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Examination of Student Outcomes in Play Therapy: A Qualitative Case Study Design

Dalena L. Dillman Taylor  
*University of Central Florida, dalena.taylor@ucf.edu*

Ashley Blount  
*University of Nebraska - Omaha, ablount@unomaha.edu*

Zachary Bloom  
*Northeastern Illinois University, z-bloom@neiu.edu*

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Abstract
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Keywords
case study, play therapy, qualitative, developmental, constructivist
Examination of Student Outcomes in Play Therapy: A Qualitative Case Study Design

Dalena L. Dillman Taylor¹, Ashley J. Blount², and Zachary Bloom³

¹Department of Child, Family, and Community Sciences, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL 32816, USA
²Department of Counseling, University of Nebraska-Omaha, Omaha, NE 68182, USA
³Department of Counselor and Special Education, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL 60625, USA

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Outcome research examining the effectiveness of teaching methods in counselor education is sparse. The researchers conducted a qualitative investigation utilizing an instrumental case study to examine the influence of a constructivist-developmental format on a play therapy counseling course in a large CACREP accredited university in the Southeastern United States. Results indicated that the constructivist-developmental lens was effective in promoting the professional development of counselors-in-training. The researchers offer course-specific recommendations as well as areas of future research.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is an opportunity for individuals to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve later vocational success (Beaman, 1995). Traditional educational models call for teachers to lecture as a form of instruction, which encourages students to be passive learners by receiving and then reciting that information (Greer & Heaney, 2004). Some faculty believe students are learning when they answer questions posed by their professors (Czekanski & Wolf, 2013), but Petress (2006) found that participation is determined by the quantity, dependability, and quality of student engagement.

Teaching paradigms vary across classroom settings (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2000). However, in counselor education programs, Young and Hundley (2013) suggested that hands-on teaching methods are superior to standard lecture-based methods in regard to the development of the unique skills and knowledge needed by counselors-in-training (CITs) to be effective future practitioners. Throughout their training and professional development, CITs progress through developmental stages (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010), which includes movement from black-and-white thinking (i.e., concrete right or wrong) to relational and process thinking (i.e., situational and circumstantially-based decision-making; Diller, 2010). This shift in CITs’ thinking mirrors the pedagogical shift from modernist thinking to constructivist thinking in counselor education classrooms, in which CITs’ previous experiences combine with their subjective reality to form the basis of their professional knowledge (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2000). Thus, the goal for counselor educators is to aid students in their transition from “black and white” thinkers to more reflective practitioners (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998).

In addition to guiding personal and professional development, counselor educators embrace and endorse a set of knowledge content areas and competencies that are integral to counselor preparation (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). Notably, in the helping professions (i.e., psychology, social work), and in counseling specifically, there is a human factor, which allows for unique opportunities for counseling students to apply what they learn with human beings. As a result, it is necessary for CITs to gain the ability to apply knowledge and skills in counseling settings with live participants (CACREP, 2016). Thus, overall, counselor educators are faced with the task of effectively creating a classroom environment that promotes active student engagement in order to support CITs personal and professional development (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2000).

However, research examining learning and pedagogical practices within counselor education is generally limited, and research pertaining to play therapy classrooms is notably absent (Barrio Minton, Wachter Morris, & Yaites, 2014). Therefore, we investigated the influence of a constructivist-developmental format on student knowledge acquisition in the context of a play therapy counseling course.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF INSTRUCTION

Constructivist Paradigm

Modernism and constructivism are two of the most widely utilized teaching paradigms within counselor education (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2000). Modernism is the belief that an objective and universal truth exists and can be encountered, thus, compelling teachers to disseminate those truths (Guiffrida, 2005). Whereas, in contrast, constructivism is the belief that all knowledge is subjective and dependent upon an individual learner’s unique perspective (Guiffrida, 2005). Constructivist thinking conceptualizes learning as being constructed through the intersection of previous experience, knowledge, and experience with new beliefs or ideas (Ültanir, 2012). Thus, constructivism is an effective paradigm for validating students’ experiences and for promoting their “[…] considering, questioning, evaluating, and inventing [of] information” (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998, p. 79).

Within the constructivist framework, students and instructors encounter the classroom with prior experience, knowledge, and preconceived ideas. As such, students and instructors collaborate to create meaning within the class structure, and students learn through experience and participating in an active and dynamic teaching and learning process (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPierto, Lovett, & Norman, 2010; Sänganjanavanich & Black, 2011). Moreover, constructivist thought is more than just a theory; it is a way of understanding human meaning making (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Individuals who engage in constructivist thinking actively construct or modify meaning of their experiences to align with their unique worldviews (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). In regards to teaching and learning, constructivist classrooms support students’ self-expression while they create new realities. Consequently, the...
Constructivist viewpoint works well with the field of counseling, where individuals are expected to be accepting of individual change, cultural practices, and experiences. Constructivism is the theoretical foundation of the course we examined in the current study.

Developmental Learning

Developmental learning conforms to the unique strengths of an educator and the demands of a field of study. While developmental teaching varies in style across disciplines as described as the matching of teachers’ instruction style with content and students’ individualized needs (Granillo & Hazler, 1998). In relation to the helping professions, different individuals have applied the pre-reflective, reflective, and quasi-reflective levels to graduate-level learners, finding support that students move through developmental stages (e.g., Bruss & Kopala, 1993; Kreiser, Ham, Wigers, & Feldstein, 1991; Stewart, 1995).

For example, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) found support for a developmental framework for conceptualizing CITs’ growth. The authors stated that CITs progress through developmental stages of: (a) imitating others to having self-confidence, (b) relying on techniques to trusting the process, (c) separating personal and professional selves into a more integrated sense of self, and (d) integrating data to trust one’s own self (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Also within a developmental domain, Granillo and Hazler (1998) found that CITs move through developmental stages of learning similar to Perry’s (1970) stages of learning (i.e., nine stages within dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment). In combination, researchers and scholars agree that the successful process of becoming a helper is a journey including theoretical identification with important developmental stages and that the stages are applicable to graduate-level learners (Young, 2013). As it relates to this study, the researchers aim to develop a developmental framework (i.e., matching students’ needs and aiding students in progression through developmentally appropriate stages) with their constructivist viewpoint.

Constructivist Framework with Developmental Considerations

The constructivist paradigm allows the instructor to assess the prior knowledge, skills, and worldview with which students enter the classroom. In a complementary way the developing framework encourages the instructor to individualize the social, emotional, and intellectual climate of the course to match students’ current level of development (Kolb, 1984). This approach prior to course learning and periodically throughout the material in order to scaffold the students to a higher level of thinking. The assessment process can take place in many ways (e.g., tests, projects, discussion, reflective writing). However, the instructor should use the process to encourage students to explore different approaches to learning. In addition, the structure of the classroom can enable students to move towards self-directed learning (e.g., students must learn to monitor and adjust their approaches to learning; Ambrose et al., 2010).

THE COUNSELOR EDUCATION STUDENT

Students who are preparing for a career of working with clients to create therapeutic change – need to develop interpersonal skills as well as competencies for both theory and practice (CACP Rep., 2016; Nelson & Neufeld, 1998). As it relates to their training, students are motivated by their desire for self-actualization and to discover the limits of their own potential (Rogers, 1961). Rogers (1961) notes that individuals have within himself (sic) the capacity and the tendency, latent if not evident, to move forward toward maturity (p. 35). This statement is likely to imply that students have the capacity within themselves to move toward learning and developing the skills of the counselor. For Rogers (1980), it is necessary to note the role of the environment in CIT development. In contrast, constructivist-developmental thinking, a student is able to take responsibility for their learning and actively create a classroom reality based on their experiences (McAuliffe & Erikson, 2001). Previous researchers suggested that counseling is well suited for constructivist-developmental framework (Heyns, 1987; Rogers, 1980), and components of developmental learning have been applied to clinical and supervision settings within the counseling field (Blount & Mullen, 2015; Lambie & Staff, 2009; Logeholm, Daly, & Delworth, 1982). Following theoretical practice, researchers found evidence supporting that graduate students respond well to developmental tenets (Stewart, 1995). And the benefits of learning in a developmental learning environment may extend to all graduate level learners (Bruss & Kopala, 1993).

According to Granillo and Hazler (1998), the three major motivators of adult learning are: (a) self-direction, (b) previous experience, and (c) the requirement for flexibility. This being said, counselor education student-learning is also motivated by the direction they see themselves taking, their past learning experiences, and desire for flexibility in the classroom (McAuliffe & Erikson, 2001). Rogers (1980) established that individualized and directed learning is a critical component of counselor education. For example, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) found support for a developmental framework. As a result, they suggest that all students move through different stages of personal and professional development as they navigate their development into a more integrated sense of self, and they integrate data to trust one’s own self.

Table 1: Levels of Reflective Judgment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Epistemological view of knowledge</th>
<th>Concept of learning</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Reflective Thinking</td>
<td>Certain truths exist</td>
<td>No evidence can prove an “truth”</td>
<td>My professor presented rubric that was the wanting on the rubric because it was the same as the one used last year. I can see it is as reflecting the authority figures as is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Thinking</td>
<td>Believe that there is subjectivity in knowledge</td>
<td>We can know the truths and evidence depends on the subjective person.</td>
<td>It’s difficult to determine if a counselor cannot really say they have evidence because there are multiple right answers. I guess it depends on the professor’s views.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quasi-Reflective Thinking</td>
<td>Believe that there is a subjectivity in knowledge, but the type of evidence provided depends on the subjective person</td>
<td>It’s difficult to determine if a counselor cannot really say they have evidence because there are multiple right answers. I guess it depends on the professor’s views.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Thinking</td>
<td>Believe that our knowledge is constructed through our experience</td>
<td>We can know the truths and evidence depends on the subjective person.</td>
<td>After reading the text, I can better anticipate a new decision making and take an active role in my learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

King and Kitchener (2004) established developmental levels of reflective thinking in students rather than concrete understanding of the material. These suggestions fall in line with a constructivist-developmental framework.

Characteristics of a Successful Counselor

Counselors work from a variety of theoretical lenses and perform a broad range of interventions with individual, couple, and family counseling clients that require effective counseling. However, it is necessary to note the role of the environment in CIT development. In contrast, constructivist-developmental thinking, a student is able to take responsibility for their learning and actively create a classroom reality based on their experiences (McAuliffe & Erikson, 2001). Previous researchers suggested that counseling is well suited for constructivist-developmental framework (Heyns, 1987; Rogers, 1980), and components of developmental learning have been applied to clinical and supervision settings within the counseling field (Blount & Mullen, 2015; Lambie & Staff, 2009; Logeholm, Daly, & Delworth, 1982). Following theoretical practice, researchers found evidence supporting that graduate students respond well to developmental tenets (Stewart, 1995). And the benefits of learning in a developmental learning environment may extend to all graduate level learners (Bruss & Kopala, 1993).

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The case study data analysis plan initially involved data for exploring whether or not the classroom instruction was effective. The general strategy of data analysis involved relying on theoretical propositions. Because we had experience in counseling classrooms, we constructed our research design to be used as an instrument for exploring whether or not the classroom instruction was effective. The total goal of this study was examine the influence of a constructivist-developmental format on a play therapy counseling using a utilizing an instrumental case study. Constructivist-Developmental Classroom Framework and Collaborative Teaching Students and instructors enter the classroom with (a) prior knowledge, (b) expectations, and (c) level of thinking. The instructor also informs the students about (a) the course objectives and (b) the course content. It is crucial for the instructor to model for the students a safe, growth-producing learning environment that parallels the counseling room and therapeutic relationship. Together, the instructor and students construct knowledge. The process is one of ongoing learning. The overall goal of this study was examine the influence of a constructivist-developmental format on a play therapy counseling using a utilizing an instrumental case study. Course Objectives and Course Assignments The course used in this instrumental qualitative investigation Design and Content of the Study The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of the role of group and family play therapy as a means for facilitating change in children, preadolescents, adolescents, and families; (b) to demonstrate knowledge of the therapeutic goals of group and family play therapy; (c) to identify selection criteria and screening processes necessary when formulating groups; (d) to discuss multicultural considerations and the use of group and family play therapy; (e) to examine the role of the therapist (i.e., knowledge and ability of the therapist’s role in group and family play therapy; (f) to describe and discuss ethical considerations and challenges of involving parents when conducting group play therapy; (g) to demonstrate the role of group and family play therapy in the treatment of children, preadolescents, adolescents, and families; (h) to demonstrate the unique developmental considerations of involving the immediate family in family play therapy; (h) to demonstrate the unique skills and strategies appropriate to using a collaborative rubrics and pre/post assessments. Final requirements for participant data inclusion in the investigation were: (a) student enrolled in the Play Therapy course and (b) student completed the pre- and post-assessment. Due to assessing retrospective course data, we were unable to provide descriptive data for the participants.

Pre and Post Assessment The research team developed and post-assessment measure for assessing participant change during their time in the Play Therapy course. The pre-assessment involved 29 short-answer questions based on the course objectives for the class. The pre-assessment was developed for the following purposes. See Appendix A for the Play Therapy Assessment used in this course.

Constructivist-Developmental Classroom Framework and Collaborative Teaching

Students and instructors enter the classroom with (a) prior knowledge, (b) expectations, and (c) level of thinking. The instructor also informs the students about (a) the course objectives and (b) the course content. It is crucial for the instructor to model for the students a safe, growth-producing learning environment that parallels the counseling room and therapeutic relationship. Together, the instructor and students construct knowledge. The process is one of ongoing learning. The overall goal of this study was examine the influence of a constructivist-developmental format on a play therapy counseling using a utilizing an instrumental case study. Course Objectives and Course Assignments

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The constructivist framework that students enter with pre-existing thinking. However, for the post-test, that same student was able to answer providing a more detailed answer on the post-assessment – less thinking. For every question, approximately 12 of 29 students left that semester.

The mean of students’ responses to items related to the learning course objectives for this course increased with the exception of objectives (f) to describe and discuss ethical considerations and challenges of involving parents when conducting group play therapy and (g) to describe strategies and adaptions for meeting the unique developmental considerations of involving the immediate family in family play therapy. Both objectives were discussed briefly in the course; therefore, the instructor will spend more time directly reflecting on ethical considerations and adaptions for family play therapy in future course discussion and content. However, for objectives (a) through (e), students demonstrated an increase in knowledge from pre- to post-assessment.

Limitations
As with most qualitative research, due to small sample size (n = 19) and unique characteristics of the sample, the findings of this study are not generalizable to other populations. Further, participants may have experienced possible testing bias given that they took the same assessment across two time periods. Despite these limitations, this study provided critical information regarding the structure, content, and course development. Findings from this study also provided insight into future research.

Implications
The instructor gained valuable information to improve the course for future semesters and to continue scholarship of teaching and learning. In this research, 100.

References
Barnes, J. M., & Goodyear, R. K. (2014). Understanding and Implementing a Constructivist Framework for Play Therapy (AFT), the accrediting body for registered play therapists (RPT). Applying applicants to become registered play therapists “must complete 150 hours of play therapy specific instruction from institutions of higher education.” (Vega & Guerrero, 2014, p. 2), including (a) play therapy history (~5 hours), (b) play therapy theories (~40-50 hours), (c) play therapy techniques and methods (~40-50 hours), and (d) play therapy applications (~40-50 hours). This course (~375 hours) meets the guidelines for some of the hours of play therapy techniques, theories, and applications. Thus, the findings of this study support the learning of students to be successful in their work with children achieving a 43.2% increase in knowledge from pre-to post-assessment.

Student Outcomes in Play Therapy
Hackett, J. A. (2010). Classroom tasks, engagement, and course content in regards to objectives (f) and (g). Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 154.
APPENDIX A

Play Therapy Assessment

Directions: Answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge.

1. Explain to the best of your knowledge, what is group play therapy?
2. Explain to the best of your knowledge, what family play therapy?
3. What is the rationale for working with children in groups?
4. What is the rationale for working with families in play therapy?
5. What are some necessary steps for assessing for group fit?
6. How does one assess for appropriateness to individual, group, or family play therapy?
7. What key factors are important for determining what modality of play therapy is best for the child?
8. What materials are suggested for group play therapy?
9. What materials are suggested for family play therapy?
10. What is the therapist's role during group play therapy?
11. What is the therapist's role during family play therapy?
12. How do responses change for the therapist when providing individual versus group play therapy?
13. What facilities are appropriate for providing group play therapy?
14. What facilities are appropriate for providing family play therapy?
15. What populations are appropriate for group play therapy?
16. What populations are appropriate for family play therapy?
17. What is the different between the following: non-directive, semi-directive, and directive group/family play therapy?
18. What are ethical considerations for group play therapy?
19. What are ethical considerations for family play therapy?
20. Name 3 structured activities for groups.
21. Name 3 structured activities for families.
22. Name 3 unstructured activities for groups.
23. Name 3 unstructured activities for families.
24. Name 3 semi-structure activities for groups.
25. Name 3 semi-structure activities for families.
27. What is the developmental rationale for group play therapy for preadolescents/adolescents?
28. What is the rationale for using structures versus semi-structured versus unstructured activities?
29. What are the steps for processing activities with children, adolescents, or families?
30. What considerations are important for determining the depth of processing?