

Peer Tutoring With Child-Centered Play Therapy Language

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on responses from fifth grade peer tutors who were trained to use child-centered play therapy language during tutoring sessions with kindergarteners. The focus of this project was to identify academic and social/emotional benefits of participating in the program. Results indicated that participation in the program provided a rich, experiential learning opportunity for the fifth graders to develop a relationship with a younger child, to reflect on the challenges of working with a younger child, and to discover and implement child-centered methods of setting appropriate limits with their kindergarten tutees.

Keywords: peer tutoring, play therapy language, elementary school

Peer Tutoring With Child-Centered Play Therapy Language

Peer tutoring programs have emerged over the last several decades as popular methods of reaching students in our nation's schools. More than 30 years of empirical research has helped to transform the arbitrary pairing of students without training or supervision to sophisticated and carefully designed peer tutoring systems (Van Norman & Wood, 2007). The benefits of participation in peer tutoring programs are abundant. Tutors close in age to the tutees are able relate more easily to the tutees, which may make the academic material more easily understood by the tutee than if communicated by the teacher (Paquette, 2008). Children who learn at a pace different from that of their peers have a chance to advance without feeling left out, to work at their own pace, to see learning in a more positive manner, to experience success and to have an older friend (Briggs, 1998).

Accompanying the increased popularity of peer tutoring programs is an increased emphasis on play-based approaches in the schools. When school counselors were brought into elementary schools in the late 1960's and 1970's, play therapists and counselor educators encouraged the use of play therapy in the schools to address a broad range of developmental needs for all children, not just the maladjusted. Continuing this preventive trend is a key emphasis for proponents of play therapy (Landreth, 2002). Empirical support for play therapy has grown over the decades. In 2000, Bratton and Ray published a meta-analysis revealed compelling results from clinicians' use of play therapy with children as far back as 1942. Specifically, the study documented improvements in children's behavior, reduction of trauma symptoms and many specific mental health disorders. An additional study was conducted in 2005

which revealed an overall treatment effect of 0.80 standard deviations, along with the finding that effects were more positive for humanistic approaches, such as child-centered play therapy, than for non-humanistic approaches like behavioral or cognitive therapy. (Bratton, Ray, Rhine, & Jones, 2005). Additionally, play itself has been related to academic success in schools. Bergen and Mauer (2000) asserted that children's symbolic play assessed in kindergarten was associated with their literacy-related skills in first grade. Lyytinen, Eklund, and Lyytinen (2003) noted a direct connection between children's play and their language development and reading comprehension.

Child-centered play therapy is based on allowing the child to lead, using encouragement instead of praise, communicating empathy and unconditional acceptance, and establishing appropriate limits in a caring and respectful manner. Various approaches have emerged where parents, school counselors and teachers are trained in the skills of child-centered play therapy and instructed to utilize these techniques in play sessions with their children or students (Robinson, Landreth, & Packman, 2007). Child-parent relationship therapy is a 10-week program for families where parents learn how to use child-centered play therapy language and techniques with their children (Landreth, Bratton, Kellum, & Blanchard, 2006). The parents are taught reflective listening, acknowledging and responding to children's stated feelings, and how to set appropriate limits. The parents then meet with their child for weekly 30-minute play sessions where the child leads the play. When setting limits, the parents are instructed to provide the child with the opportunity to develop an internal rather than external locus of control.

Teachers have also received training in child-centered play therapy through Kinder Training (Smith, 2009; White, Flynt, & Draper, 1997; White, Flynt, & Jones, 1999; White, Draper, Flynt, & Jones, 2000; Post, McAllister, Sheely, Hess, & Flowers, 2004) or Child-Teacher Relationship Training (Smith, 2009; Helker & Ray, 2009). Results from evaluative studies (Post et al., 2004; Helker & Ray, 2009) indicated that teachers working with at-risk children found the training helped them to be more empathic and responsive to the children and were able to use their newly learned skills in the classroom.

A key component of child centered play therapy is the communication of empathy. Empathy, which can be defined as "...the ability to recognize, appreciate and respond to another's feelings" (Leonard, 2010, p.1), is an important skill for children to develop. The morality of children relies heavily upon their ability to understand others' feelings:

When a child is capable of empathy, she is able to understand the emotional and social effects of her behavior on others. She can also more accurately interpret the social cues of her peers and understand their intentions. On the other hand, children who are less empathic tend to behave more aggressively towards others. This may be related to their inability to perceive or accurately interpret the feelings and behaviors of others. (Leonard, 2010, p. 1)

The development of empathy is crucial for social competence, social relatedness, and prosocial behavior. Improving these skills is likely to improve the social functioning of children (Maynard, Monk, & Booker, 2011). Miller and Jansen Op de Haar (1997) found that highly empathic children have fewer problems with attention, greater perceptual

sensitivity and more control over their inhibitions. In contrast, children who are less empathic may have more difficulty with prosocial development (Cordier, Bundy, Hocking, & Einfeld, 2010).

Robinson, Landreth, and Packman (2007) conducted a qualitative study in which fifth grade students were taught child-centered play therapy in a peer helping program for kindergarten children. The kindergarteners had been identified as experiencing difficulties adjusting to school and exhibiting shyness, withdrawal, anxiety, depression, family problems, and behavioral issues. Results indicated that the kindergarten children felt more connected to someone at school, while the fifth grade participants reported perceiving themselves as more mature and responsible. Although the social and emotional benefits of this study are clear, there remains substantial room for exploring potential academic benefits. In addition, the sessions between fifth graders and kindergarteners were peer tutoring sessions focused solely on playing, rather than tutoring sessions focusing on academic content.

Purpose of the Study

Building upon the work of Robinson, Landreth, and Packman (2007) in which fifth graders served as emotional helpers for kindergarteners, the authors of this paper sought to explore the impact of training fifth graders in child-centered play therapy *language* (empathy, encouragement, tracking/reflection, and therapeutic limit-setting), and then showing them how to use this language during academic tutoring sessions with kindergarteners. Particular emphasis was on the fifth graders' improvement in their empathy skills and how this might impact their tutoring sessions with kindergarteners. This paper examines the benefits and challenges reported by fifth graders as they were

put into the roles of the empathic listener, limit-setter, and academic tutor of a younger child.

Method

Participants

In a mid-sized elementary school in North Carolina, the school counselor and counselor intern began a peer tutoring program with a total of 14 fifth grade students and 17 kindergarten students participating in this project. The peer tutors were nominated by their teachers as suitable for serving in the peer tutor role. Teachers were given a description of the peer tutoring program and asked to identify students who were doing well academically, had consistent attendance, and were considered responsible. The kindergarten students were identified by their teachers as in need of extra help with their reading skills. Teachers perform reading assessments in the beginning of the year for Kindergarteners and these assessments informed their choices of students needing assistance.

Program Description and Evaluation

Before receiving any training in child-centered play therapy, students participated in one peer tutoring session in order to gain a baseline of how fifth graders interacted with their kindergarten peers. After consent was obtained from parents/guardians, the fifth grade student participants participated in 6 training sessions based on Landreth's 10-week model (Robinson, Landreth, & Packman, 2007). The Child-centered play therapy skills in which the fifth graders were trained are as follows:

1. Tracking behavior: the goal is to verbally reflect the content of the child's behavior (Giordano, 2000). For example, "you are using your finger to point to each word."
2. Reflecting feelings: acknowledging the surface feelings the child presents as well as tentatively guessing at more subtly underlying feelings (Kottman, 1999). For example, "you seem excited to be here today."
3. Encouragement instead of praise: Rather than saying "good job" as a positive response, the fifth graders were taught to use encouraging statements that help to motivate the child (Giordano, 2000). An example of an encouraging statement might be "I could tell you worked really hard to read all the words on that page."
4. Setting limits: The tutors were taught to set a limit through three steps (a) acknowledge the child's wishes, for example: "I know you want to color in that book," (b) communicate a limit, "but the book is not for coloring," and (c) provide an acceptable alternative, "you can color on this paper after we read". This helps the child to learn important self-regulation skills, without harsh judgment or punitive responses.

Once the training was complete, kindergarten students and 5th grade students were assigned into pairs. The fifth grade students then met for weekly 30-minute tutoring sessions with their kindergarten buddy.

The MEACI scale, developed by Stover, Guernsey, and O'Connell (1971), was used to evaluate fifth graders' display of empathy and other child-centered skills as they met with the kindergarteners. An observer who documented the language and non-verbal cues of the fifth grader during the tutoring session conducted the MEACI test on

6 minutes of video footage (Robinson, Landreth, & Packman, 2007) before training and at the end of the peer tutoring program. Total scores can range between 18 and 90 on this scale; and a lower score indicates a greater display of empathy.

In order to gain evaluative feedback from the fifth graders, the school counselor and student intern conducted weekly focus group sessions. The focus group sessions ranged from 30 to 40 minutes each week and were semi structured. They started out with the facilitators asking the students to respond to what they did well, what they need to work on, what their kindergarten tutee did well, and what their kindergarten tutee needed to work on. The focus groups were facilitated using Grounded Theory, thus allowing the facilitator to seek out more data when the flow of conversation changed direction (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The focus groups were transcribed and coded for emergent themes using Atlas TI qualitative software program.

Teachers of student participants in both kindergarten and 5th grade were asked to complete a brief survey at the end of the program describing each student's growth or changes, overall responses to the program, and any additional feedback. The 5th grade students were also asked to complete a survey which consisted of 12 questions about their experience as a peer tutor. All surveys were transferred to electronic format and coded for emergent themes using the Atlas Ti program.

Findings

Video-recordings of the students from the very first peer tutoring sessions (prior to receiving the training) indicated that the display of empathy and play therapy language did not occur naturally. For example, two 5th graders became impatient with the slowness of the kindergarten student's reading, and took the book and read it aloud

themselves. Another student was frustrated in trying to help the student read the title and responded with – “Well, what’s the title? Bears on wheels, that’s what that says,” rather than allowing the younger child to figure it out on his own.

In contrast, the videos filmed during the 6th week of peer tutoring indicated that the play therapy language skills, tracking, reflecting feelings, limit setting, and encouraging statements, were all clearly evident. Students most frequently used encouraging statements and tracking. They also used limit-setting when appropriate. Reflecting feelings was the skill that was least frequently displayed by students. One student displayed all four skills during the 6 minutes of analyzed film. For example, the student tracked, “It looks like you are writing an N.” The student was encouraging, “You should be proud of yourself, you’re doing much better than the first time and you are also sitting really still today.” When the kindergarten student began to be distracted and play with crayons, the 5th grade student set a limit, saying, “I know you’d like to play with the crayon now, but now we have to work on your alphabet. You can play with things later in your classroom.” After the kindergarten student wrote the letter N, the 5th grade tutor exclaimed, “You just wrote the letter N. You look really happy, are you?” displaying her ability to reflect the feeling. Other students used encouraging statements like, “you’ve read all this, that’s a lot” and “you read the whole book!”

Fifth graders’ display of empathy increased over time. The average MEACI score for the 5th grade students before training in the play therapy language was 54.1 while the average post test score was 30.4. These scores indicate a 23.7 point average difference between pre and post MEACI scores. All 14 of the 5th grade student participants showed a lower MEACI score after training, indicating a higher display of

empathy. A paired T-test was run on the pre and posttest MEACI data. The two-tailed P value was significant at less than .0001. The standard deviations for the pre and posttest scores were 5.053 and 4.740 respectively. The mean and standard error of the mean were found to be 54.071 and 1.350 for the pretest and 30.393 and 1.267 for the posttest.

Fifth Grade Focus Group Themes

The weekly focus groups conducted with the 5th graders allowed students to reflect on their tutoring experience. Dominant themes in the focus groups were: acquisition of skills (5th graders noting their use of the play therapy language skills), experiences working with kindergarteners (5th graders describing the struggles and enjoyment of working with young students), and transference of skills (5th graders describing use of the play therapy language outside of tutoring sessions). Table 1 shows a summary of the themes and subthemes.

Table 1

Fifth Grade Peer Tutor Focus Group Top Themes in Order

Acquisition of Skills	Experiences Working With Kindergarteners	Transference of Skills
1. Tracking	1. Positive experiences with kindergartener	1. To friends and families
2. Encouraging statements	2. Kindergartener improvement	2. Future use of skills
3. Reflecting feelings	3. Struggles with kindergartener	
4. Limit setting		
5. Areas of needed change		

Acquisition of skills. Tracking, the skill of stating exactly what the tutor sees the tutee doing, was identified regularly during focus groups as a skill utilized during peer

tutoring. Fifth grade use of tracking over the 6 week period ranged from 0 references during week 1 to 6 references in week 3. Students said things such as, "I tracked a lot...I said 'you know all the shapes'." Students frequently stated that it was difficult to remember not to say "good job" and to instead use an encouraging statement. Over time, tutors identified their use of encouraging statements more frequently and regarded encouraging statements as one of the aspects that they did well. Use of encouragement ranged from 1 reference (week 1) to 7 references (week 6). Examples of student comments include, "She wrote the whole entire alphabet and I said, 'you should be proud of yourself because you wrote the whole entire alphabet by yourself' and "... I used encouraging statements, even though I'm used to saying like good job."

Of the four play therapy language skills taught to 5th grade students, limit-setting was the most frequently identified as being utilized. Use of limit-setting ranged from 2 references (week 3) to 9 references (week 6). For example, one student said, "Sometimes he would lose focus. Then I'd set the limit." When her kindergarten buddy struggled to focus, another student reported saying "I know you want to look on that and play, but right now we have to work on words, you can play later at recess." Of the four identified play therapy skills, reflection of feelings was the least frequent skill used according to student's reflections during focus group sessions. When students shared about reflecting the kindergarteners' feelings they stated things like, "She was smiling and kind of bouncing and I said 'you seem excited today,' and she answered and I was like you look really happy and she was like yes, because I'm happy to see you."

Experiences working with kindergartener. Fifth graders identified positive experiences with their kindergarten tutee, for example, one student shared, "The

positive thing was she was really trying hard" and "what [she] was doing good was like she was understanding the directions I was giving her." Students noted behavioral improvements such as "... he was always jumping around his classroom and ... like he was super hyper and now he isn't so hyper anymore," and "she was really transitioning well this time. We didn't stay on one thing. She did something maybe for like 5 minutes and then did another thing and then we stopped and did the next thing." The frequency of complaints about kindergarteners' behaviors remained relatively stable, though the type of change desired or problem varied from week to week. For example, 5th grade tutors reflected: "he was really jumpy," "he was like staring over at other kids and just staring out into space," and "She needs help with transition because if we went to do something else, she was still doing what we were doing before." By the end of the tutoring experience, 5th grade tutors were more likely to reference identified areas of needed academic improvement rather than purely behavioral issues; for example, "what he needs to work on [are his numbers] when he gets into 15, 16, 17 up there, I think he needs to start working on [those higher numbers]."

In early weeks a greater percentage of the focus group session time was focused on specific experiences with the kindergarteners than in later weeks, where 5th grade students reflected on a range of themes such as their own acquisition of skills, and transference of skills to other areas.

Transference of skills. As students began to use the skills more during tutoring sessions, they reported changes in their thought processes and actions outside of the tutoring session. Students gained an understanding of what it might be like to be a teacher and even stated that tutoring was influencing their future careers "... I think I'm

going to be a teacher when I grow up,” and “I think it could be exciting ‘cause like some of things that we do make it exciting. I think it is fun to teach other people.” One student noted that the skills and tutoring experience would benefit her in the future “if we grow up and we happen to have children [and] if they are really arguing with you, you could use [these skills,]” and “these will be handy in middle school.” Students also stated that they began using the play therapy language outside of the designated peer tutoring time and with both friends and family members. Dealing with siblings was frequently noted as a time skills would be and already were beneficial: “I have an annoying sister, what I’ve learned at peer tutoring could really help with my sister like for example if I’m doing my homework and she annoys me I could just like remind her to stay away from me while I’m doing my homework and I’ll play with her later.” Another student stated that she reflected a friend’s feeling by saying, “Well my friend...she was looking kind of frustrated. So I said you look kind of frustrated right now.”

5th Grade Student Survey Themes

On student surveys, fifth grade students were asked to reflect on their experiences as a peer tutor, any changes they had observed in themselves and their tutees, and overall feelings and suggestions for the tutoring program. Table 2 provides a summary of these responses.

Table 2*Fifth Grade Student Survey Response Themes and Subthemes*

Student Concept of What Makes a Good Mentor	Student Areas of Growth and Reasons to Enjoy Tutoring	Academic Growth	Feelings About the Mentoring Program	Transference of Skills
Patience	Patience	Increased time spent reading	Keep everything the same	Increased empathy
Kindness	Getting to teach and help	Increased reading skills	Increased length and frequency of mentoring time	Use of skills with siblings and friends
	Tutoring was enjoyable		Less frequent lunch groups	Change in language used to argue or discipline
	Increased maturity		Change skill of tracking	

Patience and kindness were identified by 11 out of the 14 tutors as characteristics that make an individual a positive tutor. Patience was also the most common area of growth. For example in the words of one tutor, "One of the reasons why the tutoring of a kindergarten student benefited me was because it made me more patient than before." One student stated, "I've been more calm when I'm upset" as a way that tutoring changed them.

The next most frequently identified theme was the idea of getting to teach or help a student as an enjoyable experience. From simple statements such as "I enjoy helping the kindergarteners" to statements like "I like how I get to be like a personal teacher to my kindergarten buddy," the concept of helping/tutoring in a positive way was referenced 16 times throughout the 14 student surveys. Some students recognized that teaching and helping was difficult but still found it enjoyable for example, "I learned that teaching can be fun but hard" and, "It was fun and instead of learning, I taught."

Students enjoyed helping a student learn – "I felt that tutoring was enjoyable by working with the kindergartener and helping them learn." Out of 14 student participants, 11 students noted that their own reading skills were affected in a positive way because of working with kindergarten students on reading. For example, "Being a peer [tutor] has influenced me in my reading. By teaching [my tutee] letter sounds, it helps me pronounce my words better."

Play therapy language and skills were referenced throughout the student surveys. Students noted that "I learned a lot of important skills. (Tracking, reflect the feeling, etc.)" and "I learned helpful skills." More specifically, encouraging statements and limit setting were both identified by students as being particularly beneficial. In terms of the usefulness of encouraging statements, one student said that "encouraging phrases help my buddy keep going", and another said "another example of how my training changed how I treated my buddy is because I don't have to always say "good job" to her." Students themselves noted a growth over time in their skills, "[At first], I never really set the limits. Now I do set the limits and I set them a lot."

Students were asked to reflect on the tutoring program as a whole and provide feedback on what they would change, keep the same, or any other comments they would like to contribute about the program. One suggestion was related to the length and frequency of tutoring sessions: "If I were in charge of the peer [tutoring] program what I'll keep the same is to set the limits with your [student] and track them. What I would change is that to try to have a little more time with my kindergartener and maybe have it 2 times a week." Another suggested, "I would change the schedule because I think once a week is not enough for the kindergartener and the peer tutor. I would also

make the time 30 min longer because I want the kindergartener to learn you need more time to teach him/her. But other than that, I would keep everything else the same."

Students discovered that they could apply the skills they learned in peer tutoring to different areas of their lives. In particular, the fifth graders reported 15 examples of utilizing the skills outside of school, especially with their siblings and friends. Students reported paying more attention to how others were feeling: "I'm a little bit more exciting because of some of the skills you have taught me. As a friend if they are sad I can say "you seem [sad] today! And they will know that I can see how they feel," "I show more empathy/understanding to others," "I have learned to set the limit with anybody. I go home every day and set one or two limits to my brother," and "I am a better friend because instead of getting mad I set the limit instead." Another student said that because of the skills, "It changed because at home when my sister is bugging me, I don't have to scream at her anymore to get out of my room." The students had observed that the language they used with their siblings, family and friends had changed in a positive way: "[Tutoring] benefits me in one way because it helps me a lot at home with my family how I talk and interact with them."

5th Grade Teacher Observations

The fifth grade teachers were asked to give their observations of any changes that occurred throughout their students' participation in the peer-tutoring program. One of the most prevalent themes to emerge from 5th grade teacher surveys was the fact that their student participants showed assistance to peers more frequently. For example, one teacher said, "She seems to offer help and give advice more. I've noticed that she now takes on a more [assertive] role with helping students her own age. She

does a better job explaining her thinking." Another teacher said that "[He] is brilliant and funny but can be quiet. This was a good experience for him to build up working with others skills."

An increase in leadership, maturity, or signs of responsibility was documented by several teachers. Some changes were small, "I observed [him] mature during the program. He became a strong leader and more responsible," and "[she] is an overachiever and this helped her to take on more responsibility. It aided her with leadership roles and staying to a schedule while always remembering when she needed to tutor. Other changes were more drastic, "[He] pretends to be a 'bad boy' who is 'too cool' for things like this. He was always the first ready to go tutor though. It was great to develop the softer side."

Teachers also noted that tutoring brought out an increase in students' confidence, "this has brought her out of her shell a bit," and another student was noted to be participating in class more. One student was described as "more empathetic to her peers." Teachers responded with only positive reflections on their overall impressions of the program, stated that their students looked forward to and enjoyed the peer tutoring program: "the fifth graders enjoyed being good role models and feeling the accomplishment of teaching someone something." One of the 5th grade teachers reflected on the benefits to the younger students: "So many younger kids are below grade level and with early intervention using a 5th grader; it helps to aid parents and teachers with catching them up. The younger ones also look up to the 5th graders and they want to learn from them."

Kindergarten Teacher Observations

The kindergarten teachers were also asked for their observations related to the tutoring program. According to their teachers, 11 kindergarten students showed signs of reading growth over time. Some teachers provided specific data as to the print concepts, letter names, and letter sound growth from before and after the program. Teachers said things like, "The students who were tutored increased their sound/letter knowledge. Also, the students who were tutored do have some behavior challenges so it was good for them to be with an older student who modeled good behavior for them," "her letter practice with her [tutor] increased her knowledge of letters and sounds," and "her letter recognition and sound production increased." Teachers also reflected that they perceived 10 of the student participants to have particularly enjoyed and benefited from participation in the peer tutoring program: "[He] is eager to please and enjoyed the individual attention from an older student," "she is motivated and excited to be with an older student," and "it built her self-confidence."

The data from the MEACI, student focus groups, student surveys, 5th grade and kindergarten teacher surveys supported each other, indicating that 5th grade students gained important empathy skills and were improved helpers, peers, friends and siblings. Additionally, both the 5th graders and the kindergarten teachers noted the positive changes in kindergarten student behavior and academics.

Discussion

The dominant data from this school counseling program is consistent with previous research on peer tutoring programs (Dennison, 2000; Shanahan, 1998; Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Berkeley, 2007), which indicates that the tutors receive the

majority of the benefits in a peer tutoring relationship. All 14 5th grade peer tutors demonstrated increased display of empathy. Improved empathy and cooperation can lead not only to improved academic engagement in children (Karcher, 2008), but also, students with higher empathy skills are more likely to defend and stick up for a peer being victimized by bullying, an important attribute for children entering middle school.

5th grade students in this study all showed an improved score on the MEACI test but, perhaps more importantly, the reflections students provided through focus groups and surveys indicated that they perceived growth within themselves. Students reflected that they were better friends, siblings, and students due to their participation in the program. Furthermore, students reported that participating in peer tutoring improved both their academic and social competence, which is consistent with previous studies (Hendrickson & Freedman, 1980; Reissman, 1990). Since school administrators are often hesitant to support play-based programs unless there are clear academic or behavioral benefits (Robinson, Landreth, & Packman, 2007), these findings may encourage the acceptance of future play-based programs.

The 5th grade teacher's surveys supported the data students provided about themselves with reflections about students increased helping skills, leadership, confidence, and overall positive tutoring experiences. These perceived benefits are also consistent with previous research (Briggs, 1998). Our teachers noted that many students took on an increased helping role outside of the peer tutoring. This is consistent with previous research which has indicated that being a helper allows students to feel empowered, to feel competent, to be open to learning, and to be more independent (Reissman, 1990). The majority of 5th grade students' perceptions that

their kindergarten students were improving academically or behaviorally was supported by data from kindergarten teacher surveys, which indicated that the majority of students both enjoyed the experience and improved academically.

The reflections of 5th grade students indicated that they believed the play therapy language skills were useful. This study's finding that 5th grade students benefited from the skills lends support to the fact that this language is useful when working with children no matter the person's age utilizing the skills. 5th grade students indicated an understanding that "teaching can be fun but hard." With research indicating that teacher display of empathy is important to a student's education (Helm, 2007), this study provides even more support for the effectiveness and usefulness of programs like Kinder Training. While teachers may not be able to have individual play sessions with children, they could participate in training similar to the 5th grade students in order to incorporate these skills into their classroom.

One interesting finding was the fifth graders' recognition of alternatives to yelling when setting limits with younger children. Limiting the amount of yelling in the classroom in the home, and between children is a desirable goal. When reflecting on his tutoring experience a student shared that "when my sister is bugging me, I don't have to scream at her anymore to get out of my room." Students found that yelling is not the only way to deal with someone not listening, and that the steps found in limit setting can be effectively utilized during difficulties. The role of the school counselor includes teaching social skills and through this program 5th grade students acquired important concepts and tools for improved social interactions. As 5th grade students were able to not only transfer these skills to other areas of their lives, but also see the benefits of

transference, it is likely that parents, teachers, and administrators could find this language beneficial in their interaction with students. By providing them with alternatives to screaming and yelling through play therapy language training, teachers, parents, and administrators might display more empathetic responses as the 5th grade students in this program did.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is the lack of data on how this program impacted the kindergarteners' reading levels. The researchers had hoped for more definitive data on the kindergarteners' reading levels before and after participation in the tutoring program. However, this was prevented due to a district-wide change that took place after the tutoring program had begun. Teachers were then required to use a new reading test, which they conducted with their students at varying times. The type of data created from this testing could not be utilized for this study since there were no clear-cut pre- and post-measures in reading related to the tutoring program. Therefore, the only data about the kindergarten participants came from the teachers' reflective post surveys and the fifth grade students' observations. This data is not as strong as reading tests performed at intervals before, during, and after participation in a peer tutoring program. While kindergarten teachers completed surveys and indicated that most of their student participants experienced reading growth during the program, this study did not control for other impacts on kindergarten student's reading growth, such as cognitive and social development and normal academic progress. Control groups of low achieving kindergarten students who did not participate in the peer tutoring program would strengthen a future study that had reading score measurements. The fifth grade student

participants also did not have a control group. Empathy growth was seen in the fifth grade tutors, but the empathy scores of other fifth grade students were not examined. While unlikely, it is possible that the growth in empathy could be attributed to general social development. In addition, the increase in empathy of the program participants could be attributed to getting to know their kindergarten tutee better. However, the fifth graders' reflections on the surveys and in focus groups indicated that they found the play therapy language skills central to their experience as peer tutors.

Implications for School Counselors

Through the implementation of this program the school counselor's ability to meet the maximum number of students' needs was improved – the 5th grade tutors helped other students in their classes, as well as their tutees; and the kindergarten students gained academic improvement as well as important social support. Administrators are more likely to block the implementation of programs if school counselors cannot prove that they improve academic performance or decrease disruptive behaviors (Ray, Bratton, Rhine, & Jones, 2001). Because these results lend support for using the play therapy language as an academic, rather than just social and emotional tool, this may open the door for more schools to implement this type of program.

The potential for combining peer tutoring with child-centered play therapy language is huge. Future research could explore the benefits of school counselors training children of all ages in this approach. Closer examinations of using child-centered play therapy language in peer tutoring relationships could yield discipline specific benefits, such as stronger reading comprehension related to an increase in

empathy for characters in a story. Furthermore, having more adults trained to use the language could have more positive impacts on the students. If teachers transfer the child-centered play therapy language to their classroom effectively, the social and academic needs of more students may be more efficiently met. Students would then have more opportunities to mirror the language used in their classes with their peers on the playground or at home.

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