School Counseling Internship and the Role of Grit: Perceptions Among Newly Graduated School Counselor Trainees Who Successfully Navigated Internship During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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School counseling interns rose to the task of teaching full-time while earning hours for their internship course during COVID-19. For this qualitative study, the researchers conducted a focus group with eight graduates who successfully completed their internship in Fall 2021 or Spring 2022 amid the pandemic. The purpose of this exploratory, inductive, qualitative research study was to examine the role of grit in successful completion of Internship requirements among school counselor trainees who were enrolled in Internship during some of the worst months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Criterion and convenience sampling were utilized for participant recruitment. After the interviews were transcribed, the authors utilized thematic content analysis and identified six overarching themes. Following themes were identified: a) personal characteristics of grit, b) observations about gritty individuals, c) internal internship challenges, d) external internship challenges, e) internal contributors to internship success, f) external contributors to internship success. The authors present results on the participants' perceptions of their experiences during internship to offer an enhanced description of the phenomenon of grit. Implications were provided for students, educators, and programs to foster grit as a contributing factor for student success and overall well-being.

Keywords: Grit, COVID-19, school counseling internship, self-determination theory, social cognitive theory, school counselor in training (SCIT)

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the field of education leading to work-related stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout among educators putting a strain on the education system (Pressley, 2021). School counselors in training (SCITs) completing their internship semester are typically employed by school districts as full-time teachers whilst earning fieldwork hours and completing coursework. Thus, it can be posited that school counseling students enrolled in Internship amid COVID- 19 are among a unique cohort possessing a personal characteristic that researcher, Angela Duckworth, (2007) coined as grit. Grit is defined as the "perseverance and passion for long term goals" (Duckworth, 2007, p. 1087). Although research exists in the body of literature concerning the impact of COVID-19 on educators, the grit of educators, and more specifically the grit of school counselors, the authors discovered a gap in the literature on the topic of the grittiness among school counseling internship students, especially the role of grittiness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Conceptual Framework

Grit plays a crucial role in helping individuals overcome challenges and find motivation to work toward their dreams (Duckworth et al., 2007). It is through grittiness individual can persevere through hardships and self-actualize. Grit equips individuals with necessary skills to thrive in ever changing world. Grit, as defined by Angela Duckworth, is a personality trait that describes an individual's passion and perseverance toward long-term goals despite setbacks (2007). Moreover, grit is thought to be a pathway to one's happiness as it leads to positive outcomes in the forms of achievement (Robertson, et al., 2015).

As grit is a personality trait and not a theory, social cognitive theory supports the description of how grit is represented in the workplace among adults while sharing persistence as a primary characteristic (Duckworth et al., 2007). Environmental factors work in concert to create self-efficacy beliefs within the context of social cognitive theory encompassing personal, behavioral, and environmental factors. Although these factors are deeply rooted in the concept of agency, social cognitive theorists recognize that individuals do not have control over every situation in their lives (Clark & Plano Clark, 2019). According to Bandura (1977), individuals decide on the amount of time and effort to expend toward goal attainment.

Likewise, self-determination theory addresses the impact of the environment on human behavior and designates favorable conditions that support well-being in the workplace, schools, and relationships

(Ryan & Deci, 2001). The premise of self-determination theory is the individual's yearning for personal growth for optimal functioning and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination theory plays an important role in connecting the individual behavior and environmental variables (Clark & Plano Clark, 2019).

COVID-19 Impact on Education

Schools and educational processes withstood numerous changes during a period of uncertainty amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Kruczek, Sander, Smithson, & Paul, 2022; Limberg et al, 2022). The onset of COVID-19 was met with an imposed transition to online teaching and learning and was followed by a surplus of challenges for learners, educators, and parents, including increased stress, frustrations with technology-related issues, and anxiety about what lies ahead (Hammond et al, 2020). Thus, emergency, and spontaneous remote teaching and learning was, consequently, a survival reflex and a means for survival to the Covid-19 crisis (Jandrić, et al., 2021).

At the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, 60 percent of K-12 students nationwide began the 2020-2021 school year with fully remote or online delivery. Twenty percent began the same school year with a blend of remote and in-person classes, and the remaining 20 percent returned to full time in-person instruction (Dorn, et al, 2021). These modified and transformed plans consisted of hybrid models, online instruction, and face-to-face delivery with quarantine protocol unintentionally increased existing disparities in modern society (Dorn et al., 2021; Limberg et al, 2022). Disparities included, but were not limited to, social determinants of health (SDOH) or insufficient equality in education, health, and leisure and heightened discrimination and adverse childhood experiences or circumstances induced by lack of power and privilege (World Health Organization, 2021). Furthermore, COVID-19 has splintered the natural flow of life, disturbed the social living of humans, and imposed a sense of questioning an individual's survival. Moreover, this disruption has contributed to mental health issues including depression, anxiety, and a sense of loneliness (Elmer, et al., 2020).

Further, school-aged children and adolescents spending several months in an online learning environment with limited social interaction returned to their school environments with an increased level of anxiety and dysregulation (Brooks et al, 2020) while others returned to in-person learning with delayed or eroded self-management skills (Patrick, et al. 2020). In response to the deficits, classroom teachers strived to create safe and caring learning environments. However, the strategies teachers employed in the past did not meet student needs amid the COVID-19 pandemic, thus leading to increased levels of teacher burnout (Kruczek, Geesa, Mayes, & Odell, 2022). Through his research, Pressley (2021) discovered four contributing factors leading to teacher burnout: COVID-19 anxiety, current teaching anxiety, anxiety related to parent communication, and perceived lack of support from administration.

School counselors experienced COVID-19 related challenges including providing online counseling lessons daily, difficulty accessing students in an online setting, managing high caseloads, and being assigned inappropriate duties (ASCA, 2021). Moreover, limited school counselor resources and unfavorable job perception increased the probability of experiencing feelings of burnout (Kim & Lambie, 2018). Further, Kim and Lambie (2018) discovered that school counselors' responsibilities, such as non-counseling duties and handling large caseloads, impeded school counselors from sustained wellness and likelihood for burnout.

Grit Among School Counselors

Grit, among other positive qualities, serves as a protective factor for impairment, with grittier individuals reporting less stress and burnout (Mullen & Crowe, 2018). With consideration to the challenges that face educators in the school system, grit may be an essential personality trait for predicting performance and success (Larberg & Sherlin, 2021; Mullen & Crowe, 2018). When measuring grit, the highest grit score achieved is a 5 (extremely gritty) and the lowest score of 1 (not gritty at all). Mullen and Crowe (2018) conducted a quantitative study comparing the grit scores of school counselors with the grit scores of a general non-specified adult sample (M= 3.4) in Duckworth and Quinn's (2009) study. In a similar quantitative study conducted three years later by researchers Larberg and Sherlin (2021), the researchers compared school counselors' grit levels (M= 3.94) to adults in the Duckworth and Quinn (2009) study (M= 3.4). Both samples of school counselors (M =3.83) and (M =3.94) were higher than the midpoint score of 3 and the average adult sample of 3.4. It can be posited that school counselors; grit levels may be higher due to an increased level of stress and demand that they experience in their career.

Internship Requirements for School Counselors in Training

School counseling internship is typically taken by counselors in training at the end of their program after successful completion of Practicum. Students enrolled in programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) must earn 600 internship hours of which 240 hours are direct. School counselors in training (SCITs) typically enroll in internship during two subsequent long semesters offered during the Fall and Spring semesters and earn 300 hours during each semester of internship (120 direct hours/180 indirect hours). School counseling programs that are not CACREP accredited strive to meet the requirements set forth for school counselor certification and state licensing boards. For this study, the participants were enrolled in one semester of internship in which 300 hours were required (120 direct hours and 180 indirect hours).

Often, SCITs completing their internship work full time as a teacher at their site while earning their school counseling internship hours before school, after school, and during their conference periods. During semesters impacted by the pandemic, SCITs obtained practical experience implementing counseling programs during their internship experience while striving to meet course internship requirements. At the same time, school districts transitioned from in person instruction, to virtual learning, and back to face-to-face instruction again. Furthermore, SCITs taking internship experienced anxiety caused by the uncertainty of the pandemic, the ability to finish the semester, and receive credit for their internship experience (Gay & Swank, 2021). These SCITs navigated vacillating roles (parent, teacher, caretaker, patient) while simultaneously fulfilling internship requirements.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this exploratory, inductive, qualitative research study was to examine the role of grit in successful completion of Internship requirements among school counselor trainees who were enrolled in Internship during some of the worst months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The two research questions posed for the study were: (1) How do graduates of a school counseling program who successfully completed Internship during the COVID-19 pandemic conceptualize grit? and (2) What role did grit play in successful completion of Internship requirements among school counselor trainees during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Method

Sampling Scheme

Criterion and convenience sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007) constituted the sampling scheme for the research study described with this paper. Inclusion criteria for participation were: (a) graduation from the school counseling program offered within the investigators' university of employment, (b) enrollment in the school counseling internship course during the Fall 2021 or Spring 2022 academic semester, (c) successful completion of the internship course at the conclusion of the semester of enrollment, and (d) willingness to participate in a focus group with members of the research team. Per recommendations for focus group sample size (e.g., Krueger, 2000; Langford et al., 2002; Johnson & Christensen, 2004), the goal for sample size was six to 12 participants.

Participant Recruitment

After obtaining the Institutional Review Board (IRB-FY23-117) approval for the study, the investigators utilized existing enrollment data to identify recent graduates of the school counseling program who had been enrolled in the school counseling internship course during the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 academic semesters. Although investigators identified 330 graduates who met the graduation and semester of enrollment in internship criteria, email addresses were available for only 79, the latter of whom all were emailed an invitation for study participation. Sixteen of the 79 individuals (response rate = 20.25%) responded to the invitation and indicated interest in focus group participation. Ultimately, due to scheduling conflicts, only eight individuals (participation rate = 10.13%) participated in the focus group interview. However, their number constituted an adequate sample size for the purpose of the study and the research design.

Participants

Regarding demographic characteristics, all eight participants identified as female (100%). Age range of half the participants (50%) was 25-34. Age ranges among the other half were: 35-44 (n = 1, 12.5%); 45-54 (n = 2, 25.0%); and 55-64 (n = 1, 12.5%). Four participants (50%) identified as White/Caucasian, three (37.5%) identified as Black/African American, and one (12.5%) selected Other as their race/ethnicity identifier. At the time of the study, five of the eight participants (62.5%) were employed as school counselors, and three (37.5%) were employed as classroom teachers within public school systems.

Data Collection

After obtaining informed consent for participation from the eight individuals who comprised the research sample, data were collected through a demographic questionnaire and a semi-structured focus group interview utilizing Microsoft Teams. To moderate for the potential influence of researcher bias on study participants (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007), the principal investigator, who had served as the internship professor for six of the eight research participants (75%), was present during the interview without camera and microphone engaged while a co-investigator facilitated the discussion. Following conclusion of the focus group interview, which was video recorded for subsequent transcription of participants' responses to interview questions, the principal and co-investigator who led the discussion met for a peer debriefing session to discuss their impressions of the focus group process and proceedings. The focus group interview questions are presented with Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013) was conducted to answer the research questions posed for the study. Following the peer debriefing session, the principal investigator initiated the pre-analysis phase of data analysis (Bardin, 2009), which involved transcribing and organizing the data collected from participants during the focus group interview by interview question, and then reading through the transcripts several times to obtain a holistic sense of the data. The exploration stage of data analysis ensued with defining the units of analysis, specifying coding rules, and generating descriptive, in-vivo codes via open, axial, and selective coding (Bardin, 2009). Data analysis concluded with treatment and interpretation, which involved deriving inferences from the coded data, identifying overarching themes across participants' narratives, and mitigating risks to reliability of the resulting themes that the principal investigator identified (Bardin, 2009). Regarding the latter, two other members of the research team subsequently repeated the afore-described data analysis process to establish reproducibility, or intercoder reliability, of the final research results (Krippendorff, 2013).

Legitimacy and Credibility of the Research Results

Onwuegbuzie and Leech's (2007) qualitative legitimation model was used throughout all phases of the research process to anticipate and to evaluate legitimation threats, and to bolster both the internal credibility (i.e., the truth value and dependability of qualitative research results; Onwuegbuzie, 2003) and external credibility (i.e., the degree to which research results are generalizable across people, places, contexts, and time; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) of research results. At the outset of the research process, the investigative team identified the following potential threats to internal credibility: (a) researcher bias (i.e., researchers' personal assumptions or biases that can influence participants if poorly bracketed), (b) reactivity (i.e., altered responses among participants due to awareness of research participation and/or conditions), and (c) illusory correlation (i.e., a researcher's belief that their interpretations of relationships are commonplace). Threats to external credibility identified as pertinent to the present study included: (a) communicative validity (i.e.,

degree to which researchers agree on results), (b) interpretive validity (i.e., the extent to which a researcher accurately interprets the meanings that participants attribute to their experiences), and (c) generalizability (i.e., generalizing results derived from a small sample of participants to other populations that differ from the sample regarding member characteristics, context, location, and/or time).

To counter threats to researcher Bias A and participant reactivity, the principal investigator used the unobtrusive measure (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of passively observing focus group participants while a co-investigator actively facilitated the discussion. The investigative team addressed illusory correlation, communicative validity, and interpretive validity with both peer debriefing following facilitation of the focus group and triangulation via independent analysis of the research data by multiple members of the research team (Denzin, 1978). In addition to the latter two strategies, the investigative team established an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to address the threat to interpretive validity. Finally, the investigative team augmented generalizability of the research results with the use of criterion sampling, which bolstered participant representativeness (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and with rich and thick descriptions of the research data that included quotes of participants' exact words (Becker, 1970) in the final report of research results.

Results

During data analysis, the researchers identified six overarching themes. Two themes answered the first research question: how do graduates of a school counseling program who successfully completed internship during the COVID-19 pandemic conceptualize grit? The remaining four themes identified answered the second research question: what role did grit play in successful completion of internship requirements among school counselor trainees during the COVID-19 pandemic? Participant numbers were assigned to protect the focus group members' identity.

Participants' Conceptualization of Grit

The two themes that captured the participants' conceptualization of grit are personal characteristics of grit and the observations about gritty individuals. The first theme involves the participants' personal conceptualization of grit with the following subthemes: non-completion of program is not an option, the thing that kept me going (the gas), and not giving up despite hardships and challenging life events. The second theme encompasses the participants' observations about gritty individuals and consists of these subthemes: flexible, focused, ability to break tasks down into manageable steps, and perseverance. Both themes and their supporting subthemes are displayed in Table I.

Personal Conceptualization of Grit: Non-completion, Not an Option

Two participants commented that grit played a significant role because non-completion of the program was not an option. Participant eight proclaimed "Grit mentally prepared for these two years. I knew once I started that there was no alternative to finishing it." Participant seven expounded "I was just determined to finish this program to become a counselor like that was just everything to me

and there was nothing else that you could have told me that was going to get in my way from becoming a counselor".

Personal Conceptualization of Grit: The Thing that Kept me Going

Four of the eight participants formulated grit as the thing that kept them going. More specifically, participant two conceptualized grit as the "gas that kept me going". Participant one reported that grit "played a very big role with everything that was inhibiting me. I knew if I stopped, I was not going to keep going so grit really made a difference because if I didn't have grit I probably would have stopped". Furthermore, Participant six revealed "You just have to move. Hang on and just keep going. There are so many things that can pull us off our track, just regular life, but just making that committed decision and nothing's going to stop you". Participant three described grit as "even though your jaw was clenched, just making it through unscathed by the end, even though you have a lot of feelings throughout". Participant five explained that "without grit, there's no follow through and I was all in, 100%, all in."

Observations About Gritty Individuals: Perseverance

Three participants made significant comments regarding perseverance being a trait that individuals with grit possess. Participant one suggested that a person with grit "is a little stubborn and will not give up". Participant eight asserted that people with grit, "can't let it go. I don't know if that's being stubborn or hardheaded". Lastly, participant eight proposed that grit is "being firm in your decision and your commitment and being solid. Just having an unwavering faith towards your goal"

The Role of Grit in Successful Internship Completion

The four themes and subsequent subthemes identified by the researchers describing the role of grit in the successful completion of internship include internal and external internship challenges and internal and external contributors to internship success. With regards to the internal challenges encumbered during internship, the subthemes included the participants' mental health, health, and ADHD. External challenges faced during the participants' internship involved COVID-19, balancing work-related stressors while in school, webinar content filled with answering questions by the professor instead of delivering content, and family dynamics.

Table 1. Research question one: Qualitative themes and subthemes

How do graduates of a school counseling program who successfully completed internship during the COVID-19 pandemic conceptualize grit?

Themes	Subthemes
Personal characteristics of grit	non-completion of program not an option, the thing that kept me going (the gas), not giving up despite hardships and challenging life events
Observations about gritty individuals	flexible, focused, ability to break tasks down into manageable steps, perseverance

Table 2. Research question two: Qualitative themes and subthemes

What role did grit play in successful completion of internship requirements among school counselor trainees during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Themes	Subthemes
Internal internship challenges	Mental health, health, and ADHD
External internship challenges	COVID-19, balancing work-related stressors while in school, webinar content filled with answering questions by professor instead of delivering content, family dynamics
Internal contributors to internship success	organization, determination, yearning for a new role in order to help students in need
External contributors to internship success	support from peers, early fulfillment of school counselor role

The theme of internal contributors contributing to the participants success in internship consists of the following subthemes: organization, determination, and yearning for a new role in order to help students in need. Lastly, the subthemes of external contributors to the participants' internship success consisted of support from peers, early fulfillment of the school counselor role. These themes and subthemes are represented in Table 2.

Internal Challenges: Mental Health

Three focus group participants shared information about mental health challenges they incurred. Participant one shared "I had a very heightened anxiety. Pretty much like through the whole program and just making sure that I was getting things done on time and doing it the best that I can." Participant two added "my own mental health and all things related to that toward the end of the program." Participant four disclosed feelings of burnout at the end, "because I graduated in August, and I had summer courses after my internship, and it almost physically felt like I was crawling to the finish line. It was exhausting."

External Challenges: COVID-19

Three participants shared challenges created by COVID-19 including feelings of being overwhelmed and exhausted. Participant one noted that while teaching during the pandemic, "I had very aggressive students and very aggressive behaviors in the classroom. So, I was coming home, just drained every single day because I have students that are basically being abusive towards me towards other classmates". Participant two asserted that "I started the program in January of 2020, so I don't even think we had gotten through the third class yet and then that's when everything shut down and so just trying to deal with new online teaching and all of that stuff." Participant six noted "I have my full-time job with this heightened level of constantly knowing you have to battle the things that are going on at work."

Internal Contributors: Yearning for a New Role

Three of the eight participants disclosed altruistic motivations in their yearning for moving from a teacher to school counselor role. Participant three articulated her yearning for a new role, "I wanted to figure out a way to help more kids. That's the whole reason I became a teacher. And so, being able to reach more children rather than just this third-grade classroom or a fourth-grade classroom." Participant five replied, "remembering my why was the most important thing to me is I truly believed that I could help more

students if I was a counselor versus staying in the classroom and only helping up to 150 at a time." Participant seven commented "I was excited to transition into another role within education to serve students in a different way in a way."

External Contributors: Support from Peers in the Program

Half the participants referred to the importance of their peer support in the program along their journey in the program. Participant two claimed, "having actual relationships with my classmates helps. We had a group chat where we could just kind of talk about things and kind of help us process assignment directions and things like that." Likewise, participant six mentioned, "It was so helpful to have people that group text like hey, did you start on this? Sometimes you start to feel behind because you're working full time so just knowing that you have the moral support." Participant four added, "...the cohort has helped. Having people in the same class as you and being able to, you know, bounce things off each other". Participant five imparted, "I had a group of six other ladies who had the same work ethic and we collaborated on sharing resources, and we supported each other now and then."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of grit in successful completion of internship requirements among school counselor trainees who were enrolled in internship during some of the worst months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to consider that COVID-19 is an ongoing worldwide pandemic in our recent history and the first of its kind since the Spanish Flu of 1918. Moreover, the effects of COVID-19 on the field of education, student mental health, and SCITSs completing internship amid stressors are long lasting. Moreover, Elmer et al (2020), described this lasting impact as a fracture of the natural flow of life while disrupting the social living of human beings leading to mental health disparities leading to mental health issues. Focus group participants shared the challenges they experienced due to COVID-19 resulting in feelings of being overwhelmed and exhausted. The participants also disclosed mental health challenges including anxiety and burnout which were identified in the subtheme of mental health challenges.

From a more optimistic perspective, it can be posited since four of the eight focus group participants (50%) communicated that grit was "gas" that kept them going and was the fuel that contributed to successful internship completion, grit was ultimately the key component in completion of the program despite any setbacks

experienced by the focus group participants. Even still, grit serves as a protective factor for impairment, with grittier individuals reporting less amounts of stress and burnout (Mullen & Crowe, 2018). With consideration to the challenges that face educators in the school system, grit may be an essential personality trait for predicting performance and success.

The subtheme of yearning for a new role intersects with the self-determination theory positing the premise of the individual's yearning for personal growth for optimal functioning and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, grit is thought to be a pathway to one's happiness as it leads to positive outcomes in the forms of achievement (Robertson, et al., 2015). Thus, the participants' grit is connected to the internal contributor of yearning for a new role.

Lastly, the subtheme of non-completion is not an option, includes four participant responses (50%), is conceptualized by persistence, and is rooted in the concept of agency. Within the context of social cognitive theory, personal, behavioral, and environmental factors are deeply rooted in the concept of agency. Although individuals do not have control over every situation in their lives (Clark & Plano Clark, 2019) they do have control over personal and behavioral factors. According to Bandura (1977), individuals decide on the amount of time and effort to expend toward goal attainment which is related to personal and behavior factors.

Implications

The impact of COVID-19 on the education system is long lasting, and continues to impact the education system, stakeholders, and more specifically SCITs completing their internship semester during the heightened spread of COVID-19. Through the qualitative findings presented, educators are provided with specific details of the integral role of grit on persevering amid COVID-19 challenges. Moreover, this qualitative study is a novel approach to studying the personality trait of grit as it is typically studied using quantitative means, using Angela Duckworth's (2007) grit scales (short scale and 12-point).

As suggested by Gay & Swank (2021), this study attempts to provide a glimpse of the lived experiences of SCITs during their internship while adding to the limited amount of literature on SCITs concerning long-term effects of the pandemic. This study attempts to provide a unique approach by exploring the SCIT internship experience through the lens of grit. In addition, this study attempts to illustrate the suggestion from Mullen and Crowe (2018) pertaining to how one's perception of grit and passion to become a school counselor is qualitatively interwoven into their professional identity from a qualitative perspective, rather than quantitative research found in most the literature pertaining to grit. While the setting of this study was in a graduate counselor education program, the authors identified implications pertaining to higher education for students, educators, and programs.

Implications for Students

As noted by students in the subthemes of Non-Completion, Not an Option, Perseverance, and Yearning for a New Role, having a vision of what their professional and personal plans after earning their degree propelled students forward. Because an essential feature of grit is having a long-term goal (Duckworth, 2007), students may benefit from intentionally creating their goal prior to beginning a

program or shortly after admission. This could take the form of a personal vision statement.

In addition to forming a vision statement, students may benefit from seeking their own mental health support or working towards mental wellness. Multiple students indicated mental health difficulties as a stumbling block towards their completion. While students' personal grit level may allow them to manage highly stressful portions of their program (Mullen & Crowe, 2018), identifying and seeking treatment for mental health difficulties may help students navigate stressful times with less risk of burnout.

Seeking support was identified by students and noted in the subtheme of Support from Peers in the Program. The effects of personal grit characteristics likely work in collaboration with the environment of the student. While grit specifically notes a student's ability to achieve their goals despite setbacks (Duckworth, 2007), it does not preclude life factors a student may address to make the pathway easier. One such pathway noted by students in this study was seeking support from peers. A student may affect this level of support by intentionally seeking outside of class collaboration, study groups, discussion of personal concerns, and shared experiences. Combining this approach with seeking mental health support and creating a professional vision statement may allow student outcomes when coupled with personal levels of grit.

Implications for Educators

While students can take individual responsibility for addressing their well-being and success in class, educators may take steps to increase student success. One such area was identified in the subtheme The Thing That Kept Me Going. In this subtheme, students emphasized the value of momentum on completion. Educators may specifically address this during introductory courses by specifically educating students on the value of momentum by noting anecdotal or personal experiences of their own educational pathway and how momentum may contribute to student desire to complete the program.

Additionally, educators can share methods or stories related to the value of self-care. While educators can educate students on self-care and the value of momentum, there are continuing problems related to COVID-19 of higher student anxiety, greater dysregulation (Brooks et al., 2020), and lowered abilities to self-mange (Patrick et al., 2020). These concerns were manifested in the subtheme of COVID-19 and the resulting erratic behavior of students in higher education. As noted by Pressley (2021), educators were not immune from these concerns. To combat these problems, educators may seek their own mental health support and gain additional education on classroom management in a post-COVID-19 environment.

Implications for Programs

Program policy, guidelines, and culture likely affect student overall success. Possible programmatic structure and guidelines to address include creating a clearly outline course progression, implementing the use of individual degree plans, using a cohort model, providing a pathway for students to seek mental health support, and encouraging empathy among faculty and academic advisors. As noted in themes COVID-19 and Support from Peers in the Program, student interactions were of paramount importance to

student success. Implementing a cohort model or a clear course progression will increase the likelihood of students forming lasting relationships as they progress from course to course. Additionally, a clear understanding of what needs to be completed provided by an individual degree plan may be essential to their student self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). The value for this was echoed by students in the subtheme The Thing That Kept Me Going as they discussed staying on track and persevering.

While having individual degree plans, a cohort model, and a clearly outlined course progression can be helpful, students may still struggle. COVID-19 exacerbated many of these struggles (Brooks et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020). While COVID-19 created a unique environment, student struggles are not unique. Creating a departmental culture which emphasizes the value of empathy towards students from the faculty and advisors may be essential to helping students maintain the course to graduation. Similarly, giving students access to mental health support may help them complete the program successfully. As noted in the subtheme Mental Health, difficulties related to their mental well-being may become stumbling blocks. While grit is a major feature of achievement (Robertson et al., 2015) and persistence (Duckworth et al., 2007), coupling student grit with proper programmatic support may lead to greater success.

School counseling internship is the culminating educational experience for SCITs that closely represents fulfilling the role of a school counselor. SCITs enrolled in their internship semester experience a myriad of challenges related to personal agency including personal, behavioral, and environmental factors. Thus, the challenges faced in internship bolster development and personal conceptualizations of grit while playing a pivotal role in establishing critical protective factors against burnout as a future school counselor.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The first limitation of our study was the amount of time that transpired between the internship semester and the interview. For the focus group participants from the Fall 2021 Internship, 15 months elapsed between completing internship and the focus group interview in March 2023. For the focus group participants from the Spring 2022 Internship, 10 months elapsed between completing their internship and the focus group interview. During the gaps between the participants' completion of internship and the focus group, memories and experiences might not have been as vivid if the focus group interviews occurred closer to their completion of their internship semester. Future focus groups for a follow-up study will occur closer to the internship experience.

The final limitation was the homogeneity of the focus group participants. Each focus group participant communicated a high level of motivation and grit. It can be posited that gritty individuals have a significant amount of grit leading to their motivation to participate and self-report. The focus group participants consisted of 6 out of 8 former internship students of the principal investigator. In future studies, purposeful sampling could be employed to control for equal representation of internship professors among focus group participants. Lastly, a significant homogeneity factor of our study is that only those identifying as female completed the focus group interview process. Male representation would have added another layer to the study by also providing the male perspective on the role

of grit on successful completion of internship. Likewise, future research on this topic would warrant purposeful sampling instead of convenience sampling so that future focus groups consisted of equal representation of gender.

Based on their findings from their comprehensive review of the literature on school counselor burnout, Kim and Lambie (2018) emphasized the importance for school counselor preparation programs to incorporate into their curriculum the characteristics of their future work environment that may involve potential risk factors for burnout. Furthermore, it may be helpful to develop school counselors' strategies such as task-oriented coping skills (e.g., grit) in order to decrease their likelihood of experiencing burnout once entering the profession. Therefore, the development of malleable traits may be valuable to overcome the challenges of school counselors' work demands (Larberg & Sherlin, 2021)

Additional interview questions concerning the perceived role of grit for programmatic service delivery (PSD) and comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCP) will be added to the focus group protocol to align with the existing body of literature on identified challenges of implementing PSDs and CSCPs for novice school counselors. Although this study shed a light on role of grit on SCITs internship experiences, future studies may utilize Online Photo Voice (OPV) (Tanhan et al., 2021) to explore how grittiness effect SCITs internship experiences.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Standards

All study procedures involving human participants followed institutional and/or national research committee ethical standards and the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This study was also approved by the corresponding author's Institutional Review Board (IRB-FY23-117).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Author's Contributions

Kimberly McGough and Timothy Brown led data collection, with analysis involving Krystin Holmes. The introduction and literature review were authored by Kimberly McGough and Mehmet Nurullah Akkurt. Shannon McFarlin and Mehmet Nurullah Akkurt managed the methodology. Results were presented by Kimberly McGough and Timothy Brown, and the discussion was jointly handled by Timothy Brown, Kimberly McGough, and Mehmet Nurullah Akkurt.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview Questions

1. What were the factors that contributed to successful completion of your internship course?
2. What challenges did you face when completing your internship course?
3. Based on your life experiences, what personal qualities describe a person who has grit?
4. What role do you think grit played in successful completion of your internship course?