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
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.

Keywords
case study, play therapy, qualitative, developmental, constructivist

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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 & McNell, 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; Sangganjanavanich & 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 individuals engaged in 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 learning varies in style across disciplines, it is described as the matching of teachers' instruction style and content with students' individualized needs (Granell & Hazler, 1998). In relation to the helping professions, different individuals have applied the constructivist paradigm to graduate-level learners (Bruss & Kopala, 1993), for example, to scaffold students to higher levels of self-directed learning. In contrast, a major concern related to CITs is the need for dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment. In combination, researchers and scholars agree that the successful process of CITs involves the development of levels of learning (i.e., nine stages within Perry’s, 1970; and eight stages of development within King and Kitchener, 2004). The constructivist approach to learning requires CITs to assess students' level of learning in order to meet the needs of their Millennial students (i.e., using theoretical consistency with instructional consistency). In addition, the structure of the classroom must support CITs in developing classroom reality based on their experiences (McAuliffe & Stas, 2009; Libal, D., Delworth, 1982). Following theoretical practice, researchers found evidence supporting that graduate students respond well to developmental levels (Stewart, 1995). And the benefits of learning in a developmental environment may extend to all graduate-level learners (Bruss & Kopala, 1993).

According to Granell and Hazler (1998), the three major motivators of adult learning are: (a) self-direction, (b) previous experience, and (c) the requirement for flexibility. Being this said, counselor education student-learning is also motivated by the direction they see themselves taking, their past learned experience, and desire for flexibility in the classroom (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 1987). As such, a constructivist-developmental framework of learning in CIT development is the hallmark of the counseling profession (Hawkins & Shohet, 2000). Successful counselors engage in reflective practice by using the therapeutic relationship accounts for the greatest amount of counselor-based therapeutic outcomes regardless of theoretical or intervention theories. Therefore, in the helping professions, successful counselors follow Rogers’s (1957, 1980) recommendations to facilitate a therapeutic relationship, which require (a) a therapist and client to be in psychological contact, (b) a client to be congruent with the therapist in both belief system and behaviors, (c) a therapist to be congruent with himself/herself, (d) a therapist to express unconditional positive regard, (e) the therapist to experience an empathic understanding of the client's lived experience, and (f) a client to perceive and experience the therapist’s empathy and unconditional positive regard.

In addition to meeting Rogers’s (1957) conditions, reflection is the hallmark of the counseling profession (Hawkins & Shohet, 2000). Successful counselors engage in reflective practice by using the therapeutic relationship accounts for the greatest amount of counselor-based therapeutic outcomes regardless of theoretical or intervention theories. Therefore, in the helping professions, successful counselors follow Rogers’s (1957, 1980) recommendations to facilitate a therapeutic relationship, which require (a) a therapist and client to be in psychological contact, (b) a client to be congruent with the therapist in both belief system and behaviors, (c) a therapist to be congruent with himself/herself, (d) a therapist to express unconditional positive regard, (e) the therapist to experience an empathic understanding of the client’s lived experience, and (f) a client to perceive and experience the therapist’s empathy and unconditional positive regard.

**Constructivist Framework with Developmental Learning**

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 of teaching, the constructivist paradigm encourages the instructor to individualize the social, emotional, and intellectual climate of the course to match students’ current level of learning. It is recommended that students have a particular prior learning experience (Ambrose, 2008; King, 2002; et al.), which in turn will allow students to be flexible in the course and make the best decision for that situation. In the middle level, where most graduate students likely fall – quasi-reflective thinking – the student believes that all knowledge is uncertain and there are no right answers. Therefore, instructors are to assess students’ level of development prior to course learning and periodically throughout the semester 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 allow students to learn in their own way. King and Kitchener (2004) described the stages of development as (a) technological (short attention span; need more engagement), (b) special (entitlement), (c) team–oriented (emphasis on group work), (d) sheltered (dependency on adults), (e) confident (uncritical self-assessment), (f) tolerant (value agreements); (g) pressured (can lead to performance anxiety); (h) critical (can lead to self-criticism and helplessness); (i) achieving (want to get the answer right), and (j) conventional (creativity is hampered). Therefore, in line with the major tenets of constructivist-developmental thinking, instructors are recommended to alter their teaching approach to support students’ unique attributes of learning in order to meet the needs of their Millennial students (King, 2002). The constructivist-developmental framework of CIT development is the hallmark of the counseling profession (Hawkins & Shohet, 2000). Successful counselors engage in reflective practice by using the therapeutic relationship accounts for the greatest amount of counselor-based therapeutic outcomes regardless of theoretical or intervention theories. Therefore, in the helping professions, successful counselors follow Rogers’s (1957, 1980) recommendations to facilitate a therapeutic relationship, which require (a) a therapist and client to be in psychological contact, (b) a client to be congruent with the therapist in both belief system and behaviors, (c) a therapist to be congruent with himself/herself, (d) a therapist to express unconditional positive regard, (e) the therapist to experience an empathic understanding of the client’s lived experience, and (f) a client to perceive and experience the therapist’s empathy and unconditional positive regard. **Characteristics of a Successful Counselor**

Counselors work from a variety of theoretical lenses and perform a broad range of interventions with individuals, couples, and family systems. With the ability to engage in reflective practice, counselors can reflect on their own experiences and reflect on the experiences of others. counselors follow Rogers’s (1957, 1980) recommendations to facilitate a therapeutic relationship, which require (a) a therapist and client to be in psychological contact, (b) a client to be congruent with the therapist in both belief system and behaviors, (c) a therapist to be congruent with himself/herself, (d) a therapist to express unconditional positive regard, (e) the therapist to experience an empathic understanding of the client’s lived experience, and (f) a client to perceive and experience the therapist’s empathy and unconditional positive regard.

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The researchers include a Counselor Education faculty member and two doctoral students in Counselor Education programs at a mid-sized public university. The first author is a Registered Play Therapist (RPT), Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), and Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC). The second author is a Nationally Certified Counselor (NCC) and Registered Mental Health Counseling Intern (RMHCI). The third author is also a NCC, RMHCI, and a Registered Marriage and Family Therapist Intern (RMFTI). All three researchers have experience teaching in constructivist-based classrooms in Counselor Education Programs.

**METHOD**

Qualitative analysis encompasses individual realities and interactions with the world (Merriam, 1998). As such, qualitative researchers attempt to understand the constructed meanings people create in order to make sense of the events and experiences they undergo through the use of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies. In our research, we utilized a qualitative research methodology involving a bounded system (i.e., case) over a specified time period (Creswell, 2007).

Case study research is viewed as a methodology or type of qualitative research that diverges from previous research indicators (Merriam, 1998). We used a qualitative case study research design to explore the influence of one specific event in a more detailed context. Case study research is the hallmark of the counseling profession (Hawkins & Shohet, 2000). Successful counselors engage in reflective practice by using the therapeutic relationship accounts for the greatest amount of counselor-based therapeutic outcomes regardless of theoretical or intervention theories. Therefore, in the helping professions, successful counselors follow Rogers’s (1957, 1980) recommendations to facilitate a therapeutic relationship, which require (a) a therapist and client to be in psychological contact, (b) a client to be congruent with the therapist in both belief system and behaviors, (c) a therapist to be congruent with himself/herself, (d) a therapist to express unconditional positive regard, (e) the therapist to experience an empathic understanding of the client’s lived experience, and (f) a client to perceive and experience the therapist’s empathy and unconditional positive regard. **Student Outcomes in Play Therapy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Epistemological viewpoint</th>
<th>Concept of learning</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Reflective Thinking</td>
<td>Beliefs are certain...</td>
<td>Reflection...</td>
<td>My professor presented the rubric that was the right size, so he is right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Thinking</td>
<td>Beliefs are uncertain...</td>
<td>Reflection...</td>
<td>I disagree with the professor, so he is wrong.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 1. Levels of Reflective Judgment**


**New Case Study Approach to Learning**

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 allow students to learn in their own way. King and Kitchener (2004) described the stages of development as (a) technological (short attention span; need more engagement), (b) special (entitlement), (c) team-oriented (emphasis on group work), (d) sheltered (dependency on adults), (e) confident (uncritical self-assessment), (f) tolerant (value agreements); (g) pressured (can lead to performance anxiety); (h) critical (can lead to self-criticism and helplessness); (i) achieving (want to get the answer right), and (j) conventional (creativity is hampered). Therefore, in line with the major tenets of constructivist-developmental thinking, instructors are recommended to alter their teaching approach to support students’ unique attributes of learning in order to meet the needs of their Millennial students (King, 2002). The constructivist-developmental framework of CIT development is the hallmark of the counseling profession (Hawkins & Shohet, 2000). Successful counselors engage in reflective practice by using the therapeutic relationship accounts for the greatest amount of counselor-based therapeutic outcomes regardless of theoretical or intervention theories. Therefore, in the helping professions, successful counselors follow Rogers’s (1957, 1980) recommendations to facilitate a therapeutic relationship, which require (a) a therapist and client to be in psychological contact, (b) a client to be congruent with the therapist in both belief system and behaviors, (c) a therapist to be congruent with himself/herself, (d) a therapist to express unconditional positive regard, (e) the therapist to experience an empathic understanding of the client’s lived experience, and (f) a client to perceive and experience the therapist’s empathy and unconditional positive regard.
families; (b) to demonstrate knowledge of the therapeutic goals included a number of objectives: (a) to demonstrate knowledge of the material. It is crucial for the instructor to model for the students their own realities within the classroom setting (Sangganjanavanich & Black, 2011). Final assignment three involved a group project. The researchers demonstrated students' knowledge of material presented in class (Course objectives a-i). Students participated as the counselor on two occasions and a skills checklist is completed by a minimum of two observers and the course instructor. The second assignment (Self Assessment of Learning) had a goal of enabling students to self-reflect on their developmental process of learning the course material and to evaluate their own integration of the material (Course objectives a-i). The assignment was student-led, which allowed for students to take responsibility for their own learning. Researchers compared questions on the course topics to their own realities within the classroom setting (Sanganjanavanich & Black, 2011). Finally, assignment three involved a group project. The researchers demonstrated students' knowledge of material presented in class (Course objectives a-i, b, c, d, e). The Group Project was also a self-reflecting environment to promote student engagement, challenge, and support for constructivist-based learning (McNeill, 2011; Sanganjanavanich & Black, 2011).

Data Analysis
We selected a case methodology for the research design because the participating classroom students were bound by time and activities (Creswell, 2007; Mertens, 2005). Specifically, an instrumental case study because the case served as an instrument 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 and considering the class as a case study, we relied on our predisposed ideas influenced data collection (Yin, 2014). Additionally, the design of the case study and the organization of the case study analysis was influenced by the propositions; thus, we decided to analyze the data on post-test first to use our theoretical propositions to guide our data analysis (Yin, 2014).

The case study data analysis plan initially involved data collection and organization. We then demarcated boundaries of the case and identifying information was removed (i.e., names, program code) to ensure objective evaluation of correct answers. Pre- and post-assessments per participant were given the same code to compare individual results across time. Assessments were open-ended and screening processes necessary when formulating groups; (d) to discuss multicultural considerations and the use of group and family therapy with children, preadolescents, adolescents, and families; (e) to demonstrate knowledge of the therapeutic goals of group and family play therapy; (f) to demonstrate strategies for meeting the unique developmental considerations of involving the immediate family in family play therapy; (g) to determine curriculum and clinical applications of family therapy (i.e., responses to therapeutic interventionally to all members, setting therapeutic limits, facilitating problem-solving and conflict resolution); and (h) to demonstrate the ability to create group interventions appropriate to specific populations. Course objectives are provided in Table 1. Pre-assessment was to provide a broader understanding of the bounded case (i.e., course) utilized in this research investigation.

Course assignments included: (a) Meta-practicum; (b) Self-Assessment of Learning, and (c) Group Project for the Play Therapy Course. The Meta-practicum assignment had a goal of allowing students the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and application of skills. Course objective b) Students participated as the counselor on two occasions and a skills checklist is completed by a minimum of two observers and the course instructor. The second assignment (Self Assessment of Learning) had a goal of enabling students to self-reflect on their developmental process of learning the course material and to evaluate their own integration of the material (Course objectives a-i). The assignment was student-led, which allowed for students to take responsibility for their own learning. Researchers compared questions on the course topics to their own realities within the classroom setting (Sanganjanavanich & Black, 2011). Final assignment three involved a group project. The researchers demonstrated students' knowledge of material presented in class (Course objectives a-i, b, c, d, e). The Group Project was also a self-reflecting environment to promote student engagement, challenge, and support for constructivist-based learning (McNeill, 2011; Sanganjanavanich & Black, 2011).

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We examined number of questions in which students demonstrated a difference in knowledge across content. We examined number of questions in which students demonstrated a difference in knowledge across content. We examined number of questions in which students demonstrated a difference in knowledge across content. We examined number of questions in which students demonstrated a difference in knowledge across content. We examined number of questions in which students demonstrated a difference in knowledge across content. We examined number of questions in which students demonstrated a difference in knowledge across content.
to 37% of accurate previous knowledge entering the classroom. This finding supports the constructivist framework that students enter with pre-existing knowledge (two points) on the pre-assessment. This finding supports the learning of students to be successful in their work with children, averaging a 43.2% increase in knowledge from pre- to post-assessment. The researchers hypothesize the students entered thinking. For every question, approximately 12 of 29 students left that question blank. The researchers hypothesize that this policy enabled students to stay engaged with the activity and to take responsibility for their learning while demonstrating their knowledge. Future researchers should explore this concept more closely and how it relates to the students’ overall knowledge retention. However, for this particular sample of students, the researchers benefited students overall demonstration of retained knowledge over the course of the semester.

In line with Kitchener’s and King’s (2004) model of reflective judgment, students in this study demonstrated an increase in reflective thinking. For every question, approximately 12 of 29 students left that question blank. The researchers hypothesize the students entered the classroom with pre-existing knowledge – that they did not have a right answer; therefore, they choose to leave the question blank for not knowing the exact correct answer. Majority of students assessed appeared to increase in their reflective thinking as evidenced by providing a more detailed answer on the post-assessment – less questions were left blank compared to the pre-assessment. For example, student A wrote on the pre-assessment, “I don’t know.” However, for the post-assessment, student A was able to answer the question fully to earn two points, demonstrating an increase in knowledge attained as well as potentially increasing in her reflective thinking.

Further, some students entered the classroom with existing knowledge of play therapy that could be added to over the course of the semester. Per question, up to nine students had accurate knowledge (two points) on the pre-assessment. This finding supports the notion that students who already have prior knowledge of the topic are more likely to increase their knowledge. Conversely, students who had up to 37% of accurate previous knowledge entering the classroom. The structure of this course appears to lend evidence to the increase in students’ knowledge and therefore, other instructors may benefit from adding components of this structure to their courses more exponentially in nature.

**Future Research**

It behooves the field of counseling and counselor educators specifically, to continue evaluating current courses and integrating new research findings, best practices, and students’ needs into each course. As the field moves toward evidence-based practices, instructors should challenge themselves to conduct continual scholarship of teaching and learning. For example, this study found that many students’ curriculum order and teaching styles in counselor education programs.

In addition, replication with another similar course is warranted to test for possible testing bias given that they took the same assessment across two time periods. Despite these limitations, this preliminary qualitative study provided evidence for a constructivist-developmental model of teaching; however, future research should examine this model to multiple sections of course offerings or across different semesters.

The instructor will spend more time directly reflecting on ethical considerations and adaptations for family play therapy in future practice and content. However, for objectives (a) through (e), students demonstrated an increase of knowledge in these content areas.

**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 developmental framework. 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 for this specific course. A review of the findings indicates that the instructor appeared to have met the course objectives (a) through (e). However, the course might benefit from increasing the discussion and course content in regards to objectives (f) and (g).

Further research and future studies are needed to fully understand the benefit of assignment re-do’s. Thus, we recommend the instructor explore the implementation of assignment re-do’s and how the policy impacts student knowledge and retention. Examination of students’ level of engagement in the context of the constructivist-developmental framework for this course is also warranted. Although some evidence (e., unanswered questions at pre-test to complete answers at post-test) demonstrates students benefit from re-examining the material. Instructors are advised to examine this finding more specifically in future scholarship of teaching and learning. The structure of this course appears to lend evidence to the increase in students’ knowledge and therefore, other instructors may benefit from adding components of this structure to their courses more exponentially in nature.

**CONCLUSION**

A 43.2% increase in knowledge from pre- to post-assessment – that there must be a policy requirement to assign at least one re-do per assignment to increase in their demonstration of knowledge. The instructor hypothesized that this policy enabled students to stay engaged with the activity and to take responsibility for their learning while demonstrating their knowledge. Future researchers should explore this concept more closely and how it relates to the students’ overall knowledge retention. However, for this particular sample of students, the researchers benefited students overall demonstration of retained knowledge over the course of the semester.

**REFERENCES**


