

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHOD

Play therapy is used as a treatment intervention with young children because children communicate naturally and easily through play. Elementary school counselors who use play therapy need training and a solid theoretical foundation grounded in an extensive research base. The purpose of this study was to establish if, how, and why elementary school counselors are using play therapy in the schools. The study also was designed to determine the nature and extent of training in play therapy by counselors who use this mode. The study will add to our understanding of play therapy and how it is used in the elementary schools and will generate themes to form a foundation for more empirical work.

This chapter describes the qualitative research design and the methodology used for this study. Interviews were conducted to capture the experiences of the elementary school counselors. The analysis focused around issues and meanings that were identified by the participants. The method used to accomplish this study is described in several sections. The chapter begins with a list of the research questions and a description of the design. The following methodology sections describe the participant population, the instrument used, the researcher's role, the data collection, the data analysis, trustworthiness

issues, research procedures, and methodology limitations.

Research questions addressed in the 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?

Design

Qualitative methodology can be viewed as a prerequisite to experimental design (Bednar & Kaul, 1994). Identification and description of central concepts and variables are appropriate initial steps. Bevan (1991) advocated the context-sensitive methodology as an important source of potential strength of qualitative research. The qualitative researcher aspires to obtain meaning from the phenomenon rather than building hypotheses prior to the investigation. In this way, the researcher can better comprehend the human experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Counselor educators have advocated for more qualitative inquiry to complement the myriad of quantitative studies (Hill & Corbett, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1991; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). The two paradigms can be used together to uniquely strengthen findings with methodological diversity. Despite the call for phenomenological exploration in the field of counseling, scant examples of qualitative research exist. This more complex and ideographic approach was needed to answer the questions posed in this study. This study was intended to broaden the scope of school counseling research.

While a basic survey provided insight into the prevalence of the use of play therapy by elementary school counselors, a qualitative design was utilized to define and describe the central concepts more thoroughly. The first research question addressed in the study was evaluated with a survey. The last four research questions addressed in the study were analyzed with qualitative procedures.

For the purposes of this study, a multiple-case design was used with a population of Iowa elementary school counselors in two Area Education Agencies (AEAs). A case study is an investigation of a certain phenomena, such as a setting or an individual. Bogden and Biklen (1982) compare a case study to a funnel because researchers begin with a wide scope which narrows as the study continues. A multiple-case study consists of two or more case studies (Yin, 1994).

This study focused on the experiences and training of the elementary school counselors regarding play therapy. "The selection of a particular setting and experiences of a particular group of people in that setting anticipated the possibility that the phenomena described herein may not be unlike those that were present in similar settings" (Dungy, 1997, p. 58). It is necessary for the study to contain more than a single case in order for the researcher to integrate different concepts into emerging theory. Yin (1994) described the logic of multiple case studies: cases are selected to "predict similar results or produce contrasting results but for predictable reasons," (p. 46). As cases are compared and contrasted, a pattern emerges. The design provides a tool for researchers to produce findings from comprehensive undertakings.

The case study design was more appropriate than other designs because the research questions called for in-depth information regarding play therapy from elementary school counselors' perspectives rather than for specific frequencies or answers that had been influenced by survey responses. The researcher had little control over the elementary school counselors thoughts and opinions and was able to gain rich description about their use of play therapy from their viewpoints. The case study design provided a distinct advantage in these situations (Patton, 1990; Yin, 1994). The interviews allowed for an in-depth look at elementary school counselors who use play therapy and provided opportunities to explore specific issues that the interviewees introduced. The

multiple-case study design was necessary to create a broader picture of the experiences of multiple elementary school counselors.

There is a dearth of research concerning play therapy in elementary school counseling. Because these concepts have not been studied in an empirical sense, the constant comparative method was utilized for this study. The goal of the constant comparative method is to build a description from case study data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). The constant comparative method is a research design used for multiple cases. The most important characteristic of the multiple-case design is flexibility. During the process, plans are changed and restructured (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The qualitative research process has an iterative nature because the process circles back as the researcher discovers new information (Hedrick, Bickman, & Rog, 1993; Yin, 1994). This discovery-oriented approach best allows the researcher to describe the experiences of the counselors.

The primary data collection technique used in this study was the in-depth interview. Non-participant observations also were utilized as a data collection technique. When possible, a non-participant observation of the elementary school counselors' rooms provided an opportunity for the researcher to become immersed in the setting. The researcher did not ask questions and become a participant within the setting, but instead simply observed the play media in the elementary school counselors' offices. Observing the participants' rooms

provided additional information across settings about play media such as toy selection and toy placement. In some instances the combination of interviews and observations also allowed the researcher “to check description against fact” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p.82).

The constant comparative method began early in the study and continued throughout the research process. Initially the researcher collected the data and looked for key issues and recurrent events and activities. The researcher worked with the emerging model through a process of coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Yin, 1994). This process was described as a series of iterations: findings of a first case were compared to findings from subsequent cases and initial propositions are continuously revised. The researcher continued to search for “salient, grounded categories of meaning held by participants in the setting” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p.116) until core categories of the central phenomena were identified.

The formal coding process was used to categorize and sort the descriptive data. Initially, the researcher read through the transcripts several times and determined codes, such as EFF (effectiveness), USE (use), and TIME (time) (see attached coding system, Appendix H). Originally these broad codes identified a word or a phrase or an event. Next, codes were combined into categories. Tentative categories and subcategories were determined, while codes were modified and discarded. The researcher categorized and examined the data,

continuously comparing and contrasting data to other data. Themes, such as "Play therapy is time consuming," evolved from the categories (see Table 1). These themes led to propositions, which were declarative sentences, such as "Challenges to play therapy in the schools included limited time, resources and support" (see Table 1). This provided the researcher with a set of findings grounded in data.

Methodology

Participants

Participants in this study were elementary school counselors in two Iowa Area Education Agencies (AEAs). Elementary school counselors were chosen because play therapy is most commonly used with younger children. The participants for the study were selected by purposeful sampling procedures.

First, the researcher sent a survey to all elementary school counselors in two AEAs. There were 96 elementary school counselors in these regions. The survey asked elementary school counselors whether they used play therapy as a part of their school counseling (see attached survey, Appendix B). The counselors were also asked if they would consent to an interview.

From the list of elementary school counselors who identified themselves as using play therapy and who were willing to be interviewed, a sample was selected for in-depth interviews. The researcher began with twelve participants for in-depth interviews. If consistent patterns had not been found within the data

from the twelve interviews, more interviews would have been conducted (see attached Interview Schedule, Appendix C).

Researcher Role

It is imperative that qualitative researchers identify themselves as they embark on their investigation (Patton, 1990). The researcher for this study aspired to retain an open point of view and remain reflective during all aspects of the research process, including writing the research proposal, creating the survey and Interview Schedule, selecting the participants, and collecting, analyzing, and reporting the data.

The researcher's experiences and opinions are reviewed in the following section. The researcher was a female who has lived in the Northeast, Southeast, and Midwest United States. Her personal philosophy about education and counseling included intentionality and assessment. The researcher had experiences counseling children from pre-school through eighth grade in school and hospital settings. She also was a registered play therapist. The researcher's experience provided an appreciation of the uniqueness of school cultures as well as a strong belief in the importance of elementary counselors to the schools. Additionally, she had an understanding of play therapy from both theoretical and applied perspectives.

The researcher had coursework and experience in qualitative methodology prior to this study. The researcher participated in a qualitative study

of the opening of a new elementary school. She conducted a qualitative analysis concerning the outcomes of play therapy with labeled children in elementary schools. She also conducted a qualitative analysis for her Master's thesis concerning the play therapy process of children with and without conduct problems. This earlier experience aided the researcher in proceeding with the current endeavor.

Data Collection

The researcher developed the survey used in this study (see attached survey, Appendix B). The primary purpose of the survey was to locate elementary school counselors who identified themselves as using play therapy. Questions on the survey included those regarding the gender of participants and those eliciting professional information about the number of years the participants have spent as elementary school counselors. The survey also included a scale which inquired whether the respondent thought that play therapy was effective in an elementary school setting. Response choices included "unsure," "ineffective," "not very effective," "effective," and "highly effective." This question revealed the elementary school counselors' perceptions of the effectiveness of play therapy, whether or not they used play therapy as part of their counseling repertoire. The survey addressed the first research question, "Do elementary school counselors self-identify as using play therapy?".

In-depth interviews addressed the remainder of the research questions.

The Interview Schedule used in this study is attached (see attached Interview Schedule, Appendix C). The Interview Schedule was reviewed with colleagues and revised. Open-ended questions, focused questions, and checklist items were clarified to provide a thorough, unbiased Interview Schedule. The purpose of the interviews was to better understand counselors' use of play therapy in their work.

Qualitative procedures demand an analysis of data until the point of saturation (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The design called for flexibility because an arbitrary number of participants was initially selected for interviews. The researcher looked for common themes and patterns among the interviews. These themes began to repeat themselves with each new interview. The number of interview participants was determined by the data analysis. The researcher stopped with twelve interviews because additional interviews would not have provided significant new patterns or information.

Prior to beginning the interview process with the research participants, the researcher conducted a pilot study. The pilot study was a test of the Interview Schedule with a respondent who was similar to the participants in the study. The pilot study assisted the researcher in honing the Interview Schedule. This test of the instrument ensured that the open-ended and focused questions were relevant to the study and were arranged appropriately (Yin, 1994).

First, an elementary school counselor was selected as the respondent for the pilot study. While the respondent also was an elementary school counselor

from Iowa, the data from this interview was not included in the study. The respondent commented on questions and their wording. The results of the pilot study enabled the researcher to refine the Interview Schedule.

The pilot study ensured that the interview had a smooth flow and that the questions were clear to the respondent. Yin (1994) noted that a pilot study is not a “dress rehearsal,” but rather an opportunity to clarify that the researcher has established an appropriate line of questioning. Changes were made in the Interview Schedule based on the pilot interview. The researcher changed the order of several focus questions and fine-tuned the wording of several questions.

Following the pilot interview, the elementary school counselors were contacted by telephone to arrange a date and time for the interview. Following the phone conversation, the researcher confirmed these dates and times by electronic mail.

In-depth interviews served as the primary data collection technique for this study. An Interview Schedule was created to explore the use of play therapy by the selected elementary school counselors as well as their training regarding the use of play therapy (see attached Interview Schedule, Appendix C). The interview process was centered around two central open-ended questions: 1) "You indicated that you use play therapy in your school counseling. Please tell me how you use it;" and 2) "Tell me about your training in play therapy." Focused questions were more specific questions, such as "How do you designate play

therapy from other counseling interventions?" Checklist items were distinct points which could have been addressed, such as "Issues encountered when using play therapy in the schools."

Since "concern with following a[n interview] schedule rather than with understanding the data can undermine the major strength of the qualitative approach" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 78), the researcher remained flexible and used the focused questions only as a last resort. When the participants did not generate ideas, focused questions provided guidance and established consistency between interviews. The researcher strived to create a conversational interview, rather than a formal, structured procedure, in order to retain participants' perspectives on professional and personal development in the use of play therapy.

The in-depth interviews were conducted person-to-person in order to collect non-verbal data. Individuals communicate information in various other ways, such as gestures and tone. This information enhanced the researcher's understanding of the meaning as it came from the participants. Permission was requested by the researcher, and granted by the participants, for the interview to be tape recorded and for notes to be taken. The participants were interviewed in their elementary schools. One participant had an emergency during the interview and the researcher completed the interview over the telephone.

The researcher also conducted an observation of the elementary school

counselor's offices with each interview. The researcher used an observation checklist to record observations about the play media directly following the visit (see attached observation checklist, Appendix D) . The checklist provided information as to the existence and accessibility of the play media which the counselors used (e.g. if the play media was in the child's view as well as on shelves, on the floor, and/or on a table). The researcher also recorded on the checklist whether the elementary school counselor had play media in each of the five categories of play media, including family/nurturing, pretend/fantasy, aggressive, scary, and expressive. These categories are commonly recognized among play therapists.

The researcher took field notes during the interview in addition to taping the interview. Immediately following each interview, the researcher took notes about the interview and began to transcribe the interview. Checks on the researcher's interpretations of the interviewees' responses included immediate questions for the participants as well as follow-up telephone calls for clarification of content and understanding. Following each contact with the participants, the researcher wrote a note of thanks to the participants.

Data Analysis

The intent of data analysis was to find meaning within the data. This occurred during the process of categorizing the data and attaching meaning to the categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Patton, 1990; Yin, 1994). Analysis was a

continuous process throughout the data collection. The audit trail delineated an account of this process for the current project (see attached Audit Trail, Appendix G). Throughout the length of the study, the researcher recorded details of the data collection and data analysis on the audit trail.

Yin (1994) described the qualitative data analysis as a series which repeats itself. The researcher begins by making an initial proposition. The researcher then compares the data from one of the case studies against the proposition, a process which may result in changes to the proposition. Next the researcher compares subsequent case studies to the revised proposition.

The researcher began the data analysis with a list of broad categories (see attached coding system, Appendix H). The counselors' language from the interviews generated the initial coding, for example the code "INV" arose directly from the word "involvement." This first iteration coding provided a preliminary foundation for the coding categories that were used for interpretation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Patterns emerged from the second iteration. As new categories and subcategories were determined, codes were modified and discarded. As these patterns emerged, themes related to the research question were identified. Subsequent iterations included checks for congruous findings.

The researcher checked and rechecked the transcripts by reading through them numerous times to revise patterns. The researcher also searched for negative instances; negative instances occur when the data does not fit the

hypothesized pattern of categories and subcategories (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The categories were revised continually to refine the research process for the study (Yin, 1994).

The interviewer conducted member checks with several participants throughout the process of data collection and data analysis. After the first four interviews were coded and categorized, the researcher contacted one of the participants to see if the participant felt that the results reflected the participant's experiences. The participant agreed with the results and offered additional examples to support the results. The researcher conducted a second member check after coding and categorizing the second four interviews. The participant agreed with the themes that the researcher presented. When the researcher felt a point of saturation had been reached, a final member check was performed with three of the counselors. Two participants agreed with all the themes. One participant agreed with all the themes except one. This was not a surprise as the researcher previously had found the participants' views to be a negative instance for this particular theme. All three participants volunteered many new examples to support the themes. All member checks were conducted in-person, by telephone, or by electronic mail.

Observation data were triangulated with the interview data. Triangulation is "the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 146). The researcher compared her subjective

notes from the interviews with the transcripts from the interviews and with the observation results. These comparisons provided additional information. For example, the observations of the counselors' offices provided opportunities to view toy media choice and placement and to make comparisons with the counselors' descriptions of their use of play therapy. The researcher analyzed the interview transcripts, her notes, and the observation checklists to compare and contrast findings generated by the different sources. Further comment on this analysis is described in the next two chapters.

Trustworthiness Issues

Ethical concerns are common to all forms of research. Some aspects of qualitative ethics may be addressed by establishing the trustworthiness of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Trustworthiness refers to the authenticity or quality of the qualitative investigation. While quantitative researchers have traditionally used specific criteria to validate their work, alternative measures more appropriately "reflect the assumptions of the qualitative paradigm" (Marshall & Rossman, p. 145). Adhering to certain constructs enables qualitative researchers to demonstrate the reliability and validity of their research as well as to maintain ethical standards for the approach.

Four constructs establish the trustworthiness of qualitative research. First, credibility can be attained by preserving an accurate description and identification

of the subject of a study (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). By specifically stating parameters, the researcher can demonstrate internal validity within those limits. This validity is the primary strength of a qualitative study. A second concept, transferability, refers to the generalizability of a study and is related to the external validity which has traditionally been a limitation of qualitative research. Transferability allows a new researcher to generalize sample findings of an original researcher to a population and then also apply them to a different population. Determining parameters can help create generalizability, as can triangulation or the use of multiple sources such as informants, researchers, or data collection methods (Marshall & Rossman). Transferability also is strengthened by providing as much detailed information as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). A third construct, dependability, refers to the consistency that emerges from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability is achieved by accounting for the changing nature of qualitative work. This clarification reduces difficulties in replication which are caused by fluctuant variables, such as the subjects, the setting, or the design (Marshall & Rossman). Confirmability is a final construct for which a qualitative researcher must strive. It refers to whether the results represent the participants and are free from researcher bias. Determining whether a study is confirmable by another researcher places emphasis on the data rather than a researcher's degree of objectivity (Marshall & Rossman).

This researcher persisted in establishing the trustworthiness of the qualitative inquiry. The descriptive data collection strengthened the study's validity. Using care and accuracy to precisely describe the research process ensured greater reliability and validity (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Goetz & LeCompte, 1982; Peshkin, 1993). Double note-taking during the interviews included objective and subjective notes. Objective notes were strictly impartial; subjective notes included personal feelings and comments the interviewer had during the interview. Double note-taking during the in-depth interviews allowed the researcher to check for bias and to strive for value-free notes. The researcher recorded observer comments and feelings during the interviews. Having numerous transcripts from multiple interviews helped to eliminate threats to reliability and validity because of the opportunity for extended data analysis (Goetz & LeCompte). Extensive notes were taken during the coding of the data as part of the qualitative analysis procedure. Controls for bias in interpretation included a search for negative instances and alternative explanations, checking and rechecking the data, and the duplicate note-taking. Throughout the study, the researcher triangulated, or cross-referenced, interview and observation data in order to further ensure reliability.

Controls for bias were necessary to account for researcher subjectivity. The researcher recognized that researcher bias could influence the research process at many points during its numerous stages (Patton, 1990). The

researcher's role and experiences were reported earlier in order to clarify how the researcher's experiences and beliefs might influence the project. The researcher attempted to preserve the participant's meaning throughout the project. Member checks allowed participants to provide feedback about whether the results were reflective of their experience. Additionally, the researcher attempted to provide ample quotes from the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Finally, the researcher consulted resources and faculty advisors throughout the evolution of the study.

Research Procedures

The following steps outline the procedures which were used to collect data following the sampling and selection of participants for this study:

1. The researcher conducted a pilot study with an elementary school counselor and refined the interview.
2. In-depth interviews were held with the participants at their elementary schools.
3. The researcher conducted observations of the elementary school counselors' offices at the conclusion of the interviews.
4. All interviews were tape-recorded with the counselors' permission and then transcribed.
5. Follow-up interviews for immediate questions and for initial validity checks were held at the sites, on the telephone, or by electronic

mail.

6. The transcripts were reviewed and coded for categories.
7. The transcripts were checked and rechecked. Additionally, the transcripts were searched for negative instances.
8. Observation data were triangulated with the interview data. Observer comments and subjective notes were reviewed.
9. Member checks were performed, either by telephone, face-to-face, or by electronic mail after every four interviews in order to determine if the results were reflective of the participants' experiences. Final member checks were also performed.

Methodological Issues

The results of this study had constraints regarding generalization to different populations of elementary school counselors. First, only Iowa counselors were sampled. Second, the results should not be generalized to middle school counselors who use play therapy. Elementary school counselors who did not believe play therapy was very effective (5.7%) and elementary counselors who were unsure about the effectiveness of play therapy (10%) were not interviewed for this study. The results should not be generalized to these counselors. Additionally, the results should not be generalized to non-school counselors who use play therapy.

The limitations of the interview process include possible reluctance from

the interviewees to provide certain information. The participants also may have answered questions in a certain manner in order to please the interviewer. Furthermore, the possibility that the interviewee could have provided false accounts can not be ignored.

Researcher bias always must be considered a threat to qualitative research. The researcher's background and beliefs constitute a lens through which the data were viewed. Responses may not always have been correctly comprehended by the interviewer. Controls for bias included checking and rechecking the data, searching for negative instances, and recording through value-free notes. The researcher also was candid about personal experiences in a prior section. A strong ethical foundation can be built by the researcher's awareness of personal biases, his or her recognition of replicability concerns, and the establishment of trustworthiness of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The researcher resolved to establish trustworthiness in the qualitative inquiry by illustrating the details of the research process.