

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The function of counseling in schools has evolved from a vocational purpose in secondary schools to a developmental role at both the secondary and elementary levels (Gysbers, 1990). Although elementary school counselors have become a vital part of the majority of school counseling programs, the role of elementary counselors is still profoundly different from the more-traditional role of secondary counselors (Hardesty & Dillard, 1994). Both secondary and elementary counselors are involved in individual counseling with their students. However, secondary counselors often have been called upon to perform administrative and scheduling duties, while elementary counselors spend more time actively counseling students and consulting with teachers and parents.

Secondary school counselors are faced with students who are planning their futures and must attend to transition issues such as college and career choice decisions. Scholarships and financial aid matters are primary concerns. Scheduling and paperwork are more routine duties than are relationship, drug, or abuse counseling (Hardesty & Dillard, 1994). In contrast, elementary school counselors describe their primary roles as counseling, coordination, consulting, and creating curriculum (Bailey, 1989). They discover problems which arise for

young children and then counsel the children either individually or in groups. Because elementary school counselors must deal with numerous developmental, social, and emotional issues, frequent coordination and consultation with faculty, parents, and the community is necessary. Hardesty and Dillard (1994) noted that this systematic interaction differentiates elementary counselors from their middle and secondary school counterparts. As elementary counselors address such issues as peer relations or abuse, remediation and prevention, through individual counseling sessions and classroom guidance, are both necessary job components.

A continuing controversy exists over whether elementary school counselors should be defined as mental health professionals or educators (Gerler, 1988). Bailey et al. (1989), commenting on an American School Counseling Association survey, suggested that perhaps this debate arises from semantics and from disagreement about the definitions of the terms “educator” and “mental health professional.” The survey results recommended that elementary counselors be defined as both because they must face mental health issues in educational institutions (Bailey et al.). Societal problems like child abuse and increasing divorce rates must be combated through preventive intervention and therapy. These societal problems have had a significant impact on school systems. Various counselor educators purport that the future of elementary school counseling calls for elementary school counselors to enlarge their roles as

service providers to meet the growing needs of children.

Many elementary counselors view play therapy, an approach to counseling children which utilizes toys as a medium, as an essential intervention that allows them to provide appropriate counseling services for the children in their schools. Play is an activity which flows from children spontaneously and naturally as a means of self-expression. "One of the most firmly established principles of psychology is that play is a process of development for a child" (Schaefer & O'Connor, 1983, p. 95). Regardless of the amount of time spent on individual counseling, play is necessary to communicate with elementary children. As different approaches to counseling have been used with children over the years, play therapy has evolved as a popular and effective means of combining play, children's fundamental mode of communication, with therapy.¹

Play is a major part of children's lives. Historically play has been noted as the most natural form of communication for children (Axline, 1947; Landreth, 1982). Play is typically used with young children because it provides a language that does not require verbal communication. Play is current and mirrors children's concrete level of thinking, allowing them to express abstract feelings which they are unable to verbalize. Play is a recognizable form of activity for children because they have experience with play. Play media such as toys are also

¹ For the purposes of this study, counseling and therapy will be used interchangeably.

comfortable and familiar, so children are free to express their understanding of the world.

Play therapy is distinguished from other therapies used with children by its use of play and play media to identify and treat concerns. Play therapy is an appropriate method for counseling children because it utilizes their natural tendency to use play as a means to express themselves (Axline, 1947; Schaefer & O'Connor, 1983). Because of their developmental or emotional inabilities, children can communicate through toys during play in ways that they cannot through language (Brady & Friedrich, 1982; Cattanach, 1992; O'Connor & Schaefer, 1994). Play therapy facilitates the expression of emotions in a safe environment and enables children to deal with distressing situations. As a therapist focuses on a child, play also provides a medium for building the relationship.

Although different theoretical approaches have their own definitions of play therapy, all play therapies are distinguished from other methods of counseling children by their use of toys as a medium. Play therapy necessitates an understanding and utilization of an organized theoretical framework rather than random use of toys or games within a classroom or with a talk-based therapy. The International Association for Play Therapy provided the following definition for play therapy: "Play therapy is the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use

the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development" (Homeyer, 1998, p. 24).

Elementary school counselors use play therapy to meet the diverse developmental needs of children (Landreth, 1983; 1987). The goal of elementary schools is to provide the optimum learning environment, an atmosphere which facilitates the potential of all children. Many children struggle with learning because they are preoccupied with behavioral or emotional difficulties. Elementary school counselors are called upon to help children work through their problems so that they are better prepared to learn in the classroom.

Elementary school counselors help establish an environment in schools that minimizes social, emotional, and developmental barriers to learning. They do this with schoolwide programs, classroom guidance activities, and consultations with staff and parents. They also provide a counseling role where the focus is on a particular child or child and family. The use of play therapy in the school focuses more on this individual role. Play therapy is an "adjunct to the learning environment, an experience which assists children in maximizing their opportunities to learn" (Landreth, 1983, p. 201). As children work through their psychological issues and express emotions in play therapy, they are better equipped to learn. Recent surveys have documented the nationwide use of play therapy by elementary school counselors (Kranz, Kottman, & Lund, 1998; Phillips & Landreth, 1995).

As the number of counselors who use play therapy techniques as part of their counseling repertoire increases, there are questions about their training, their theoretical foundation, and the research evidence for their techniques. The growing interest in the use of play therapy in the schools warrants further inspection into whether and how many elementary school counselors identify themselves as using play therapy and what counselors are doing when they say they are doing play therapy. There is a need for an in-depth analysis of how elementary school counselors view play therapy and how they use play therapy in schools. Such an analysis will aid counselor educators in meeting the training needs of those counselors.

Need for the Study

Specialized training in play therapy is needed for elementary school counselors if they continue to utilize this method of treatment. Various authors have called for expanded play therapy training opportunities. Kranz et al. (1998) suggested the inclusion of play therapy courses in training programs for counselors. Many current play therapy practitioners have not been trained in graduate programs, but have attained their education from various workshops (Kranz et al.). Thus it seems that counselors using play therapy may not be getting training through the traditional ways of preparation. Counselor education programs stress theory and research as well as practical application. In workshops, counselors may be getting training for practical application, but not a

grounding in theory and research. To strengthen the play therapy research base, practicing play therapists from all disciplines should become self-reflective and should examine their training and practice (Kranz et al.; Phillips & Landreth, 1995). This study was designed to gather information concerning these areas from elementary school counselors who used play therapy or self-identified as play therapists.

This study was needed to determine:

1. the prevalence of elementary school counselors who identified themselves as using play therapy in the schools,
2. how counselors defined play therapy,
3. how counselors actually used play therapy in the schools,
4. why counselors chose to use play therapy, and
5. the training of counselors in the use of play therapy.

The number of elementary school counselors who actually identified themselves as using play therapy in the schools was determined from a survey. A definition of play therapy, how play therapy is used, and why play therapy is used evolved from in-depth interviews with counselors. Ideally counselors base their choice of intervention on a combination of research with practice, rather than intuition with practice. All counselors should have a theoretical orientation which provides a systematic way of dealing with children. A research base for the accompanying techniques assures that counselors are using valid and reliable

interventions. The same standards that are used for counselors who use a more traditional, talk-based therapy also should be applied to counselors who use play therapy. Whether school counselors who use play therapy are operating from a theoretical base that was imparted through an educational program or whether they haphazardly use play techniques without a theoretical foundation was ascertained from the interviews. If elementary counselors are going to use play therapy in the schools, sound training, a solid theoretical foundation, and an extensive research base are essential.

The training of elementary school counselors who use play therapy was ascertained by in-depth interviews. If elementary school counselors are practicing play therapy, then training programs for elementary school counseling professionals should provide the necessary education. A gap between usage and training does not build a profession. All counselors have a professional and ethical responsibility to promote client welfare. This responsibility calls for the ability to provide proof of research that interventions are effective. Training in a grounded theoretical foundation provides this knowledge base to inform counselors' actions while usage without training is unethical and problematic (Dawes, 1994; Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1992). Findings from an analysis of in-depth interviews with elementary counselors in the schools can enable counselor educators to increase their knowledge about elementary school counselors and their practice of play therapy and to adjust counselor training

programs accordingly.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess the use of play therapy in elementary schools in two Iowa Area Education Agencies (AEAs). First, this study determined the prevalence of play therapy in these Iowa elementary schools, and illustrated how play therapy was being defined and used by the school counselors. The study investigated why self-identified play therapists used play therapy as well as the extent and nature of their training. It is important to determine why counselors use play therapy and whether counselors are familiar with deliberate, coherent play therapy practices or whether they have intuitively included play in their counseling.

This study focused on elementary counselors in two Iowa AEAs to answer these questions. The survey illustrated whether these Iowa elementary school counselors identify themselves as using play therapy. Follow-up interviews with those elementary counselors who self-identified as using play therapy further illuminated the education, training, and practices of these professionals. The research was undertaken to meet the goals of adding new data to the research base and to create a database from which to generate testable hypotheses to form a foundation for more empirical work.

Research Questions

The specific questions addressed in this study were:

Question One: Do elementary school counselors self-identify as using play therapy?

Question Two: How do those elementary school counselors who self-identify as using play therapy define play therapy?

Question Three: How do those elementary counselors who self-identify as using play therapy actually use play therapy in the schools?

Question Four: Why are those elementary counselors who self-identify as using play therapy using play therapy?

Question Five: What is the play therapy training of those elementary counselors who self-identify as using play therapy?

To answer the questions posed in this study, a qualitative approach was needed. Rather than accumulating facts to provide evidence, the goal of qualitative research is to "grasp the basic interpretive nature of human behavior and the human experience the processes by which (individuals) construct their own meaning, as well as [to] describe what those meanings are" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 49). Qualitative methodology allowed the elementary school counselors to construct their own definitions of play therapy, which allowed the researcher to better understand the experience of elementary school counselors who used play therapy, including how and why they used play therapy. Little

research exists concerning elementary school counselors and their use of play. Qualitative research guided both the descriptive and explanatory questions by identifying specific variables which can be used for subsequent research, whether it be qualitative or quantitative.

Summary

As play therapy gains popularity as a preferred treatment mode for children with numerous behavioral and emotional problems (Gil, 1991; Kottman & Schaefer, 1993; Schaefer & O'Connor, 1983; Singer, 1993), practitioners, researchers, and educators should recognize the process of play therapy with different populations and should conduct research to establish its therapeutic effectiveness. This study was designed to assess the use of play therapy in the elementary schools, to determine why school counseling professionals use play therapy, and to examine the training of such counseling professionals. This foundation is vital in order to establish play therapy as a viable treatment intervention for children.