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

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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

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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, Wächter 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, DiPietro, 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 others and to move beyond cultural practices, and experiences. Constructivism is the theoretical foundation of the course we examined in the current study.

Developmental Learning

Developmental learning conforms to the unique strengths of an educator and the demands of a field of study. While developmental teaching varies in style across disciplines, it is described as the matching of teachers’ instruction style with content and students’ individualized needs (Granell & Hazler, 1998). In relation to the helping professions, different individuals have applied the three levels of developmental-level learning, supporting that students move through developmental stages (e.g., Bruss & Kopala, 1993; Kreiser, Ham, Wigers, & Feldstein, 1991; Stewart, 1995). For example, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) found support for a developmental framework for conceptualizing CITs’ growth. The authors state that CITs progress through developmental stages of: (a) imitating others to having self-confidence, (b) relying on rules to guide one’s learning; Ambrose et al., 2010). The marrying of these two approaches enables the matching of teachers’ instruction style and content with students’ current level of development to best impact their learning experience (Ambrose et al., 2010). The quasi-reflective and reflective thinking encourage the instructor to individualize the social, emotional, and intellectual climate of the course to match students’ current level of development and to match the classroom structure of the classroom (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Gaff and Gaff (1981) claimed that in order to motivate individuals to learn, students must be challenged. Thus, the constructivist-developmental framework of this current study can aid in studying CIT development. The instructor can scaffold the student to great levels of learning, while also encouraging students to take responsibility and to engage in their own learning process.

The Millennial Generation

The majority of students pursuing advanced degrees in higher education are members of the millennial generation (McNeill, 2011), as are the participants of this investigation. The Millennial student possesses core traits that are both beneficial and harmful to student learning depending on the method of instruction. McNeil (2011) described Millennials as (a) technologically oriented (emphasis on group work), (d) sheltered (dependency on content, so it is. As reflecting the class, so it is. level thinking in students rather than concrete understanding of the material. These suggestions fall in line with a constructivist-developmental framework.

Characteristics of a Successful Counselor

Counselors work from a variety of theoretical lenses and perform a broad range of interventions with individual, couple, and family clients, both in a clinical setting and in effective groups. 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 himself/herself, (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 (Hawks & Shohet, 1989), and successful counselors engage in reflective practice. The researchers include a Counselor Education faculty member and two doctoral students in a large Southeastern, CACREP accredited Counselor Education Programs. The researchers include a Counselor Education faculty member and two doctoral students in a large Southeastern, CACREP accredited Counselor Education Programs. The researchers include a Counselor Education faculty member and two doctoral students in a large Southeastern, CACREP accredited Counselor Education Programs. The researchers include a Counselor Education faculty member and two doctoral students in a large Southeastern, CACREP accredited 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 (Holloway &腾腾, 1996). As such, qualitative research methodology involving a bounded system (i.e., case) over a specified time period (Creswell, 2007).

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The course used in this instrumental qualitative investigation was designed to examine the influence of a Play Therapy course on the knowledge and ability of the therapist’s role in group and family play therapy; (f) to describe and discuss ethical considerations and challenges of involving parents when conducting group play therapy; (g) to describe and discuss ethical considerations and challenges of involving parents when conducting group and family play therapy as a means for facilitating change in children, preadolescents, adolescents, and families; (h) to demonstrate the knowledge and ability of the therapist’s role in group and family play therapy; (i) to demonstrate knowledge of the therapeutic goals facilitating change in children, preadolescents, adolescents, and families; (b) to demonstrate knowledge of the therapeutic goals facilitating change in children, preadolescents, adolescents, and families, the researchers obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and obtained using a variety of collection procedures over a five week period. Nineteen students completed both the pre- and post-assessment for this study. All 19 students demonstrated marked improvement on three to 19 students per question compared to the post-test in which the range was two to 17. The average number of students who earned two points per question was M = 1.14 (pre-assessment) compared to M = 9.52 (post-assessment).
discussion
Graduate level studies are designed to increase skills and knowledge necessary to achieve future vocational success (Beaman, 1995) and participation is determined by the quantity, dependability, and quality of the student’s knowledge. Through this constructivist-developmental framework in this study was used to promote both student-led learning and increase the quality of student engagement. Students entered the course knowing 37% or less on the pre-assessment (as 22% of 59 total points). Through the active engagement process of the course, the students’ overall knowledge gained increased an average of 24.47 or 43% improvement over time. All three assignments were designed to challenge students to actively engage in the learning process (Gaff & Gaff, 1981; McAiliffe & Eriksen, 2011), and to increase their ability to retain knowledge over the duration of the semester (e.g., 16 weeks). In addition, students required flexibility in their learning (McAiliffe & Eriksen, 2011), the instructor enacted a policy that all students could use 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, this model provided benefits for overall students’ 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-reflective thinking – that there must be a question blank. The researchers hypothesize the students entered the classroom with pre-reflective thinking – that there must be a question blank. The researchers hypothesize the students entered the classroom with pre-reflective thinking – that there must be a question blank. 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 re-assessment, the findings indicate that the instructor appeared to have met the course objectives (a) through (e), students demonstrated an increase in knowledge from pre- to post-assessment. The mean of students’ responses to items related to the learning course objectives for this course increased with the exception of objectives (f) to describe and discuss ethical considerations and challenges of involving parents when conducting group play therapy and (g) to describe strategies and adaptations for meeting the unique developmental considerations of involving the immediate family in family play therapy. Both objectives were discussed briefly in the course; therefore, the instructor will spend more time directly reflecting on ethical considerations and adaptations for family play therapy in future course discussion and context. However, for objectives (a) through (e), students demonstrated an increase in knowledge from 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 investigation 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, context, and content of the current course. Findings from this study also provided insight into future research.

Implications
Course Specific
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).

Future research is needed to further examine the benefits of assignment re-do. Thus, we recommend the instructor explore the implementation of assignment re-do and how the policy impacts student knowledge and retention. Examination of students’ level of understanding the constructivist-developmental model at the end of the course is also warranted. Although some evidence (e.g., unanswered questions at pre-test to complete answers at post-test) demonstrates students’ growth in their reflective judgment. Further research could examine how 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 externally in nature.

Future Research
It behooves the field of counseling and counselor educators specifically, to evaluate the current course and integrating new research findings, best practices, and students’ needs into each course. The field moves towards evidence-based practices, instructors should challenge themselves to conduct continual scholarship of teaching and learning. Student assessment findings into their course teaching to enhance the learning of the students. This preliminary qualitative study provided evidence for a constructivist-developmental model of teaching; however, future research should examine this model into multiple institutions, different sections, and across different semesters. For instance, future studies could include random assignment into a traditional course and into a constructivist-developmental approach. In addition, replication with another similar course is warranted to see if results are comparable.

Conclusion
Researchers should consider using a qualitative research design to explore the effectiveness of constructivist-developmental classrooms in their institutions for limiting their engagement in students in active learning. While researching teacher effectiveness in counselor education programs is sparse, counselor education classrooms – as well as graduate level courses in general – are moving towards constructivist and developmental paradigms due to their theoretical meeting of CIT’s needs. Thus, we investigated the influence of a constructivist-developmental format on a play therapy counseling course. Through an interpretive qualitative investigation, we found that instructors navigating through developmental and constructivist lenses can support students in their transition from novice counselors, to reflective practitioners as evidenced by a 43.2% increase in student knowledge from pre- to post-assessment. We recommend that instructors consider implementing constructivist-developmental tenets in their classrooms and encourage future researchers to examine the effectiveness of constructivist-developmental classrooms across graduate programs.

References


Blount, A., & Mullen, P. R. (2015). Development of an Integrative Assessment for Play Therapy (APT), the accrediting body for registered play therapists (RPT). Applicants applying to become registered play therapists “must complete 150 hours of play therapy specific instruction from institutions of higher education.” (Veiga & Guerrero, 2014, p. 2), including (a) play therapy history (4-5 hours), (b) play therapy theories (40-50 hours), (c) play therapy techniques and methods (40-50 hours), and (d) therapy applications (40-50 hours). This course (37.5 hours) meets the guidelines for some of the hours of play therapy techniques, theories, and applications. Thus, the findings of this study support the learning of students to be successful in their work with children, averaging a 43.2% increase in knowledge from pre- to post-assessment.


