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International Journal for the Scholarship of
Teaching and Learning

Volume 11 | Number 1

Article 11

January 2017

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Recommended Citation

Dillman Taylor, Dalena L.; Blount, Ashley; and Bloom, Zachary (2017) "Examination of Student Outcomes in Play Therapy: A Qualitative Case Study Design," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 11: No. 1, Article 11.
Available at: https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2017.110111

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Abstract

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

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

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(Received 06 April 2016; Accepted 19 August 2016)

Outcome research examining the effectiveness of teaching methods in counselor education is sparse. The researchers conducted a qualitative investigation utilizing an instrumental case study to examine the influence of a constructivist-developmental format on a play therapy counseling course in a large CACREP accredited university in the Southeastern United States. Results indicated that the constructivist-developmental lens was effective in promoting the professional development of counselors-in-training. The researchers offer course-specific recommendations as well as areas of future research.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is an opportunity for individuals to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve later vocational success (Beaman, 1995). Traditional educational models call for teachers to lecture as a form of instruction, which encourages students to be passive learners by receiving and then reciting that information (Greer & Heaney, 2004). Some faculty believe students are learning when they answer questions posed by their professors (Czekanski & Wolf, 2013), but Petress (2006) found that participation is determined by the quantity, dependability, and quality of student engagement.

Teaching paradigms vary across classroom settings (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2000). However, in counselor education programs, Young and Hundley (2013) suggested that hands-on teaching methods are superior to standard lecture-based methods in regard to the development of the unique skills and knowledge needed by counselors-in-training (CITs) to be effective future practitioners. Throughout their training and professional development, CITs progress through developmental stages (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010), which includes movement from black-and-white thinking (i.e., concrete right or wrong) to relational and process thinking (i.e., situational and circumstantially-based decision-making; Diller, 2010). This shift in CITs' thinking mirrors the pedagogical shift from modernist thinking to constructivist thinking in counselor education classrooms, in which CITs' previous experiences combine with their subjective reality to form the basis of their professional knowledge (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2000). Thus, the goal for counselor educators is to aid students in their transition from "black and white" thinkers to more reflective practitioners (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998).

In addition to guiding personal and professional development, counselor educators embrace and endorse a set of knowledge content areas and competencies that are integral to counselor preparation (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). Notably, in the helping professions (i.e., psychology, social work), and in counseling specifically, there is a human factor, which allows for unique opportunities for counseling students to apply what they learn with human beings. As a result, it is necessary for CITs to gain the ability to apply knowledge and skills in counseling settings with live participants (CACREP, 2016). Thus, overall, counselor educators are faced with the task of effectively creating a classroom environment that promotes active student engagement in order to support CITs personal and professional development (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2000). However, research examining learning and pedagogical practices within counselor education is generally limited, and research pertaining to play therapy classrooms is notably absent (Barrio Minton, Wachter Morris, & Yaites, 2014). Therefore, we investigated the influence of a constructivist-developmental format on student knowledge acquisition in the context of a play therapy counseling course.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF INSTRUCTION

Constructivist Paradigm

Modernism and constructivism are two of the most widely utilized teaching paradigms within counselor education (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2000). Modernism is the belief that an objective and universal truth exists and can be encountered, thus, compelling teachers to disseminate those truths (Guiffrida, 2005). Whereas, in contrast, constructivism is the belief that all knowledge is subjective and dependent upon an individual learner's unique perspective (Guiffrida, 2005). Constructivist thinking conceptualizes learning as being *constructed* through the intersection of previous experience, knowledge, and experience with new beliefs or ideas (Ültanir, 2012). Thus, constructivism is an effective paradigm for validating students' experiences and for promoting their "[…] considering, questioning, evaluating, and inventing [of] information" (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998, p. 79).

Within the constructivist framework, students and instructors encounter the classroom with prior experience, knowledge, and preconceived ideas. As such, students and instructors collaborate to create meaning within the class structure, and students learn through experience and participating in an active and dynamic teaching and learning process (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPierto, Lovett, & Norman, 2010; Sangganjanavanich & Black, 2011). Moreover, constructivist thought is more than just a theory; it is a way of understanding human meaning making (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Individuals who engage in constructivist thinking actively construct or modify meaning of their experiences to align with their unique worldviews (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). In regards to teaching and learning, constructivist classrooms support students' self-expression while they create new realities. Consequently, the

https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2017.110111

constructivist viewpoint works well with the field of counseling, where individuals are expected to be accepting of individuals with differing viewpoints, cultural practices, and experiences. Constructivism is the theoretical foundation of the course we examined in the current study.

Developmental Learning

Developmental learning conforms to the unique strengths of an educator and the demands of a field of study. While developmental teaching varies in style across classrooms, it is described as the matching of teachers' instruction style and content with students' individualized needs (Granello & Hazler, 1998). In relation to the helping professions, different individuals have applied the developmental lens to graduate-level learners, finding support that students move through developmental stages (e.g., Bruss & Kopala, 1993; Kreiser, Ham, Wigers, & Feldstein, 1991; Stewart, 1995).

For example, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) found support for a developmental framework for conceptualizing CITs' growth. The authors stated that CITs progress through developmental stages of: (a) imitating others to having self-confidence, (b) relying on techniques to trusting the process, (c) separating personal and professional selves into a more integrates sense of self, and (d) integrating data to trust one's own self (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Also within a developmental realm, Granello and Hazler (1998) found that CITs move through developmental stages of learning similar to Perry's (1970) stages of learning (i.e., nine stages within dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment). In combination, researchers and scholars agree that the successful process of becoming a helper is a journey including identifiable developmental stages and that the stages are applicable to graduate student-level learners (Young, 2013). As it relates to this study, the researchers infused a developmental framework (i.e., matching students' needs and aiding students in progression through developmentally appropriate stages) with their constructivist viewpoint.

Constructivist Framework with Developmental Considerations

The constructivist paradigm allows the instructor to assess the prior knowledge, skills, and worldview with which students enter the classroom. In a complimentary way, the developmental framework encourages the instructor to individualize the social, emotional, and intellectual climate of the course to match students' current level of development to best impact their learning experience (Ambrose, et al., 2010). The marrying of these two approaches enables the instructor to be flexible to meet the current and future needs of students.

TABLE 1. Levels of Reflective Judgment

Level	Epistemological Perspective	Concept of Justification	Example
Pre-Reflective Thinking	Knowledge is certain One correct answer Authority figures can impart "truth"	Beliefs = truth Beliefs justified through authority figures	My professor presented rubric what she wanted on the rubric so I am going to follow it exactly as reflecting content, so it is. listed.
Quasi-Reflective Thinking	Knowledge is uncertain or subjective Knowledge is filtered through perception	Beliefs justified through evidence, but the type of evidence provided depends on the perspective of the person	It's difficult to complete this a cannot really say if one assignment because there are multiple right answers. I guess guess it depends on what my professor wants.
Reflective Thinking	Knowledge is constructed By synthesizing a wide range of evidence (which is considered in context), openness to the possibility that new evidence could change the "truth"	Beliefs justified through comparing, contrasting, and interpreting evidence and opinions from a variety of sources	After reading several articles antalking to several and books as well as listening to the lecture and discussions in have made a decision taking class, the student can argue for or against certain answers as well as see that their own views on the matter. "I can do the think this decision is the best I can with the resources I currently have."

Note. Chart adapted from King, P. M., & Kitchener, K. S. (2004). Reflective judgment: Theory and research on the development of epistemic assumptions through adulthood. *Educational Psychology, 39*(1), 5-18.

King and Kitchener (2004) established developmental levels of reflective judgment to assess students' ability to self-direct learning and to scaffold students to higher levels of self-directed learning. In Table 1, the authors outline the three levels of reflective judgment with teaching examples from this framework: pre-reflective thinking, quasi-reflective thinking, and reflective thinking. A student with pre-reflective thinking believes the instructor is right because he or she is the expert and all answers are black and white. In contrast, a reflective thinker understands that there are multiple *right* answers; therefore, this individual will assess options for each answer and make the best decision for that situation. In the middle level, where most graduate students likely fall – quasi-reflective thinking – the student believes that all knowledge is uncertain and there are no right answers. Therefore, instructors are to assess students' level prior to course learning and periodically throughout the semester in order to scaffold the students to a higher level of thinking. The assessment process can take place in many ways (e.g., tests, projects, discussion, reflective writing). However, the instructor should select assessments that are theoretically consistent with his or her approach to learning. In addition, the structure of the classroom can enable students to move towards self-directed learning (e.g., students must learn to monitor and adjust their approaches to learning; Ambrose et al., 2010).

THE COUNSELOR EDUCATION STUDENT

Counselors-in-training (CITs) – counselor education students who are preparing for a career of working with clients to create therapeutic change – need to develop interpersonal skills as well as competencies for both theory and practice (CACREP, 2016; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). As it relates to their training, students are motivated by their desire for self-actualization and to discover the limits of their own potential (Rogers, 1961). Rogers (1961) noted, "the individual has within himself [sic] the capacity and the tendency, latent if not evident, to move forward toward maturity" (p. 35). This statement is likely to imply that students have the capacity within themselves to move toward learning and developing the necessary knowledge and skills to be effective counselors. However, it is necessary to note the role of the environment in CIT development.

In line with constructivist-developmental thinking, a student is able to take responsibility for their learning and actively create a classroom reality based on their experiences (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Previous researchers suggested that counseling is well suited for operating within a developmental framework (Ivey & Goncalves, 1987), and components of developmental learning have been applied to clinical and supervision settings within the counseling field (Blount & Mullen, 2015; Lambie & Sias, 2009; Loganbil, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982). Following theoretical practice, researchers found evidence supporting that graduate students respond well to developmental tenets (Steward, 1995). And the benefits of learning in a developmental learning environment may extend to all graduate level learners (Bruss & Kopala, 1993).

According to Granello and Hazler (1998), the three major motivators of adult learning are: (a) self-direction, (b) previous experience, and (c) the requirement for flexibility. This being said, counselor education student-learning is also motivated by the direction they see themselves taking, their past learned experiences, and desire for flexibility in the classroom (McAiliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Gaff and Gaff (1981) claimed that in order to motivate individuals to learn, students must be challenged. Thus, the constructivist-developmental framework of this current study can aid in increasing learner motivation. The instructor can challenge and scaffold the student to great levels of learning, while also encouraging students to take responsibility and to engage in their own learning process.

The Millennial Generation

The majority of students pursuing advanced degrees in higher education are members of the millennial generation (McNeill, 2011), as are the participants of this investigation. The Millennial student possesses core traits that are both beneficial and harmful to student learning depending on the method of instruction. McNeill (2011) described Millennials as (a) technological (short attention span; need more engagement), (b) special (entitlement), (c) team–oriented (emphasis on group work), (d) sheltered (dependency on adults), (e) confident (unrealistic self-assessment), (f) tolerant (value acceptance of many views, (g) pressured (can lead to performance anxieties), (h) civic (concern for justice and societal problems), (i) achieving (want to get the answer right), and (j) conventional (creativity is hampered). Therefore, in line with the major tenets of developmental learning, instructors are recommended to alter their teaching approach to support students' unique attributes of learning in order to meet the needs of their Millennial students (McNeill, 2011). Some changes might include promoting internal rather than external motivation, creating a holistic focus on learning rather than a linear trajectory, implementing a collaborative teaching approach rather than authoritarian approach, and developing higher order thinking in students rather than concrete understanding of the material. These suggestions fall in line with a constructivist-developmental framework.

Characteristics of a Successful Counselor

Counselors work from a variety of theoretical lenses and perform a broad range of interventions with individual, couple, and family clients. However, previous research indicated that the therapeutic relationship accounts for the greatest amount of counselor-based therapeutic outcomes regardless of theoretical lens or intervention (Norcross, 2002; Norcross & Wampold, 2011). As such, successful counselors follow Rogers's (1957; 1980) recommendations to facilitate a therapeutic relationship, which require (a) a therapist and client to be in psychological contact, (b) a client to be congruent with him/herself, (c) a therapist to be congruent with him/herself, (d) a therapist to express unconditional positive regard, (e) the therapist to experience an empathic understanding of the client's lived experience, and (f) a client to perceive and experience the therapist's empathy and unconditional positive regard.

In addition to meeting Rogers's (1957) conditions, reflection is the hallmark of the counseling profession (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989), and successful counselors engage in reflective practice (Irving & Williams, 1995). In their review of the literature, Neufeldt, Karno, and Nelson (1996) identified empirical support between counselors' use of reflective practice and counselors' professional development and improved work with clients. Thus, reflective practice is integrated into all aspects of the counseling field including clinical practice, supervision, and consultation (Bernard, 1979).

RESEARCHER CONTEXT

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

METHOD

Qualitative analysis encompasses individual realities and interactions with the world (Merriam, 1998). As such, qualitative researchers attempt to understand the constructed meanings people create in order to make sense of the events and experiences they undergo in their lives. We chose to view case study research as a unique qualitative research methodology involving a bounded system (i.e., case) over a specified time period (Creswell, 2007).

Case study research is viewed as a methodology or type of qualitative research design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998). Stake (2005) on the other hand, stated that case study research is less of a methodology and more of a researcher choice as to what is being studied (i.e., specific event at a certain point in time). Qualitative case study research involves exploring "a program, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals" (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). We examined the case study of a play therapy counseling classroom (N = 19), in which detailed participant information was obtained using a variety of collection procedures over a five week (i.e., course) time period. The course meetings were comprised of five, eight-hour segments, equaling a total of 40 hours of in-class experience. The type of case study utilized was an instrumental case study qualitative investigation. Stake (1995) stated instrumental qualitative investigation involves researchers focusing on a single concern or issue (i.e., constructivist, collaborative classrooms) and studying one bounded case to illustrate the concern (e.g., the single play therapy classroom). The steps followed included: (a) determine if case study methodology is the appropriate approach, (b) identify a specific case or cases, (c) collect participant information, (d) decide upon appropriate data analysis, and (e) interpret the meaning derived from the case or cases.

Participant Recruitment

The participants were students from a single Play Therapy course in a large Southeastern, CACREP accredited institution. The data for the investigation was initially collected for an institutional effectiveness program (i.e., assessing course effectiveness) at the university and is therefore considered retroactive in nature. Thus, the researchers obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to analyze the data post-collection prior to data analysis. The first researcher taught the Play Therapy course and implemented the institutional effectiveness protocol (i.e., implemented the use of the collaborative rubrics and pre/post assessments). Final requirements for participant data inclusion in the investigation were: (a) student enrolled in the Play Therapy course and (b) student completed the pre- and post-assessment. Due to assessing retroactive course data, we were unable to provide descriptive data for the participants.

Pre and Post Assessment

The researchers implemented a pre- and post-qualitative measure for assessing participant change during their time in the Play Therapy course. The pre-assessment involved 29 short-answer questions based on the course objectives for the class. The post-assessment involved the same items for comparison purposes. See Appendix A for the Play Therapy Assessment used in this course.

Constructivist-Developmental Classroom Framework and Collaborative Teaching

Students and instructors enter the classroom with (a) prior knowledge, (b) expectations, and (c) level of thinking. The instructor also brings the standards of counseling and course content and material. It is crucial for the instructor to model for the students a safe, growth-producing learning environment that parallels the counseling room and therapeutic relationship. Together, the instructor and students engage in dialogue to increase learning. The overall goal of this study was examine the influence of a constructivist-developmental format on a play therapy counseling using a utilizing an instrumental case study.

Course Objectives and Course Assignments

The course used in this instrumental qualitative investigation included a number of objectives: (a) to demonstrate knowledge of the role of group and family play therapy as a means for facilitating change in children, preadolescents, adolescents, and families; (b) to demonstrate knowledge of the therapeutic goals of group and family play therapy; (c) to identify selection criteria and screening processes necessary when formulating groups; (d) to discuss multicultural considerations and the use of group and family play therapy with special populations; (e) to demonstrate knowledge and ability of the therapist's role in group and family play therapy; (f) to describe and discuss ethical considerations and challenges of involving parents when conducting group play therapy; (g) to describe strategies and adaptations for meeting the unique developmental considerations of involving the immediate family in family play therapy; (h) to demonstrate the unique skills set when utilizing group and family play therapy (i.e., responding therapeutically to all members, setting therapeutic limits, facilitating problem-solving and conflict resolution); and (i) to demonstrate the ability to create group interventions appropriate to specific populations. Course objectives are provided in order to give a broader understanding of the bounded case (i.e., course) utilized in this research investigation.

Course assignments included: (a) Micro-practicum, (b) Self-Assessment of Learning, and (c) Group Project for the Play Therapy Course. The Micro-practicum assignment had a goal of allowing students the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and application of skills (Course objective h). Students participated as the counselor on two occasions and a skills checklist is completed by a minimum of two observers and the course instructor. The second assignment (Self Assessment of Learning) had a goal of enabling students to self-reflect on their developmental process of learning the course material and to evaluate their own integration of the material (Course objectives a-i). The assignment was student-led, which allowed for students to take responsibility of their own learning (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992) as well as co-construct their own realities within the classroom setting (Sangganjanavanich & Black, 2011). Finally, assignment three involved a group project, with a goal of providing students the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge of material presented in class (Course objectives a, b, c, d, e, i). The Group Project was also a self-led undertaking in order to promote student engagement, challenge, and support constructivist-based learning (McNeill, 2011; Sangganjanavanich & Black, 2011).

Data Analysis

We selected a case study methodology for the research design because the participating classroom students were bound by time and activities (Creswell, 2007; Mertens, 2005). Specifically, an instrumental case study because the case served as an instrument for exploring whether or not the classroom instruction was effective. The general strategy of data analysis involved relying on theoretical propositions. Because we had experience in counseling classrooms (i.e., using constructivist/developmental techniques), our predisposed ideas influenced data collection (Yin, 2014). Additionally, the design of the case study and the organization of the case study analysis was influenced by the propositions; thus, we decided to rely on our theoretical propositions to guide our data analysis (Yin, 2014).

The case study data analysis plan initially involved data organization. Each participant's data was given a code and any identifying information was removed (i.e., names, program track) to ensure objective evaluation of correct answers. Pre- and post-assessments per participant were given the same code to compare individual results across time. Assessments were open-ended and participants were instructed to answer each question to the best of their knowledge. We then conducted content analysis and descriptive statistics, including analyzing the mean, median, and mode of the pre- and post-assessments. Multiple pre- and post-assessments were thoroughly examined to gain an overall sense of an accurate answer to each question (Creswell, 2009). During the content analysis process, the first author took detailed notes as to variations of accurate answers (e.g., patterns) agreed upon by the research team. Based on our knowledge of the class content, literature, and research on this course topic, compiled with commonalities in the data, overall themes were established for each answer and a coding manual for scoring the assessments (pre and post) was developed. The general coding manual was designed to account for student experiences in the classroom and learned content and consisted of three codes to be marked per answer: (a) 0 = no answer or wrong answer, (b) 1 = partial answer, and (c) 2 = complete answer. For example, for question 26 "what is the developmental rationale for group play therapy for preadolescents/adolescents," the researchers decided that the student must indicate components of the following: (a) rapid developmental change occurs; (b) increase in importance of peers; and (c) desire to find a sense of belonging with peers to receive full credit. For partial credit, the student's answer needed to contain at least two of the above criteria. If the student's answer contained one or less of the above criteria, then that student did not receive any credit (0 points). The complete coding manual consisted of answers for 29 questions for 58 total possible points and allowed for an objective format for critiquing student answers. Following completion of the coding manual, the researchers re-examined all pre- and post-assessments to assess the codes separately. The researchers then compared results of each assessment (19 pre-assessments and 19 post-assessments). If a discrepancy occurred between scores, the researchers discussed this discrepancy and came to an agreed upon answer.

RESULTS

Nineteen students completed both the pre- and post-assessment for this course (100% completion rate). All 19 students showed some improvement across time from pre- to post-testing. Out of 58 possible points, the pre-assessment scores ranged from 0 – 22 points; whereas the post-assessment scores ranged from 26 – 50 points. Students improved an averaged 25.47 points from the pre- to the post-assessment, ranging from a 14 – 35 point increase (Mode = 28; Median = 27).

Several questions (n =14) indicated marked improvement for at least one-third of the class (pre = 0; post = 2). At least half of the class demonstrated marked improvement on three questions: (1) What populations are appropriate for family play therapy? (n =10); (2) Name 3 semi-structure activities for groups (n =9); and (3) Name 3 semi-structure activities for families (n =11). These findings demonstrated students' increase in knowledge across the course. No student showed a marked decline in knowledge across all questions. For three of the questions, two students showed a slight decline (2 to 1) in knowledge from pre- to post-assessment (one point): (13) What facilities are appropriate for providing group play therapy? (n = 2); (15) What populations are appropriate for group play therapy? (n = 2); and (17) What is the difference between the following: non-directive, semi-directive, and directive group/family play therapy? (n = 2). For example, one student stated for question 13 during the pre-assessment, "a room that is not too large or too small, a place that can allow for noise-making, not a personal office where one would worry about valuables," which counted as a full credit answer. For the post-assessment, "ones that provide a safe space conducive to expression of emotions, as acted out by clients; not too large or small." Although the post-answer was partially correct, the student eliminated part of her pre-answer that fell under the umbrella of "allows for messiness" that was required by the coding team.

In comparing pre- and post-scores across the 29 questions, students demonstrated a difference in knowledge across content. We examined number of questions in which students demonstrated no knowledge of course material (assigned zero points) versus no knowledge at the conclusion of the course. At pre-assessment, questions in which students were assigned zero points ranged from three to 19 students per question compared to the post-test in which the range was zero to eleven. The average number of students who earned zero points per question was M = 11.72 (pre-assessment) compared to M = 2.34 (post-assessment). In addition, researchers examined mastery of content across the course (assigned two points) at pre-assessment versus at post-assessment. At pre-assessment, questions in which students were assigned two points ranged from zero to nine students per question compared to the post-test in which the range was two to 17. The average of students who earned two points per question was M = 1.14 (pre-assessment) compared to M = 9.52 (post-assessment).

Play Therapy Course Objectives

For course objective (a) to demonstrate knowledge of the role of group and family play therapy as a means for facilitating change in children, preadolescents, adolescents, and families, the researchers examined responses to questions 1 and 2. The average score increased for question 1 from 0.63 (pre) to 1.32 (post) and for question 2 from 0.74 (pre) to 1.63 (post). For course objective (b) to demonstrate knowledge of the therapeutic goals of group and family play therapy, questions 3 and 4 were examined. The average score increased for question 3 from 0.63 (pre) to 1.37 (post) and for question 4 from 0.47 (pre) to 1.11 (post). For course objective (c) to identify selection criteria and screening processes necessary when formulating groups, questions 5, 6, and 7 were examined. The average score increased for question 5 from 0.89 (pre) to 1.42 (post), for question 6 from 0.42 (pre) to 0.79 (post), and for question 7 from 0.63 (pre) to 1.21 (post). For course objective (d) to discuss multicultural considerations and the use of group and family play therapy with special populations, questions 15 and 16 were examined. The average score increased for question 15 from 1.21 (pre) to 1.26 (post) and for question 16 from 1.11 (pre) to 1.63 (post). For course objective (e) to demonstrate knowledge and ability of the therapist's role within group and family play therapy, questions 10, 11, and 12 were examined. The average score increased for question 10 from 1.11 (pre) to 1.37 (post), for question 11 from 1.16 (pre) to 1.60 (post), and for question 12 from 0.89 (pre) to 1.42 (post). For course objective (f) to describe and discuss ethical considerations and challenges of involving parents when conducting group play therapy, questions 18 and 19 were examined. The average score decreased for question 18 from 1.84 (pre) to 1.05 (post) and for question 19 from 1.74 (pre) to 0.95 (post). For course objective (g) to describe strategies and adaptations for meeting the unique developmental considerations of involving the immediate family in family play therapy, question 26 was examined. The average score decreased for question 26 from 1.58 (pre) to 1.47 (post). Course objectives (h) and (i) were not examined within the assessment because these objectives were skills-based as opposed to knowledge-based. Therefore, the instructor evaluated objectives (h) and (i) through a skill-based activity and used the play therapy skills checklist to gauge student progress (Ray, 2004).

DISCUSSION

Graduate level studies are designed to increase skills and knowledge necessary to achieve future vocational success (Beaman, 1995) and participation is determined by the quantity, dependability, and quality of student engagement (Petress, 2006). Thus, the constructivist-developmental framework in this study was used to promote both student-led learning and increase the quality of student engagement. Students entered the course knowing 37% or less on the pre-assessment (0 to 22 out of 59 total points). Through the active engagement process of the course, the students' overall knowledge gained increased an average of 24.47 or 43% improvement over time. All three assignments were designed to challenge students, to actively engage them in the learning process (Gaff & Gaff, 1981; McAiliffe & Eriksen, 2011), and to increase their ability to retain knowledge over the duration of the semester (e.g., 16 weeks). In addition, students required flexibility in their learning (McAiliffe & Eriksen, 2011); the instructor enacted a policy that all students could use one re-do per assignment to increase in their demonstration of knowledge. The instructor hypothesized that this policy enabled students to stay engaged with the activity and to take responsibility for their learning while demonstrating their knowledge. Future researchers should explore this concept more closely and how it relates to the students' overall knowledge retention. However, for this particular sample of students, this model of instruction appeared beneficial to students' overall demonstration of retained knowledge over the course of the semester.

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

Further, some students entered the classroom with existing knowledge of play therapy that could be added to over the course of the semester. Per question, up to nine students had accurate knowledge (two points) on the pre-assessment. This finding supports the constructivist framework that students enter with pre-existing knowledge regarding the course content (Ambrose, et al., 2010; Sangganjanavanich & Black, 2011). As noted earlier, students had up to 37% of accurate previous knowledge entering the classroom. This pre-assessment informed the instructor of what level of knowledge the students had prior to the course. The instructor could alter the course to meet the students' developmental needs and build upon the existing play therapy knowledge.

This specific play therapy course, housed at the researchers' local university, aligns with the criterion outlined by the Association for Play Therapy (APT), the accrediting body for registered play therapists (RPT). Applicants applying to become registered play therapists "must complete 150 hours of play therapy specific instruction from institutions of higher education," (Vega & Guerrero, 2014, p. 2), including (a) play therapy history (4-5 hours), (b) play therapy theories (40-50 hours), (c) play therapy techniques and methods (40-50 hours), and (d) play therapy applications (40-50 hours). This course (37.5 hours) meets the guidelines for some of the hours of play therapy techniques, theories, and applications. Thus, the findings of this study support the learning of students to be successful in their work with children, averaging a 43.2% increase in knowledge from pre- to post-assessment.

The mean of students' responses to items related to the learning course objectives for this course increased with the exception of objectives (f) to describe and discuss ethical considerations and challenges of involving parents when conducting group play therapy and (g) to describe strategies and adaptations for meeting the unique developmental considerations of involving the immediate family in family play therapy. Both objectives were discussed briefly in the course; therefore, the instructor will spend more time directly reflecting on ethical considerations and adaptations for family play therapy in future course discussion and content. However, for objectives (a) through (e), students demonstrated an increase of knowledge in these content areas.

Limitations

As with most qualitative research, due to small sample size (n = 19) and unique characteristics of the sample, the findings of this investigation are not generalizable to other populations. Further, participants may have experienced possible testing bias given that they took the same assessment across two time periods. Despite these limitations, this study provided critical information regarding the structure, content, and assessment of the current course. Findings from this study also provided insight into future research.

IMPLICATIONS

Course Specific

The instructor gained valuable information to improve the course for future semesters and to continue scholarship of teaching and learning for this specific course. A review of the findings indicates that the instructor appeared to have met the course objectives (a) through (e). However, the course might benefit from increasing the discussion and course content in regards to objectives (f) and (g).

We also found some evidence supporting the benefit of assignment re-dos. Thus, we recommend the instructor explore the implementation of assignment re-dos and how the policy impacts student knowledge and retention. Examination of students' level of thinking at the beginning of the course compared to the end of the course is also warranted. Although some evidence (i.e., unanswered questions at pre-test to complete answers at post-test) demonstrates an increase in reflective judgment, instructors are advised to examine this finding more specifically in future scholarship of teaching and learning. The structure of this course appears to lend evidence to the increase in students' knowledge and therefore, other instructors may benefit from adding components of this structure to their courses more experiential in nature.

Future Research

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

Conclusion

Researchers and scholars criticized standard lecture-based classrooms for their limitations in engaging students in active learning. While research examining teacher effectiveness in counselor education programs is sparse, counselor education classrooms – as well as graduate level courses in general – are moving towards constructivist and developmental paradigms due to their theoretical meeting of CITs needs. Thus, we investigated the influence of a constructivist-developmental format on a play therapy counseling course. Through an instrumental case study qualitative investigation, we found that instructors navigating through developmental and constructivist lenses can support students in their transition from novice counselors, to reflective practitioners as evidenced by a 43.2% increase in student knowledge from pre- to post-assessment. We recommend that instructors consider implementing constructivist-developmental tenets in their classrooms and encourage future researchers to examine the effectiveness of constructivist-developmental classrooms across graduate programs.

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APPENDIX A

Play Therapy Assessment

Directions: Answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge.

1. Explain to the best of your knowledge, what is group play therapy?
2. Explain to the best of your knowledge, what family play therapy?
3. What is the rationale for working with children in groups?
4. What is the rationale for working with families in play therapy?
5. What are some necessary steps for assessing for group fit?
6. How does one assess for appropriateness to individual, group, or family play therapy?
7. What key factors are important for determining what modality of play therapy is best for the child?
8. What materials are suggested for group play therapy?
9. What materials are suggested for family play therapy?
10. What is the therapist's role during group play therapy?
11. What is the therapist's role during family play therapy?
12. How do responses change for the therapist when providing individual versus group play therapy?
13. What facilities are appropriate for providing group play therapy?
14. What facilities are appropriate for providing family play therapy?
15. What populations are appropriate for group play therapy?
16. What populations are appropriate for family play therapy?
17. What is the different between the following: non-directive, semi-directive, and directive group/family play therapy?
18. What are ethical considerations for group play therapy?
19. What are ethical considerations for family play therapy?
20. Name 3 structured activities for groups.
21. Name 3 structured activities for families.
22. Name 3 unstructured activities for groups.
23. Name 3 unstructured activities for families.
24. Name 3 semi-structure activities for groups.
25. Name 3 semi-structure activities for families.
26. What is the developmental rationale for group play therapy for preadolescents/adolescents?
27. What is the rationale for using structures versus semi-structured versus unstructured activities?
28. What are the steps for processing activities with children, adolescents, or families?
29. What considerations are important for determining the depth of processing?