Dealing for Healing: Play Therapy as a Solution for Counselor’s Dilemma at School Setting

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ABSTRACT
In play therapy, toys are like the child's words and play is the child's language. Play is used as a therapy for children due to their natural limitations in cognitions and verbal communication in expressing their emotions and struggles. Hence, counselors need to have the ability to deal with child clients in counseling sessions, if not it will remain as a counselors’ dilemma in school settings. The therapeutic relationship during play therapy sessions can provide a corrective emotional experience necessary for healing. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the uses of play therapy as a solution for counselor’s dilemma in dealing with child clients in school settings. Besides, this study aims to increase positive attitudes toward children, to expand play therapy knowledge, to enhance the play therapy skill and to explore the competency and satisfaction level of school counselors dealing with children. This was a qualitative study using interview questions to gain the demographic data as a school counselor and to explore experience and competency conducting counseling sessions with children from five school counselors. The findings show through play therapy training that was participated by the counselors was effective to give insights and help the counselors to work effectively in helping children with mental health concerns. The counselors had the opportunity to increase their attitude, knowledge, and skills in play therapy and improve the quality of the counseling profession in Malaysia.

Keywords: Play Therapy, School Counselor, Dilemma

Introduction
Play Therapy as a Solution for Counselor’s Dilemma at School Setting
Play therapy is an effective counseling approach for children because children are able to express feelings, thoughts and experiences through their natural language which is play (Landreth, 2012). Play is viewed as the vehicle that enables children to communicate their experiences and inner awareness in a “language” familiar to them. Play therapy is also used to address a number of developmental issues faced in childhood (Wynne, 2008). People might think children does not have any problems or stress to face unlike adults. However, children are like an adult people who do have problems and feel stress in their life. Toys, art supplies, games, and other play media provide a means by which children can express themselves using the language of play. Landreth et al (2009) described the use of play as children’s language in which children are able to safely express past experiences and associated feelings. Through play, children can communicate past experiences and associated feelings (Landreth, Ray, & Bratton, 2009). Bratton et al. (2005) argue the need for
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developmentally responsive interventions to help ensure that the mental health needs of all children are met.

According to Schmidt (2008), the suitable place to provide an ideal setting for play therapy is school setting. Schools through the counseling services supposedly can be the first setting which can offer and recognize the mental health needs of children (Cochran, Cholette, & Nordling, 2011). Hence, counselors need to have the ability to deal with child clients in counseling sessions. Thus, counselor as a professional needs to be trained in play therapy to enhance their attitude, knowledge, and skills approaches and practices. According to American School Counselor Association (2012), the use of play therapy in school setting is congruent with the ASCA National Model’s outline of a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program.

At school settings, counselors help students dealing with their issues whether it is related to academic or personel. They are the needs to overcome the students’ struggles since that may affect their social life and academic growth and success. Counselor need to use an effective approach such as play therapy in handling child client at school. The use of play in the school setting by school Play will help children to express themselves in developmentally appropriate means that can exceed the limitations of verbal expression and cultural barriers as the natural and universal language of children (Drewes, 2009). Many researches have been done to prove that play therapy is one of the most effective ways in handling child client.

Researchers continue to recommend the integration of play therapy and play techniques into elementary, middle, and secondary school counseling programs (Blanco & Ray, 2011; Landreth et al., 2009; Shen, 2008; Baggerly & Borkowski, 2004) as an effective ways to meet the needs of students with a variety of difficulties and concerns at varying ages and ability levels. Ray, Muro, and Schumann (2004) in a year-long pilot study, found that adding play therapy strengthened the remedial and preventative aspects of a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program. Interviews with administrators and teachers suggested a decrease in student referrals and an increase in academic success and classroom behavior (Ray et al., 2004).

In addition to providing counselors with a modality that can function for students at a variety of academic levels, play is a culturally sensitive approach that transcends numerous differences and enables students to use the universal language of play. Play is not limited by cultural boundaries and allows expression of individual views of self, others, and the world around them (Kottman, 2003). Wynne (2008), in exploring the role of play therapy in schools, concluded that finding ways to support play therapy and play in school counseling is imperative as it has the power positively impact students dealing with a of variety issues, including anxiety (Shen, 2008), decision making and confidence (Green & Christensen, 2006), classroom behavior (Ray et al., 2007), and can ultimately enhance students’ potential for learning (Landreth, 2012).

Shen’s (2002) experimental study of 65 Taiwanese children who experienced an earthquake revealed that children receiving short-term, child-centered, group play therapy in their schools scored significantly lower on measures of anxiety and suicide risk than the control group who did not participate in the school-based play therapy. Similarly, Ray et al. (2007) studied 60 elementary school students diagnosed with attention deficit or hyperactivity disorder and school counselors can easily match play therapy and play approaches with children’s developmental needs as understood through Piaget’s (1962) theory of cognitive development. Children are not developmentally able to engage fully in abstract reasoning or thinking until middle school or beyond, thus play is the concrete expression of the child and the child’s way of understanding the world (Landreth, 2012).

Hence, the main purpose of this study is to investigate the uses of play therapy as a solution for counselor’s dilemma in dealing with child client in school settings. Besides, this
study aims to increase positive attitudes toward children, to expand play therapy knowledge, to enhance the play therapy skills and to explore the competency and satisfaction level of school counselors dealing with children. as will be described in this writing. This writing will show a brief overview how play therapy become an effective solution for counselor’s dilemma at school setting.

**Methodology**

This was a qualitative study using interview protocol in order to gain the demographic data as a school counselor and to explore experience and competency conducting counseling sessions with children. The participants of this study were voluntary five counselors in primary schools. This study present results on how play therapy can be used to effectively work with a child clients in the school setting. In this study, the five counselors has been undergo play therapy training for three days conducted by profesional and expertise in this approach in Malaysia in order to gain knowledges, and skills to practise play therapy in school setting. After a week from the three days training, they were interviewed in order to received feedbacks from the participants regarding their experience before and after the training.

**Perception towards Toys and Play**

The results of this study shows that through play therapy training that was participated by five primary schools counselors was effective to give insights and help the counselors to work effectively in helping with children with mental health concerns. After attending the play therapy training, counselors showed their positive changes and improvement regarding their perception towards play and toys and their knowledge about play therapy. The positive changes are described as follows:-

**Perception towards Toys and Play Before the Play Therapy Training**

Before attending the play therapy training, some of the counselors having negative perceptions towards toys and play. They thought that there is no benefit and purpose from play. Play can make children loss of focus in study, and counseling sessions do not need play as an intervention. These negative perceptions and misunderstanding will influenced the use of play therapy if the counselors are not trained well. This finding was corresponding to Robyn (2011) in his survey study that found the elder community members commented that work was important to their generation and that play had no value. Their negative perception towards toys and play are as follows:-

*There was no benefit and meaning of play.*

“...when I saw children playing, it was just a play for me and nothing more...and toys bothering me because I need to clean up the toys after my children play”.

(Respondent 2)

“...before this, for me toys were not effective... I’m always used art therapy and writing in counseling session...”

(Respondent 3)

“...previously when at home, I threw away the toys in dustbin...because I thought there was no function of play...”

(Respondent 4)
Play make children loss of focus in study.
“...I worried if students play in class, they will not focusing on their study.. that was why I was not interested with toys...”
(Respondent 4)

Counseling sessions do not need play as an intervention
“...for me, it was hard to apply play in my session because my students was able to talk to...”
(Respondent 4)
“...I don't know.. for me, there is no need using play..perhaps, it because of myself does not accepted play yet to be implemented in counseling session...”
(Respondent 4)

Perception towards toys and play after training
After attending the play therapy training, counselors showed their positive changes regarding their perception towards the play and toys. Besides, this study showed the positive attitudes toward children, and play therapy itself. The positive changes are as follows:

Play is interesting
“...now I feel play is very interesting and I want to do it in proper way...I would like to have play therapy room and toys...”
(Respondent 3)

Play is child language
“...before this, I kept all the toys in box...after the training I let my childrens play with the toys and they are very happy and enjoy with the toys... now I realized that play is actually their language...”
(Respondent 2)

Play is a tool for children to communicate
“...before this, I’ve never thought that toys is a tool to communicate with children...”
(Respondent 1)

Play have meaning
“...but now I know and I realized there is meaning behind the play..”
(Respondent 2)

Gain interest on play
“...after the training, I’ve some interest in toys and play...”
(Respondent 4)

Play is good for counseling
“...toys and play are good in counseling sessions...hopefully, one day I can implement play therapy at my school...”
(Respondent 4)
Training Improved Counselor’s Knowledge and Skills on Play Therapy

Play therapy training that counselors attended helped to increase their attitude, knowledge, and skills in play therapy and can improve the quality of the counseling profession in Malaysia. It shows that, in this study, training is very important to deliver knowledge and better understanding towards play therapy. This study was corresponding to Ku Suhaila, Bruce and Mohamad Isa (2014), which in their research demonstrated that short-term play therapy training can significantly help participants enhance their attitude, knowledge, and skills in play therapy. The benefits included enhancement of the participants’ careers and improvement in the overall abilities of the mental health profession. Another benefit of this study was to provide the participants with play therapy skills they could practice immediately after the training. Ultimately this study was beneficial to children and parents in Malaysia through the work of the professionals who participated and continue in their effective work.

“...now I got the knowledge...the play therapy workshop helped increase my understanding about children...”

(Respondent 4)

“...I’ve never imagine play therapy is useful in counseling session... through this training it helps me to improve my understanding...”

(Respondent 5)

“...Now I understand more...how play therapy functions...how to implement. Previously, I knew the existent of play therapy...but I do not know the right way to use it in session...”

(Respondent 1)

“...I received many info which helped me to understand more about play therapy...this training just not focusing only on theory but more to practical.. it is really helps in term of increasing my confident to implement play therapy in my counseling session at school...”

(Respondent 5)

“...before this, I confused.. I’ve try to put the toys as my therapy approach but I thought it was under art therapy... now I know it is under play therapy... I do not know how to arrange the toys categorically previously.. thus, it is new knowledge for me...”

(Respondent 3)

“...play therapy is more easier to handle...”

(Respondent 5)

These finding was corresponding to Landreth (2012), which is talking about problems using words is often difficult for children due to their natural limitations in cognitions and verbal communication in expressing their emotions and struggles. Children will refuse to talk if they feel uncomfortable and unsafe with the person who are talking to them including the counselor at school (Shannon, Carrie, & Morgan, 2013). Successfully counseling the child client requires a collaborative approach between counselor and the client by building rapport and establish trust with child client (Lauren & Paxton, 2011). Therefore, regarding this child...
clients natural limitation, counseling at school setting need an effective approach to deal with children, otherwise it will remain as counselor’s dilemma. According to Landreth (2009), play therapy is widely recognized as an effective therapeutic approach for children who are unable or unwilling to communicate their psychological distress.

In play therapy toys are viewed as the child's words and play as the child's language (Landreth, 2012). Play Therapy allow the children to express their inner world more comfortably and safely through the symbolic representation the toys provide. The use of toys enables children to transfer anxieties, fears, fantasies, and guilt to objects rather than people. In the process, children are safe from their own feelings and reactions because play enables children to distance themselves from traumatic events and experiences. Therefore, children are not overwhelmed by their own actions because the act takes place in fantasy. By acting out through play a frightening or traumatic experience or situation symbolically, and perhaps changing or reversing the outcome in the play activity, children move toward an inner resolution, and then they are better able to cope with or adjust to problems. A major function of play in play therapy is the changing of what may be unmanageable in reality to manageable situations through symbolic representation, which provides children opportunities for learning to cope.

The Need of Professional Play Therapy Training

In order for play therapy being implemented effectively in counseling session at school setting, counselor need to have basic knowledges, skills and competencies to run this approach by attending professional play therapy training. According to Landreth (2009), prospective play therapists such as counselor have to be adequately trained. Within or in addition to such a program, training should incorporate the areas of child development and basic counseling skills including acquisition of a theoretical approach incorporating a rationale for behavior change consistent with the play therapy approach utilized. The program of study should include extensive training in the area of play therapy and a supervised practicum experience with children in play therapy.

Many studies of various types of play therapy training have been conducted (e.g., Kagan & Landreth, 2009; Kao & Chang, 2007; Hunt, 2010). Trainings demonstrate benefits for mental health professionals including practitioners, counselors, school counselors, and graduate counseling students, who work closely with children in support of their well-being. Bratton et al. (1993) investigated the effectiveness of training by conducting an intensive three-day play therapy supervision. The therapist and participants reported many areas of self-improvement through this training with changes occurring rapidly such as self-awareness, confidence, therapeutic skills, and understanding of the play therapy process.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, play therapy suggested as one of the effective intervention as a solution for counselor’s dilemma in dealing with child client in school settings. Therefore, skill in using play therapy is an essential tool for school counselors to work with children. To serve clients successfully, they must have had proper training and should have relevant certifications to demonstrate their competence. Continuing training plays an important role in increasing the ability of professionals. This study showed that through training, counselors as participants improved their attitude and increased their knowledge and skill in conducting sessions and helping child clients. In conclusion, specific attitude, knowledge, and skills requirements should be mandated before a worker with children can be called a play therapist. Thus, it is very important to have proper training to enhance the capability of play therapists and their ethical practice. Malaysia and other countries where play therapy is emerging need to recognize the potential effectiveness of play therapy in helping children.
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with mental health issues. They must also provide training to make sure that play therapy is not misused. Hence, the aims of this study was to increase positive attitudes toward children, to expand play therapy knowledge, to enhance the play therapy skill and to explore the competency and satisfaction level of school counselors dealing with children.

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