

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine why and how elementary school counselors used play therapy as well as their training in play therapy. The previous chapter presented survey results and an analysis of in-depth interviews with twelve elementary school counselors who were selected from survey counselors. Central themes which emerged from the participants' responses also were presented. This chapter contains a brief summary of the findings pertaining to each of the research questions. The focus of this chapter is a discussion of the meaning of the results and their implications for the counseling profession. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

Research Questions

Question One: Do Elementary School Counselors

Self-Identify as Using Play Therapy?

Ninety-six elementary school counselors from two Iowa Area Education Agencies (AEAs) received surveys for this study. Seventy surveys (73%) were returned (see survey results, Appendix E). Sixty-six of the 70 counselors reported that they used play therapy. Generalizations from this population are limited

because counselors were from only two Iowa Area Education Agencies. However, the fact that 94.2% of these counselors reported using of play therapy is telling. This percentage shows that perhaps play therapy is more prevalent within elementary schools than school counselors, administrators, and counselor educators may realize.

Question Two: How Do Those Elementary School Counselors Who
Self-Identify as Using Play Therapy Define Play Therapy?

The elementary school counselors defined play therapy as an intervention in which the counselor utilizes play media, such as toys and art materials, as a medium to communicate with young children and to enable children to address emotional issues. The International Association for Play Therapy (IAPT) has defined play therapy as “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). Many of the counselors’ definitions and examples of play therapy did not match the IAPT definition. The primary difference between the IAPT definition and the definitions used by the elementary school counselors in this study was the absence of mention of a theoretical model in the participants’ definitions. Play therapy is grounded in theory which guides the counselor in the use of specific skills and language throughout a session. While three of the participants discussed theory

as they explained their use of play therapy, many of the other counselors used toys without an organized theoretical framework. This issue is discussed further with the next research question.

Question Three: How Do Those Elementary Counselors Who Self-Identify
As Using Play Therapy Actually Use Play Therapy in the Schools?

While the counselors reported extensive use of play therapy in the elementary schools, many of these counselors were not actually using play therapy as defined by the IAPT. These counselors considered themselves to be using play therapy but actually were using play media, such as toys, to accompany their talk-based therapies. While play is a natural way for children to express themselves, play therapy is based on specific theoretical orientations which utilize play as a method for communication. 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 following are examples in which the counselors described themselves as using play therapy even though, according to the IAPT definition, they simply were using play media. One counselor used play media at the beginning of a talk-based session:

I use it as an ice breaker with the kids who are more withdrawn or are less likely to talk to an adult because they don't trust them. It's an easy, comfortable way to get the trust level going. (CBP1)

Another counselor used play media to keep the children's hands busy during a

talk-based session. This counselor explained:

It seems to be a comfort thing for them - just so they have something with their hands. (CKP3)

Like the counselor quoted in the last chapter who simply had a basket of toys available, these counselors did not use the toys with specific language or techniques. Rather, they had play media available for the children to hold while they talked to the children.

Despite the fact that they had noted on the surveys that they frequently used play therapy, some of the counselors knew that they did not have training in theory-based play therapy. For example one counselor commented:

I had never taken a class in it. I keep looking to find one for me. I don't know a lot about it. I just think some of what I do is what a bit of play therapy is. (CKP1)

Another counselor expressed:

You know I probably don't do play therapy like you should do it. I do let younger kids, third grade on down, play with things. It's easier for us to talk if they're playing with something like play-dough. (CCP1)

One counselor was familiar with systematic, theory-based play therapy because she had seen social workers in private practice use it. She also recognized that she did not use a theory-based practice yet she still referred to it as play therapy.

Later in the interview, she stated:

I don't think I'd call it play therapy. Using play to communicate. (CFP4)

While a few of these counselors realized that what they were doing was not

actually play therapy, they believed in the use of play and toys. They believed that using play media randomly along with talk-based theories was more successful than using talk-based counseling techniques without the play media. They also believed that further training in play therapy would augment their success with children.

Some counselors did discuss their systematic use of play therapy as opposed to random use of play media. A few of these counselors even elaborated on the play therapy theories which they chose to implement. For example, one counselor described the organized, specific use of Adlerian language and techniques:

One of the girls with the dolls left the doll alone and she said it was the doll's fault - like the doll had done something bad. I said, 'Sometimes kids aren't taken care of because their parents aren't able to take care of them. Their parents love them, but something has happened to their parents.' So I would try and introduce another idea, but if they don't bite or go for it, I back off. I would offer it depending on the relationship with the child. (CGP8)

Other examples of this intentional use of theory-based play therapy practices, such as tracking, reflecting, and limit-setting, were presented in Chapter Four.

The counselors used play media in diverse ways. The existence of varied toys demonstrated the broad disparity among the counselors (see observation results, Appendix F). Kottman (1995) suggested five categories of toys which are appropriate for play therapy, i.e. family/nurturing, pretend/fantasy, aggressive, scary, and expressive. The combination of these categories provides an effective

medium for expression of feelings. Only three of the participants in this study had toys from all five categories. While three more had toys in most of the categories, half of the counselors only had toys in one or two categories. Every counselor had expressive toys, such as art materials and clay. The second most frequent category of toys was family/nurturing toys.

The majority of the counselors did not have toys to represent aggressive or scary categories. These types of toys are essential to express feelings of anger and fear. They enable children to deal with confusing issues. Aggressive and scary toys may contribute to a feeling of safety in play, providing protection or giving a child a feeling of control. Half of the counselors did not have pretend/fantasy toys. These types of toys give children an opportunity to act out situations and experiences to explore different roles. The absence of these toys in the counselors' offices elicits questions about the organization of their play therapy. This absence also demonstrates the limits that counselors have without an organized theoretical framework.

The elementary school counselors intended to supply a comprehensive range of toys for their children but, using only their intuition, they actually selected a restricted range of toys. Specific theoretical orientations provide categories of toys that a counselor should have to conduct play therapy. Many of the participants did not have those toys. These counselors may not be as effective with certain problems because they do not have a range of toys. For

example, if a child wishes to express frightening feelings, yet does not have access to scary toys, the child may be less likely to release the frightening emotion. Many of the elementary school counselors left out items which may be critical to effective play therapy.

Question Four: Why Are Those Elementary Counselors Who
Self-Identify as Using Play Therapy Using Play Therapy?

Some elementary school counselors in this study used play techniques or experimented with play media instead of using play therapy grounded in theory and empirical research. A few of the elementary school counselors were familiar with theories of play therapy and discussed their intentional use of the accompanying techniques and language. Other counselors, who did not have theory-based play therapy training, used toys in a way that felt right to them rather than in a coherent, structured, theory-guided manner. Whether they used play media in an organized or unorganized manner, all of the counselors felt that they were getting results from using play media.

This effectiveness was a primary reason counselors continued to use play therapy. Examples of perceived effectiveness were presented in the previous chapter. As one counselor stated:

I think it is really effective. I like the results I get with it. I want to continue with it. I want to learn more about it. I can see where it has made a difference in some children. (CCP7)

The counselors saw changes in children in their offices, in the classroom, and at

recess. They reported behavioral and academic changes which were observed by administrators, teachers, parents, and peers as well as by the counselors themselves. The counselors attributed this change to play therapy.

The elementary school counselors chose play therapy because they perceived it to be a highly effective intervention in the schools. They believed that play therapy was effective because it provided a safe environment where kids felt comfortable and were able to gain a sense of trust. They recognized children's natural inclination to play and consequently viewed toys as an obvious counseling medium for children. The play media provided children with a means to communicate what they were unable to express verbally. The children were able to release pent-up feelings, such as fear and anger. The counselors listed numerous examples of behavioral and academic change to support this perception. They also recalled testimony of teachers and children regarding the worth of the counselors' play therapy interventions.

The counselors utilized play therapy as an intervention for diverse concerns. Several elementary counselors felt that play therapy was the best intervention for specific problems. For example, one counselor explained:

There are certain kinds of experiences in kids that I feel compelled to use play therapy over anything else. The two examples that I would use this week are kids that are in transition of some kind, kids in foster care or kids in shaky home environments so they are traumatized - real obvious trauma. They are real sensitive. (CBP1)

Other counselors appreciated the ability to use play therapy for children with all

kinds of issues. For example, one counselor commented:

Because of all the issues school counselors face and play therapy can be used with all these. It's not just children of divorce. Somebody in the family might die, or a pet, and there's a war going on right now and bombing. We have students who are upset about this. [They ask,] 'Are we going to get bombed?' And some of them have relatives that are overseas and they are worried about that. Now we are having bad weather, tornadoes. They make students upset. We deal with all these issues. School avoidance. (CLP8)

All of the counselors but one began using play without any training. These counselors initially used toys because it intuitively made sense to use a medium which naturally comforted children. One respondent simply stated:

I knew we needed it and it was part of me. I like it. (CKP3)

One of the counselors was initially introduced to play through training. This counselor did not use play media until attending some provocative workshops.

The counselor described these experiences:

I was into family stuff with Byron and Carol Norton. This was in the 80s. Byron had a list of what every toy and animal meant and I thought, there has to be more than that. I was skeptical. The case studies he shared on the effectiveness of play therapy and the enthusiasm of the people there - I was really impressed. After that I ran into Garry Landreth. He presented in Kansas City and I got to see him. It was interesting. His big thing was rules of thumb. I was real impressed with him. I got his book and read it. (CGP21)

The elementary school counselors used play therapy simply because they believed in the process of play. Their statements illustrate this, for example:

Play isn't all that random. Even out at recess, play isn't all that random. It's not random. It is all based on thoughts, feelings, ideas that just are in there with them all the time. It exhibits itself moment to moment. (CGP8/9)

A few of the participants explained that they also used play therapy as a preventative measure. These counselors used play therapy with all children, not just children with specific problems. They believed that all children could benefit from some play therapy. One counselor discussed how to manage this:

It became more intentional and more focused. I took the idea of having play group with all kindergarteners, one day a week, with six kids in a group, funneling them through four sessions so every child had time before the end of the school year. For a half hour of play which I would bring out certain toys. I had a rice tray, I had a kitchen set, and all this stuff. I would interject what I see happening and at the end we'd sit down and say, 'What'd you see?' (CFP9)

There was an overall enthusiasm and clear commitment to the use of play therapy in the schools. While these counselors identified various drawbacks to the inclusion of play therapy in their curriculum, such as lack of resources, they clearly believed that the benefits were worth the challenges. One participant even added an additional advantage:

It helps me in being spontaneous. I really truly believe I have much better counseling skills. (CFP11)

Question Five: What Is the Play Therapy Training of Those Elementary Counselors Who Self-Identify as Using Play Therapy?

While the play therapy education of the elementary school counselors varied from one workshop to a combination of multiple courses and numerous workshops, the majority of the participants had been to multiple workshops at regional and state conferences. Two participants had only been to one workshop. Three participants had taken one course. One participant had taken multiple

courses. Nine of the participants had attended multiple workshops. These workshops ranged from forty-five minutes to two days. This finding is consistent with prior surveys of practicing play therapists. Both Phillips and Landreth (1995) and Kranz et al. (1998) found that the majority of play therapy conference participants had not received graduate training in play therapy, but had only attended workshops.

The elementary school counselors who had taken a course in play therapy used play therapy differently than those who had not taken a course. They clearly differentiated between unorganized play and the use of theoretically-grounded play therapy techniques. This was evident in their use of both language and play media. With one exception, those counselors who only had attended workshops did not appear to use language and techniques in an organized fashion. Workshops did not appear to provide systematic training grounded in theory. Training from workshops did not appear to be equivalent to training from courses.

The four counselors who had taken a course were intentional in their use of language and play media. They talked about the use of theory and specific skills; several examples in the previous chapter illustrated this organization. In the following example a counselor demonstrated how she uses her knowledge of different theories of play therapy to determine what works best for a particular child:³

³ CO indicates the counselor; RE indicates the researcher.

- CO: We need to be better trained in all the little parts of it. We need to make better decisions, because I'm finding as I meet more and more kids that there is a cognitive piece that is better for this kid yet we still can call it play therapy. I sure better use the eclectic approach because I am and then I fit the kids better. I still use Adlerian and that part works real well for some children.
- RE: Can you explain why a certain theory would work for one child?
- CO: OK, I'm thinking of a child with Asperger's or a behavioral disorder. He's at so many different stages of development, but I certainly better go cognitive behavioral with him. It just has worked better with him than nondirective. He'll call me on the nondirective stuff, so I'm going to go with the cognitive.
- RE: When you say he calls you on stuff, what do you mean?
- CO: He'll look at me and say, 'Why are you saying that stuff?' and I can go into the Rogers and follow that but it doesn't work - it gives me a road block with him. It does not build the relationship but stops the relationship. I want to follow his thinking and I can do that in a more cognitive route. (CIP1)

The elementary school counselors who only had been to multiple workshops copied the techniques they had observed and had success with them. The difference for most of these counselors was that, without the underlying foundation, they lacked intentionality. Play therapy theory guides a counselor in what to say and what to do during a session. Without the theory, the counselors did not have a guide. As a result, they usually used play media to accompany their talk-based counseling. The fact that many found this to be more successful

with children than anything they had previously tried suggests that they could have even more success if they had proper training in the use of play therapy.

A few counselors noted that they were not getting enough from just workshops. For example, one counselor stated:

I haven't had any formal training. I've been to the workshops that last a couple of hours or you go to an intercession - that sort of thing. I don't claim to know enough about play therapy to go about it in an organized manner. (CJP1)

Another also stated:

At conferences I have seen it and tried to connect but you don't really learn what it is. (CKP5)

Others believed that counselors really should have a course to practice play therapy. For example:

The only weakness I see is trying to do it without taking a course in it and you don't know what you are doing. With any type of therapy that isn't a very good idea. You need to feel comfortable about what you are doing . . . sometimes you might get into something you don't know how to handle. Knowing your own limits and knowing where maybe you need to call in someone else. This is beyond what I can do and whatnot. (CLP12)

Counselors who already had been certified as school counselors were much more likely to participate in workshops than courses. Perhaps as part of their workshops, counselor educators who present could emphasize theory in addition to demonstrating a few techniques. Counselor educators who were trained before play therapy gained popularity could become familiar with play therapy theories so that they can teach play therapy courses and lead these

workshops. If practitioners have a responsibility to the profession to use practice grounded in theory and empirical research, counselor educators have a responsibility to provide that theory and research to the practitioner.

The previous chapter presented reasons why it is difficult for counselors to take a course during the school year (for example, if their time is filled with school and family responsibilities). These challenges provide a good argument for why a play therapy course should be included in their initial training. While it is not too difficult for counselors to take an occasional workshop, it is much more complicated to go back and take a course.

One of the counselors also noted that there would be resistance from some counselors to taking a play therapy course. The counselor explained that not all elementary school counselors are open to play therapy training. The counselor suggested that some counselors are skeptical until they have a chance to use play therapy themselves. The counselor explained:

Because they are not sure of their role and how it is defined. Also I see it as a control issue. You have to give up control and let the children do the leading. That's too hard for some people. They like control. They tell the child what to do rather than letting the child come to realize what is going to work best for them. (CCP10/11)

Another counselor also discussed the discomfort that counselors who do not use play media might feel with play therapy. The counselor explained why:

It makes them uncomfortable. As an adult, I'm too old to play. It's that frame of mind that I'm an adult and I'm x number of years old and I don't play. I'm not even interested in having kids play. That's recess time. In here, you have to get something done. It has to be a

talking sort of thing. They forget that talking doesn't necessarily work, especially for really little kids. There's a forgetting of developmental progress that kids are making. Play is the work of children. . . .They have forgotten the importance of play for themselves. Play is much more important than any job you will ever do. (CJP5/12)

A few of the elementary counselors commented that it certainly is not necessary to be a registered play therapist to use play therapy in the schools. While this makes sense, it seems that some training in the systematic use of play therapy techniques would be beneficial to counselors. Elementary counselors should be competent in the use of play therapy in order to have it as an option. They have a responsibility to use proven techniques in order to provide the best services for their students. On the other hand, counselor educators must provide research that shows whether or not play therapy is an effective school intervention. Perhaps the best solution is for school counselors and counselor educators to work together to best meet the needs of children.

Discussion and Implications

The intention of this research was to examine the use of play therapy in the elementary schools. School counselors were surveyed about how they defined play therapy, how they used play therapy, why they used play therapy, and what training they had received in play therapy. The findings suggested that elementary school counselors strongly believe in the effectiveness of play therapy as a therapeutic intervention; however, they recognize that conducting play therapy in the schools is not without challenges.

Several issues from the findings warranted further discussion. School counselors have strong feelings, as well as clinical evidence, that play therapy is effective. They believe that play therapy works, yet many school counselors who use play therapy do not feel they have the general support of teachers, administrators, or counselor educators. This situation creates confusion and anxiety for those counselors; the term “play therapy” creates additional confusion for them. The push for play therapy in the schools is coming from school counselors and not from academia. Because practice is ahead of training, counselor educators need to consider how they include play therapy in their training programs. This will help ensure that school counselors have theory-based methods on which to base their practice.

The Use of Play Therapy in the Schools

A fundamental issue which arose from this study was the dearth of school counselors who are practicing play therapy using techniques grounded in theory and empirical research. The participants felt that their use of play techniques was effective and therapeutic. Actual understanding and knowledge about the theoretical underpinnings of play therapy was limited. This finding is consistent with past research. Shen (1998) found similar results in her exploration of elementary school counselors who used play therapy in Taiwan. Shen stated, "With a limited philosophical foundation, some of the participants tended to be more attracted to the technique than to theories, and, therefore, they utilized the

technique in a more practical-minded and idiosyncratic way." The lack of comprehensive collections of toys in counselors' offices is likely another testament to fragmented training. The categories of toys are defined in order to allow expression of various emotions. Without toys to represent different categories, counselors are not conducting an organized theory-based play therapy. Therefore, they potentially could be conducting a more effective play therapy intervention.

The therapeutic effectiveness of unorganized play techniques is unknown. While there is no evidence to support that theory-based play therapy is more effective than the use of random play media, there is an advantage to using theory-based techniques which have been organized in a coherent manner (Hill, 1990). Hill (1990) suggests that practice should flow from theory and practitioners need research which builds theory. Effective practice is based on theory which is grounded in research. Likewise, regardless of which theory a school counselor chooses for play therapy, the intervention should be theory-driven. Logically, it is preferable that elementary counselors have training, possess a range of toys, and are systematic in their use of play therapy.

School counselors are using evidence other than research to support their use of play therapy. Intuitively, they know that something they are doing works. They also have behavioral observations and testimonials from administrators and teachers, yet do not have a conceptual base for their practice. Professionals

require research documentation and a coherent theoretical orientation. If counselors are not using sophisticated research-based techniques, this reflects on their lack of training. The use of non-research-based techniques is a problem in the general field of counseling (Dawes, 1994; Hill & Corbett, 1993). If school counselors are not working from theory, or are using play therapy techniques for which they are not trained, this deficit should be addressed. Professionals regulate themselves through the use of training standards (Nugent, 1981) and school counselors must seek appropriate training. Counselor educators can combat this shortcoming by providing opportunities for play therapy training within their programs.

Whether or not the elementary school counselors were using play therapy as defined by the IAPT in their schools, they remained strongly committed to what they were doing. Many of the counselors recognized that they did not have adequate play therapy training, yet realized that this would be valuable. If counselors are going to use play media, it makes sense that they be trained in theory-based methods. One counselor who was clearly just using unorganized play techniques stated that she was utilizing play therapy for over half of her time in the schools. This amount of time devoted to play therapy was not unusual. Such counselors should have a course in play therapy, not only so that their training is organized rather than random, but even so that they have appropriate toys available. The importance of training is obvious on a number of levels.

Training for School Counselors

The elementary school counselors protested the lack of available training and supervision in play therapy, both initially in their Master's programs and later when they were practicing. If training was readily available, the counselors would take the coursework. Elementary school counselors need training in play therapy in order to best meet their job responsibilities. Kaczowski and Patterson (1975) support this hypothesis: "It is sometimes difficult to engage a child in a verbal counseling relationship Every elementary school counselor should thus be prepared to engage in play therapy" (p. 105). Training for school counselors in play therapy techniques is warranted in certification programs and continuing education opportunities.

While counselor educators have a responsibility to offer training in play therapy, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), the accrediting board for school counseling programs, does not require a play therapy course for certification. Furthermore, CACREP's 48-hour program does not leave room for electives. Specific counselor education programs may choose to require more hours and may offer play therapy as an elective course. The onus is clearly on individual counseling programs to meet this need for play therapy training. Counselor educators typically have their own areas of expertise in which they like to teach, and play therapy may not be one of these areas. However, school counselors obviously gravitate to using play;

perhaps counselor educators should also. Play therapy is being used in the schools and the call from school counselors for play therapy training can not be ignored. A viable alternative for counseling programs is to ensure that theory-based play training is offered as a component of courses which address the counseling of children.

Another suggestion from counselors was that administrators and faculty need to be educated in play therapy. This extends to the larger role of counselors. Perhaps the responsibility begins with counselor educators. Venable (1999) suggested, "Perhaps we as counselor educators should build better relationships with our faculty peers in Ed[ucation] Leadership, and ask that Ed[ucation] Leadership students take an Intro to Counseling class. Maybe this would slowly change the school environment so many counselors work in" (personal communication, April 24). Several authors have advocated the importance of educating administrators and teachers, parents, and the community about the elementary counselor's role (Coll & Freeman, 1997; Hughey, Gysbers, & Starr, 1993). For example, Hughey et al. (p. 35) noted, "Public relations is an ongoing effort that takes a conscious effort on the part of the counselors." These educational activities are a crucial part of the overall guidance program.

The Role of Play Therapy in the Schools

Educating the public concerning play therapy would be an easier task if

the elementary counselors themselves did not feel so conflicted by confusing messages about the role of play therapy in the schools. The term "play therapy" evoked a negative reaction from many educators, which often caused counselors to avoid the use of the term. The confusing messages result from the reaction to the term "therapy" in the school setting. The negative connotations of this term create an issue which will be difficult to resolve. School counselors and counselor educators must address this issue.

Individuals clearly have strong feelings about the implications apparently inherent in the term "therapy." Most individuals who are opposed to the term "therapy" in the schools are referring to long-term individual therapy which takes a great deal of the counselor's time and which may detrimentally affect other children in the school that the counselor is supposed to be serving. The term therapy implies the existence of acute psychological problems and raises the question of whether it is the business of schools to get into therapy. It is unclear whether individuals who object to the term "therapy" in the schools would be able to get past the term in order to see play therapy in a different light. Additionally, the term "play" is not seen as educational or therapeutic but as a fun activity which could be construed as a waste of time in the school setting.

The problem does not belong only to those who find the term "therapy" threatening. Elementary school counselors who use play therapy have a responsibility to continue to educate others on why play therapy is an appropriate

intervention regardless of its name. The elementary school counselors in this study made two arguments. First, individuals should not be curtailed by a term. Many of the interventions that school counselors use could be called therapy. The counselors gave examples of small group counseling which could be called “group therapy” and of individual counseling sessions which could be called “individual therapy.” For example, one counselor stated:

I just call it individual counseling. I never thought about it, because I might use different things at different times. We haven't gotten into it. You could say it's group therapy. We just haven't called it that. The social worker and I do therapy groups, but we never use that [term]. (CLP7)

Second, the success of play therapy is not dependent on hour-long sessions for an extended period of many weeks in order to be successful. Many counselors relayed that they had success with one or two sessions of play therapy. For example, one counselor noted:

It was a one shot deal, second-grade boy. His teacher asked me to intervene because this guy was mad after recess, crying, not speaking to anyone. And he certainly didn't want to come to me! He did, though, and proceeded to play with dinosaurs - forming teams, killing the dinosaurs off, etc. Never said a word to me as I followed and reflected until he'd had enough. That was thirty minutes later. He simply said, “I'm done.” The next week his teacher contacted me again. (This was in a school where I counseled one day a week.) The boy had requested to see me. He said to me, “Thanks for helping me with my anger last week. It made me feel better.” I was astounded! He said it just like that. I never, ever did find out what he was angry about. (CIP18)

In this manner play therapy can fit nicely into counselors' time and job requirements.

The participants also noted that they could refer to counselors outside the school setting when necessary. For the most part, they were not going to spend extended time on individual sessions when a child should be referred to an outside professional. The exception to that was that, in each school, the counselor noted that he or she saw a few children for an extended period of time, sometimes even over the course of years, because those children had parents who were not going to take their children to individual counseling under any circumstances. The counselors said this was just something that was done, but not necessarily condoned. One counselor explained:

Someone at the administrative office would say 4 to 8 times. If you can't get it done then, give it up. On the other hand, there are people we see weekly all year long for a check-in sort of thing. How are you doing - are things better - tell me what is going on - are things worse? Then you get into is that therapy? Is that counseling? What is that? Or is that just checking in? Sometimes it is all three of those. You get nervous about the therapy word. You can also say in a liberal sense that everything we do is therapy. (CJP10)

There was unanimity in the counselors' responses that play therapy did not have to be a long intense process, although, for some counselors, occasionally it was a long process. Regardless, there was a place for play therapy in the schools.

The terminology for play therapy has been a topic of many discussions in the literature (Hoffman, 1991; Kaczowski & Patterson, 1975; Landreth, 1993). Kaczowski and Patterson summarized that "Just as writers on school counseling avoid the term psychotherapy, so do they avoid the term play therapy. The term play counseling, however, is awkward, and is not used. Instead

circumlocutions occur, and writers speak of the use of play techniques or play media” (p. 104). While everyone has an opinion concerning the difference between counseling and therapy and whether the latter is appropriate for the school setting, the argument is almost meaningless because it is an issue of semantics.

Renaming play therapy is a potential solution to the dilemma. Although it would be used in the same manner, play therapy could be called “play therapy” in a private counseling setting and could be labeled a "play intervention" in the schools. However, renaming play therapy may not legitimize its use in the schools, and renaming play therapy may be confusing because it suggests that there is a difference between the interventions in the two settings. Renaming play therapy “play interventions” in the schools should not give counselors leeway to use haphazard methods. If play therapy in the schools is called a "play intervention," counselors still must recognize the professional obligation for training in an organized theoretical framework.

Some of the elementary school counselors in this study felt that renaming play therapy was not a solution because changing the name would separate school counselors from the larger professional body of play therapists. One counselor expressed the difficulty she had already encountered in gaining permission for continuing education in play therapy from her administrators. A name change only would create further complications for counselors attempting

to justify workshops and courses. These same counselors, however, already substitute the terms "group counseling" for "group therapy" and "individual counseling" for "individual therapy." Clearly they already have responded to their school cultures.

Counselor educators are in a unique position to clarify this confusion. Counselor educators can promote the theory behind play therapy, yet also explain why different terms such as "play techniques" may need to be used in the school setting. In order to avoid confusion among school counselors, counselor educators must emphasize that the play interventions in the schools are the same as play therapy outside the schools. Both must be grounded in an organized theory. The two practices essentially are the same, and they use the same language and techniques, such as limit-setting. The primary difference is that play therapy interventions in the schools usually are more time-limited.

The school counselors in this study agreed that in some instances a child should be counseled in the school while in other instances he or she should not. The difference between the two had to do with how serious a child's problems were and how long the child needed to be in therapy. Play therapy does not have to be a long-term intervention for a child with serious problems; for example, play therapy can be used effectively for one session with a child who is having friendship problems. The determinative criterion for whether or not to use play therapy should not be its name. Referring to the use of play therapy in the

schools as play interventions alleviates this struggle.

Long-term therapy should not be commonplace in school programs. However, counseling interventions which promote growth and development are indispensable (Borders & Drury, 1992). Counseling interventions make a difference in students' learning (see Borders & Drury, 1992; Myrick, 1987). School counselors and counselor educators must view play therapy as a counseling intervention and recognize its potential impact on the profession of school counseling.

The reason that play therapy in the schools should not be called "play therapy" is not because it is a different practice, but because of the unique culture of American schooling. Most school counseling interventions typically are not referred to as "therapy" because of the implications of the term. Individual school counselors should know their school and their district and should use whatever term is most appropriate; it is essential that school counselors know their audience and meet their needs. The message that counselor educators must send to school counselors is that play therapy is a theory-based intervention, no matter what it is labeled. Counselor educators must clarify this message in order to alleviate ambivalence and confusion among school counselors.

The overwhelming number of counselors who participated in this study believe that play therapy is one of their most effective interventions. Counselor

educators must recognize this reality in the field and respond. There is not enough research literature regarding school counselors and their practices, and with play therapy, practice is obviously ahead of research. Counselor educators have a responsibility to provide the research which can inform practice.

Limitations

The results of this study had constraints regarding generalization to different populations of elementary school counselors. Iowa counselors from two Area Education Agencies were sampled for this study. The results may have limited generalizability to other areas, settings, situations, or people.

The thoughts of the elementary school counselors who did not volunteer to participate in the interviews are unknown. Why they did not volunteer and whether their thoughts are similar to the thoughts of the participants in this study are not known. One respondent who did not wish to be interviewed sent her thoughts on the study:

I do not use play therapy in its purest sense. I do not have time to devote to therapy for a selected number of students. I am responsible for 450 students in my assignment. I use aspects of play therapy to better understand children and enable them to be functional in some settings. However, long-term, 40- to 60-minute sessions are not feasible in a school setting. I do think some of the play therapy techniques could be very helpful with a wide variety of students. But many teachers are not open to such help. Modifying approaches to some problems in the classroom with play therapy techniques has been very useful to kids and teachers alike.

It is interesting that her comments echo many of the beliefs of the participants.

While the researcher resolved to establish trustworthiness in the

qualitative inquiry by illustrating the details of the research process, researcher bias remained a threat to the process. The counselors may have provided biased accounts or tried to please the researcher. Answers may not always have been correctly comprehended by the interviewer. Controls for bias were implemented throughout the research process.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions can be made for future research. Quantitative and qualitative research paradigms share similar goals of advancing knowledge and describing the human experience. The two approaches can be used together to uniquely strengthen findings with methodological diversity. There are very few studies of school counselors' use of play therapy as an intervention in the larger body of play therapy literature. Both quantitative and qualitative research are needed to build a knowledge base if play therapy continues to be used in the schools.

The themes and the propositions found in this study could be used as hypotheses for larger studies. Several ideas for future research can be gleaned from the survey results in this study:

1. A qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with the school counselors who believed that play therapy was ineffective in the school setting.
2. A qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with the counselors who

were unsure about the effectiveness of play therapy in the schools.

3. A qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with school counselors who had unique responses to the survey. For example, some counselors believed play therapy was highly effective in the schools yet did not use it as an intervention .
4. A comparison of the data from the above studies and the data from this research project.
5. A comparison of the perception of the prevalence of play therapy by counselor educators and administrators with the actual use of play therapy in the schools.

Other ideas evolving from this study include:

1. A comparison of school counselors trained in the theories of play therapy and school counselors who use play media but do not have training in play therapy.
2. An analysis of in-depth interviews with counselor educators concerning their beliefs about play therapy and school counseling as well as their training in play therapy.
3. A national study of counselor training programs and play therapy, including if and how play therapy training is offered in the programs, as well as why or why not the training is offered.
4. A national study of school counselors that includes a comparison of

the attitudes toward, and the use of, play therapy in different regions of the country as well as a comparison of new school counselors with experienced school counselors.

6. An analysis of observations of play therapy being used in the schools by counselors who have had course training versus workshop training.

Finally, empirical studies of play therapy in the elementary school setting are desperately needed. These studies could:

1. evaluate the overall effectiveness of play therapy in the schools,
2. evaluate the effectiveness of different theoretical perspectives of play therapy in the schools, and
3. evaluate the effectiveness of play therapy with specific populations.

Conclusion

Elementary school counselors who use play therapy believe that it is an effective intervention for working with young children. Those school counselors often feel unsupported in their use of play therapy and are uncertain about the place of play therapy in the school setting. Although they face various challenges within the school setting, they remain consistent in their commitment to play therapy. While play therapy necessitates an understanding and utilization of an organized framework rather than random use of toys or games with a talk-based therapy, many of the school counselors did not use theory-based techniques.

They used play therapy both with and without training. Because practice is ahead of training, counselor educators need to consider how they include play therapy in their training programs to ensure that school counselors have theory-based methods on which to base their practice.

Counselor educators need to recognize the use of play therapy by school counselors and the need for appropriate training. The aim of counselor educators should be to promote the use of theoretically-grounded play therapy techniques for brief interventions in the schools. Counselor educators need to offer play therapy training within their certification programs and need to provide continuing education opportunities for practicing school counselors. School counselors need to seek this education because they have an ethical responsibility to use theory-based techniques in their practices. Proper education and further research can alleviate school counselors' confusion about the place of play therapy in the school setting.

The in-depth interviews from this study generated numerous topics for discussion. Many of these topics were unrelated to play therapy. For example, the counselors discussed peer consultation, supervision, and suggestions for training. The counselors' enthusiasm and dedication to the profession were obvious throughout this study. Elementary school counselors have much information to share; they are a wealth of untapped information which should not be ignored.

The results of this study suggest that the use of play therapy is prevalent in the elementary schools. The elementary counselors who participated in this study had strong convictions concerning play therapy. One counselor summarized the general feeling:

I can't imagine being an elementary counselor without [play therapy]. I can't imagine; I can't even envision my role without it.
(CCP10)

The extent of this dedication has implications for practice and training. Further exploration by counselor educators and school counselors into the effectiveness of play therapy in the school setting is warranted. Responding to the call for the study of play therapy in the schools has the potential to benefit countless children.