Elementary School Counselors' Perceptions of Reality Play Counseling in Students' Relationship Building and Problem-Solving Skills

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, eight school counselors participated in a series of reality play counseling trainings introducing techniques appropriate for counseling upper-grade elementary school students to enhance positive relationship building and problem solving skills. Participants were interviewed and their transcripts were analyzed using grounded theory methods which yielded four core categories: positive aspects of implementation, perceptions of the effectiveness of relationship building, perceptions of the effectiveness of developing problem solving skills, and concerns regarding implementation.

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According to *The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2005), school counselors have the responsibility for promoting academic, career, and personal/social development of all students. In particular, school counselors play a significant role in preparing all students to acquire attitudes, skills, and knowledge necessary for successful academic achievement (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Roberts & Mills, 2009). These school counselors must be vigilant in maintaining accountability by ensuring the interventions are clearly defined, effective, and appropriate (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Myrick, 2003). Meeting these expectations can be staggering when taken into account that approximately five million students between the ages of 6 and 16 come to school regularly, but are unmotivated and disconnected from the school community including teachers, counselors, administrators, peers, and schoolwork (Glasser, 1997b). Two of the most effective and appropriate means for school counselors to work with students on such issues, and to elicit growth-fostering relationships while maintaining accountability is through the use of play counseling and Dr. William Glasser's choice theory and reality therapy (Carmichael, 2006; Glasser, 1997b; Nystul, 1995).

Reality therapy (Glasser, 1990) and play counseling (Landreth, 1993) both address the promotion of positive relationships and accountability with developmentally appropriate and effective means for school counselors. In particular, Glasser (2000) posited that many students lack good relationships with warm, caring, responsible adults. By combining reality therapy concepts with play counseling techniques, school

counselors can attempt to help students address these problems with a novel and potentially developmentally, culturally appropriate intervention The researchers used Glasser's choice theory and reality therapy approaches for the development of these techniques combined with traditional play counseling interventions to investigate elementary school counselors' perceptions of the possible utility of this approach to enhance students' relationship building and problem-solving skills.

Choice Theory and Reality Therapy

The driving theoretical frameworks for this study were Glasser's choice theory and reality therapy. Choice theory relates to the theoretical aspects of Glasser's ideas while reality therapy encompasses the delivery system of counseling interventions related to the theory (Wubbolding, 2000). Perhaps the most salient principle of choice theory is that humans are driven by five basic genetic needs: survival, love and belonging, freedom, fun, and power (Glasser, 2000). In order to meet these needs, individuals must be aware of their quality world, a very specific, personal world at the core of our lives which can include people, things, and beliefs that drive our need satisfaction (Glasser, 1997a). The difficulty for individuals arises when the ideal quality world pictures do not match reality and are coupled with an inability to adapt to that difference (Glasser, 1998). For students, school often has an early place in their quality world pictures, but begins to dissipate in the later elementary grades due to decreased relationships with faculty and schoolwork (Basic, Ticak-Balaz, Uzelec, & Vorkapic-Jugovac, 1997; Glasser, 1990).

Reality therapy principles utilized in a school counseling setting can help counselors to build a relationship with the student by staying in the present, creating a

safe and warm environment, avoiding coercion and punishment, expressing genuine concern and empathy, and being positive and optimistic (Basic et al., 1997; Wubbolding, Brickell, Imhof, Kim, Lojk, & Al-Rashidi, 2004). Once the relationship is established, the reality therapy oriented school counselor introduces the concepts of choice theory such as basic needs and quality world pictures to the student. Then, measures are introduced to understand the concept of choosing all of our behaviors, through the concept of total behavior composed of actions, thoughts, feelings, and physiology. According to Glasser (1998), individuals have direct control over acting and thinking; however, they have indirect control over feelings and physiology.

Once these concepts are explained to a student, the interventions based on reality therapy principles can be introduced. The four fundamental questions of reality therapy are as follows and can be viewed as a problem solving model: 1) What do you want? (Wants), 2) What are you doing to get what you want? (Doing), 3) Is what you are doing working? (Evaluation), and 4) What is another way to get what you want? (Planning) (Passaro, Moon, Wiest, & Wong, 2004; Wubbolding, 2000). This technique is known as the WDEP method and is a tool for teaching and learning reality therapy skills while helping people gain a skillful, creative, and artful method for effective intervention (Wubbolding, 2000; Wubbolding & Brickell, 2007). The WDEP concept particularly applies to the school environment as it is important for students to be involved in the development of plans through the use of decision making and problem solving skills to meet their needs and wants.

Play Counseling: A Multidisciplinary Approach

Play has long been considered an important tool for children to act out their lives and rehearse its possibilities (Association for Play Therapy [APT], 2008). A variety of professional fields, including education, pediatrics, counseling, and anthropology, recognize the importance of play in healthy cognitive development, social and emotional competence, physical coordination, interpersonal skills, and overall well-being of children (Ember & Ember, 1993; Magnuson, 2003; Schor, 1995). Elementary school counselors can refocus the use and importance of play by utilizing it in building positive relationships with students, addressing school related issues, and aiding the student in passing along the vicarious learning to classroom performance (Landreth, 1993).

Toys can have the specific purpose of enhancing and providing means of communication for children (Landreth, 1991). The selection of toys should be very intentional as they can aid in focusing certain aspects of communication, self-reflection, and growth (Magnuson, 2003). For this study, the researcher utilized the following toys: puppets, sand trays and miniatures, and drawing materials.

Play counseling, with over fifty years of research, has been long considered an appropriate tool and ideal avenue for dealing with a wide range of emotional, social, and academic difficulties for children from a variety of cultures through a number of theoretical approaches (Bratton, Ray, Rhine, & Jones, 2005; Carmichael, 2006; Josefi & Ryan, 2004). However, little research has been conducted on the use and practice of play counseling by elementary school counselors (Ray, Armstrong, Warren, & Balkin, 2005). Furthermore, little research has been conducted on the school relationships of elementary school students, despite the significance of such bonds in their academic

achievement (Anderman & Kaplan, 2008; Glasser, 1990; Spencer, Jordan, & Sazama, 2004).

Reality Play Counseling

Throughout the years of research and evidence of the effectiveness of both play counseling and reality therapy, there is no evidence that an attempt to combine the two has ever been undertaken. Reality play counseling can be a potentially powerful tool for elementary school counselors. Most children below the age of eleven lack a fully developed capacity for abstract thought needed for verbal expression or understanding of complex issues and feelings (Bratton et al., 2005; Piaget, 1950). Using creative techniques to connect with clients across ages and development further enhances the potential usefulness of reality play therapy (Kennedy, 2008).

Both counseling approaches have been considered to be well-suited for short term counseling while helping students discover how to make choices regarding behavior, take responsibility, and use the techniques throughout life to meet needs (Landreth, 1991; Nystul, 1995). Once such needs are addressed or fulfilled, it is postulated that students can become more enthusiastic about learning, thus leading to improved academic performance (Glasser, 1986; Parish, 1992). Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to investigate elementary school counselors' perceptions of the usefulness of reality play counseling with elementary school students in relationship building and problem-solving skills.

Method

A qualitative methodology was selected to examine the perceptions of reality play counseling's effectiveness with elementary school students by school counselors

because it has the potential to yield rich, deep, and innovative perspectives through the phenomenon of human experiences (Grbich, 2007). Grounded theory methods are qualitative research approaches designed for the systematic generation of theory from data (Glaser, 1978). In this study, grounded theory served as the research method to produce (a) descriptions of school counselors' perceptions of reality play counseling, (b) explanations of how elementary school counselor perceive the implementation of reality play counseling with elementary school students in relationship building and problem-solving skills, and (c) a theory about the meaning made by the school counselors regarding reality play counseling and elementary schools students.

Participants and Sampling

Participants included in this study were 8 volunteers drawn from the elementary school counselor population ($n = 26$) of a north central Florida school system. They were all volunteers who agreed to participate in all aspects of the study and were state certified school counselors working in an elementary school setting. The generally accepted number of participants is 5-8 in a qualitative research study involving long interviews (Patten, 2007). Therefore, the utilization of 8 volunteers was an appropriate total for this method of research.

The research participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity in reporting the results. Efforts were made to include participants' diversity related to ethnicity/race, gender, elementary school counseling experience, and location of elementary school. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the total sample. Table 2 provides the demographic information of the school counselors' students who participated in the individual reality play counseling sessions.

Table 1

School Counselor Demographics

Counselor	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Years of Elementary Experience
Lisa	F	61	W	36
Mona	F	27	W	2.5
Maggie	F	52	W	7
Selma	F	59	W	18
Marge	F	58	W	28
Maude	F	61	B	15
Patty	F	30	W	3.3
Edna	F	38	W	15

Table 2

School Counselors' Student Demographics

Counselor	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Grade
Lisa	M	10	B	5
Mona	M	9	B	4
Maggie	F	10	B	4
Selma	M	11	B	5
Marge	F	10	B	5
Maude	M	10	B	4
Patty	M	9	W	4
Edna	M	10	W	5

Training and Implementation Procedures

Once the complete list of volunteers was compiled, a total of four hours of training was conducted in reality play counseling techniques by the researcher at the beginning of the 2009-2010 academic year. The first hour of training consisted of an introduction and overview of choice theory and reality therapy principles. In the second hour of training, the school counselors received an overview of play counseling

including its purposes, rationale, and the developmentally appropriate language to use in play counseling. The final two hours of training combined the use of play counseling techniques with the choice theory and reality therapy principles.

Three techniques used in reality play counseling were introduced to the school counselors: the quality world sand tray exercise (Allen & Berry, 1987; Gil, 1998; Glasser, 1998), the use of puppet play to introduce the concept of total behavior (Gil, 1994; Glasser, 1998) and finally a WDEP drawing activity (Gil, 1998; Landreth, 1991; Wubbolding, 2000). In the quality world stand tray exercise, students were instructed to build their quality world, including people, things, and beliefs, using miniatures in the sand tray. The purpose of this activity was to provide both the student and school counselor a visual representation of the students' world view, including important quality world pictures. The second technique addressed the concept of total behavior through puppet play. Four puppets were utilized to describe each of the four components of total behavior (acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology). This activity was intended to aid the student in understanding each of these aspects of behavior and how they can interact and affect each other. Finally, the WDEP drawing activity was introduced, utilizing the wants (W), doing (D), evaluation (E), and planning (P) components in a series of drawings. This activity served the purpose of allowing the counselor and student to visually represent the presenting problem and potential solutions.

Following the training sessions, the school counselors implemented the techniques over the course of six weekly counseling sessions lasting 30 minutes each with an individual elementary school student. Because reality play counseling focuses on relationships, the school counselors were instructed to select students presenting

relationship problems with school faculty, peers, or school work. The relationship problems were to fall into one of the following categories: 1) difficulty following classroom directions; 2) difficulty making friends; or 3) difficulty completing school work assignments. Additionally, the school counselors selected students from upper elementary (4-5th grade), English speaking only, mainstream classes due to the language and cognitive developmental needs of understanding and applying logical operations for this counseling approach (Glasser, 1990; Piaget, 1950).

Data Collection

The data collection method for this study was the use of participant interviews conducted by the first researcher. School counselor participants were interviewed in a semi-structured, in-depth interview format for approximately 30-45 minutes following the completion of the six total counseling sessions. A semi-structured interview, rather than a predetermined set of questions, allows for explanation, expansion, and exploration in order to delve into "unexpected, unusual, or especially relevant material revealed by the participant" (Patten, 2007, p. 153). Examples of the initial prompts included, "What were your overall perceptions of this counseling process using reality play therapy techniques?" and "How effective do you think these techniques were in gaining insight into the student's needs?"

Data Analysis

Grounded theory was developed by sociologist Barney Glaser and Anselin Strauss (1967) and is based on the need for new theoretical explanations built on previous knowledge to explain changes (Grbich, 2007). Grounded theory data analysis utilizes the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which continually

compares each new element of the data with all previous elements to establish and refine categories (Patten, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher makes continued theoretical comparisons between and within data through coding to delineate various properties of the emerging concepts and categories to analyze their similarities and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Each of the eight interviews with the school counselors was transcribed verbatim. This step was followed by a detailed open coding process of each data set. During this process, each individual line of the transcription was reviewed by the researcher to identify meaning and themes presented by the school counselors. After coding each data set for all participants, the initial codes were reviewed to look for emerging relationships among codes and to note more frequent and significant codes. Constant comparison of the codes involved comparing the coded meaning units with each other resulting in increased codes. This process allows for increased connection among the codes as well as providing clarity of the data. As this data was clarified, it was reorganized and grouped into similar codes related to various aspects of the school counselors' perceptions of the reality play counseling process of implementation.

From the coding process, the emerging theory was developed. The theory was related to the perceptions of the school counselors associated with the implementation of reality play counseling. This theory was grounded in the data offered by the school counselors from the individual interviews conducted by the researcher. During the entire data collection process, the researcher utilized theoretical sampling to ensure the direction of the process was appropriate. Because the school counselors' interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times for emergent themes by the researcher, as well

as member checked by the participants for errors and new thoughts, it was deemed that no new information was emerging. A group debriefing was also conducted with the participants to present the findings and elicit any additional information. At this point, it was determined that the data collection process had reached saturation and the data analysis was complete.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers are given the opportunity to experience data through the lived experiences of the participants resulting in potentially rich information based in natural environments (Hunt, 2011). However, there is a potential risk for skewing data toward a desired outcome with the use of qualitative research (Eppler, 2008). In particular, it is common to question the researcher's subjectivity and its potential effects on the data and theories produced (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007). Although the researcher's personal experiences with the topics of this study shaped the overall interest, a sincere attempt was made to remain neutral and open to the perceptions of the participants. Further, steps were taken to avoid bias as well as addressing trustworthiness of the study. It is vital that such steps be taken to ensure the trustworthiness-also described as credibility, validity, confirmability, and rigor- of the research (Hunt, 2011; Scarborough & Luke, 2008).

In this research study, several steps were taken to increase the trustworthiness of the data. Skewing of the data was addressed by using academic colleagues for peer review of methods to ensure their appropriateness and efficiency. Additionally, member checking by participants was utilized for accuracy of data sources (Eppler, 2008; Scarborough & Luke, 2008). Member checking was conducted following the

transcription of each of the eight individual interviews by providing participants with the entire transcript for review for errors and additional insights. Although new information was minimal, this process allowed each of the participants' reactions, clarifications, and additions to become part of the transcripts of the interviews and guide the coding process. Allowing such procedures throughout the coding process can aid in avoiding other limitations such as ignoring existing theories or poorly integrated theoretical explanations (Grbich, 2007). Additionally, the use of an audit trail, a chronological sequence of records which contain materials directly pertaining to and resulting from the research procedures, was essential to maintaining the trustworthiness of this qualitative research study. Further, constant and consistent note taking and memo writing were utilized in an effort to enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative research (Hunt, 2011; Scarborough & Luke, 2008).

Results

The data analysis revealed four major categories associated to the school counselors' perceptions of reality play counseling. These categories were related to the school counselors' perceptions of the positive aspects of implementation, effectiveness of relationship building, effectiveness of developing problem-solving skills, and concerns about implementation. Based on these findings, a grounded theory was developed to hypothesize the relationships among the categories and their components. The theory posits the interconnectivity between the implementation of reality play counseling and its effectiveness in developing relationships and problem-solving skills for the elementary school students.

Positive Perspective of Reality Play Counseling Implementation

The participants of this study recognized and noted the importance for elementary school students' need for an outlet to express themselves through creative means such as those offered in play. In particular, Lisa noted the creative avenue of play allows students to access "items to represent everything/one that is important" and "learn a lot about ourselves." In conjunction, the play materials ease the students' anxiety and allow for exploration of topics that may be more difficult or forced in a traditional talk session or as Maggie noted, "My sense was once the puppets were on the hands, that revealing the thoughts, feelings, and nature of the conversation flowed freely." The recognition of students' need for play and creativity provided possible support of elementary school counselors' call for new ways, such as reality play therapy, to encourage such creative activities when counseling students.

This introduction of a new approach also stimulated the school counselors' interest in working with additional students utilizing the approaches. Edna noted that she planned on integrating more of the concepts with her students in individual sessions as well as in small and large group settings. Marge, in particular, approved of the expansion of the use of these techniques because of the relation the activities had to some previously learned strategies in "giving I messages and discussing empowerment" and the ability to link them together. Additionally, Mona related how "effective" the sand tray and drawing activities could be in working with a class on such issues as "making friends, getting into trouble in class, or not completing assignments." The school counselors also noted their approval of these activities with a variety of students and topics including anger, death, divorce, and friendship.

Perhaps the most "effective" and "insightful" means of all of the activities that provided perspective into the students' world, was the sand tray activity, according to six of the eight school counselor participants. Through this exercise, students were able to portray a variety of needs in a safe environment. Some of the needs that surfaced involved safety and trust as Marge's student "caged" the animals that represented danger to her on the opposite side of the tray away from the doll she chose to represent herself. Selma's student used similar play utilizing fences to block the predators from accessing him. Patty's student depicted a scenario with the tiger and lion looking into his car and that they were the "bullies attacking." The need for connection and belonging again surfaced as Maggie's student "positioned herself in the middle of the world and stacked items so she was the tallest….behind her were her support, favorite teachers, support staff, and two friends, all facing the same direction." Edna's student was able to share his need for power as he played out a scene with military miniatures in which he was the great leader of the battle.

Another choice theory concept that came to light in the reality play counseling activities involved students' ability to recognize aspects of total behavior. While using the puppets, Selma's student was able to express several of these concepts as he told her, "when he gets really angry and tries to yell at someone, nothing really comes out and how frustrated this makes him feel and also hurts his head." Mona shared her observation about her student, "I feel like his madness got in the way of his actions so it may be helpful to work with him next time on dealing with feelings and not letting it control his behavior so he can get his need met." The students were also able to provide vivid visualization of the effects of the total behavior components (i.e. feeling

"crumpled up and small") thus allowing the school counselor to see the powerful way in which these situations affected the students.

Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Relationship Building

The environment established by the counselors utilizing concepts of reality therapy and play counseling, along with basic counseling skills, allowed for positive relationship building. In Marge's session with the quality world sand tray, she was able to connect with her student in a discussion about the student's father's recent death. Further, the atmosphere of nonjudgmental acceptance from choice theory and play counseling allowed for complete "trust" in Selma's relationship. Maggie was able to "clarify and reflect" in her session to gain a clear picture of who and what was important to her student. Lisa was able to "plant the seed of change" in her student and follow it throughout the counseling sessions to see his progress.

The student anticipation for the sessions was observed early in the data analysis. Edna stated, "He absolutely wanted to come. It helped to build a relationship quite a bit." The other counselors all expressed some variation of this including "he liked coming to see me," "she felt like she was getting more special attention," and "he was more excited about getting to spend time with me and having this fun thing to do." The previous statements provide a great example of the importance of the relationship in the context of an accepting and fun, yet structured environment for both students and school counselors.

In addition to anticipation for the interaction with the school counselor, a trend toward eagerness for the use of the materials by the students surfaced in the data. Maude's student expressed this anticipation even beyond the toys to the actual sand as

he "started playing in the sand before even touching the toys" indicating his desire for the tactile experience of the sand. Virtually every other school counselor mentioned the increased level of "excitement," "engagement," and "enjoyment" revolving around the materials. Such emotions denote the desire of this age range to be involved in the play process and see it as valuable.

Students were also able to portray the need for positive classroom relationships through the play activities. Edna's student eventually connected the need for friendship issues with his classroom behaviors during the planning phase of the drawing activity in that "if he listens to the teacher and the other students more, the kids would be more likely to be his friend." This need for friendship was also exemplified in the sand tray by Selma's student in which:

> He added and removed characters in it representing a friend who he would like to make that was out of the sand, the predators that were around him making it difficult for the friend to get in, or even make himself known and things he had tried to get the friend closer.

The "friend" outside of the sand represented a missing component of friendship in his quality world. Such a comment accentuates this student's understanding of the classroom dynamics and need for connection that factor heavily in the daily peer interactions of elementary school students.

Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Developing Problem-Solving Skills

In some of the sessions, students and counselors were able to develop a plan linked to the total behavior concept. For example, Patty and her student worked out a plan in which the total behavior aspects were addressed as the "action" puppet "walked

away from the bully," and the "thoughts" puppet "wanted to tell a teacher." Edna also worked with her student by "discussing him using nice words to ask for what he wants from friends instead of saying things like 'you are mean'." Selma and her student worked on a plan that addressed changing his actions and thoughts to see "what the new feelings and physiology might be" that could result in an overall behavior change in the classroom. During the puppet activity, Lisa and her student "replayed the argument, working each puppet appropriately, and were able to find a more positive choice and outcome." By relating to the total behavior concept, both parties were able to break the situation down into workable and understandable parts for future implementation of the plan.

Students' needs, such as making and maintaining friends to meet the need of belonging, were also addressed in the development of plans. For example, Selma's student played out "taking the fence down" and "approaching one of the predators" in an attempt to connect and potentially develop a friendship. By addressing the students' needs in the context of developing plans, a stronger investment may be made by the student resulting in a more beneficial and effective outcome.

In many of the plans, there was a component that addressed the classroom setting. For example, Lisa's session, the student developed a plan of "ignoring, moving away from, and reporting the provocative behavior of others" to avoid his involvement in problem behaviors and the resulting consequences. In a similar example, Maude's student worked out an option of "doing his reading and math assignments in school which will get him a green star at the end of the day which equals a good day" resulting in better interactions with his teacher and mother.

Specific plans were also developed for interactions with peers in the school setting. One such plan utilized by Marge and her student involved how "choosing a different behavior might offer a different reaction" from the peer. This outcome was accomplished with a puppet role play in which "several scenarios" were created with "different responses" which elicited "different reactions" from the peer. Her student ultimately reported the effectiveness of this strategy as she and the peer had "settled their differences by talking about how she feels about his teasing." Patty and her student also discussed the continuation of his plan to "use positive words" with peers in an attempt to "help his friendships grow." By creating a specific plan for direct interaction with peers, the students are provided positive options for solving the problem while simultaneously developing new peer relationships.

Concerns Regarding the Implementation of Reality Play Counseling

The participating school counselors presented a set of concerns related to the implementation of reality play counseling Perhaps the most pressing concern to emerge from the reality play therapy implementation involved the cognitive developmental stage of the upper grade elementary students. Despite the fact that this age range has the potential to understand such concepts, there were still concerns raised by the counselors in the context of the sessions. Several of the school counselors referred to the students' need to be of a certain cognitive developmental stage to fully grasp the reality play counseling concepts and activities. For example, Lisa noted:

I don't know that I would've taken exactly the same sessions with a much

younger child or a child who is not as capable cognitively as he is. Because he's

really bright and it made sense to him. He can talk about things with a good

vocabulary and good understanding.

Selma made a similar comment expressing her reservations about using reality play

counseling with a student who may not have the "same ability level" as her student.

Edna furthered this idea by stating that "some of the constructs are hard to get down to

an elementary kid level" and a need to put the counseling theory into "10 year old

words." These statements reflect both the counselors' apprehension about students'

needed level of cognitive development and their self-expectations for students' ability to

comprehend such concepts as reality play counseling.

The other prevalent theme involved time considerations. All of the school

counselors noted feeling an intense pressure to fulfill a variety of job duties during the

school day. Selma expressed this by stating, "The problem was time for me….all the

other stuff that comes between and the other things that have to be done during the

day." In most cases, these duties do not connect directly to provide services to students,

much less counseling them. Lisa noted, "sometimes as counselors, we don't have as

much time to have the individual over a long time for counseling." Edna also expressed

her "frustration" due to the lack of "consistency" of seeing her students. These

statements exemplify not only the curriculum pressure, but also the extra duties and

misconceptions about the role of the school counselor that hinder them in providing

counseling services to the elementary school population.

Discussion

This qualitative study analyzed the perceptions of school counselors in using a

model of combining reality therapy principles with play counseling techniques to help 4th

and 5th grade children with relationship building and problem solving skills. Despite the novelty of this approach at the elementary school level, there is literature related to both the reality therapy and play counseling components of reality play counseling that support the consistency of the findings. The selective codes related to the major elements are: positive perceptions and concerns of reality play therapy's implementation and perceptions of the effectiveness of relationship building and problem solving skills. From the realm of play counseling with Axline (1947), Ray (2007), Gill (1998), and Landreth (1991; 1993) to choice theory and reality therapy's development with Glasser (1986; 1990; 1998; 2005) and Wubbolding (1994; 1999; 2000), the outcomes and insights these researchers report with students are consistent with the data from this study.

An important observation made from the data involved the target of building relationships. In the field of counseling, there is no more vital component than the relationship between counselor and client/student (Glasser, 1998; Landreth, 1993; Wubbolding, 2000). In particular, choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling all recognize the importance of such interactions and connections in the counseling process to ensure appropriate growth and change for the students (Axline, 1947; Erwin, 2003; Glasser, 1997a; Landreth, 1993). The observation of relationships with the creative play materials served to enhance the relevance of the importance of relationships with the counselor, self, and others from the choice theory perspective (Glasser, 1986; 1998). This enhancement is a clear benefit of reality play counseling, and can serve school counselors in future relationship development with students, potentially resulting in more positive school relationships.

Choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling focus on the significance of the students' ability to develop problem solving skills as a way of dealing with school and life related problems (Cochran, 1996; Wubbolding, 2000). The school counselors' experiences validated this concept as they observed the use of reality play counseling to aid students in creating appropriate and realistic plans in making positive changes in their school behavior and relationships. Further, it was vital that these plans were developed by the student with the help of the school counselor to increase the students' ownership and ability to develop strategies as suggested in the literature (Carmichael, 2006; Glasser, 1986; Wubbolding, 1999). The fact that all school counselors observed some aspects of the problem solving component beyond the individual sessions into the classroom and school environment was significant for their meaning making experience. Considering that students were able to expand the problem solving skills from the sessions to the classroom setting and school environment serves as a fundamental principal of any counseling approach.

Implications for School Counselors

In the field of school counseling, there are established methods and techniques for working with students. However, research (Glasser, 1986, 2000; Landreth, 1993; Ray, 2007; Wubbolding, 2000; Wubbolding & Brickell, 2007) suggests that there is a demand for new, innovative ideas for working with today's school children. The elementary school counselors recognized their familiarity with, and approval of, the choice theory/reality therapy approach; yet, they expressed a need for a more appropriate intervention rather than traditional talk therapy. The combination with a creative process such as play counseling provided that bridge for the school counselors

to teach the choice theory concepts to the students while developing appropriate relationships, gaining valuable insights, providing an avenue for creativity, and aiding in problem solving skills development (Wubbolding, 1998). Such favorable reactions and meaning constructed by the school counselors indicate the potential usefulness of the reality play therapy approach.

There is a great deal of pressure placed on school counselors for accountability for their work due to increased standardized testing demands, federal funding requirements, and providing research based counseling interventions in a timely manner (Daggett, 2005; Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Mason & Duba, 2009; Wittmer & Clark, 2007). Using counseling approaches that effectively address elementary school students' academic and social-emotional needs, school counselors can provide accountability measures that specify how their interventions relate to student outcomes. Reality play counseling could be one such option for today's elementary school counselor. Showing specific outcomes of improved relationship and problem solving skills can help elementary school counselors provide evidence of their effectiveness by supporting positive student relationships which can in turn affect classroom and school climate.

Perhaps the most vital relationship in the implementation of reality therapy and play counseling begins with the counselor (Glasser, 1998; Landreth, 1991; Wubbolding, 2000). It is through this connection that students can feel accepted and understood while learning new skills for meeting their needs in appropriate ways. Additionally, it is important that the student play a primary role in the development of problem-solving skills to ensure a solid commitment and connection to the potential plan resulting in a

higher probability of success in implementing and completing the plan (Wubbolding, 2000).

Ultimately, such approaches as reality play counseling can give shape and structure to the elementary school counselors' list of effective interventions that can be provided to their students, thus enhancing the entire school environment ranging from relationships to academics. Once the school counselors gain a definitive understanding of reality play counseling, a logical step may be to introduce the techniques to teachers and parents so they can also use the activities when working with the elementary students. It would be the school counselors' responsibility to introduce and educate the teachers and parents on the reality play counseling techniques by providing appropriate literature, training, and opportunities to practice the activities. By expanding this approach to other adult stakeholders, more students can be reached and these techniques may be used in small group as well as classroom settings through large group guidance or teacher implementation.

Limitations

Although the findings of this study provides some insights to perceptions of the effectiveness of reality play counseling, it cannot be generalized to the entire population of elementary school counselors at this point in the research. The purposeful sampling in the study sought to include all eligible elementary school counselors in the selected area. However, this population reflects the typical elementary school counselor makeup of White, middle class females with seven of the eight participants matching this demographic. Even though this study did represent the majority of elementary school

counselors based on demographics, it may not have covered as much diversity as originally envisioned.

In comparison to the school counselor population, this student sample was somewhat more balanced and diverse with regard to distribution of gender, age, race, and grade. Both the school counselor participants and the student participants were representative of the school district where the study was conducted. Elementary school counselors in this study, as well as in the school counselor population across the nation, are less diverse as a group than are the students with whom they work. An implication is that with the increased diversity of student populations to include language and culture, different ways of communicating, such as the reality play counseling used in this study, may be very helpful for school counselors in working with diverse groups of students.

Directions for Future Research

Because of the novelty of the reality play counseling approach, there is a need for additional future research. To continue the development of the proposed grounded theory, future researchers may wish to include a more heterogeneous mix of ethnic groups for both the school counselor and elementary student populations. It would be interesting to see if ethnicity and gender differences could have an effect on the school counselors' perceptions of reality play counseling's implementation, relationship building, and problem solving skills. Additionally, focusing on more specific subgroups of elementary school student populations, including special education students, non-English speaking students, and specific behavior related issues, could provide a more thorough picture of reality play counseling's effectiveness.

Another potential area of future research could address more specific areas of academic and social-emotional outcomes. It may be beneficial to research the effects of reality play counseling on academic areas such as student grades, attendance, and test performance. Additionally, social-emotional concerns related to behavior (i.e. discipline referrals, self-concept) could be addressed in future research. Analyzing data in each of these areas could provide valuable information regarding the potential use of reality play counseling techniques in developing interventions for school counselors.

Conclusion

This study was undertaken to gain elementary school counselors' perceptions of reality play counseling's effectiveness in helping students in building relationships and developing problem solving skills. This current research study findings tentatively suggest that the meanings made by the elementary school counselor participants attribute favorable perceptions of reality play counseling's effectiveness in student relationship building and problem solving skills development. The conclusions developed from this study's findings offer additional information concerning the process by which elementary school counselors perceive, experience, and implement reality play counseling concepts and techniques with upper elementary grade students. Not only do elementary school counselors and students potentially benefit from a broader understanding of the reality play counseling approach, but so could the entire school environment. Through this understanding, relationships and problem solving could increase resulting in a more positive and productive elementary school environment. Reality play counseling has the potential of opening new doors for school counselors to

build such relationships though a familiar and effective means for children. Or as one

student noted, "When you play together, you learn more."

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