and their families (Shi & Watkinson, 2019; Schwallie-Giddis et al., 2004). School counselors also experienced unproductive interactions with linguistically diverse students due to frustrations with language differences (Clemente &

Collison, 2000; Schwallie-Giddis et al., 2004). The same is the case for this study as SCITs reported the language barrier becoming apparent, not only when SCITs were interacting with students but also when it came to creating guidance lessons.

Also, SCITs reported self-perceived doubts and inadequacy when working with EL students. This result is expected considering that SCIT participants did not receive any formal coursework or training in their school counseling program regarding the EL population. In Johnson et al.'s study (2016), school counselors who did not have any previous EL-related training reported lower self-efficacy.

Another challenge SCITs experienced was that EL students did not seem to understand school counselors' role. This result was not surprising at all since EL students might not have any interactions with school counselors in their schools or had never used school counseling services before. In the literature, EL students perceived school counselors as unavailable and only accessible in the beginning of the year for scheduling (Vela-Gude et al., 2009). In this study, not only EL students lacked knowledge about what a school counselor does, ESL teachers also had confusion about it. This finding was consistent with previous literature on school counselors' role-confusion from teachers' perspectives. The findings from previous studies consistently supported a notion that teachers need to be educated on appropriate tasks school counselors do and the role of professional school counselors (Joy et al., 2011; Powers & Boes, 2013). For example, teachers rated as "highly needed or highly important" tasks that would be inappropriate for school counselors, such as designing a master schedule, registering and scheduling students, administering tests, and maintaining student records (Powers & Boes, 2013).

### **Strategies**

In this study, SCITs used different strategies to overcome the challenges they encountered when working with ELs on their social emotional well-being. To reduce language barriers, SCITs used visual tools and showed their own vulnerability in using a foreign language (e.g., Spanish) in and out of classrooms. These strategies are commonly used ESL teaching strategies adopted by ESL teachers. Even though the SCIT participants in this study did not receive formal training from their counselor education programs, they were able to gain this knowledge through their regular team meetings with ESL teachers and also from ESL teachers' modeling in virtual class. Johnson and Cain's (2019) study illustrated that ESL teaching strategies could be utilized by SCITs after receiving a workshop and that some of the strategies used in their presentation included visual tools, such as real images, graphic organizers, and realia.

Additionally, in the present study, SCITs used the following strategies to help build trusting relationships with EL students: (a) being more present and actively engaging with students and (b) using non-verbal communication and games to engage students. Previous literature supported that it is important for school counselors to be present and actively engage with students in order to build rapport (McHugh et al., 2013). Also, immigrant students tended to underutilize school counseling services and the least commonly used service by immigrant students was talking with school counselors about personal problems (Shi, 2018). The underutilization of school counseling services could be because of lacking trust with people outside of family, not knowing the services are available to them or how to secure them, or lacking shared understanding regarding expectations and roles (Holland, 2015).

Also, SCITs tried to enhance the understanding of school counselors' role among both EL students and ESL teachers, as a strategy to overcome the challenges related to self-doubts. The issue related to role ambiguity and conflict have long been recognized in school counseling literature (Culbreth et al., 2005; Ortqvist & Wincent 2006). School counselors who experienced role ambiguity and conflicts tended to report poor job performance, job stress, and burnout (Ortqvist & Wincent 2006). Blake (2020) pointed out that school counselors' role ambiguity was due to lack of a clear job description, overlap with similar professions, and inadequate forms of performance evaluation.

Besides, SCITs collaborated with peers, ESL teachers, classroom volunteers, and program directors to enhance their confidence in this study. Collaboration is one of the three main indirect services for school counselors identified by ASCA (2019). Auslander (2018) conducted a case study that investigated the impact of school counselors' collaboration with teachers around culturally and linguistically responsive instruction for newcomer ELs in a small urban high school over one academic year. Results from Auslander's (2018) study illustrated how counselor–teacher collaboration could contribute to better designed classroom lessons, social emotional wellbeing of newcomer ELs, and an inclusive and welcoming school environment.

Through this experiential training, SCITs not only gained confidence with the EL population, but also had a deeper understanding of their role in collaboration with ESL teachers and other stakeholders. SCITs also learned to examine their own assumptions and biases, which is a critical step to become culturally aware and competent in working with diverse student populations (Sue & Sue, 2019).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The intention of this study was to offer practitioner's perspectives on how SCITs experienced an experiential learning activity designed to expose them to EL students so that SCITs could be better prepared to work with this population. Generalization was not the objective for this study and findings need to be interpreted within the context of practice. This study uses a very small sample of SCITs as participants. We acknowledge the limitations caused by such small sample size in this study. This decision was made due to the restrictions of funding agency and the needs and capacity of the community partner who hosted the summer program. Future studies could further this inquiry using a different research design and approach by recruiting a larger sample and try to explore the experiences of SCITs from other types of counselor education programs, institutions, and geographical regions. Also, we recognized that having research participants as researchers might cause biases in the data analysis process, especially when analyzing the reflection journal entries. Even though we had a research assistant helping the research team to assign journal entries to other authors to code, it is important to note that biases might exist. Lastly, focus group, as a qualitative data collection method, could yield data that are compromised by social desirability bias. Future studies could build upon our findings by adopting other qualitative research to further capture the experiences among SCITs during this experiential learning activity, such as, case study.

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

This practitioner inquiry study describes an experiential training experience provided to SCITs to work with EL students and address ELs' social emotional needs in a community-based summer program. The results from this study provided the following implications for our practice in training and preparing SCITs in our own counselor education program, as well as to other counselor educators, school counselor practitioners, and policy makers.

### **Implications for Our Own Practice and Other Counselor Educators**

Through this practitioner inquiry, we gained some valuable insight on how SCITs experienced an experiential learning activity to work with EL students in a community-based summer program. First, by analyzing our SCITs' reflections, we believed that they benefited from this activity to become more culturally aware and gain a deeper understanding of the EL population. This was particularly important since counselor education programs do not typically provide specific courses on this topic and SCITs need such preparation to be able to work with EL students more effectively. Hence, as counselor educators, we could expand this activity in our program to a larger student body and create more opportunities like this one by nurturing existing partnerships with community agencies and looking to develop new ones in the future.

Second, it is not realistic to expect all counselors-in-training to be fluent in multiple languages, but counselor education programs should emphasize preparing SCITs to be fluent in cultural competence. Counselor education programs can support students' self-awareness to help them identify their own biases and prejudices (Sue & Sue, 2019) in both formal and informal learning (e.g., student organization events, brown bag lunch series, campus activities). The participants in this study experienced language and cultural barriers and responded to them immediately while also confronting their biases. This kind of hands-on learning is hard to be replaced by a course or professional development. Keeping this in mind, counselor educators could incorporate early exposures in their program through field experiences (Burnham et al., 2009), community service work, or service-learning courses. The focus of the experiential learning activities should center around providing the opportunity for SCITs to work with diverse student populations and to challenge them to overcome their self-doubts and struggles through collaboration of other stakeholders, self-reflections on biases and assumptions, and actively seeking supervision and professional development opportunities.

### **Implications for School Counselor Practitioners**

The SCITs expressed how this experience helped to build their confidence in working with the EL population. They also pointed out how they learned to be intentional when working with EL students. Knowing from research the pivotal role they play in their students' social emotional development (Johnson et al., 2016), school counselor practitioners should actively seek professional development and build their capacity to serve the EL population. Professional development activities that focus on bridging the cultural divide between the counselors and EL students could help practitioners build their confidence and approach EL students in a culturally responsive way (Clemente & Collison, 2000; Schwallie-Giddis et al., 2004).

Acknowledging that not all EL students have a clear understanding of the role of school counselors, it is critical for school counselors to initiate contacts and conversations with immigrant families and provide information on what a school counselor does. Not only do EL students need this information, but so do teachers and other stakeholders (e.g., principals, community leaders, etc.). School counselors are encouraged to actively collaborate with teachers and stakeholders in providing the services EL students and their families need. Lastly, school counselors could make concerted efforts to build relationships with the EL population. Some of the strategies school counselors can use include relying on visual tools and non-verbal communications and being more present to engage with students.

### **Implications for Policymakers**

Given the steady growth of the EL student population in the United States (NCES, 2019) and the results shown from this study, policy makers could promote and invest in programs like the one presented in this study that address EL students' unique needs in language acquisition and social emotional development (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This might mean pushing for the creation of more partnerships between universities, counselor education programs, and local community agencies that lend themselves to be a place where school counselors-in-training could be provided such experiential training to enhance their competencies in working with EL students.

## **Conclusion**

Using a practitioner inquiry approach, we described SCITs' lived experiences in a summer program working with ELs and examined the implementation of an experiential learning activity within the context of our practice. SCITs experienced some challenges and utilized a variety of strategies to overcome those challenges they encountered when working with ELs on their social-emotional well-being. The findings of this study provided important implications for counselor educators, school counselor practitioners, and policymakers.

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