ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF REALITY PLAY THERAPY IN STUDENT RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

By

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To everyone who believes in the power of children
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DEFINITION OF TERMS

ASCA National Model: A set of standards developed by the American School Counselor Association which outlined school counselors’ responsibility for promoting academic, career, and social/personal needs of all students.

Basic needs: Five basic human needs: 1) survival; 2) love and belonging; 3) power; 4) freedom; and 5) fun.

Choice theory: Dr. William Glasser’s theory of counseling that posits all human behavior is chosen in an effort to meet five basic human needs. Additionally, choice theory states all human problems are relationships problems.

Classroom relationships: Includes Dr. William Glasser’s components of relationship important to the school environment: 1) Teacher, 2) Peers, and 3) Schoolwork.

Play counseling: A method of counseling that utilizes play to express needs and feelings while learning effective problem-solving strategies in a developmentally appropriate manner.


Quality school: An educational institution that has adopted Dr. William Glasser’s choice theory concepts and applied them to the educational curriculum.

Quality world: A set of pictures all human beings have in their minds. These pictures include people, things, and beliefs that drive our need satisfaction.

Reality play therapy: A method of working with children that incorporates aspects of Dr. William Glasser’s choice theory and reality therapy with play counseling techniques.

Reality therapy: The delivery system of choice theory. Reality therapy involves techniques implementing the ideas of choice theory to be utilized by the counselor.

Total behavior: All aspects of human behavior: 1) Acting, 2) Thinking, 3) Feeling, and 4) Physiology.
WDEP: A reality therapy method of intervention utilizing four fundamental questions to aid in problem-solving. These questions focus on the following components: 1) What do you want? (Wants), 2) What are you doing to get what you want? (Doing), 3) Is what you are doing working? (Evaluation), and 4) What is another way to get what you want? (Planning).
Within this study, the researcher examined an approach to teaching elementary school counselors a combination of Dr. William Glasser’s reality therapy and play counseling techniques, and school counselors’ perceptions of its implementation with elementary school students. Many of today’s elementary school students are lacking the school relationships required to meet their needs for positive, growth-fostering interactions which can affect personal, social, and academic issues. Reality therapy and play counseling both seek to address these poor or missing relationship components through developmentally appropriate and effective interventions. Through the use of reality play therapy, elementary school counselors can provide students with opportunities to create positive relationships and develop problem-solving skills to meet their needs. Eight school counselors, recruited from a north central Florida public school system, participated in a series of reality play therapy trainings which introduced techniques appropriate for counseling upper-grade elementary school students. A thematic analysis was conducted on feedback sessions following the trainings yielding three major themes related to the counseling theories, school environment, and reality
play therapy techniques. The school counselors’ reflection journals and interview transcripts were analyzed using grounded theory methods which yielded four core categories: positive aspects of implementation, concerns regarding implementation, perceptions of the effectiveness of relationship building, and perceptions of the effectiveness of developing problem solving skills. The theory developed presents interconnectivity among the core categories in the school counselors’ meaning making and perceptions of the implementation and effectiveness of reality play therapy in student relationship building and problem-solving skills development.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Overview

The landscape of the elementary school counseling environment is ever changing. No longer can school counselors simply make sure students are in the correct classes or just work with the troubled students. Further, the attitude of school counselors’ effectiveness being accepted on good faith is no longer valid (Myrick, 2003b). It is now part of the school counselor identity to be accountable or “demonstrate to others the effectiveness of the program in measurable terms” (Brott, 2006, p. 179). The geology of schools, even at the elementary level, is now shaped by this concept of accountability, as well as high-stakes testing. These changes are evident in recent legislature such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a) and increased standards for school counselors as outlined by The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2005). Additionally, school counselors are expected to “fix all types of behavioral and learning problems in a short amount of time with a wide array of students from diverse cultural backgrounds” (Fall, 2001a, p. 316), while addressing each student as a unique entity (Roberts & Mills, 2009). Although changes have occurred in the past several years, additional adjustments are in order for school counselors to meet these academic accountability standards while completing their counseling duties (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006). These changes will be addressed within the following areas: the school counselor, expectations of the school counselor, and reality therapy and play counseling.
The School Counselor

Despite being a relatively young profession, the history of school counseling is quite rich. The idea of school counseling emerged from the social reform movement in the late 1800s and early 1900s and revolved around curriculum involving moral and career development for students. Movements in vocational guidance and mental health counseling also contributed to the development of school counseling’s current format (Baker & Gerler, 2004). Of particular interest, were the historical components of World Wars I and II and the focus on school testing for potential soldiers and the space race with the launching of the Sputnik satellite resulting in the National Defense Education Act (Wittmer & Clark, 2007). Recently, shifts have been made from the “individual, position-oriented, one-to-one, small group counseling approach to a more preventative, wellness oriented, proactive one” (Wittmer & Clark, p.5). Some of the ideas related to this developmental model include school counselors being competent in counseling skills, utilizing techniques available to and appropriate for all students, providing leadership to the entire school community, facilitating change, coordinate communication efforts, and being open to contributions of the community as a whole (Baker & Gerler; Dahir, Sheldon, & Valiga, 1998).

School counselors have the daunting task of meeting these expectations through effective, innovative, developmentally appropriate, and culturally competent methods (Cochran, 1996; Ray, 2007). The elementary school counselor can be one of the most effective members of the school community in developing appropriate interventions to aid in structuring the environment to encourage connections throughout the entire school. Through the counselor-student relationship, students can take this newfound sense of relationship understanding and acceptance into the classroom environment to
enhance teacher and peer interactions potentially resulting in academic, social, and personal improvement (Anderman & Kaplan, 2008; Ray).

**School Counselor Responsibilities**

According to The ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2005), school counselors have the responsibility for promoting academic, career, and personal/social development of all students. In addition, the American Counseling Association’s [ACA] Code of Ethics (2005) calls for counselors to promote healthy relationships while communicating information in ways that are both developmentally and culturally appropriate. Further, it is the duty of school counselors to meet the immediate needs of students necessitated by life events, situations, or conditions with culturally competent responsive services (ASCA; Lee, 2001). All students must be included in these services, even those meeting diagnosis for psychiatric disorders which could range from 18-22% of the school population (Eder & Whiston, 2006). In conjunction, school counselors must always be vigilant in maintaining accountability by ensuring the interventions are clearly defined, effective, and appropriate (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Myrick, 2003b). Meeting these expectations can be staggering when taken into account that approximately five million students between the ages of 6 and 16 come to school regularly, but do not make the effort to become competent readers, writers, or problem-solvers. This lack of effort is often due to a missing connection to the school community which includes teachers, counselors, administrators, peers, and schoolwork (Glasser, 1997b). Over the years, a multitude of theories, interventions, techniques, and programs have been introduced to address these needs. Two of the most effective and appropriate means for school counselors to work with students on such issues, and to elicit growth-fostering relationships while maintaining accountability is through the use of play counseling and
Dr. William Glasser’s choice theory and reality therapy (Carmichael, 2006; Glasser, 1997b; Nystul, 1995).

**Reality Therapy and Play Counseling**

Reality therapy and play counseling cover both the promotion of positive relationships and accountability with developmentally appropriate and effective means for school counselors (Glasser, 1990; Landreth, 1993). Nystul (1995) stated that many problem behaviors originate in childhood as a means of meeting basic needs and students’ need to engage in self-evaluation to determine if behaviors are working to meet these needs. In particular, school students often lack motivation. These unmotivated students typically do poor work, learn little, and exhibit disruptive behaviors (Erwin, 2003). Often, educators react to these issues seeking to simply punish rather than attempting to find causes of misbehavior resulting in even more behavior and relationship problems (Glasser, 2005; Toso, 2000). Reality therapy and play counseling can provide school counselors with tools to improve academics, help make school a joyful place, encourage useful education, and help students do quality work (Anderson, 2008). In particular, Glasser (2000a) stated that many students lack good relationships with warm, caring, responsible adults. By combining reality therapy with play counseling techniques, school counselors can attempt to address these problems with developmentally and culturally appropriate and effective means. For the duration of this study, the combination of reality therapy and play counseling will be referred to as reality play therapy. The author used Glasser’s choice theory and reality therapy approaches for the development of these techniques combined with traditional play counseling interventions. Each will be considered and explained in the following sections.
Theoretical Frameworks

Glasser’s choice theory is the driving theoretical framework for this study. His reality therapy principles were utilized in the conceptualization of combining the choice theory principles with play counseling techniques. A variety of play counseling ideologies and techniques were utilized in this combination as well. Additionally, Jean Piaget’s (1950; 1952; 1965; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) developmental theory was employed to discuss the appropriateness of the intervention for the proposed population. Finally, from a methodological/philosophical view, constructivism (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1995; Haynes & Oppenheim, 1997; Sexton, 1997) will be reviewed because it forms the grounded theory perspective (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of the qualitative data analysis.

Choice Theory and Reality Therapy

Glasser began his work in the 1960s while working as a psychologist with mental health patients in a hospital facility followed by work with female high school delinquents. During this time, he began to develop his own system of therapy known as reality therapy based on his idea of control theory (Anderson, 2008). The name control theory came from the main premise that human beings control all of their behaviors (Glasser, 1998). During the late 1980s, Glasser changed the name from control theory to choice theory to make it clearer that individuals choose these behaviors (Robbins, 2005). Glasser also began to work in the school setting focusing on the importance of relationships and quality school work for positive schools and learning (Anderson).

There are three major tenets that drive choice theory. The first states that all substantial problems are relationship problems and affect everyone in society (Glasser, 2000b; 1998). These problems can be the result of difficulties arising from current,
unhappy relationships or the lack of significant relationships with others and self (Robbins, 2005). Second, is the concept that the only person’s behavior an individual controls is his/her own. Glasser (1997a) explained that individuals simply give and receive information and it is their choice as to how they react to this information based on satisfying a certain need at that time. In other words, all human behavior is chosen, not thrust upon humans by their environment or early development, in an effort to meet certain needs (Wubbolding, Brickell, Imhof, Kim, Lojk, & Al-Rashidi, 2004). The final, and perhaps most salient tenet, is that humans are driven by five basic genetic needs. These needs include survival, love and belonging, freedom, fun, and power (Glasser, 2000a).

In order to meet these needs, individuals must be aware of their quality world pictures. The quality world is a very specific, personal world at the core of our lives which can include people, things, and beliefs that drive our need satisfaction (Glasser, 1997a). This concept can be best thought of as a group of pictures stored in our brains depicting our worlds with extreme precision. As a result of this precision, all humans tend to see the world differently from a very personal point of view (Glasser, 1998). The difficulty for individuals arises when the ideal quality world pictures do not match reality, coupled with an inability to adapt to that difference (Glasser, 1998). For students, school often has an early place in their quality world pictures, but begins to dissipate in the later elementary grades due to decreased relationships with faculty and schoolwork (Basic, Ticak-Balaz, Uzelec, & Vorkapic-Jugovac, 1997; Glasser, 1990). That is where reality therapy becomes significant to school counselors.
Reality therapy begins by building a relationship with the student by staying in the present, creating a safe and warm environment, avoiding coercion and punishment, expressing genuine concern and empathy, and being positive and optimistic (Robbins, 2005; Wubbolding et al., 2004). Once the relationship is established, the reality therapy counselor introduces the concepts of choice theory such as basic needs and quality world pictures to the student. Then measures are introduced to understand the concept of choosing all of our behaviors. Glasser (1997a) stated that accepting the ability to control your own behavior is the most difficult lesson of choice theory. Most often, this is introduced and explained through the concept of total behavior. All behavior is total behavior and is composed of actions, thoughts, feelings, and physiology. Of these, individuals have direct control over acting and thinking; however, they have indirect control over feelings and physiology (Glasser, 1998). This concept is often taught through the analogy of a car. The front wheels are actions and thoughts while the back wheels represent feelings and physiology. They all interact and affect each other, but the front wheels direct the car and the back wheels follow along (Robbins, 2005). For example, changing our actions can affect our thoughts and feelings (Ringer, 2005).

Once all of these concepts are taught to a student, the intervention portion of reality therapy can be introduced. The four fundamental questions of reality therapy are as follows: 1) What do you want? (Wants), 2) What are you doing to get what you want? (Doing), 3) Is what you are doing working? (Evaluation), and 4) What is another way to get what you want? (Planning) (Passaro, Moon, Wiest, & Wong, 2004; Wubbolding, 2000). This technique is known as the WDEP method and is a tool for teaching and learning reality therapy skills while helping people gain a skillful, creative, and artful
method for effective intervention (Wubbolding; Wubbolding & Brickell, 2007). It is important to remember that the plans must be made by the student with the help of the reality therapist and be workable in order to obtain the wants (Ringer, 2005; Wubbolding). The WDEP concept particularly applies to the school environment as it is important for students to be involved in the development of plans to meet their needs and wants (Toso, 2000).

Glasser’s work also expanded his ideas explicitly to the school setting early in his career because of his theory that for a mentally healthy society to exist there must be an early focus on relationships in the schools (Glasser, 1986a, 2005). He emphasized this work through his concept of the quality school. In Glasser’s quality school, everyone learns choice theory and value is placed on relationships and quality work for students and staff (Glasser, 1990). Quality work focuses on continual improvement, not settling for good enough for every student, and the absence of emphasis on grades. These concepts are the direct opposite of the current U. S. system that only focuses on students who want to learn or work simply to gain specific grades (Glasser, 1997b). Schooling, the emphasis placed on teaching material that is only useful in the school setting, is also avoided in the quality school (Glasser, 1990). The quality school allows all members their own methods of learning because not every student is motivated to learn and behave as the typical system of education currently prefers (Erwin, 2003). As a result of learning choice theory, students gain knowledge about why they are behaving as they do resulting in more effective behaviors and positive school relationships with teachers, counselors, administrators, peers, and schoolwork (Glasser, 1997a). These satisfying relationships can have a great impact on a student’s quality of
life and profound positive effects on scholastic achievement. Through these relationships, school can be placed in the student’s quality world and seen as a valuable asset worthy of effort (Erwin; Glasser, 1990).

**Play Counseling**

Play has long been considered an important tool for children as even some of history’s greatest thinkers such as Aristotle and Plato reflected on the importance of play (Association for Play Therapy [APT], 2008). A variety of professional fields, including education, pediatrics, counseling, and anthropology, recognize the importance of play in healthy cognitive development, social and emotional competence, physical coordination, interpersonal skills, and overall well-being of children (Ember & Ember, 1993; Magnuson, 2003; Schor, 1995). For instance, Sigmund Freud (1908) stated:

Might not we say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather re-arranges the things in the world in a new way which pleases him? It would be wrong to think he does not take the world seriously; on the contrary, he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it. The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real (p. 143).

Play was at one time considered vital to becoming a successful adult because children rehearsed such activities as hunting, gathering, and child rearing; however, play is now more focused on entertainment and competition without addressing the true meaning of connection and the educational value of play (Landreth, 1991; Steffens & Gorin, 1997). Elementary school counselors can refocus the use and importance of play by utilizing it in building positive relationships with students, addressing school related issues, and aiding the student in passing along the vicarious learning to the classroom (Landreth).
If play is the language of children, then toys serve as their words. Toys have the specific purpose of enhancing and providing means of communication for children (Berg & Steiner, 2003). The use of toys and play materials in the elementary schools can convey the notion that talking is not always required or expected; thus, allowing the child the freedom to communicate in a comfortable and nature manner (Drewes, 2001). The selection of toys should be very intentional as they can aid in focusing certain aspects of communication, self-reflection, and growth. For example, blocks and puzzles can foster self-control and problem-solving, while art can develop expression of emotions (Magnuson, 2003). For this study, the researcher utilized the following toys: puppets, sand trays and miniatures, and drawing materials.

Play counseling has been long considered an appropriate tool and ideal avenue for dealing with a wide range of emotional, social, and academic difficulties for children from a variety of cultures through a number of theoretical approaches with over 50 years of research (Bratton, Ray, Rhine, & Jones, 2005; Carmichael, 2006; Josefi & Ryan, 2004). Despite this fact, little research has been conducted on the use and practice of play counseling by elementary school counselors (Ray, Armstrong, Warren, & Balkin, 2005). In conjunction, little research has been conducted on the school relationships of elementary school students despite the significance of such bonds (Anderman & Kaplan, 2008; Glasser, 1990; Spencer, Jordan, & Sazama, 2004).

**Piaget’s Cognitive Development Theory**

It is the school counselor’s duty to be prepared to provide services and interventions to a variety of students with a full range of issues while considering political and societal influences (ASCA, 2005; Cochran, 1996). Perhaps the most salient of these duties is the ability to recognize and adapt to each student’s personal
needs, including the student’s developmental level and abilities. One of the most grievous mistakes a counselor can make is to attempt to utilize adult counseling techniques in working with children because they differ developmentally from adults (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Landreth, Baggerly, & Tyndall-Lind, 1999). Piaget’s (1950) theory of cognitive development recognized the difference between children and adults in understanding. The theory posits human cognition works as a network of psychological structures created by an active organism constantly striving to make sense of his/her experiences (Piaget, 1952). According to Piaget (1950; 1952; 1965) and Piaget and Inhelder (1969), this creation of meaning occurs over the lifespan as humans progress through the following four distinct cognitive stages of development. The first stage is the sensorimotor (ages birth-2) and is categorized by the use of senses and motor abilities to understand the world. The sensorimotor stage is followed by the preoperational stage (ages 2-7). During this stage, there is rapid development of representation of the world. Next is the concrete operational stage (ages 7-11). In this stage, humans are capable of understanding and applying logical operations to life to interpret experiences. The finals stage, formal operational (ages 11-adulthood), is marked by abstract thinking and the development of hypothetical concepts. For the purpose of this research study, students in upper elementary school (grades 4-5) were of interest because they are in the concrete operational stage of cognitive development. This grade is appropriate because this is the stage when most children can utilize the cognitive skills needed for effective use of reality therapy (Glasser, 1998; Wubbolding, 2000).
Constructivism

Constructivism suggests that the knower is intertwined with what is known and that knowledge is relative to societal context (Sexton, 1997). There are two ends of the continuum in constructivist thought. First, is the idea there is an absolute reality to be discovered; however, it can never truly be found due to limitations in a human’s ability to process perceptions, cognitions, and emotions. The second states reality is created entirely by the observer (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1995; Haynes & Oppenheim, 1997). For this study, both ends of the continuum were of interest; however, the individual experience and meaning made by the school counselors related to the implementation of reality play therapy with elementary school students was given primacy to gain a rich and broad understanding of the phenomenon.

Statement of Problem

In the age of academic rigor, standards, and accountability, fostering caring relationships in schools is not always viewed as a priority (McLennan, 2008). Despite this fact, research has shown that relationships are closely linked to academic and personal school success and well being (Drewes, 2001; Passaro et al., 2004; Ray, 2007; Spencer et al., 2004) and are included in National Standards for School Counseling (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). Eder and Whiston (2006) also emphasized the importance of significant relationships as being critical to positive change and noted they are disappearing due to pressures felt by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a) emphasis on high-stakes testing. One of the side-effects of this, especially in elementary schools, is that children are becoming even more powerless in American society and losing the opportunity to have their voices heard and understood (Curwin & Mendler, 2004; Jordan, 2000; Landreth et al, 1999;
West, 2005). According to choice theory, being heard and understood is of vital importance because motivation comes from within and to have that voice silenced can have significant effects on school relationships and functioning. Hearing students’ voices is imperative because understanding a child’s perception of classroom activities and interactions can inform educators of the effects of educational efforts (Parish, 1992; Wing, 1995). Currently, the focus on academics, curricula, testing, and federal funding contingent on school-wide performance is excluding the social and emotional needs of students, as well as de-emphasizing the importance of gaining knowledge about the individual student (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Hart, 2004; Long, Volk, & Gregory, 2007).

The shift toward high stakes testing and federal funding appears to be in opposition of nonjudgmental acceptance of students in warm and caring relationships without the pressure of accomplishing a task as the only means of interaction with adults (Landreth, 1993; Spencer et al., 2004). In particular, when schools fail to convey concern and teach subjects perceived as mundane or unimportant in the traditional scholar-academic approach, students disconnect (Hart, 2004; Parish, 1992). Further, relationships are often viewed as secondary to the primary condition of independence and separateness, especially in school settings (Jordan, 2001). Because of these dissipating relationships, students have gradually removed teachers and school from their quality worlds by the fourth grade (Basic et al., 1997). However, researchers have begun to investigate and show increased awareness in the importance of school-related relationships. For example, Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, Swanson, and Reiser (2008) discovered through a longitudinal study that social/emotional factors relate to aspects of
school success and failure (i.e. academic competence, positive mental health, graduation, etc.) even when controlling for intelligence. As a result of such a finding, the focus on efforts to increase school connectedness may have more impact than efforts to affect school level issues such as class sizes (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). Choice theory addresses school relationships stating it is almost impossible for individuals to satisfy their needs without positive relationships (Glasser, 1997a). Further, both reality therapy and creative techniques such as play have shown to be effective with many issues such as fostering relationships, trauma, abuse, and violence (APT, 2008; Glasser, 1990; Kennedy, 2008).

**Need for the Study**

Students facing academic and personal difficulties are of great concern for schools nationwide (Glasser, 1990). Included among these concerns are students facing additional difficulties involving emotional and behavioral problems, mental health issues, developmental delay, and anger issues (Edwards & Cadenhead, 2009; Glasser, 2000b; Passaro et al., 2004; Reynolds & Stanley, 2001; Schroeder, 2005). An additional concern is that many of these students may be resistant to counseling (Passaro et al.). This aversion to counseling is often exacerbated by educators using coercion and punishment to work with students. Choice theory and reality therapy encourage the avoidance of coercion, keeping the students’ best interests at heart, showing care, listening, encouraging, and sharing laughter and fun to reach students dealing with a variety of issues (Glasser, 1997a; Kennedy, 2008). A combination of such principles with play counseling techniques could enhance the potential relationships created in the school counseling environment through the understanding of the whole child resulting in enhanced school relationships. Additional benefits that
could result include the development of character, moral reasoning, symbolizing emotions, and social justice in addition to academics (Paone, Packman, Maddux, & Rothman, 2008; Thompson & Henderson, 2007).

Elementary students learn meaning from events that take place in school. Such learning forms a framework around which they understand school and the world as a whole (Wing, 1995). Unfortunately, for many students, school is not a part of their quality world pictures (Glasser, 1990). Of particular concern are the current national testing standards decreasing the amount of developmentally appropriate play children are allowed to participate in during the school day (Ranz-Smith, 2007). The decrease of developmentally appropriate play is an area of concern for older elementary students especially because it is during this time that many students’ satisfaction with school begins to drop. Further, there also tends to be a decrease in the amount of creative arts and play during this time of an elementary school student’s career (Glasser; Kennedy, 2008). Opportunities for free play during recess had decreased from 96% to 70% in elementary schools over a ten year period (Ginsberg, 2007). With play providing so much for students in relation to communication skills, competence, creative thinking, decision making skills, problem solving, and metaphoric thinking, it is vital to keep play as a part of older elementary students’ academic lives (Thompson & Henderson, 2007; Wing, 1995). For example, problem solving skills can provide useful structure to the counseling process clearly defining role and function for school counselor and student. Further, it is essential for students to be able to engage in self-evaluation to determine if the problem-solving behavior is working to meet their needs (Nystul, 1995). Elementary school students need an intervention that allows them to focus on goals and help them
observe problem behaviors keeping them from these goals (Passaro et al., 2004). Glasser (2004) stated that for people to be happy, they need to behave in ways that enable them to not only love and belong, but also succeed in things they want to do. Further, learning is enhanced when relationships are composed of both fun and educational components (Glasser, 1986a). Reality play therapy can potentially provide these aspects for elementary school students in an environment that encourages both creativity and responsibility.

Yet another consideration is that both reality therapy and play counseling avoid a common trap in many schools behavior interventions, punishment. Punishing gives students even more reasons to leave school out of their quality worlds. It gives students the opportunity to blame teachers, administrators, and the system leaving them with no fault in the situation (Glasser, 1997a). Further, these external motivators tend to rupture relationships resulting in even more disconnect (Erwin, 2003; Glasser, 2005). As a result, disconnection from schools in academics and relationships leading to unhappy students can occur (Glasser, 1990). In addition, children cannot learn unless they feel comfortable and safe in school (Scott, 2004). One of the serious outcomes that can result is a potential for violence. Almost all unhappy students carry with them the potential for violence, especially if the school environment is not in their quality world. This can result in such tragedies seen in Columbine and Kentucky (Glasser, 2000a). When educators no longer assume they can control students’ behaviors, the focus can shift to helping students control their own behaviors (Toso, 2000). As a result, students can find their own internal drive creating conditions for motivation and responsibility leading to new skills in developing more efficient approaches in an
environment they now include in their quality worlds (Erwin; Nystul, 1995). One such approach that could potentially aid is this is reality play therapy.

Reality play therapy can be a potentially powerful tool for elementary school counselors. This statement especially holds true considering that most children below the age of eleven lack a fully developed capacity for abstract thought needed for verbal expression or understanding of complex issues and feelings (Bratton et al., 2005). The fact that any counselor can use creative techniques to connect with clients across ages and development further enhances the potential usefulness of reality play therapy (Kennedy, 2008). Reality play therapy also takes into consideration the need to implement curriculum goals while attempting to maintain an encouraging and developmentally appropriate environment. Further, reality therapy addresses all three domains of the ASCA National Model, including academics, personal/social, and career development needs (Mason & Duba, 2009). By allowing child-sponsored activities such as play in sync with reality therapy, concepts such as total behavior, satisfying needs, and focusing on connections throughout the entire school can be addressed (Ranz-Smith, 2007; Robbins, 2005).

**Purpose of the Study**

Throughout the years of research and evidence of the effectiveness of both play counseling and reality therapy, there is no evidence that an attempt to combine the two has ever been undertaken. This fact is interesting especially when both counseling approaches are considered to be well-suited for short term counseling while helping students discover how to make choices regarding behavior, take responsibility, and use the techniques throughout life to meet needs (Landreth, 1991; Nystul, 1995). Once these endeavors to fulfill needs are addressed, students can become more enthusiastic
about learning, thus leading to improved academic performance (Glasser, 1986a; Parish, 1992). Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to investigate elementary school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy’s introductory implementation with school students in relationship building and problem-solving skills.

The specific research questions addressed in this study include:

1) What are school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy’s effectiveness in relationship building with elementary school students?

2) How do school counselors perceive the implementation of reality play therapy in developing problem-solving skills with elementary school students?

3) What meaning do school counselors make concerning the implementation of reality play therapy with elementary school students?

**Rationale for the Methodology**

Reality therapy takes into consideration the need for positive human relationships while accepting personal responsibility for all of our choices and behaviors. Reality therapy purports that these positive relationships are essential to meeting our basic needs based on our quality world pictures (Glasser, 1998). Further, reality therapy states that internal motivation is not controlled by external factors or past experiences (Wubbolding et al., 2004). Through the introduction of reality play therapy in a series of original trainings, the researcher was able to examine the elementary school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy’s effectiveness with elementary school students.

A qualitative methodology was selected to examine the perceptions of reality play therapy’s effectiveness with elementary school students by school counselors because it has the potential to yield rich, deep, and innovative perspectives through the phenomenon of human experiences (Grbich, 2007). Grounded theory methods are
qualitative research approaches designed for the systematic generation of theory from data (Glaser, 1978). It has been suggested that qualitative methods are natural extensions of the counseling process and can contribute to such areas as play counseling in the development of theories that can lead to future research and development (Glazer & Stein, 2010). In this study, grounded theory served as the research method to produce (a) descriptions of school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy, (b) explanations of how elementary school counselor perceive the implementation of reality play therapy with elementary school students in relationship building and problem-solving skills, and (c) a theory about the meaning made by the school counselors regarding reality play therapy and elementary schools students.

**Summary**

Chapter 1 introduced the topic of study and its purpose. The purpose of this study was to examine how elementary school counselors perceive reality play therapy’s effectiveness with elementary school students. Chapter 1 also introduced the theoretical frameworks of choice theory, play counseling, and Piaget’s cognitive developmental theory, need for the study, and the constructivist grounded theory methodological rationale of the study. Chapters 2-5 will cover the remainder of the research study. Chapter 2 will provide a review of the literature relevant to the area of inquiry. In Chapter 3, the researcher outlines the method of study including procedures and the theoretical and methodological justification for these procedures. Chapter 4 presents the findings and grounded theory derived from the data analysis. Finally, Chapter 5 explores the implications of the findings for school counselors, choice theory, reality therapy, play counseling, school environments, and future research.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Chapter 2 summarizes the current level of knowledge concerning choice theory, reality therapy, play counseling, and Jean Piaget’s cognitive development theory. Each of the aforementioned theories served as a guide to the research in this study. A brief historical review of choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling will be offered. Additionally, school relationships involving students, school counselors, teachers, and administrators will be addressed. Studies concerning reality therapy and play counseling will be reviewed to offer support for their integration and implementation of reality play therapy with upper grade elementary school students. The cognitive development theory of Piaget will be used to address the appropriateness of the suggested approach with the upper elementary school student population in question.

Choice Theory

History of Choice Theory

Dr. William Glasser began his medical training in the 1960s. During this time, he worked mainly with mental institution patients and female high school delinquents (Anderson, 2008). While working with these populations, Glasser published his first book in 1965 entitled “Reality Therapy.” It was in this book that he first outlined his ideas of individuals meeting their needs and taking responsibility for their behaviors through making choices (Anderson). These concepts developed and progressed into the idea of control theory and eventually to choice theory (Glasser 1998). Throughout these developments, the concepts of basic needs, quality world pictures, disconnecting and connecting behaviors, total behavior, and external control psychology were
formulated and incorporated into choice theory (Glasser 1998; 2000b). Each of these will be described in greater detail throughout this chapter.

The counseling implementation component of choice theory, known as reality therapy, would be further enhanced by Dr. Robert Wubbolding (Anderson, 2008). Wubbolding (2000) developed the WDEP method to aid counselors in working with clients using choice theory. This method incorporates each person’s wants (W), doing behaviors (D), evaluation of the behavior’s effectiveness at meeting needs (E), and planning for new behaviors to replace ineffective behaviors (P) (Wubbolding). The WDEP method will be discussed further in the Reality Therapy Techniques section.

A final component of Glasser’s work for this study includes his contributions to the school setting. Glasser’s ideas regarding school-based relationships began in the 1960s during his work with the female high school delinquents, but were not fully developed until the late 1980s with the creation of the Glasser Quality School (Anderson, 2008). The quality school is one in which every member of the school is taught choice theory and it is implemented in every aspect of the school from curriculum to discipline (Glasser, 1990). Additional aspects of the quality school will be discussed further in this chapter.

To truly understand all of these portions of Glasser’s work, it is important to first consider the driving theory of his ideas, choice theory. Choice theory is made up of several components that come together to fully explain the idea (Glasser, 1998). The researcher will begin with most important underlying basic tenets of choice theory.

**Basic Tenets**

There are three major tenets that underpin choice theory. The first states that all substantial problems are relationship problems and affect everyone in society (Glasser,
1998; 2000b). Glasser (2005) stated that not getting along with others is the primary public mental health problem in the world. These problems can be the result of difficulties arising from current, unhappy relationships or the lack of significant relationships with others and self (Robbins, 2005). Past relationships and behaviors are not addressed in great detail with choice theory. According to Glasser (1998), the past has a great deal to do with an individual’s development, but reliving the past can contribute little to present needs. Staying in the past can also allow the client and counselor to avoid the real, current problem (Glasser, 2004). Glasser (1997a) stated that current human relationship problems are often the most difficult to solve, but easy to understand with the use of choice theory. This concept is important due to the fact that there is a lifelong connection between the quality of human relationships and physical and mental well-being (Erwin, 2003).

Second, is the concept that the only person’s behavior an individual controls is his/her own. Glasser (1997a) explained that individuals simply give and receive information and it is their choice as to how they react to this information based on satisfying a certain need at that time. In other words, all human behavior is chosen, not thrust upon humans by their environment or early development, in an effort to meet certain needs (Wubbolding et al., 2004). Choice theory posits that human behavior occurs because it is the most need satisfying choice at that given time (Glasser). These behaviors are purposeful and goal-directed in an attempt to close the gap between wants and reality (Wubbolding et al.). Difficulties can arise with this tenet because humans often blame others for problems in conjunction with attempting to control them or trying to escape from their control (Glasser, 2004).
The final, and perhaps most salient tenet, is that humans are driven by five basic genetic needs. These needs include survival, love and belonging, freedom, fun, and power (Glasser, 2000a). These basic needs operate like an internal thermostat and guide how humans behave regardless of age, sex, or race (Parish, 1992; Thompson & Henderson, 2007). Glasser’s basic needs are similar to the ideas of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow of an inner locus of control that drives human behavior (Banmen, 1985). Because these five basic needs are so essential to the understanding of choice theory, each will be addressed in the following section.

**Five Basic Needs**

**Survival.** The first need of survival is perhaps the most obvious and basic to satisfy (Glasser, 1997a). Survival encompasses the basic elements of life (i.e. food, water, shelter, air, etc.) (Glasser, 1998). Included in survival is also the need to feel physically and emotionally safe (Erwin, 2003). Such safety and security can provide a feeling of a comfortable place to go for support, helping the person to navigate life’s events (Roberts & Mills, 2009).

**Love and belonging.** Love and belonging is perhaps the most important of all of the needs because it involves the relationship component. According to Glasser (1998), all human problems are due to missing or poor relationships with self and others. It is important that human beings receive love and belonging as well as give love and belonging to others to completely satisfy this need (Robbins, 2005).

**Freedom.** Freedom involves not only the ability to express oneself and make choices, but also the freedom to do things and freedom from doing things (Erwin, 2003; Glasser, 1998). Freedom-to involves choices such as freedom to go where you want, say what you want, and pursue interests. Freedom-from refers to the avoidance of
physical or emotional discomforts (Erwin). It is important to remember that while freedom is reflected in the belief that humans can act and think without restriction of creativity, these aspects cannot significantly interfere with others’ access to the same freedom (Mickel & Mickel, 1999).

**Power.** Power is similar to freedom because it involves being able to decide about factors concerning basic human existence. It is different because with power, the person has some feeling of control over self and the environment related to gaining a sense of importance (Glasser, 1998; Mickel & Mickel, 1999). Power also involves a great deal of responsibility for choices and behaviors (Wubbolding, 2000).

**Fun.** Fun is the basic idea that all humans have a need to be involved in activities that elicit feelings of joy (Robbins, 2005). For children, in particular, fun and play are of vital importance. Such activities inspire creativity and reduce stress for children while building relationships (Erwin, 2003).

Meeting the five basic needs is essential to building positive relationships with the self and others (Robbins, 2005). An inability to consistently satisfy needs can lead to life problems (Banman, 1985). The most effective way to meet the basic needs is by satisfying the pictures in the quality world (Glasser, 2000a). The quality world and its components will be explained in the following section.

**Quality World Pictures**

The most important concept of choice theory is the quality world. The quality world is a very specific and personal world at the core of every human’s life (Glasser, 1997a). The quality world is comprised of a series of pictures made up of people, things, and beliefs that humans find need satisfying (Robbins, 2005). Quality world pictures are constantly created and recreated based on meeting human needs at a
given time (Glasser, 1998). In other words, these constantly changing pictures motivate humans internally to behave in certain ways to maintain relationships with these people, things, and beliefs (Wubbolding & Brickell, 2000).

Of these pictures, people constitute the most influential because of the relationship component (Glasser, 1998). Glasser (1997a) stated that it is virtually impossible to satisfy needs without relationships. These relationships include bonds with other humans as well as the self (Robbins, 2005). Satisfying these relationships can have a great impact on the quality of life for all humans (Erwin, 2003). Conversely, not satisfying these relationship pictures can have devastating results. Depression, anger, and isolation may manifest in behaviors detrimental to everyone in society (Glasser, 2000a; Jordan, 2001). By learning about personal, as well as other's quality world pictures, clear and strong relationships can be created and maintained (Glasser, 1998). This understanding of the quality world is a dynamic process connected to each individual’s worldview, including culture and the community in which he/she lives (Mickel & Liddie-Hamilton, 1997).

**Total Behavior**

According to Glasser (1998), all humans do from birth to death is behave. These behaviors are conscious and unconscious means of meeting the five basic needs as well as communicating with the world (Ringer, 2005; Wubbolding & Bucknell, 2007). Further, all behavior is total behavior and made up of four inseparable components: acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology (Glasser, 1998). All total behavior is chosen, but we have direct control over the acting and thinking components. It is possible to control feelings and physiology indirectly through how actions and thoughts are chosen (Robbins, 2005).
Because these four components are inseparable, they constantly interact and influence each other (Robbins, 2005). The analogy used by Glasser (1998) is that of the four wheels of a car with the front wheels being the components with direct control (acting and thinking). The back wheels include the components with indirect control (feeling and physiology). The front wheels typically drive the car, but can be influenced by the back wheels. It is through understanding this concept that humans can begin to choose more need satisfying thoughts and actions as two of the four components resulting in more effective total behavior (Glasser, 2000b). However, humans can be affected by outside influences through a concept Glasser (1998) labeled external control psychology.

**External Control Psychology**

External control psychology is the source of the unsatisfying relationships afflicting humans throughout the world today (Glasser, 1998; 2000b; Robbins, 2005). The external control phenomenon is often learned from such sources as parents and teachers (Glasser, 2005) and is comprised of three components. First, is the idea that outside factors, such as other people and things, make people behave. Second, is the belief that humans can control the behaviors of others through such acts as coercion and bribing. Finally, is the idea that humans feel that they not only know what is best for themselves, but also know what is best for those around them. Conversely, choice theory states that humans are driven by internal motivations rather than external factors in making choices to meet basic needs (Glasser, 1998; Wubbolding et al., 2004). This focus on internal forces creates conditions for motivation and responsibility (Ervin, 2003).
External control psychology is exacerbated by the use of the seven disconnecting behaviors (Robbins, 2005). These behaviors include criticizing, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, and bribing (Glasser, 2000b). It is quite common to see these behaviors in marriages, schools, and businesses resulting in poor relationships and needs not being met (Glasser, 1990; 2000b). These disconnecting behaviors can be replaced however with the seven connecting behaviors. These behaviors include caring, trusting, listening, supporting, negotiating, encouraging, and accepting (Glasser, 2000b). Through these behaviors, strong and supportive relationships can be established and maintained (Robbins).

Quality Schools

Glasser developed the quality school concept in response to years of unsuccessful schools resulting in students removing schools from their quality world pictures despite billions of dollars spent on improving education (Glasser, 1986, 1993; Mason & Duba, 2009). Considering that by the age of 18, children will have spent 13% of their lives in the school setting, it is vital that this environment be positive (Daggett, 2005). Additionally, because classrooms of 25-30 people are in close proximity for six hours every day for ten months a year, it is natural that conflicts arise (Curwin & Mendler, 2004). The quality school is one in which all students and staff are trained in and utilize choice theory in all aspects of the school, including curriculum and discipline to help make the school a need satisfying place (Glasser, 1990). The focus of the schoolwork is creating quality work including an explanation of the usefulness of the material for lifetime skills while fostering positive relationships (Glasser 1990; 1993). Quality work is an activity both students and staff find worth working for to meet needs and provides useful information (Glasser, 1990). In particular, the quality school
emphasizes the importance of reading in education because reading accounts for approximately 85% of all curricula (Dorman, 2009; Glasser, 1990). For example, Glasser (1993) stated that all math problems should be word problems because this is how math is presented in the real world. Further, a central characteristic of a high performing school is one in which students are allowed to use reflective thought in the educational process (Daggett, 2005).

All quality schools must meet six conditions to be considered effective (Glasser, 1993). First, and most importantly, school staff must provide a warm, supportive environment for all school community members. Second, students and staff only participate in useful and quality work. A third condition involves asking students and staff to always do their best work possible. Next is the idea that everyone evaluates their own work and attempts to improve it. The final two conditions state quality work always feels good and is never harmful (Glasser, 1990; 1993).

Another aspect of the quality school is that all staff members become leaders rather than bosses. Glasser (1990; 1993; 1997a) defined a leader as someone who encourages quality work, has the best interest of students at heart, shows genuine care, listens, and laughs with students. This concept is also known as lead-management in the school environment (Robbins, 2005; Wubbolding & Brickell, 2007). The lead-manager also avoids punishment and coercion when working with students to meet academic and behavioral needs (Glasser, 1993). In addition, the lead-manager considers the uniqueness of each student when addressing these needs (Mason & Duba, 2009).
School counselors in particular, can aid in the quality school by helping students choose new relationship-improving behaviors much closer to satisfying basic needs from ones they are presently choosing (Glasser, 2000b). The ultimate idea, however, is that every educator should be in a counseling relationship with students because this can help in refocusing on goals, recognizing problem behaviors, and meeting basic needs (Passaro et al., 2004). Appealing to basic needs can help maintain these relationships, drastically increasing responsible student behaviors, while helping them to learn more effectively (Erwin, 2003). The quality school offers teachers and students ways to reach appropriate displays of behavior with less confrontation and more input from both sides (Anderson, 2008). A team approach with open communication among all members is the most efficient way to meet a student’s needs (Roberts & Mills, 2009).

**Reality Therapy**

While choice theory is the underlying explanation, reality therapy is the delivery system for working with clients and students (Wubbolding & Brickell, 2007). Reality therapy encompasses two main areas, the counseling environment and counseling procedures (Wubbolding et al., 2004). In the following sections, aspects of reality therapy including the counseling environment and techniques, along with its effectiveness in schools, will be discussed.

**Counseling Environment**

In reality therapy, the relationship between counselor and client is paramount (Wubbolding et al., 2004). The reality therapist’s primary goal is to help an individual discover alignment or lack thereof between satisfying the quality world picture needs and behaviors in an appropriate manner (Passaro et al., 2004). In this, reality therapy is purposeful, goal directed, and phenomenological with the motivation to change
behaviors deriving from needs not being met (Nystul, 1995). The best way for the therapist to aid with this change is to develop a positive relationship with the person in a safe and acceptable environment (Mason & Duba, 2009). Typically, this involves focusing on the present, avoiding complaints, dealing with thoughts and actions, avoiding blame, exploring the client’s perceptions, finding new conditions, and focusing on the connection while utilizing developmentally appropriate means (Robbins, 2005; Wubbolding, 1994, 2000).

The need for these components especially holds true for school students because they need to feel physically and emotionally safe and supported in the school environment (Erwin, 2003). Additionally, reality therapy avoids using the seven disconnection behaviors including criticizing, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, and bribing. Instead, the reality therapist focuses on the seven connecting habits of listening, supporting, encouraging, respecting, trusting, accepting, and negotiating (Glasser, 1998; Robbins, 2005). Through these skills, the counselor can learn from the client aiding in relationship building, cultural understanding, and problem-solving (Wubbolding et al., 2004). By utilizing these skills and focusing on the seven connecting behaviors, the counselor can become part of the students’ quality world; thus allowing for a more productive counseling relationship (Wubbolding, 2000). Once this positive environment is established, it is the counselor’s duty to incorporate the techniques that can lead to change (Mickel & Spencer, 2000).

**Reality Therapy Techniques**

Reality therapy has been a popular and recognized means of working with students since its inception in the 1960s. Clients have reported reality therapy as self-empowering with the chances to change behavior giving rise to a sense of hope
(Ringer, 2005). Choice theory encourages self-exploration, evaluation, and empowerment by answering questions about why humans do what they do (i.e. what motivates human behavior) (Wubbolding & Brickell, 2007). Appealing to basic needs can help build and maintain essential relationships leading to dramatically increased responsible behavior while learning more effectively (Erwin, 2003). The most essential reality therapy technique utilized to accomplish this is the WDEP method developed by Dr. Robert Wubbolding (1994; 2000).

The WDEP method addresses four fundamental questions. The four fundamental questions of reality therapy are as follows: 1) What do you want? (Wants), 2) What are you doing to get what you want? (Doing), 3) Is what you are doing working? (Evaluation), and 4) What is another way to get what you want? (Planning) (Passaro et al., 2004; Wubbolding, 2000). This method is a tool for teaching and learning reality therapy skills while helping people gain a skillful, creative, and artful method for effective intervention (Wubbolding; Wubbolding & Brickell, 2007). The WDEP method is also quite similar to the problem-solving method utilized in schools to match instructional resources to educational needs. The problem solving-method steps include defining the problem, analyzing the problem, implementing a plan to meet a goal, and evaluating the effectiveness of the plan (Dorman, 2009). This similarity aids the WDEP counseling technique because it is familiar for the students who use problem-solving concepts taught and implemented in the school.

The planning portion of the WDEP method is based on a formula for creation. This formula is expressed as SAMIC3/P which means the plan is simple (S), attainable (A), measurable (M), immediate (I), consistent (C), contingent on the person’s
willingness to work (C), and commitment by the person (C) and is ultimately made by the person (P) (Wubbolding et al., 2004). It is important to remember that the plans must be made by the student with the help of the reality therapist and be workable within the student’s world in order to obtain the wants (Ringer, 2005; Wubbolding, 1994; 2000). Through this formula, the counselor can connect to the client or student helping to establish and maintain a counseling alliance (Wubbolding & Brickell, 2007). The WDEP method particularly applies to the school environment because it is important for students to be involved in the development of plans to meet their needs and wants most effectively (Toso, 2000).

**Reality Therapy in Schools**

The use of reality therapy in schools has shown to be very effective when working with students (Wubbolding & Brickell, 2000). Reality therapy empowers students by emphasizing the power of controlling what they want and do through self-evaluation versus simply focusing on what works (Ringer, 2005; Wubbolding & Brickell, 2000). Additionally, according to Wubbolding and Brickell (2007), reality therapy contains elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy. Some of these elements include a person’s emotional and behavioral responses being determined by how the situation is perceived and interpreted, emphasis on internal, mental processes, and therapy as a collaborative process between counselor and client. Cognitive-behavioral therapy approaches typically view personality as reflecting an individual’s cognitive organization and structure with as much emphasis on beliefs about actions being as important as the actions themselves (Gilliland & James, 1998; Reber & Reber, 2001). Cognitive behavioral approaches have been deemed evidence-based practices by a variety of school boards and educators. Evidence-based practices are defined as having a
credible body of scientific data to support the effectiveness of an approach (Dorman, 2009). Additionally, reality therapy has been shown to effectively address the three domains of academic, personal/social, and career needs of students included in the ASCA National Standards (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) by providing real time experiences to address life choices (Mason & Duba, 2009). These facts are of great importance considering that in a time of limited resources, schools must include evidence-based practices, such as reality therapy, to address students’ academic and behavioral needs (Dorman; Wubbolding & Brickell, 2007). Further, choice theory and reality therapy are taught in a majority of counselor education training programs throughout the world, giving future school counselors a basis in the concepts and techniques (Thompson & Henderson, 2007).

Several studies have reported the positive academic and behavioral effects of reality therapy in schools. Erwin (2003) found a 78% decrease in behavior referrals for middle school students as a result of relationship focused initiatives such as reality therapy. Yet another study reported 7th graders increasing 20% in math scores at a Glasser Quality School. Another school in the same study reported 88% reading/85% math state standard scores versus 49% reading/60% math for the state average. Both schools also expressed an increase in quality work by both teachers and students (Glasser, 1997b). Quality schools have also shown increased test scores on state exams, increased grade promotion and graduation rates, improved attendance, and reduced discipline issues and suspensions (Glasser, 1986; Uroff & Greene, 1991). A study by Block (1994) also showed a significant effect for reality therapy on increasing fifth- and sixth-grade students’ self-concept levels according to the Piers-Harris
Children’s Self-Concept Scale. Further, schools that have learned choice theory have reported statements by students such as “You {teachers} care about us” and “And now you give us choices and work we like to do” (Glasser, 1997a).

School behavioral issues have also been addressed with reality therapy. In a study by Passaro and colleagues (2004), students improved the average daily behavior rating by teachers by 42% over the course of the school year. Further, out of school suspension decreased by 12% with the time spent in general education courses increasing by 62% over the school year. This increased time in the classroom has the potential of leading to more time involved in positive relationship building with teachers, peers, and schoolwork. The academic time consideration is also taken into account considering reality therapy’s session length is based on the quality of the relationship built. Positive school counselor-student relationships can result in great accomplishments taking place in as few as one session, but often seen in approximately ten sessions (Glasser, 2000b). Further, it has been found that 20% of students create 80% of the disruptions in schools. If the school counselor can meet with these students to address behavior issues with reality therapy, the majority of behavioral disruptions could decrease significantly (Khan, 2008).

In light of the fact that reality therapy and choice theory have become widely accepted and validated through research, the focus still remains primarily on working with adolescents and teenagers (Anderson, 2008). Little work has been done to develop effective means of delivering choice theory and reality therapy to younger students such as those in elementary schools. Thus, this study combined reality therapy with the child-centered approach of play counseling. In the following section,
Play counseling will be addressed to gain a full understanding of the history and concepts of the approach.

**Play Counseling**

Play has long time been considered of vital importance in the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children (Behrman, Kleigman, & Jensen, 2004; Ember & Ember, 1993; Schor, 1995). Play can inspire creativity, reduce stress, and build relationships for children (Erwin, 2003). Play counseling is considered an effective and developmentally appropriate means of working with children to help them understand and develop strategies for dealing with life’s difficulties (APT, 2008). In the play counseling process, children enter into a dynamic relationship with a counselor that enables them to express, explore, and make sense of difficult and painful experiences using their own natural language of play rather than adapting adult verbal and conceptual frameworks (BAPT, 2004; Landreth, 1993; Landreth et al., 1999). In the next sections, the history of play counseling, its use in schools, and the selection of toys will be discussed further.

**History of Play Counseling**

Play counseling began in the psychoanalytical perspective of the early 1900s as a means of working with children through the works of Hermine Hug-Hellmuth, Anna Freud, Margaret Lowenfeld, and Melanie Klein. They suspected that a child’s spontaneous play was a substitute for free association used by adults in psychotherapy (BAPT, 2004; Carmichael, 2006). In the 1940s, there was a shift from psychoanalytical counseling to humanistic counseling as emphasized by Carl Rogers’ client-centered counseling (BAPT). It was during this time that play counseling began to gain
recognition as a legitimate means of working with children due largely to the work of Virginia Axline (Landreth, 1991).

Axline (1947; 1964) was crucial in the development of nondirective play counseling with children. Nondirective play counseling is described as allowing the child to take the lead and determine the direction of the counseling sessions in a physically and emotionally safe environment (Landreth, 1991). Axline outlined the basic principles of nondirective play counseling (Carmichael, 2006). Some of these included the need for a warm, friendly relationship, acceptance of the child, respect for the child’s feelings and ability to solve problems, and patience with the child and the play counseling process (Axline, 1947). The works of Rogers and Axline, along with Gary Landreth, are considered the standard for nondirective play counseling in the profession today (Carmichael).

The profession continues to grow with the development of play counseling techniques within the majority of the primary counseling theories (APT, 2008). Some of these counseling approaches include cognitive-behavioral, Adlerian, Jungian, and Gestalt. Each of these approaches combines the basic concepts of the theory with techniques appropriate for children (Carmichael, 2006). One of the more popular and effective approaches to play counseling now includes filial play counseling in which parents are taught to use the techniques with their children in the home (APT; Johnson, Bruhn, Winek, Krepps, & Wiley, 1999). Play counseling has also found a home in the school system as an appropriate and effective means for working with students (ASCA, 2005; Landreth, 1991).
Play in Schools

With the growth of guidance and counseling programs in schools during the 1960s, it became evident that there was a need for specific techniques school counselors could use to work with children (Carmichael, 2006). Counselor educators and researchers including Alexander, Landreth, Myrick and Holden, and Nelson encouraged the use of play counseling in schools to meet a variety of the developmental needs of all students (Landreth, 1991). Ultimately, it is the school counselor’s responsibility to meet the needs for all students in a developmentally appropriate fashion (ASCA, 2005; Myrick, 2003a). Play counseling accomplishes this by “helping children get ready to profit from the learning experiences offered” (Landreth, 1991, p. 33). Further, 73% of elementary school counselors rated play counseling as effective or highly effective for working with students (Ray et al., 2005). Because of this amplified interest, research related to the effectiveness of play based interventions and techniques with students and in the entire school environment has also increased.

The implementation of play counseling in schools can provide a plethora of benefits. Through play, children can naturally and safely practice, fail, and practice some more with new ideas and approaches with problems related to ADHD, self-efficacy, self-concept, depression, and student participation (Ray, 2007; Ray et al., 2005; Steffens & Gorin, 1997). In a study by Landreth, Ray, and Bratton (2009), the researchers found that at-risk fourth through sixth grade students maintained self-esteem scores and increased internal locus of control with a mean of four play counseling sessions. Also, in a meta-analysis of 93 play counseling studies, Bratton and colleagues (2005) found that play is a statistically viable intervention across age, gender, and issue. Silin and Stewart (2003) additionally noted that play helped students
to gain a better understanding of personal perspective, leading to a higher level of organization. As a result of such play interventions, students not only learn to deal with difficult life experiences, but also become more receptive to learning thus better meeting educational needs (BAPT, 2004). Research also suggests that experiences in play counseling paves the way for greater expression of self-control and beliefs in coping abilities outside of the counseling setting (i.e. classrooms) (Johnson, McLeod, & Fall 1997).

Teachers have also reported improvements in classroom behaviors for students following the implementation of play counseling (Johnson et al., 1997; Landreth et al., 2009). There are also reports that indicate play as a possible effective intervention in reducing child-teacher relationship stress (Ray, 2007). Further, the use of play in schools can help increase positive teacher attitudes towards children. In turn, these improved attitudes can help the teachers to be more supportive and less dominant (Kao & Landreth, 1997). Due to all of these reasons, play counseling is recognized as a direct counseling intervention and categorized under responsive services for school counselors by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA; Ray, 2007). In addition, the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights has recognized play as the right of every child (Ginsberg, 2007).

Despite this shift, there is still concern regarding the lack of training school counselors receive in play therapy (Kao & Landreth, 1997; Ray, 2007). Up to 73% of school counselors reported receiving no formal training in play therapy techniques (Ray et al, 2005). This fact is of great interest because many scholars recognize the importance of such interventions as play being effective in working at developmentally
appropriate levels of interaction and communication with younger children (Cochran, 1996; Fall, Balvan, & Johnson, 1999; Landreth, 1993). However, there has been an increased interest by educators, researchers, and policymakers in such approaches as play counseling as an ideal avenue for dealing with a variety of social and emotional issues in schools (Josefi & Ryan, 2004; Koth et al., 2008; Kranz, Lund, & Kottman, 1996). Landreth and colleagues (1999) also reported play counseling as a time-efficient means of working with students with successful results seen in ten or fewer sessions. Further, there is significantly increased interest in play therapy at both the master’s and doctoral levels in counselor training and there are an estimated 75% of validated university programs offering play courses throughout the world (BAPT, 2004; Jones & Rubin, 2005).

One of the most important aspects of play counseling is the selection of toys. Toys provide the medium of the counseling interchange (Landreth et al., 1999). The selection and use of play counseling toys will be considered further in the following section.

**Toy Selection in Play Counseling**

The materials selected for play counseling must meet one specific purpose and that is to enhance communication with the child (Berg & Steiner, 2003). Toys should be selected that allow for exploration and encourage interaction between the counselor and child (Peabody, 2001). Elementary school counselors must be aware of these guidelines in selecting toys as many of today’s toys are based on current television and movies with limited creative potential (Crenshaw, 2008). Through the selection of appropriate toys (i.e. dolls, puppets, miniature vehicles and animals, weapons, sand, costumes, blocks, art supplies, Play-Doh, etc.), children are allowed to express
exploration and mastery by solving problems, assuming and practicing various roles, and obtaining acceptance often denied in real life (Behrman et al., 2004; Landreth, 1991). Children can use toys to transplant feelings onto objects versus people freeing them from potentially painful experiences (Gill, 1998; Ramirez, Flores-Torres, Kranz, & Lund, 2005). Additionally, many of the toys seen in play counseling (i.e. puppets, art, etc.) are also used by classroom teachers resulting in a feeling of familiarity and consistency in the school environment (Campbell, 1993).

For this study, three specific toys were utilized for the reality play therapy techniques. These toys included puppets, sand trays, and drawing materials since they are all included in the most valuable equipment for play counseling (Kranz, Kottman, & Lund, 1998). The definition and rationale for each will be described in the next sections.

**Sand trays.** The use of sand trays in play counseling is an expressive and projective mode of counseling involving processing of personal issues through the use of specific materials as a nonverbal medium of communication (Carmichael, 2006). These materials typically include a tray (e.g. Tupperware-type containers) and a variety of miniatures to be used in the tray (Gill, 1998). Included among these miniatures are people, animals, buildings, vehicles, fences, and natural items which can combine both fantasy and reality components (Carmichael; Hunter, 2008).

Typically, the child is asked to create a scene in the sand tray using the miniatures externalizing his or her internal world (Gill, 1998). The sand tray process allows for complete control in a manageable and metaphorical world making the abstract concrete for the child and counselor (Hunter, 2008). The evaluation of meaning is developed through the therapeutic dialogue between the child and counselor (Gill). The themes
and contexts exposed and developed through the sand tray allow children to work productively for personality development and future learning (Allan & Berry, 1987).

During the sand tray activity, it is common for the child to progress through three stages: chaos, struggle, and resolution (Allan & Berry, 1987). Chaos is often depicted as “vast upheaval and intermingling of sand and toys” (Allan & Berry, p. 301). During the struggle phase, children play out battles with a hero emerging, yet there is no winner (Carmichael, 2006). Finally, the child resolves the situation through the restoration of order and balance (Allan & Berry). By progressing through these stages, the child can develop choice making and problem-solving skills, facilitate storytelling, and produce feelings of well-being (Hunter, 2008; Gill, 1998).

Sand trays and miniatures were used to address the students’ view of their current and potential worlds. Through this activity, students were able to create a visual representation of their quality worlds including people, things, and ideas they find need satisfying in the safe and comfortable medium of the sand tray.

**Puppets.** Children from a variety of backgrounds are drawn to puppets (Isbell & Raines, 2007). Due to this, puppets can be effective aids in counseling children, especially in developing trust and rapport while allowing children to identify with a symbol to facilitate projection of feelings (Carmichael, 2006; Gill, 1998). Most often, hand puppets are utilized in play counseling, but bags, socks, finger puppets, and marionettes are also commonly used by counselors (Carter & Mason, 1998). Puppets provide the counselor with several options when working with children. For example, puppets can symbolize a variety of things, allow children to project feelings, and try out new feelings and ideas (Carter & Mason). Puppets also provide countless opportunities
for externalization of difficult feelings, thoughts, or experiences in anonymity and safety (Gill).

One of the most common uses of puppets is in the counseling interview. This usually involves the puppet asking questions to the child who may also answer through a puppet thus allowing for projecting of emotions onto the puppets creating a safe and comforting space when dealing with difficult issues (Gil, 1994). The interview is often not scripted to allow the student to play out roles spontaneously in a safe place. In this spontaneity, children are more likely to reveal a variety of emotions and personality styles (Sprague, 2001). The puppet interview can be helpful in eliciting affective responses from children due to the feelings of safety (Gill, 1998). Puppet interviews can also assist the child in the acquisition of a feelings vocabulary while bringing issues to the forefront to be dealt with (Fall, 2001b). A final benefit of the puppet interview is that children can gain a better view of the world while also rehearsing potential future actions (Sprague).

In this study, a puppet activity was conducted addressing the choice theory concept of total behavior. The puppets were used to allow students to express themselves through a detached means which can allow for more freedom of expression while discussing how total behavior relates to themselves and their actions.

Drawing. In the counseling realm, drawing is often used as a behavioral assessment tool; however, it can be utilized by counselors to work with students experiencing social and emotional issues (Carmichael, 2006). Art is considered both a fundamental and distinctive way of knowing for children and provides an important nonverbal tool (Isbell & Raines, 2007). Art activities, such as drawing, allow children to
experience a feeling of satisfaction because there is no correct way to draw, color, or paint (Landreth, 1991). Children are comfortable with creative art activities because they use them in other settings such as school and home (Kruczek, 2001). Also with art, “you have a tangible image that you can retain” (p. 36) for later use and reflection (Kennedy, 2008). For example, children can use drawing to tell stories, visualize events, and develop solutions to problems (Carmichael; Isbell & Raines).

Proponents of the use of art with children stated that art is an avenue for understanding their emotional workings. The self-expression of art is a healthy way of dealing with personal thoughts for a child at his or her developmental level (Isbell & Raines, 2007). Counselors can also use art to help children expand their communications repertoire while providing tangible symbols of emotion (Kruczek, 2001; Thompson & Henderson, 2007). Dialog can be developed through the drawn metaphors (Gill, 1998). Drawing activities have also been found to be very effective in working with children who have experienced violence and trauma (Carmichael, 2006; Eppler, 2008; Kennedy, 2008).

Drawing materials were utilized to create a visual representation of the students’ problems and potential solutions. Students used crayons, markers, and paper to draw scenarios and solutions related to their problems. These issues were addressed using the reality therapy WDEP method of problem-solving.

One of the most salient issues to consider when working with elementary school students is the use of developmentally appropriate counseling approaches. Reality play therapy has the potential to meet this need for school counselors and students. In the
following sections, Jean Piaget’s cognitive development theory will be considered to validate the suggested approach by the researcher.

**Piaget’s Cognitive Development Theory**

**Overview**

The primary focus of cognitive theories is the structure and development of a person’s thought processes and how they affect the person’s understanding of the world. In turn, cognitive theories consider how this understanding can affect the person’s behavior (Berger, 1994). In this study, Piaget’s (1950; 1952; 1965) cognitive development theory will be used to understand and justify the use of reality play therapy because it recognizes the differences between children and adults in cognitive development and understanding (Ray et al., 2005). Further, similar to choice theory and play counseling, Piaget (1965) recognized the child as an intrinsically motivated learner (Landreth, 1993; Wubbolding & Brickell, 2000).

Piaget (1950; 1952) described human cognition as a network of psychological structures created by an active organism constantly striving to make sense of experiences. These specific psychological structures, known as schemas, change with age through the “creation of increasingly complex forms and a progressive balancing of these forms with the environment” (Piaget, 1952, p. 3). These cognitive changes occur through four processes (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). The first process is adaptation through direct interactions and experiences. The second involves assimilation and interpretation of these experiences. The third process includes the adjustment, or accommodation, to the experiences. Finally, humans internally rearrange schemas through mental organization to make sense of the experiences. These changes occur
and reoccur throughout four separate stages according to Piaget (1950). The stages will be described in the following section.

**Stages of Cognitive Development**

The first stage is known as the sensorimotor stage and occurs between birth and age two (Piaget, 1950; 1952). During this stage, there is a vast development of physical reflexes and motor habits. The child displays a great use of senses and motor abilities to understand the world (Piaget, 1950). This stage is also marked by no conceptual or reflective thought by the person (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

Piaget's (1950) second stage is known as the preoperational stage and occurs between the ages of two and seven. Throughout this stage, there is rapid development of representation of the world, typically accomplished through play (Berger, 1994; Landreth, 1991). The child tends to focus on only one aspect of an experience with the initial and final stages of a problem being unrelated in the child's mind (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Additionally, children in this stage tend to be egocentric, meaning they view the world only from their perspective (Berger). Finally, there is an increase in the use of symbolic thinking (i.e. language usage) (Piaget, 1965).

The next stage, known as concrete operational, occurs between the ages of seven and eleven (Piaget, 1950). It is in this stage that the child begins to understand and apply logical operations to help interpret experiences objectively and rationally (Berger, 1994). The concrete operational stage is marked by increased communication skills, reversible thinking, ability to view other perspectives, and the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). During this stage, children are capable of the “discovery of new means through active experimentation” (Piaget, 1952, p. 340).
The final stage is known as the formal operational stage. This stage begins at age eleven and progresses into adulthood (Piaget, 1950). During this stage, children are capable of thinking about abstractions and understanding. They are also capable of developing hypothetical concepts to make sense of experiences (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

**Rationale for Reality Play Therapy**

Most elementary students are in the second (preoperational) or third (concrete operations) stages compared to the fourth (formal operations) stage of adults. The concrete operational stage skills of increased communication skills, reversible thinking, ability to view other perspectives, and the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) are recommended to fully grasp the concept of choice theory (Glasser, 1998). However, there is still a need for concrete aids for learning (Piaget & Inhelder). Play counseling can serve as the bridge connecting the concrete skills and needed aid especially when considering the use of a common language such as choice theory (Bratton et al., 2005; Nystul, 1995). It is when student needs are met in relation to cognition and affect that they are most able to succeed in school (Uroff & Greene, 1991). It is also common for students to begin to formulate a system of values on which decisions concerning right and wrong are based (Paone et al., 2008). This value system can have a profound effect on meeting basic needs.

Difficulties can result in communication across these stages as children’s identity and language are developing simultaneously and gradually (Piaget, 1950). Because of this developmental difference, children may not be able to fully comprehend the abstract experiences and discussions that occur in talk-based therapy (Ray et al., 2005). Such disconnect can have significant affects on the young child’s communication and learning.
processes (APT, 2008). Further, moral thinking tied to decision-making mirrors, and is constrained by, a child’s cognitive level. It is also more helpful for children to have the opportunity to play out situations as verbal explanations are not often as reassuring or effective (Behrman et al., 2004).

These points are extremely important to remember as elementary school counselors typically deal with students at these developmental levels keeping in mind that concepts are more fully developed when everyday and school concepts are congruent (Doherty & Hilburg, 2007). Piaget (1965) also emphasized the need for educators to be immersed in a child’s activity to present situations with new problems and solutions. Due to these developmental issues, the combination of play techniques with reality therapy could serve as a potentially substantial method of working with elementary school students in upper grades balancing counseling, creative means, and cognitive aspects. The ultimate goal, however, is to develop positive and appropriate need satisfying relationships in the school environment. This aspect will be discussed further in the following sections.

**Relationships**

For the purpose of this study, the most important aspect of counseling was the relationship fostered between the counselor and student encouraging exploration and growth for meeting needs. As a result of this positive, accepting, and supportive relationship paired with the aforementioned benefits of play and reality therapy, it was surmised that children would extend the experiences of emotional exploration, acceptance, and developing problem-solving techniques for meeting needs beyond the play sessions to the classroom. Included in the elementary classroom are the student’s interactions and relationships with the teacher, peers, and schoolwork. To fully connect
these ideas, one must understand the total impact and importance of relationships in school settings.

**School Counseling Relationships**

The school counselor provides a variety of valuable and much needed services in today’s school. School counselors play a significant role in preparing students for successful transitions and accomplishments through the acquisition of attitudes, skills, and knowledge needed to function in today’s society (Dahir et al., 1998). These attributes of student learning are promoted and enhanced through the three main areas of academic, career, and personal/social development (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). It is the ultimate purpose of the school counselor to impart specific skills and learning opportunities through these components to aid students in becoming productive members of society (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Campbell & Dahir).

Schools tend to serve as a microcosm of society, often showing the same types of problems seen in the general population (Baker & Gerler, 2004). Many school problems, as in society, can be related to the lack of a relationship with self or others (Glasser, 2000b). Such missing relationships have been tied to students’ motivation and engagement in school related activities (Anderman & Kaplan, 2008). It is likely that school counselors can provide a positive relationship and productive framework for students through choice theory and play counseling (Glasser, 1990; Josefi & Ryan, 2004; Uroff & Greene, 1991). The task of the school counselor is to continually and consistently aid students in making better relationship-improving behaviors to meet basic needs, replacing current unproductive behaviors (Glasser, 2000b; Silin & Stewart, 2003). It is also the responsibility of the school counselor to employ developmentally
appropriate and research-based techniques most effective for a particular student at the time (ASCA, 2005; Dorman, 2009; Glasser, 1986; 2004).

Because children differ developmentally from adults, special knowledge and sensitivity is needed from the school counselor when working with elementary school students (Landreth et al., 1999; Myrick, 2003a). Using only talk-based interventions ultimately limits the school counselor’s potential as a helper (Jacobs, 1992). The school counselor is also in a strategic position to help students who may not have access to such services as counseling (Eder & Whiston, 2006). This fact is of significant importance considering the estimated growth of the United States school population rising from 48.7 to 51.2 million by the year 2015, including an increase in students with disabilities and living in poverty (Wittmer & Clark, 2007).

School counselors can teach students how to use choice theory to discover new ways to control behaviors and take responsibility for their actions (Nystul, 1995). It is essential that therapeutic interventions be used with all students, including those with emotional disturbances, in lieu of simply employing traditional discipline methods such as suspensions, time-out, and additional schoolwork (Passaro et al., 2004). Further, it is essential that school counselors provide opportunities to practice using counseling techniques such as those used in reality therapy and play counseling to be effective with such students, as well as the general school population (Nystul). Students can only change their behaviors when taught new skills and given the opportunity to practice them in an encouraging environment (Hart, 2004). Both reality therapy and play counseling serve as a very effective, appropriate, and timely tools for school counselors helping with healthier relationships, increasing confidence and hope, reducing
obstacles to learning, enhancing communication skills and emotional literacy, and collaboration with staff’s educational efforts (APT, 2008; BAPT, 2004; Wubbolding et al., 2004).

Through developmental counseling models which allow students to feel emotionally and physically safe, school counselors can provide a space in the school for meeting the basic need for survival (Erwin, 2003; Landreth et al., 1999). Fulfilling such needs expands the two-way therapeutic relationship, stimulates personal growth, and dramatically increases responsible behavior (Erwin; Silin & Stewart, 2003). Glasser (1993) stated that students will work hard for those who can help them meet basic needs through the following actions: 1) caring (love and belonging), 2) respect (power), 3) laughing (fun), 4) allowing for thoughts and actions (freedom), and 5) making lives secure (survival).

The school counselor can also be a direct influence on the entire school community by working with students and staff to develop connections, empowerment, safety, collaboration, consistency, respect, and fun (Lindwall & Coleman, 2008). Elementary school students, in particular, find meaning from events that occur in classrooms forming a framework around which they understand school (Wing, 1995). Such interactions are linked to learning (i.e. achieving instructional goals) (Doherty & Hilberg, 2007). By gaining an understanding of the child’s perception of the classroom and school, the counselor can inform staff of educational efforts (Wing). School counselors can then fuse choice theory and play counseling into the school community through large group sessions, small groups, and staff information sessions (Campbell,
1993). As a result, students may feel less inhibited in classrooms to express creative abilities resulting in more trusting and productive relationships (McLennan, 2008).

Elementary school students with emotional, social, and academic problems are often confused and do not understand why things are going wrong (Jacobs, 1992). This lack of understanding may result in the students experiencing difficulties managing academic and social stresses of school (Roberts & Mills, 2009). Through the use of creative arts and counseling, school counselors can connect with students across ages and developmental stages dealing with a variety of issues (Jacobs; Kennedy, 2008). In particular, school counselors can provide an outlet for artistic creativity and play for upper elementary school students since most school-related art projects and play begin to disappear around age 10 due to the emphasis on high-stakes testing and meeting state standards in core curriculum courses (Kennedy, 2008; Long et al., 2007). Play counseling can allow counselors to enter the world of the child through his or her language of play (Landreth et al., 1999). Through creativity and play, the students can bring into the room the impact of all components of the world and rebuild it, reducing it to a size they can handle allowing for the creation of meaningful relationships and connection on emotional level (Axline, 1964; Magnuson, 2003). Such activities provide students with the opportunity to escape the frenetic pace and tension of over scheduling and high stakes testing resulting in an invigorated student better able to complete tasks (Schor, 1995). Freedom from such tasks can narrow the content to be taught, freeing up time to address a robust expectation for students’ academic and social learning (Dorman, 2009).
While implementing such unique and creative ideas as reality play therapy, school counselors must practice patience and perseverance to overcome challenges that will surely surface (Daggett, 2005). There can be a great deal of skepticism with such approaches, especially considering the external pressure placed on schools to show changes in academics and behaviors through measurable and assessable means (Cochran, 1996; Eder & Whiston, 2006; Ray, 2007). In regards to choice theory, there can be a backlash related to No Child Left Behind legislation (2002a) pressure with no time to be “compassionate” and “individualistic” for each student (Anderson, 2008, p.4). Further, the implementation of play and choice theory requires flexibility and collaboration within the multiple systems of the school environment (Johnson et al., 1999; Anderson).

It is imperative that school counselors make administrators and teachers aware of the goals of play and choice theory through involvement, communication, and sharing of knowledge. As a result, they can be helping partners as well as being knowledgeable of perceptions of working with children using play counselors and choice theory (APT, 2008; Baggerly & Parker, 2005; BAPT, 2004; Glasser, 1990; Johnson et al., 1997). The development of a strong school community stems from a sense of belonging and can facilitate prosocial outcomes and positive attitudes for students and staff (Lindwall & Coleman, 2008). A school committed to building relationships also understands the importance of communication because all educators play a role in creating an environment of achievement (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Daggett, 2005).

These explanations of appropriate rationale and benefits can result in less resistance from all members of the school population resulting in more interactions with
students. Because of such actions taken by school counselors, play and choice theory are becoming more welcomed by many teachers and school districts (Ranz-Smith, 2007; Reynolds & Stanley, 2001; Thompson & Henderson, 2007). Another future consideration is to provide training in basic play interactions (i.e. reflection, tracking, use of art, etc.) and choice theory (i.e. basic needs, quality world, etc.) to teachers and staff for utilization in the classroom or other settings outside of the counselor’s office. This collaboration could serve to strengthen and enhance school relationships, thus aiding in students’ interpersonal relationships and potentially their academic success.

**School Relationships**

Warm, supportive human relationships are needed for students to succeed in school (Glasser, 1986b; 1997a). One of the central characteristics of a high performing school is that students are provided adults with whom they can develop personal relationships (Daggett, 2005). The lack of significant relationships and disconnection can result in a sense of immobilization, self-blame, shame, and unworthiness (Jordan, 2000). Children who cannot connect with others may feel isolated and be at risk of emotional and adjustment difficulties that could interfere with the mastery of skills needed for success as a peer or adult (Schor, 1995). This lack of connection is no different for students in school settings. Spencer and colleagues (2004) found that students expressed a high desire for strong relationships with adults based on mutual empathy and empowerment. Glasser (2005) stated close attention and support of people whom students believe in and whom students believe care about them has always had a healing effect. Further, positive social relationships in the school context have been found to be important for academic success in such subjects as math, reading, and language (Valiente et al., 2008).
A lack of relationship can highly affect students’ motivation and engagement in classroom environments (Anderman & Kaplan, 2008; Glasser, 1986b). Schools specifically are in great need of bringing individuals back into healing connections where they can begin to reconnect with others through growth-fostering relationships. These relationships are necessary as positive school climate is recognized as an important factor in quality of life, successful student achievement, and effective schools (Erwin, 2003; Jordan, 2001; Koth et al., 2008). Positive school climate is vital because students can pick up on discouraging school environments resulting in even more disconnect within classroom relationships (Austin, 1998). Until students are convinced school can offer something better, they will not seriously consider putting forth significant effort (Glasser, 1993). Choice theory nurtures these warm, supportive relationships needed for student success (Glasser, 1997b).

Congruently, teachers place high value on the classroom relationship and quality work for themselves and students (Glasser, 1997b). Research indicated that the teacher-student relationship is a contributing factor in young children’s successful academic, social, and emotional development (Edwards, Varjas, White, & Stokes, 2009; Helker & Ray, 2009). These relationships are of key importance as up to 50% of new teachers leave urban classrooms within the first three years due to classroom management issues related to poor connections in the classroom (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007). These teachers tend to react in ways that perpetuate rather than prevent problematic behaviors (Helker & Ray). Teachers are also at risk of low morale, feelings of inadequacy, isolation, and drop out as a result of poor interactions with students and administration (Austin, 1998). Play counseling and reality
therapy can be phenomenal tools in garnering these positive relationships because the focus of the play is on the relationship while learning new skills to meet needs (Glasser, 2000b; Landreth, 1993).

The reality play therapy process begins with the child entering the dynamic relationship with the counselor that enables them to express, explore, and make sense of difficult experiences while building a strong partnership necessary for investigation and healing (APT, 2008; BAPT, 2004) or as one student stated in the Spencer and colleagues (2004) study, “When you play, you can build trust” (p. 358). Additionally, students sometime need a break from the frenetic pace and burden of over-scheduling seen in many of today’s elementary school environments (Schor, 1995). Upon returning to the classroom, the student will have built a stronger sense of belonging and acceptance of self which will carry over to the interactions with the teacher and schoolwork. When students feel a sense of acceptance and belonging in the classroom, there is more acceptance of authority and the child can regulate his/her own emotions and behaviors (Glasser, 1990; Koth et al., 2008). This process can be critical because 60% of teachers report a student’s ability to be sensitive to feelings and not being a disruption as representing important aspects of academic readiness leading to a more supportive teacher-student relationship. The child-teacher relationship can serve not only as a buffer from risk factors associated with poor performance, but also to motivate and encourage classroom teachers resulting in a positive perception of the child and classroom (Koth et al.; Valiente et al., 2008).

Further, the concepts of play and choice theory such as genuine and authentic interest, unconditional acceptance, creation of free and safe space, avoidance of
coercion, and belief in the child’s ability to grow and learn (Axline, 1964; Jordan, 2000; Landreth, 1991; Robbins, 2005; Wubbolding, 2000) are quite similar to techniques of effective teachers. Included among these are personalizing the education experience, remaining flexible and open to new ideas, and fostering a positive learning environment (Myrick, 2003b). For example, the use of play, art, music, movement, and toys such as puppets in the kindergarten classroom to teach basic academic and social skills has long been a common practice for teachers (Campbell, 1993). Of particular interest, teachers have reported improvements in classroom behaviors following the implementation of play techniques and have welcomed play as a part of the school day (Johnson et al., 1997; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Teachers have also reported positive effects regarding student behaviors with the use of reality therapy in schools (Passaro et al., 2004; Wubbolding & Brickell, 2000). Administrators are also becoming more comfortable and encouraging of creative and innovative interventions, especially if the school counselor can align them with the overall mission of the school (Drewes, 2001; Reynolds & Stanley, 2001).

The idea of interpersonal relationships, interaction patterns, and social perceptions play a vital role in this motivation related to teacher as well as peer engagement (Anderman & Kaplan, 2008). Peers in particular can “significantly impact a child’s academic performance and emotional growth” (Drewes, 2001, p. 43). Play and choice theory can significantly aid in these areas because they have a great impact on the child’s ability to make and foster relationships; lacking these abilities can result in disconnection and inability to express self (Glasser, 1998; Jordan, 2001; Landreth et al., 1999). Children have an innate knowledge and ability to empathize with those in need
(Berg & Steiner, 2003). Play can allow students to recognize and respect these abilities, thus eliciting them in real world settings such as the classroom resulting in the creation of meaningful relationships and connection on emotional levels (Berg & Steiner; Magnuson, 2003).

Children in upper elementary grades are especially well-tuned for reality play therapy as they are beginning to understand concepts such as reversible thinking and perceiving the view of others while still utilizing play to understand and implement these concepts (Bratton et al., 2005; Piaget, 1950; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Play and choice theory can even be utilized by school counselors and/or trained teachers in the classroom to help children play out and resolve issues with peers (Crenshaw, 2008; Glasser, 1990). These peer play interactions can be of incredible use as the observation of play can provide insights into a student’s funds of knowledge and linguistic abilities as a way to identify what children know about themselves and the world. In turn, teachers can use this information to develop culturally and developmentally responsive interventions and curricula (Long et al., 2007).

It is for all of the aforementioned reasons that play therapy is recognized by the American School Counselor Association as a direct counseling intervention and falls under the category of responsive services (Ray, 2007). Additionally, choice theory is recognized and well received throughout the world as an effective and appropriate counseling intervention for school counselors (Thompson & Henderson, 2007; Wubbolding & Brickell, 2007). School counselors are in the advantageous position to help students who may not otherwise receive it in the community. The school setting reaches a broader range considering almost all children go to school and school
counselors have direct access to the students on a regular basis (Eder & Whiston, 2006). The importance of the counselor-student relationship especially holds true for marginalized populations who may not be financially equipped or acculturated to the U.S. value of acceptance of counseling to seek outside services, and the school may be the only avenue (Baggerly & Parker, 2005; Eder & Whiston; Lee, 2001; Ramirez et al., 2005). This point holds true considering the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychology estimates 70% of children diagnosed with a mental disorder receive no individual treatment (Edwards & Cadenhead, 2009). The relationship established between the school counselor and student can be a powerful tool for aiding the student in other aspects of the school environment.

Endeavors to fulfill needs can lead to students being more enthusiastic about learning resulting in better academic performance (Glasser, 2004; Parish, 1992). Schools must implement curriculum goals while attempting to maintain an environment that allows child-sponsored activities such as play and the creative arts (Ranz-Smith, 2007). Play and choice theory in schools can help in numerous areas including fostering healthier relationships with staff and peers, encouraging creativity, satisfying needs, reducing obstacles to learning, and enhancing communication skills and emotional literacy (BAPT, 2004; Mason & Duba, 2009; Glasser, 1990).

Yet another area of strength to be considered with play counseling and reality therapy is the potential multicultural insights they can potentially provide. Due to the current emphasis on the need for effective multicultural counseling techniques and interventions, this aspect will be covered in more detail in the next section.
Multicultural Considerations

Play is a component utilized to teach skills of living in almost every society. This is of considerable note when considering all societies vary in the upbringing of children, education, and influences such as parental expectations and task assignments (Behrman et al., 2004; Ember & Ember, 1993; Steffens & Gorin, 1997). Despite these differences, it has been noted that all humans have the same basic needs regardless of age, sex, or race (Mickell & Liddle-Hamilton, 1997; Thompson & Henderson, 2007). It is hypothesized by Post (2001) that “children of every race and socioeconomic status have the same needs for understanding, safety, and attention” (p. 108). Mickell (1995) furthered this by relating choice theory concepts with African-centered values. For example, fun is similar to Kuumba while love and belonging equals Umoja. It is the school counselor’s responsibility to provide counseling programs and interventions that reflect the needs and realities of all students, regardless of cultural background, while considering the importance of cultural and sociopolitical influences on people’s functioning (Jordan, 2000; Lee, 2001; Passaro et al., 2004). Providing such services can prove to be difficult considering legislative acts such as No Child Left Behind (2002a) have “endangered students” with multicultural heritages, living in poverty, and dealing with emotional and behavioral problems (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006, p. 302). Play and reality therapy fit this formula because they are less limited by cultural and gender differences and focus on more culturally-relevant concepts such as emphasis on social/emotional environment and meeting basic needs (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007; Cochran, 1996; Glasser, 1998; Parish, 1992).

The literature offers numerous examples of the effectiveness of play counseling and reality therapy with children of varying backgrounds. Significant reductions in
externalizing behaviors of British children related to domestic violence witnesses and substance abuse in parents has been witnessed with the use of play (BAPT, 2004). However, there remains a need for counseling approaches that are consistent with African worldviews and developmental needs based on such concepts of unity, purpose, and creativity. Play counseling is a culturally sensitive approach that honors the four components of the African American worldview including emotional vitality, interdependence, collective survival, and harmonious blending (Baggerly & Parker, 2005). The play counseling approach is also recommended for youth of Mexican-American descent as the counselor strives to see the child’s point of view, not impose beliefs or solutions, and work within the framework of the familial belief and values while focusing on the Mexican-American culture of human interaction over task orientation (Ramirez et al., 2005). Yet another example is in the allowance of Korean-American children to play out submissive mother routines showing the value of minimal social conflict (Baggerly & Parker). Similarly, reality therapy is taught around the world and has shown to be effective with a wide range of cultures and ethnicities including persons of African American, Korean, Yugoslavian, and Chinese decent (Wubbolding et al., 2004).

Play can help children explore and test a variety of cultural worldviews and values in a safe and free environment as well as giving the counselor insight into his/her cultural perspectives (Baggerly & Parker, 2005; Landreth, 1991; Post, 2001). It is suggested that with the appropriate toys and support, play can aid in developing internal strength and resolution resulting in better adjustment, coping, and buffering in dealing with racism (Baggerly & Parker; Bondy et al., 2007; Landreth, 1993). Such abilities are
vital because experiences with racism and negative judgments from adults in authority can lead to levels of mistrust that could hamper the sense of positive support and relationship building (Spencer et al., 2004). Additionally, creative techniques utilized in play counseling can help counselors be better able to help students to possess their own identities, become integrated, incorporate outside knowledge, and create new possibilities (Gladding, 1997). However, it is important for school counselors to always be aware of the child as an individual with a unique view of the world and remember that commonly-cited group values, beliefs, and norms may not be representative of the child’s circumstances (Mason & Duba, 2009; Ramirez et al., 2005; Wubbolding, 2000). Fortunately, the free and open non-judgmental space created by the school counselor aids counselors in refraining from making such assumptions. Therefore, the combination of play techniques with reality therapy can strengthen these aspects while focusing on developing appropriate ways of meeting goals associated to basic needs (Glasser, 1998; Passaro et al., 2004).

Although play and reality therapy have been found to be effective in dealing with such issues commonly seen in youth as anger, grief, divorce, family disruptions, anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, and physical and learning disabilities for both males and females regardless of race (APT, 2008; Edwards & Cadenhead, 2009; Landreth, 1991; Parrish, 1992; Robbins, 2005), they are not just for students with typical school related difficulties (i.e. academic, social, etc.). Play techniques and reality therapy have shown to be effective with a great range of students and issues, and not just for maladaptive behaviors but also for children needing preventative interventions (Carmichael, 2006; Glasser, 1998; Ray, 2007). Included are such events as natural
disasters, living in poverty, death and grief, and unstable home situations because play allows children to act out the event in safety and in their own language (Drewes, 2001; Eppler, 2008; Herbert & Ballard, 2007). Research also suggests that play counseling and reality therapy can be useful interventions with students who have been labeled by the educational society (i.e. at-risk, low socioeconomic status, emotionally disturbed, etc.) because they often feel unaccepted and may act more labeled due to a lack of communication skills (Johnson et al., 1997; Passaro et al., 2004; Post, 2001).

Relationships developed through reality therapy and play counseling encourage lowering the threshold of defensive behaviors and moving toward children’s natural inclinations of growth (Fall, 2001; Mickell, 1995; Wubbolding & Brickell, 2007). Of particular interest, there has been an increase in the potential of play in working with children on the autistic spectrum. The unconditional acceptance, empathy, congruence, emphasis on developmental level, and allowing for choice of pace by students can allow autistic children to benefit socially and emotionally in a favorable environment through a substitute attachment relationship with the counselor (Josefi & Ryan, 2004). It is key for the school counselor to remain aware of the perceptions of working with labeled students in the context of the school environment (Johnson et al., 1997; Passaro et al.).

Overall, school counselors utilizing play techniques and reality therapy have an increased culturally-relevant repertoire for the expectations of working with the entirety of the school population in culturally effective and appropriate manners.

**Summary**

A child’s behavior is seen as a process to satisfy personal needs. The effective school counselor must understand children’s perceptions of reality (Landreth, 1993). Reality therapy and play counseling provide a medium to project views of self and world
in conjunction with a supportive and positive relationship with the school counselor (Glasser, 1998; Mason & Duba, 2009; Perry, 1993). Chapter 2 has provided an in-depth evaluation of the history and current knowledge regarding choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling. Rationale was offered for the implementation of a counseling method combining reality therapy and play counseling. The researcher also addressed the important factors of cognitive development, school relationships, and multiculturalism in the reality play therapy approach. Chapter 3 will discuss constructivism, postmodernism, and grounded theory in relation to methods of the research study. Chapter 3 will also provide the methodological components of the study including the participants and sampling, research procedures, and data collection and analysis.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Overview

Chapter 3 includes an outline of how the current study will be conducted and the rationale for the methodological approach. First, the definition and implications of the constructivist theoretical perspective and grounded theory are offered. Next, the purpose and research questions are restated. This is followed by the procedures and justification for sampling, research procedures, data collection, and data analysis methods. A statement will be provided containing means of maintaining trustworthiness. Finally, there will be a subjectivity statement declaring the researcher's personal experience and interest in the study to make transparent any biases and assumptions regarding the research.

Constructivist Theoretical Perspective

The constructivist theoretical perspective shapes the grounded theory methodological aspects of this study. The general constructivist perspective shares a number of assumptions (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1995; Hayes & Oppenheim, 1997). The first assumption states that knowledge is relative and based on societal situations in which both the knower and the known cannot be removed from their content (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). As a result, the knower is both influenced by, and influences, the observed phenomenon (Sexton, 1997), or as Crotty (1998) stated, “no object can be adequately described in isolation from the conscious being experiencing it” (p. 45). Second, constructivism posits human subjectivity produces legitimate knowledge which is constructed versus discovered (Schwandt, 2000). In this study, it was the meaning made by school counselors regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of reality
play therapy in elementary schools that was of interest. Because the constructivist perspective assumes that all individuals construct meaning in context, it was appropriate for analyzing the context in which elementary school counselors perceive the effectiveness of reality play therapy and the meaning they make from the training and implementation experiences.

The constructivist beliefs related to the nature of reality and how reality becomes known are explained from two different perspectives. The first perspective states there is an absolute reality to be known, but it can never be truly known due to the observer's limitations in perceptual, cognitive, and emotional processes. Conversely, the second perspective states that reality is created entirely by the observer (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1995; Hayes & Oppenheim, 1997). This study approached school counselors’ perceptions of the effectiveness of reality play therapy in elementary schools from each perspective.

It was assumed that the experiences of the training and implementation of reality play therapy exists as it was experienced by the elementary school counselor. Meaning was made from these experiences solely by the individual counselors. Additionally, the theory that was generated by this study derived from the experiences and meaning made by the individual counselors as they were brought together through the researcher's interpretation and data analysis. It is noted that individual constructions may combine with those of other individuals in such a way as to create something of consensus (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The constructivist perspective shaped the qualitative data analysis of grounded theory employed in this study. Grounded theory will be defined and explained in the following section.
Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselin Strauss (1967) and is based on the need for new theoretical explanations built on previous knowledge to explain changes (Grbich, 2007). This inductive method of analysis can lead to new theories of behavior (Patten, 2007). Inductive methods involve ideas generating directly from the data rather than taken ideas from the literature (Eppler, 2008). The grounded theory methodology is rooted in two perspectives, positivism and constructivism. From the positive perspective, grounded theory assumes that there is something to be uncovered in the data (Glaser & Strauss). The constructivist and postmodernist perspectives posits that this uncovered knowledge is based on individual meaning making by each person involved in the phenomenon within the context of society and culture (Charmaz, 2005; Clarke, 2005). Grounded theory can be most useful when there is little to no prior knowledge in a certain area (Grbich). Through grounded theory, the researcher becomes the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. The researcher’s theoretical sensitivity allows for the development of theory based on the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Grounded theory data analysis utilizes the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method can be best described as comparative analysis which refers to constantly comparing each new element of the data with all previous elements to establish and refine categories (Patten, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This reciprocal loop between the data and literature is used to create an emerging theory (Eppler, 2008). An inductive analytical process is used to create interplay between data collection and data analysis. The researcher constantly makes theoretical comparisons between and within data through coding to delineate various properties of the emerging
concepts and categories to analyze their similarities and differences (Glaser & Strauss; Strauss & Corbin). Coding involves identifying and giving a type to the themes found in the data. Coding is defined as searching through data for regularities and patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glaser & Strauss). Components of coding include the following: 1) coding categories, 2) themes, 3) open coding, 4) subcategories, and 5) axial coding (Bogden & Biklen; Patten, 2007). Coding categories are made up of words or phrases that represent patterns seen in the data. Themes include some concept or theory that emerges from the data uniting them into coherent patterns (Bogden & Biklen). Open coding includes segments examined for distinct, separate segments. Subcategories are more specific categories. Axial coding involves reexamined themes with purpose of identifying relationships between categories and themes identified during open coding (Patten). Through these empirical and conceptual comparisons, researchers can develop new theoretical explanations built on previous knowledge to explain changes (Grbich, 2007; LaRossa, 2005).

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to investigate school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy’s effectiveness with elementary school students. The specific research questions of this study included:

1) What are school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy’s effectiveness in relationship building with elementary school students?

2) How do school counselors perceive the implementation of reality play therapy in developing problem-solving skills with elementary school students?

3) What meaning do school counselors make concerning the implementation of reality play therapy with elementary school students?
Participants and Sampling

Sampling in qualitative studies is used to select participants who can provide rich data relevant to the research questions. Further, the meaningfulness and insights developed from qualitative inquiry are more relevant to the richness of the information provided by the cases selected rather than the sample size (Patton, 1999). The purpose of this study was to gain a deep and rich understanding of the experiences perceived by the elementary school counselor participants related to the effectiveness of reality play therapy with elementary school students.

In this study, participants were selected based on a certain set of criteria. Patten (2007) stated that criterion sampling derives its power from selecting a sample because of its likeliness of offering meaningful data related to the interest of the researcher. Criterion sampling offers options for selecting participants based on the needs of the researcher (Kuzel, 1992). Specific criterion were addressed prior to the collection of data gathering to ensure that all participants meet certain criteria relevant to the purpose of the study and research questions (Kuzel). Theoretical comparisons, or comparison of developed themes, were utilized to reflect similarities and differences among the participants to better understand the resulting data and lead to theory development (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

For this study, the criteria for participants included being voluntary participants and certified elementary school counselors for the 2009-2010 academic year. The participants were recruited from a north central Florida public school system. The initial recruitment occurred during an elementary school counselor meeting conducted by the school system’s Director of Guidance and Student Services in March of 2009. Each school counselor was provided a handout (see Appendix A) and given an overview of
the research project by the researcher. A list of e-mail contacts were collected for follow-up purposes.

Participants included in this study were volunteers drawn from the elementary school counselor population (n=26) of a north central Florida school system. The utilization of the participants was justified because they were all willing volunteers who agreed to participate in all aspects of the study and were state certified school counselors working in an elementary school setting. The target sample size for this research study was 8-10 elementary school counselor volunteers. The generally accepted number of participants in a qualitative research study involving long interviews is 5-8 (Patten, 2007); however, the extra participants were utilized in the cases of attrition, such as suspension, transfer, or health issues. The number of participants for the study initially numbered ten. However, two participants had to withdraw from the study bringing the final number of participants to eight. One of the school counselors suffered a severe back injury resulting in surgery and thus had to withdraw from the study. The second school counselor had to withdraw because her target student was suspended and procuring a new student with parental permission prior to the beginning of the study was not accomplished.

The research participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity in reporting the results. Efforts were made to include participants’ diversity related to ethnicity/race, gender, elementary school counseling experience, and location of elementary school. However, due to the lack of male elementary school counselors, the entire participant sample was female. As a result, there could be possible effects related to this distribution of all female counselors. Data provided by participants via
information sheets (see Appendix B) offer demographics of the school counselor participants. Table 3-1 summarizes this demographic information of the total sample.

The school counselors also completed forms with demographic information for the elementary student participating in the counseling sessions (see Appendix C). Table 3-2 provides the demographic information of the school counselors’ students who participated in the individual reality play therapy sessions.

**Training and Implementation Procedures**

Once the complete list of volunteers was compiled, a total of four hours of training were conducted in reality play therapy techniques by the researcher at the beginning of the 2009-2010 academic year during the month of October. The exact time and location of the trainings were determined following a meeting with the volunteer school counselors and the school system’s Director of Guidance and Student Services to determine the most convenient schedule and location. During the training, the school counselors were taught concepts regarding choice theory, reality therapy, play counseling, and reality play therapy. The trainings were conducted by the researcher. The researcher’s qualifications for conducting the trainings include the following: 1) completion of one basic intensive week of choice theory, reality therapy, and lead management; 2) attendance of numerous professional presentations on choice theory and reality therapy; 3) construction of the trainings with feedback from the William Glasser Institute; 4) completion of a 3-hour course in play counseling and play process with children at the University of Florida; 5) co-teaching a 3-hour course in play counseling and play process with children at the University of Florida for three semesters; and 6) development of the reality play therapy intervention.
The first hour of training consisted of an introduction and overview of choice theory and reality therapy. The first topic to be covered was the basic tenets of choice theory. These tenets included: 1) all substantial problems are relationship based, 2) humans choose all behaviors, and 3) all humans are driven by five basic needs. Then the five basic needs of survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun were covered. Following the five basic needs, quality world pictures were introduced. Quality world pictures are groups of pictures stored in every person's head depicting people, things, and beliefs that drive our need satisfaction (Glasser, 1998). Next, the concept of total behavior, including acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology were addressed. The training then moved into the reality therapy counseling environment. This environment is expressed as a safe and warm area where the counselor focuses on the present, avoids coercion and punishment, expresses genuine concern and empathy, and is positive and optimistic (Robbins, 2005; Wubbolding, 2000). Finally, the WDEP method was discussed. The WDEP method is an intervention technique involving what the student wants (W), what the student is doing to meet those wants (D), evaluating these actions for effectiveness (E), and planning new means of meeting the wants (P) (Wubbolding).

In the second hour of training, the school counselors received an overview of play counseling including its purposes, rationale, and the appropriate language to use in play counseling. Next, the play counseling techniques were introduced and explained. For this study, play techniques utilizing puppets, sand trays, miniatures, and drawing materials were used. Puppets were used to allow students to express themselves through a detached means which can allow for more freedom of expression. Sand trays
and miniatures were used to address the students’ views of their current and potential worlds. Finally, the drawing materials were utilized to create a visual representation of the problem and potential solutions.

The final two hours of training combined the play counseling techniques with the choice theory and reality therapy principles. Three unique techniques were introduced to the school counselors. First was the quality world sand tray exercise. In this exercise, students were instructed to build their quality world, including people, things, and beliefs, using miniatures in the sand tray. The purpose of this activity was to provide both the student and school counselor a visual representation of the students’ world view, including important quality world pictures as well as potentially missing components. The second technique addressed the concept of total behavior through puppet play. Four puppets were utilized to describe each of the four components of total behavior (acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology). The purpose of this activity was to aid the student in understanding each of these aspects and how they can interact and affect each other. Finally, the WDEP drawing activity was introduced. This activity utilized the wants (W), doing (D), evaluation (E), and planning (P) components in a series of drawings. The purpose of this activity was to allow the counselor and student to visually represent the problem and potential solutions.

The trainings were conducted through lecture, PowerPoint presentations, and interactive formats. The school counselors were given the opportunity to practice each component introduced throughout the trainings. Additionally, time was provided at the end of each hour of training for questions and comments. An overview of all four hours of training and handouts of the PowerPoint presentations for first two hours of the
training sessions were provided to the school counselors (see Appendix D). The final two hours consisted of lecture and interactive formats and did not utilize any handout materials; however, each school counselor was provided the materials needed to practice the activities (see Appendix E). The variety of materials was randomly distributed with the assurance that each counselor has the same distribution of number and types of toys.

Following the training sessions, the school counselors implemented the techniques over the course of six weekly counseling sessions lasting 30 minutes with an elementary school student. Because reality play therapy focuses on relationships, the school counselors were instructed to select students presenting relationship problems with school faculty, peers, or school work. The relationship problems were to represent one or more of the following categories: 1) difficulty following classroom directions; 2) difficulty making friends; and/or 3) difficulty completing school work assignments. In addition to these qualifications, the school counselors utilized their own prior knowledge and relationships with the students, as well as information gathered from parents, teachers, and administrators, to select the most appropriate students to participate in the individual counseling sessions. Overall, all of the students selected displayed a combination of all three categories with difficulty making friends as the primary issue for the majority of the students. Additionally, the school counselors selected students from upper elementary, English speaking only, mainstream classes (4-5th grade) due to the language and cognitive developmental needs of understanding and applying logical operations for this counseling approach (Glasser, 1990; Piaget, 1950). Despite the fact all of the counselors utilized a standard outline, each counseling session was unique for
the students due to the exclusive nature of the individual’s presenting issue related to the criterion.

Because the school counselors were working with elementary school students under the age of consent, permission forms were completed by each student’s caregiver consenting to each student’s participation in the study (see Appendix F). The participating school counselors were provided all of the materials needed for the techniques (see Appendix E). As an added incentive for participating, the school counselors were allowed to keep all of the materials to add to their personal collection. No additional monetary or physical compensation was provided as a result of participating in the study. Further, the school counselors were also provided an outline of each session utilizing the reality play therapy techniques (see Appendix G). Once the implementation had commenced, each school counselor was provided one hour of weekly on-site supervision by the researcher to provide support and answer any questions that arose during the sessions.

**Data Collection**

In this research study, there were three points of data collection. The first was a secondary data set and included feedback sessions conducted after each of the four training sessions. The next two were primary data collection sets and included participant interviews and reflection journals. Each of these points will be discussed further in the following paragraphs.

The first set of data to be collected was the group feedback sessions following each of the trainings in reality play therapy. The feedback sessions were fifteen minutes in duration and recorded for transcription with the school counselors’ permission. The format was an open conversation with all eight school counselors
encouraged to participate by the researcher. Each feedback session covered the school counselors’ reactions to the trainings. This data was used to gain insight into the school counselors’ initial perceptions of reality play therapy as well as the training itself. Additionally, this information was used for any corrections or adjustments made in the implementation process of the research study, including the sessions, supervision, reflection journals, and final interviews.

The primary data collection method for this study was participant interviews conducted by the researcher. In qualitative research, the interview is “used to gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world” (Bogdan & Biklen, 207, p. 103). Because the purpose of this study was to gain school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy’s implementation in elementary schools, interviews created the opportunity for the school counselors to describe their experiences and the meaning they made from those experiences. Because perceptions are not observable phenomenon, the interview process was an appropriate data collection method.

Participants were interviewed in a semi-structured, in-depth interview format for approximately 30-45 minutes following the trainings and the six counseling sessions. A semi-structured interview does not simply follow a predetermined set of questions. Rather, it allows for explanation, expansion, and exploration in order to delve into “unexpected, unusual, or especially relevant material revealed by the participant” (Patten, 2007, p. 153). The researcher used a guided question list that address the purpose and research questions of the study (see Appendix H), but allowed for the semi-structured format. Examples of the interview questions developed from feedback
collected from the reflection journals and weekly supervision sessions included: 1) What were your overall perceptions of this counseling process using reality play therapy?; 2) How effective do you think these techniques were in helping student’s make choices?; and 3) What changes would you make to the techniques?

A second method of data collection included school counselor reflection journals (see Appendix I) to be completed following each of the six reality play therapy sessions. The purpose of these feedback forms was to allow the school counselors to process and report their reactions to each of the sessions. Additionally, the feedback forms were used for discussion and reflection during the weekly supervision meetings as well as shaping the interview questions. The forms were collected during the weekly supervision meetings.

The school counselor interviews were conducted following the six week implementation of the reality play therapy techniques. During this interview, the feedback forms were also discussed. The duration for each interview was 30-45 minutes. As each school counselor informed the researcher that she had completed all six reality play therapy sessions, an interview date and time was agreed upon by both parties. The interviews were conducted at each school counselors’ elementary school locations in a secure and private area. The semi-structure interviews were recorded for transcription with the school counselors’ permission. Further, the interviews were member checked by the participants for accuracy and theoretical comparisons were conducted to enhance and probe the meaning of the existing codes. A follow-up meeting was also conducted once the data had been collected and analyzed. The purpose of this meeting was to allow the participants to view the coding trail and
proposed theory produced by the data analysis. The duration of this meeting was approximately 30 minutes.

Both the feedback sessions and interviews were recorded and transcribed for the data analysis. The research utilized a Sony ICD-PX 720 recorder and Dragon Naturally Speaking 10 Speech Recognition Software for the recording and transcription processes. All of the participants were informed of these procedures prior to the interviews. Additionally, they were informed of the purposes of the study and that it was being conducted for the researcher’s dissertation and possible later publication. All aspects of the consent process as required by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Florida were followed (see Appendix J). Participants were required to complete an assent form (see Appendix K). All materials were collected, handled, and stored in a confidential and appropriate manner by the researcher. The time frame for the research study, including training, implementation, interviews, initial data analysis, and follow-up meeting, was five months (September 2009-January 2010). The in-depth data analysis lasted four months (January 2010-April 2010).

Data Analysis

Stages of Coding

In grounded theory, coding is a process of developing categories involving searching the data for regularities and patterns. Data are coded during three phases: open, axial, and selective (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The specific goals of each of these phases are to develop emerging themes, processes, relationships, and dimensions of the theory (Strauss & Corbin). These themes unify the data into coherent patterns (Bodden & Biklen, 2007; Glaser & Strauss; Scharborough & Luke, 2008). A rich description of the participants’ point of view and
voice with direct quotes can be garnered from the categorical analysis of the themes. A constant comparison of data creates a reciprocal loop between the data and literature to create the emerging theory (Eppler, 2008).

**Open coding.** Open coding begins with examining segments of the data sources for distinct, separate segments and identifying them (Patten, 2007). This process allows for a more in-depth understanding of the data without the benefit of a specific theoretical orientation. The researcher’s goal is to start a grounded theory by broadly coding each data source, proceeding line-by-line, constantly comparing the codes, and developing abstract and generalizable concepts within the data (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Axial coding.** Following open coding, the data sources are reexamined with the purpose of identifying relationships between the categories and themes (Patten, 2007). These axial codes aid the researcher in forming higher levels of categories to specify the categories’ qualities and properties (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Selective coding.** Selective coding involves grouping the axial codes into a “theoretical structure that enables us to form new explanations about the nature of the phenomena” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 103). The result is a core category. This core category is the “main overarching category under which the other categories and subcategories belong” (Patten, 2007, p. 159). The ultimate goal is the development of a cohesive theory stemming from the all of the category’s dimensions, properties, and relationships (Strauss & Corbin).
Theoretical Memos

Theoretical memos are utilized by the researcher to maintain "descriptive record of ideas, insights, and hypothesis development and testing" (Grbich, 2007, p. 77). They are meant to capture the ideas stimulated by the data and serve to clarify concepts for the researcher (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Glaser (1978), theoretical memos serve the purposes of working with ideas, allowing freedom of thought, developing a memo bank, and sorting the memo bank. Through these four functions, the researcher is allowed to conceptualize ideas, explore relationships, and integrate ideas with an open mind.

Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling involves the generation of theory. During this stage, the researcher collects, codes, and analyzes the data in unison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From there, the researcher decides what data to collect next and where to find the needed information (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process aids in the development of theory as it emerges (Glaser & Strauss).

Theory Development

The ultimate goal of grounded theory is the collection and connection of theories and categories through coding to develop an integrated theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This inductive idea of data analysis strives to develop new theories of behavior (Patten, 2007). By systematically analyzing and constantly comparing the data, the researcher works with the data until a theory results (Glaser, 1978). The grounded theory process is relevant because it allows “core problems and processes to emerge” (Glaser, p. 5).
Data Analysis in This Study

As stated earlier, there were two sets of data for this study. The first is a secondary set of data because it does not tie directly to the research questions. However, it is of interest as it provides insight into the school counselors’ initial perceptions of reality play therapy. Additionally, it provided useful information related to the trainings and implementation procedures of the individual sessions as well as the overall study. A thematic analysis was conducted on this data set and will be discussed more in the following paragraph.

In qualitative research, a thematic analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of behavior to encapsulate the data, but not necessarily to develop a theory related to it (Aronson, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes are often oriented toward ways of thinking or some shared ideas that may not be as general as their overall perception of the event, but indicate orientations toward a particular aspect of the event (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Overarching themes are identified that relate to the pattern and divided into sub-themes for further explanation. Because this process is not as in depth as the grounded theory analysis, it important to include relevant literature connected to the emerging themes (Aronson). Ultimately, the themes and patterns relate to a comprehensive guide that provides a picture of the collected experience for the participants based on the concepts that arise from the data (Aronson; Grbich, 2007).

Following each feedback session, the researcher transcribed the recordings verbatim. The transcripts were then analyzed line by line for recurring themes, comments, and concepts offered by the school counselors. Participants of the research study member checked each of the transcriptions for accuracy. The transcripts were reviewed and reevaluated after each session to identify new themes and confirm
previous ones. During the process, relevant literature was reviewed related to each emerging theme for corroboration (Arronson, 1994). The themes were then categorized into sub-themes based on similar concepts as identified by the researcher based on the feedback of the school counselors. Each of the themes and sub-themes will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 4.

The primary data sets were analyzed using grounded theory methods. These methods provide a means for interpreting the interaction of processes in the participants constructed meaning of their experiences. It is through these experiences that a theory can be derived related to the meaning made from the experience of the participants (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The school counselor reflection journals were collected for each session and each of the eight interviews was transcribed verbatim. This step was followed by a detailed open coding process of each data set. During this process, each individual line of the transcription was reviewed by the researcher to identify meaning and themes presented by the school counselors. After coding each data set for all participants, the initial codes were reviewed to look for emerging relationships among codes and to note more frequent and significant codes. The researcher utilized a series of different color markers to identify and sort the different codes. Constant comparison of the codes involved comparing the coded meaning units with each other resulting in increased codes. This process allows for increased connection among the codes as well as providing clarity of the data. As this data was clarified, it was reorganized and grouped into similar codes related to various aspects of the school counselors’ perceptions of the reality therapy process of implementation.
Once the open coding process was completed, the next step of axial coding began. In axial coding, the goal is to sort, synthesize, and organize the large amount of data from the open coding process (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1998). The resulting subcategories group the broad open codes into more central categories while identifying relationships between the categories (Patten, 2007). This procedure allowed the researcher to identify the contexts in which the initial codes interacted with the developing theory of the participants’ experiences. During this stage, the researcher arranged the open codes based on the colors identified in the initial process into the more developed subcategories. This process led to the final stage of coding, selective coding.

The selective coding process represents the final step in grounded theory analysis and involves “the integration of concepts around a core category” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 236). This core category is the overarching category under which the other categories and subcategories belong and work together (Patten, 2007). The open and axial codes were organized based on their relation to the initial research questions. The selective codes focused on the perceptions of the school counselors in regards to the implementation of reality play therapy and its effectiveness in building relationships and developing problem solving skills. Each of the aforementioned codes will be described further in Chapter 4.

From the coding process, the emerging theory was developed. The theory was related to the perceptions of the school counselors related to the implementation of reality play therapy. This theory was grounded in the data offered by the school counselors from the reflection journals and individual interviews conducted by the
researcher. During the entire data collection process, the researcher utilized theoretical sampling to ensure the direction of the process was appropriate. Information gathered from the reflection journals as well as the weekly individual supervision sessions was used to shape and develop the questions asked by the researcher in the final collection process of individual interviews with the school counselors.

During the coding process, several processes were conducted to ensure reliability of the information. First, the feedback session and interview transcriptions were sent to the school counseling participants for member checking purposes. Member checking allows the participants to corroborate and edit the information in the transcripts to ensure an accurate depiction of their comments and meanings. Additionally, the researcher kept track of the coding process through a coding trail (see Appendix L). There was also constant comparison among the codes to ensure consistency and accuracy of the emerging theory. Finally, frequent recordings were made related to the researcher’s ideas about the relationships between codes, the meaning of the codes, and questions stemming from the codes. These ideas were recorded in memos that were dated and labeled for organizational purposes (see Appendix M).

**Trustworthiness**

In the context of research, one of the most important issues to address involves validity. A research study is valid if it accurately measures the intended area of investigation (Patten, 2007). In qualitative research, there are a number of methods to utilize to maintain accurate validity and trustworthiness. Each of these will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

There is a potential risk for skewing data toward a desired outcome with the use of qualitative research (Eppler, 2008). This study used a constructivist approach to
grounded theory and as such, the findings are an interpretation of the constructed meaning of the participants. From these perspectives, findings are acknowledged to be interpretive, propositional, and situational (Charmaz, 2005; Clarke, 2005). It is vital that the researcher holds himself open and accountable during the design, data gathering, and analysis to ensure the knowledge developed is informed, accurate, and valid (Clarke; Patten). Because this study involved the introduction of novel counseling approach, there was the potential of data skewing by the researcher to increase the favorable outcome of the research study. Several steps were taken however to increase the trustworthiness of qualitative data.

Skewing of the data can be avoided by using colleagues for peer review of methods and member checking by participants for accuracy of data sources (Eppler, 2008; Scarborough & Luke, 2008). Member checking, in particular, allows participants’ reactions, clarifications, and additions to become part of the transcripts of the interviews and guide the coding process. Allowing such procedures throughout the coding process can aid in avoiding other limitations such as ignoring existing theories or poorly integrated theoretical explanations (Grbich, 2007). Additionally, the use of an audit trail, a chronological sequence of records which contain materials directly pertaining to and resulting from the research procedures, is essential to qualitative research. Through constant and consistent note taking and memo writing, the trustworthiness of the qualitative research can be enhanced (Scarborough & Luke).

**Subjectivity Statement**

In qualitative research, it is common to question the researcher’s subjectivity. There is a constant concern with the effects his/her own subjectivity may have on the data and the theories produced (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007). Due to this potential conflict, it
is important for the researcher to state any personal beliefs and experiences to help minimize any influences.

Three main areas of concern emerged in this study. First was my experience with both of the approaches in this study. It has been approximately eight years since I was introduced to reality therapy and play counseling through my graduate training in school counseling. Both concepts were adopted quickly into my counseling repertoire. Since that time, I have attended numerous courses, trainings, and lectures, read several books and articles, conducted research, presented at professional conferences, and instructed other students in both reality therapy and play counseling. It was quite evident that I fully believe and accept these counseling approaches as valid and effective in working with students and clients. This was where the second concern became relevant.

As a former school counselor who utilized both reality therapy and play counseling with students, there was a preconceived notion of the appropriate means of implementation and usefulness of both in schools. My past successes with reality therapy and play counseling have led me to believe in their combined potential effectiveness in working with elementary school students. Additionally, my perspectives of how the school environment is shaped and maintained could be influenced by my past experiences in my own school.

Finally, the fact that all members of the research study were female and I was a male was of potential concern. The typical stereotype of the male in the role of administrator or doctoral candidate could have shaped the presentation and processing of the reality play therapy concepts. Additionally, the gender differences between the
researcher and participants could have affected the implementation, data collection, and data analysis of the research study because of the perceived differences between the female counselors and male researcher.

In this study, my view of the data was shaped not only by my past experiences with reality therapy and play counseling and as a school counselor, but also as a male doctoral candidate. Additionally, the fact that I conducted the trainings as well as the resulting data collection and analysis could also affect the data. Each of these perspectives may have potentially influenced the meaning constructed from the data.

**Summary**

Chapter 3 introduced the constructivist theoretical perspective shaping the grounded theory methodological approach of this study investigating school counselors’ perceptions of reality therapy’s implementation with elementary school students. Participants were trained by the researcher in and implemented reality play therapy in their respective elementary schools with upper-grade students. Data was collected through feedback sessions, interviews, and feedback forms. The data was analyzed to develop a thematic analysis and grounded theory regarding the school counselors’ perceptions and meaning made from the experience. Trustworthiness and the researcher’s subjectivity were also addressed in this chapter. Chapter 4 will provide an in-depth review of the findings including the grounded theory developed from the data analysis.
### Table 3-1. School counselor demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Counselor</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years of Elementary School Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
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<td>61</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>27</td>
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<td>Maggie</td>
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<td>W</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selma</td>
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<td>59</td>
<td>W</td>
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<td>Marge</td>
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<td>W</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patty</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### Table 3-2. School counselors’ student demographics

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<th>Student Age</th>
<th>Student Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Student Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>B</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mona</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
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<td>Maggie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selma</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marge</td>
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<td>B</td>
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<td>Maude</td>
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<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Edna</td>
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<td>W</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

Introduction

The research questions for this study sought to investigate school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy’s implementation with upper grade elementary students. In preparing the data for analysis, it became evident that one of the data sets was not primary in the development of a grounded theory to describe the phenomenon of the experience. That secondary data set involved the feedback sessions conducted and transcribed following each of the four training sessions with the school counselors. Ultimately, this data was quite pertinent in the overall research study and provided great insight into the school counselors’ initial perceptions of reality play therapy as well as a variety of elementary school counseling related topics. To understand this set of data, a thematic analysis was conducted on this information to focus on identifiable themes. The overarching themes related to the theories of counseling in reality play therapy, the overall school environment, and the novel reality play therapy techniques. Each theme had a resulting subtheme. The theories of counseling included framework for counseling/review of theory, theoretical terminology issues, and developmental concerns. For the school environment themes, elementary school students’ need for play, frustration with the education system, and practical concerns were addressed. Finally, anticipation for new counseling techniques, the value of hands-on activities, and therapeutic value for the counselor were included in the reality play therapy techniques theme. The thematic analysis results will be described further in the next sections.
Thematic Analysis Results

In this section, an outline is provided of the three overarching identifiable themes categorized into sub-themes through a thematic analysis. The purpose of this approach is to build a comprehensive picture of the reality play therapy training experience. Each of the feedback sessions following the trainings was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for thematic components to emerge related to the training sessions.

Once the transcriptions were completed and member checked, they were analyzed by the researcher for recurring themes. For this process, the researcher read and reread each transcript identifying and confirming frequent themes offered by the school counselors. Once the initial themes were identified, they were categorized into sets of subthemes. From these subthemes, the researcher was able to further categorize the themes into three overarching themes. The three overarching themes were associated with 1) the choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling theories of counseling, 2) the actual school environment, and 3) the reality play therapy techniques. The overarching themes will be explained along with each of the sub-themes in the following sections.

Themes Related to Counseling Theories

During the analysis of the reality play therapy feedback sessions, themes related to the theoretical approaches for the counseling approaches and techniques began to emerge. These themes mostly addressed the concepts of choice theory and reality therapy as opposed to play counseling. Three specific areas of interest in regards to the counseling theoretical aspects of the research study emerged during the coding process. These three areas included: 1) a framework for counseling/review of theory, 2)
theoretical terminology issues, and 3) developmental concerns. Each of the areas will be discussed in the next sections.

**Framework for Counseling/Review of Theory**

It became quite clear during the initial stages of the training that the school counselors were in need of review of the underlying assumption and tenets of choice theory and reality therapy. This need was evident in the early questions and comments related to understanding the approaches as well as the influence of time in regards to previous knowledge and training of the subject matter. One participant noted, “Sums, um, up very well what I had to learn about years ago in a theories class and then some other workshops a long time ago. So, I think it does provide a nice summary.” Overall, the school counselors appeared to be appreciative of the basic review.

The school counselors also noted a link between the review and developing an understanding of the counseling work they had been conducting with the elementary school population in general. This understanding provided some of the school counselors with a basis for the approaches and techniques used with the students. Further, it provided “not just a summary, but a framework for understanding and the reasons behind certain things we may start doing.” These things included building relationships with students and helping with the development of problem solving skills.

Yet another way this review of theory was relevant for the school counselors involved the application of counseling interactions into a context for daily interactions with the school population. The review of the approaches seemed to aid the participants with understanding counseling techniques and ideologies already in place. Specifically, there was a link between the review and reality therapy. This was displayed in one school counselor’s statement that “You do a lot of this stuff in your day-
to-day. Everything you do in life is a choice and I have said that to my students. I don’t know how many times I have said that.” The previous statement reflects the adaptability of reality therapy as applicable in providing a conceptual framework to a variety of counseling situations and a focus on student behavior for the school counselor (Banmen, 1985; Wubbolding, 1998).

Overall, the sub-theme related to providing a framework for counseling and review of theory appeared to be one of appreciation and necessity for the participants. Wubbolding (1999) emphasized that the teaching of such concepts as basic needs, quality world, total behavior, and the WDEP system is vital to understanding choice theory and reality therapy. Ultimately, the reality play therapy training provided a needed structure and enhancement of some of the counseling and play techniques and approaches already in place at many of the participating elementary schools; however, the reality play therapy approach was a novel experience for each of the school counselors.

**Theoretical Terminology Issues**

The second thematic set associated with the theoretical aspects of the reality play therapy training included some issues associated with the terminology of the approaches. In particular, aspects of the choice theory/reality therapy concepts proved to be “challenging” or “misleading” for some of the school counselors. There was also concern on the part of the school counselors in regard to translating and explaining the choice theory/reality therapy concepts to the students during the implementation of the counseling sessions. In particular, the counselors noted that the quality world concept would have to be presented in a manner that would make it “very clear with the children so they will understand it.”
It is quite possible that these concerns arose from a variety of areas. One included the lack of understanding of the concepts by the participants. This understanding could have resulted from the amount of time or confusion related to previous trainings in reality therapy and play counseling. It is necessary for the counselor to address such concerns by remembering that reality therapy must be done with students and not for them (Glasser, 1986). The most appropriate manner for this is for the school counselor to develop a working relationship with the student to identify needs and quality world components (Banmen, 1985). Additionally, a lack of clarity may have existed in the current trainings conducted by the researcher. Ultimately, these concerns were addressed in either the trainings or supervision sessions that occurred during the actual sessions through constant review and explanation of the basic tenets of choice theory and reality therapy as suggested by Robert Wubbolding (1999).

**Developmental Concerns**

The final area to emerge in the thematic analysis from the theoretical perspective involved developmental concerns for the upper grade elementary students. Despite the fact Piaget’s (1950, 1952) developmental theory states that children of this age range are capable of thought needed to understand and apply logical operations for such concepts, some of the school counselors were still apprehensive about certain students’ abilities to comprehend some of the choice theory/reality therapy concepts. One example included, “Because, even because, this is for older elementary school kids, even some of my older elementary school kids are not at the level I think kids need to be.” It is possible that these concerns stemmed from the school counselors’ perceptions regarding the expected developmental level for the students based on curriculum or societal expectations.
Several of the school counselors were also concerned about appropriate means for conveying the information to the students. It was discussed during the feedback sessions that some of the activities would need specific directions to be introduced effectively and conducted because it is the educators’ responsibility to provide interventions that match student ability (Curwin & Mendler, 2004). For example, “Helping us find words to help the kids understand the concepts because they’re kind of big concepts and have that make, um, more visuals are a way to explain those concepts.”

To help with these concerns, we discussed potential methods for introducing some of the choice theory and reality therapy concepts. These ideas included providing personal examples of quality world components and relating concepts to previous similar counseling and classroom guidance activities with the students. All of these ideas are compatible with teaching choice theory and reality therapy to clients and students capable of comprehending the importance of basic needs and wants (Glasser, 1998; Wubbolding, 2010).

**School Environment Themes**

The second set of themes to surface involved the actual school environment for the school counselors and students. It is interesting to note that these themes not only dealt with the immediate on-site school environment, but the local and national educational system as a whole. The three sub-themes of 1) elementary students’ need for play, 2) frustration with the education system, and 3) practical concerns will be discussed individually in the subsequent sections.
Elementary Students’ Need for Play

The first sub-theme involved the school counselors’ perception about the elementary school students’ need for creativity and play-related activities for healthy development. It is quite clear in the literature that there is a distinct need for such activities for children to develop appropriate cognitive, social, and personal growth (Bratton et al., 2005; Landreth, 1993; Schor, 1995). One instance that exemplified the school counselors’ concern included, “I think it (reality play therapy) is really appropriate because the kids don’t get the chance to play anymore.” This statement reflects the first hand observation of the pattern of decreased play and creative arts in many elementary schools for students around the age of ten (Kennedy, 2008). This observation is of concern based on the idea that this age range is most adept at utilizing and learning from creative interactions to address needs and develop problem solving skills (Sousa, 2001).

The school counselors also discussed the need for creative approaches when working with students to aid in the development of the counseling relationship as well as student growth. These concerns relate directly to the literature stating that children are more at ease in counseling settings with creative activities utilizing such materials as puppets since play materials can provide tangible symbols of emotion (Gill, 1998; Thompson & Henderson, 2007). There were several statements from the school counselors exemplifying this idea. Some of the examples included, “In my experience, when children use puppets, my experience is that they totally throw themselves into it.” Another counselor stated, “When you’re looking at the puppet instead of the child, it may make the child feel safer talking.”
A final component of this sub-theme conveyed the idea that creative interactions such as play are not only for the lower grade elementary students. The targeted fourth and fifth grade students even “surprised” some with their desire to “go into their fantasy world like everyone else.” Indeed there is a suggested need for play for the upper elementary school students as well (Ray, 2007).

These ideas helped to present the theory that play and creativity are a vital component of the elementary school environment. This need for creativity and play not only exists for the younger elementary students, but for the upper grade students as well. Further, the concepts, such as those in reality therapy, are enhanced for students when combined with creative techniques by the counselor (Ginsberg, 2007; Mason & Duba, 2009).

**Frustration with Educational System**

It became quite evident during the trainings that the school counselors were harboring frustration with the current state of the educational system. It is important to note that these frustrations stemmed from not only school level issues, but also local and national pressures placed on school counselors (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Glasser, 1993). In particular, the school counselors expressed aggravation over the current professional role they seem to play in the implementation of state and national policy. One such example included the following statement:

> We all came from an incredibly stressful meeting this morning because we were training, or retrained, in RTI (response to intervention) and it was a lot to absorb. A lot of things fall on us and major changes that we have to implement and hope that the teachers follow.

The previous statement also alludes to the school counselor’s role in the local school environment. There appears to be some confusion as to the role of the school
counselors. Are they supposed to be counselors or administrators? How are they to interact with the teaching staff? And most importantly, what are their duties in regards to the students? This final question was exemplified by the following statement, “Being a part of this study is going to force me to see kids again.”

These preceding examples embody the current confusion and concern that exists regarding the professional school counselor's role in today's elementary school environment (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006). It is important to note that such confusion and misunderstanding can hinder school counselor effectiveness of counseling interventions (Edwards et al., 2009). Further, because more students are being diagnosed with mental issues and receiving little to no counseling services, there is call for school counselors to become more involved in treatment (Edwards & Cadenhead, 2009).

Practical Concerns

The final area that came to light included the practical concerns of the school counselors for the everyday elementary school environment. In particular, the counselors as a whole addressed the ideas of time constraints and appropriateness of select materials to be utilized in the activities. Each of the practical concerns will be addressed in the following sections.

Time. In conjunction with the previous theme of frustration revolving around the role of the school counselor, time is a factor of great concern. Many of the participants noted the potential difficulty of maintaining a weekly, six session schedule due to school duties, school activities, and pressures felt from national testing standards. As previously noted, this is a realistic concern for school counselors (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006). To alleviate this stress, as a group we discussed potential ways of
working out feasible schedules for all involved. In addition, the scheduling of weekly individual supervision sessions provided encouragement to maintain the sessions in a timely fashion. Further, the school counselors noted that by participating in a study with permission from the school principal would allow for that time to be taken each week. Again, however, this reiterates the frustration with the current educational system that such links are needed to provide regular counseling sessions for elementary school students.

Materials. A second area of concern that arose for the school counselors involved certain materials to be used during the counseling sessions. In particular, the use of miniature soldiers for the quality world sand tray activity aroused apprehension. The main area of doubt revolving around the miniatures was the use of weapons. Additionally, the implication of violence was questioned by some of the participants. Ultimately, however, as the literature states, there was a need for the miniature soldiers and weapons to potentially provide some insight and play out some aggressive scenarios for the students (Kranz et al., 1998; Mickel, 1994; Reynolds & Stanley, 2001). This proved to be a surprise for some of the counselors as one stated, “I was adverse or fearful of the soldiers, but I was surprised they had a point for me.”

Reality Play Therapy Technique Themes

For the final thematic analysis, themes related to the actual use of reality play therapy techniques were revealed by the school counselors. The overarching theme for this section involved the attitudes toward teaching and practicing each of the activities to be utilized during the sessions with the students. Additionally, the school counselors expressed their desire for a new approach for working with the targeted population of upper elementary school students. The subthemes of 1) anticipation for new counseling
techniques, 2) value of hands-on activities, and 3) therapeutic value for counselors will be discussed further in the following sections.

**Anticipation for New Counseling Techniques**

Several of the school counselors noted a sincere desire and anticipation for learning these new techniques. This eagerness was evident from the beginning of the sampling when a majority of the school counselors for the school district expressed interest in participating. Additionally, once the final participant number had been decided upon, more counselors requested being included in the study. Because of these requests, a revision was submitted and accepted by the Institutional Review Board to include the two additional counselors. Once the trainings began, it was obvious that the desire was existent. Upon expressing my surprise and appreciation for all of the positive reactions to the study, one counselor noted, “You don’t know how hungry we are!”

Yet another facet of the participant’s anticipation was the introduction of a potentially viable and relatively straightforward addition to their counseling repertoire. Reality therapy, in particular, provides such tools while allowing for self-evaluation, making choices, and problem solving (Mason & Duba, 2009; Wubbolding & Brickell, 2000). This was apparent during the trainings and exemplified in one counselor’s statement that, “It’s like I can do this. To just have new tools.” In addition, many of the school counselors relayed the desire for an outlet for underutilized approaches such as play in a contextual form. One such example included:

Play therapy is something that I always wanted to do, but it was really hard to find a form for it with kids and I am so glad to be a part of this because it gives me a form to do it.
Value of Hands-On Activities

For the purpose of the reality play therapy trainings, it was decided that allowing the school counselors to participate in the activities would serve as the best method of understanding. This approach proved to be successful for the school counselors and provided great insight into the potential perspective of the students. It was through the hands-on experiences of the school counselors that they were able to envision what the experience of actually doing the activities would be like for the students. Additionally, the hands-on training provided the importance of play as a needed resource for children. As one counselor explained, “It feels immediate for me. Like, once I start handling the toys, then I’m coming from a place of knowing inside, but it doesn’t rely on me trying to sort it out, how to say it.”

The play component was also evident in the actual process of playing with the materials. The school counselors were able to experience the phenomenon of choosing and utilizing the materials in the actual activities. This occurrence resulted in the school counselors experiencing the potential emotions and insights that can result from the play counseling interaction. One such example provided by a participant included, “I was putting things into the sand tray, like at first, it was not very nice. It was violent…and I can imagine watching a kid doing the same thing because today was not a fun day for me.” This experience likely gave the counselors direct understanding of sand play’s potential of providing opportunities to resolve issues by externalizing fantasies and developing a sense of mastery and control (Allan & Berry, 1987).

The phenomenon of experiences the reality play therapy atmosphere offered a glimpse into the child’s perceptual world and reality which is vital to counselors’ ability to provide effective counseling (Landreth, 1993; Wubbolding, 1998). This insight also
potentially provided some surprising results for the school counselors related to the therapeutic value of the interactions with the activities and materials (Gill, 1998; Kranz et al., 1998). Many of the school counselors were not necessarily prepared for the possible insights that could be gained from such creative activities. Such insight into a child's world not only provides great understanding of the child's perception, but also informs counselors of the potential educational effects (Wing, 1995).

**Therapeutic Value for Counselors**

During the interactive portions of the trainings with the activities, many of the school counselors used their own personal interactions and difficulties to play out scenarios. In many cases, this personal component allowed for some cathartic outcomes for the participants. One counselor stated, "Well, I used a real problem or a personal problem and actually do feel better. I don't feel like I fixed it, but it is what it is." This insight is in conjunction with choice theory and reality therapy in that it provides an initial perspective of the situation. In turn, this insight can allow the student and counselor to develop a plan based in reality to address the issue and develop new behaviors to meet needs (Wubbolding, 2000). An example provided by one of the school counselors exemplified the appropriateness of a choice theory method of counseling by stating, "I used a personal problem too and breaking it down into those four parts (total behavior) gave me a different perspective on the problem."

Overall, the therapeutic value for the counselors ended up being one of the more valuable themes because continual self-exploration is required for the effective use of play related techniques (Kranz et al., 1998). Similarly, Wubbolding and Brickell (2000) emphasized the need for counselors to constantly evaluate their own perceptions and quality worlds to provide the best services possible.
Thematic Analysis Summary

As a result of the feedback sessions conducted at the conclusion of each training session, many important components surfaced. Themes related to the overarching theories of the reality play therapy approach, school environment related issues, and the appropriateness of the actual techniques all provided insight into the potential effectiveness of reality play therapy as well as some perspective areas to be addressed. Through these feedback sessions, the concerns were targeted and possible solutions were formulated. These solutions were also followed up during the weekly supervision sessions and allowed for alterations in the actual sessions as needed. Some examples of the changes included simplifying the instruction of the activities to be more clear and spending more time on the review of previous sessions with the students.

Overall, however, a potentially important theme to materialize from the training based on the school counselors’ feedback was the prospective effectiveness of the reality play therapy approach. Not only did the school counselors display their desire for the new approach, but also the need for a delivery system for the underrepresented use of play counseling for children. Based on the feedback of the school counselors at this initial stage with a secondary data set, reality play therapy has the potential of becoming a viable and reliable option for working with upper-grade elementary school children.

The primary data sets will now be addressed from the grounded theory perspective.

A Grounded Theory Model

The two primary data sets related directly to the research questions were analyzed using grounded theory methods to explore the meaning made by the school counselors and their experience with the reality play therapy approach. These data sets included the feedback journals each counselor completed following each session and
the final interview conducted following the six total reality play therapy sessions. This data was analyzed through coding and constant comparison as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The data analysis revealed four major categories associated to the school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy. These categories were related to the school counselors’ perceptions of the effectiveness of relationship building, problem-solving skills, positive aspects of implementation, and concerns about implementation. In regards to relationship building, the school counselors recognized several important student relationships in the process including ones with the counselor, materials, others, and self. The perceptions of problem-solving skills spanned through the sessions, into the school setting, and beyond to students’ lives. Participants also introduced positive aspects of the implementation of reality play therapy including an outlet for play and creativity, a needed new approach, and the ability to gain insight into the students’ perceptions. Several concerns were also raised by the participants. Among these were time considerations for implementing counseling interventions, language and development issues for student understanding, structural needs for the activities, and the impact of external influences such as the role of responsibility and blame.

Based on these findings, a grounded theory has been developed to hypothesize the relationships among the categories and their components (see Figure 4-1). The theory posits the interconnectivity between the implementation of reality play therapy and its effectiveness in developing relationships and problem-solving skills for the elementary school students. In regards to the implementation pieces, participants reported both needs for such an approach to work with the population as well as
concerns about the approach that need to be addressed. Secondly, the school counselors identified their insights into the effectiveness of reality play therapy to enhance relationships and increase problem-solving skills. As these two components interact and intersect, the grounded theory that emerged focused on the school counselors’ perceptions of the reality play therapy approach and its potential usefulness as a valid and appropriate counseling tool for working with upper level elementary school students. Each of these areas will be addressed further in the following sections.

**Positive Perspective of Reality Play Therapy Implementation**

The most important aspect of any counseling theory is its ability to be implemented in an effective manner with a desired population. In this case, reality play therapy sought to enhance the school counselors’ varied repertoire of counseling techniques to address needs of upper grade elementary school students. Throughout the implementation of the six individual counseling sessions, a variety of positive aspects began to emerge related to reality play therapy. The data analysis ultimately recognized three main positive perceptions of the school counselors related to the implementation of reality play therapy: 1) an outlet for play and creativity, 2) the need for a new approach, and 3) gaining insight.

**Outlet for Play and Creativity**

**Need for play.** The participants of this study recognized and noted the importance for elementary school students’ need for an outlet to express themselves through creative means such as those offered in play. In particular, Lisa noted the creative avenue of play allows students to access “items to represent everything/one that is important” and “learn a lot about ourselves.” In conjunction, the play materials ease the students’ anxiety and allow for exploration of topics that may be more difficult
or forced in a traditional talk session or as Maggie noted, “My sense was once the puppets were on the hands that revealing the thoughts, feelings, and nature of the conversation flowed freely.” She furthered this concept by stating the following:

It was effective in that puppets seemed to help her express herself in a way that was more safe and helped her get some clarity that when she felt disappointed by adults and let down by adults, her way of trying to get power was to get defiant, albeit passively. In the end this way of trying to have an impact on the adult, she thought was in the wrong was not productive in reaching her ultimate goal.

**Student understanding.** The previous quote also denotes the ability for the play materials to bridge the understanding gap for the students and counselors with this new approach. With reality play therapy introducing such novel ideas to students, it is vital to have techniques which speak to the students’ level of understanding of reality play therapy. Edna noted that when working with her student “after introducing the puppets, he was able to speak with them regarding the situation from each of the four perspectives.” It is important to note that one participant gained perspective on the need for creativity beyond the sessions as well in understanding and learning for students. During the quality world activity, Selma noted how “he really liked the activity because it was kinda like how he wished we would do science” and “he loved the little characters that he could use to represent things.” Such insight potentially informs education to the usefulness of creative and play beyond counseling sessions and into the actual classroom for learning activities.

**Appropriateness of materials.** Another area of interest associated with play and creativity that emerged dealt with the appropriateness of their use in schools with the
upper level elementary students. Many of the school counselors noted the decrease in the amount of play and creativity in the schools despite the fact that they are a welcome avenue for even the older students. Maude noted this in working with her student because “it didn’t matter even what grade they were in when they saw that sandbox on the table, it was like they wanted to get into it, the younger ones, older ones, the fifth graders, it didn’t matter.”

In general, the participants noted several positive aspects related to outlet of play and creativity offered by reality play therapy. Ranging from the ability to provide safety and context for the students in counseling sessions and educational settings, the use of play and creativity were duly noted as a much needed techniques for all elementary school students. It appears that their use could provide the bridge between simply introducing the concepts and students’ actually understanding them and their application to a variety of situations. The recognition of students’ need for play and creativity provides possible support of elementary school counselors’ call for new ways, such as reality play therapy, to encourage such creative activities when counseling students.

**Need for a New Counseling Approach**

The second area related to the positive implementation of reality play therapy was the school counselors’ desire for a new approach for working with elementary school students. This yearning was evident from the beginning of the research project when virtually the entire elementary school counseling population expressed interest in participating. Such overwhelming response seems to signify that the school counselors are desperate for “new ways to learn” an approach for working with their students.


**Context for counseling.** One of the insights of the new approach actually came from the idea that choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling were not new for many of the school counselors. Despite the fact that many of them expressed appreciation for the review because they had “gotten away from the concepts,” most of them noted a familiarity with choice theory and reality therapy. The difference existed in that they had not been able to place it within a context for use with their elementary school students. Maude exemplified this by stating:

> You don’t think about the basis of where its coming from, but it makes you think and its like, okay, this is why I do this and it makes sense now and so I think it was good in that respect.

Mona also elaborated on the approach having a “basis to kind of go by, a guideline on how you approach a problem” while teaching new skills to both herself and the student. These techniques also provided a path for the participants in working with the students to reach specific goals and understanding. Many of the counselors expressed approval of the activities as guiding agents in providing an outline for the counseling sessions while building on the tenets of reality therapy and play counseling such as relationship building and developing problem solving skills.

**Extension of concept.** This introduction of a new approach also stimulated the school counselors’ interest in working with other students utilizing the approaches. Edna noted that she planned on integrating more of the concepts with her students in individual sessions as well as in small and large group settings. Marge, in particular, approved of this because of the relation the activities had to some previously learned strategies involving “giving I messages and discussing empowerment” and the ability to link them together. Additionally, Mona related how “effective” the sand tray and drawing activities could be in working with a class on such issues as “making friends, getting into
trouble in class, or not completing assignments.” The school counselors also noted their approval of these activities with a variety of students and topics including anger, death, divorce, and friendship.

**Directness of activities.** Participants also noted an appreciation for the directness and brevity of the reality play therapy approach. Patty and Marge expressed their approval of having a “brief, structured method of assisting students to identify their needs” and a “set of activities that work toward a specific goal” as opposed to “doing these long drawn out therapies with kids.” In conjunction with pressures placed on school counselors for results with many students coupled with severe time restraints, the school counselors expressed a need for direct interventions, or as Mona stated, “I am always looking for readymade lessons because we don’t have time to do that.” The indication here is that these school counselors are ready for a new approach that can address the needs of students in a simple, yet effective means. An aspect of such an approach that could aid the school counselors in relationship building and developing problem solving skills lies in the ability to gain insight into the students’ perception of their worlds.

**Gaining Insight into the Student’s World**

The final positive aspect of implementing reality play therapy with the elementary school students revolved around the ability to gain insight into the children’s view of their worlds. The activities allowed for a glimpse into several aspects of the students’ worlds. Among these were identifying wants, needs, feelings, perceptions, and relationships.

**Recognition of needs.** Perhaps the most “effective” and “insightful” means of all of the activities that provided perspective into the students’ world was the sand tray
activity according to six of the eight participants. Through this exercise, students were able to portray a variety of needs in a safe environment. Some of the needs that surfaced involved safety and trust as Marge’s student “caged” the animals that represented danger to her on the opposite side of the tray away from the doll that represented her. She also played out her fear of the unknown and her father’s death with the “scary animals” and how this affects her need for power in her life. Selma’s student used similar play utilizing fences to block the predators from getting to him. Patty’s student depicted a similar scenario with the tiger and lion looking into his car and that they were the “bullies attacking.” The need for connection and belonging also surfaced as Maggie’s student “positioned herself in the middle of the world and stacked items so she was the tallest…behind her were her support, favorite teachers, support staff, and 2 friends, all facing the same direction.” Edna’s student was able to share his need for power as he played out a scene with military miniatures in which he was the great leader of the battle.

**Recognition of total behavior.** Another choice theory concept that came to light in the reality play therapy activities involved students’ ability to recognize aspects of total behavior. While using the puppets, Selma’s student was able to express several of the total behavior concepts as he told her “when he gets really angry and tries to yell at someone, nothing really comes out and how frustrated this makes him feel and also hurts his head.” Mona also observed that, “I feel like his madness was got in the way of his actions…so it may be helpful to work with him next time on dealing with feelings and not letting it control his behavior so he can get his need met.” The students were also able to provide vivid visualization of the effects of the total behavior components (i.e.
feeling “crumpled up and small”) thus allowing the school counselor to see how truly powerful these situations affected the students. All of these examples provided important insight on connecting the four total behavior components into viable plans to meet students’ needs in more productive ways.

**Perceptions.** Students also provided vision into their daily lives that validated some the school counselor’s preexisting perceptions. For example, Marge noted that her student “initially put a lot of items in the sand tray in a very chaotic way—much like I feel her life has been.” Selma also gained a vision of her student’s resignation of addressing his problems making friends until middle school where he may be able “to find more students like him.” Students also provided insight into their perceptions of themselves and those around them through portrayals with the play materials. These examples included the students’ use of animals (tigers, monkeys, lions) and cars (sports, utility) to represent themselves and others as “strong,” “fast,” or “cool,” thus allowing the counselor to observe how the student sees self and others.

Another of the relationship insights came from Lisa’s student. In his sand tray, he depicted his quality school world as resembling “boot camp.” He further expressed the desire for “it not to be too physically rough, but did want there to be teams which competed in things like tug of war” relating to a yearning for structure based in teamwork. The school counselors also gained insight into the importance of the relationship on the counseling process and the impact it can have on the session. Maggie noted this in the following:

I think it was neat looking at a student create their world, what is important to them that doesn’t necessarily come out per se and the conversation that I have with students because they are a little more problem focused or solution based whereas this was let me see your world.
The school counselors were also able to experience the importance of outside school relationships as students brought in family, peer, and community influences into the activities. Conversely, the school counselors also connected some potential concerns related to reality play therapy’s intervention in the school setting.

**Concerns Regarding the Implementation of Reality Play Therapy**

As with any new approach, there are bound to be areas of concern that must be addressed. During the implementation of reality play therapy, several concerns surfaced. These concerns involved aspects of time considerations, developmental issues, structural considerations, and external influences. Each of these concerns will be expanded upon in the following sections.

**Time Considerations**

The participating school counselors presented a set of concerns related to the implementation of reality play therapy. One of the most prevalent themes involved time considerations. All of the school counselors noted feeling an intense pressure to fulfill a variety of job duties during the school day. Selma expressed this by stating, “The problem was time for me…all the other stuff that comes between and the other things that have to be done during the day.” In most cases, these duties do not connect directly to provide services to students, much less counseling them. Lisa noted, “sometimes as counselors, we don’t have as much time to have the individual over a long time for counseling.” Edna also expressed her “frustration” due to the lack of “consistency” of seeing her students. This issue as well as other time concerns will be explored further in the following sections.

**Training.** The earliest time issue dealt with the trainings as many of the counselors expressed a desire for more time to understand the concept. Mona
specifically relayed a need in making the trainings longer and spending more time on specific activities to better understand “what they should look like in session.” She also offered ideas such as “providing a video of how the session is supposed to look” for future trainings. Two of the school counselors also suggested spending more time practicing the activities to get a better understanding of the directions and intentions.

**Student attendance.** A potentially distracting issue school counselors face regarding time and implementing counseling sessions is the school attendance of the student. In order for school counselors to counsel the students, their school attendance is imperative to making progress. Attendance issues were seen as a potential area of concern in the utilization of reality play therapy as Mona noted, “I think it would be tough if the kid was absent a lot and you had several weeks between sessions.” The natural progression of the school calendar also factored into this issue as Lisa noted a “lack of stability” in the schedule due to holidays, events, and examinations. Both of these examples indicate a need for consistency to fully understand and implement the reality play activities and concepts.

**External pressure.** Pressure felt from the school personnel also played a role in the implementation of reality play therapy and the time needed for sessions. Selma experienced this in attempting to schedule her sessions:

> The problem was time for me, and probably other counselors, is all the other stuff that comes between and the other things that have to be done during the day. And fitting it in because in fifth grade of their curriculum is so tight that I can’t call them during the 90 minute reading block. There is a certain time when I can pull him.

Lisa also reflected this emotion as she mentioned that “we don’t have as much time to have the individual over a long time” or having the ability to “see him at a time other than when he’s not in trouble.” These statements exemplify not only the curriculum
pressure, but also the extra duties and misconceptions about the role of the school counselor that hinder them in providing counseling services to the elementary school population.

**Research requirements.** Because the counseling sessions were a part of a research study, there was a great deal of structure associated with their implementation. This regiment proved to be one of the more difficult aspects for the counselors in regards to feeling they had completely covered the purpose of the activities. In particular, Edna and Patty both noted a desire to stay with certain activities for an additional week or so rather than moving on the next session. Maggie also noted this as she “had to suggest that she didn’t need to be as detailed in the drawing…I was aware that time may be an issue.” As a result of this schedule, some of them felt this fast pace hindered the counseling environment and level of understanding for the students.

**Time lapse.** The length of time between sessions may have affected some of the counselors because they felt like the time between sessions potentially affected impact of the activities. For example, Maude noted that her student expressed some discontent with the review of the previous sessions and activities as the “newness had worn off.” As a result of her experience, she recommended that the sessions should potentially occur more often than the weekly basis to keep the activities and situations “fresh” so that the student feels more involved and invested. Additionally, the length of time between sessions could have affected the students’ perceptions and memories of the previous sessions as well as the initial problem situation resulting in inconsistency in the counseling process. Conversely, some of the counselors felt that the time
differential may have actually aided the students’ comprehension of the activities and concepts. Patty expressed that she was “pleased that he understood the concepts a little better than our previous session.” Maggie also reflected on the time lapse allowing her student to “reflect on it” aiding in her ability to understand the concepts. This ability to understand the concepts lead to another possible concern for the school counselors related to the students’ developmental levels.

Developmental Issues

Perhaps the most pressing concern to emerge from the reality play therapy implementation involved the developmental status of the upper grade elementary students. Despite the fact that this age range has the potential to understand such concepts, there were still issues raised by the counselors in the context of the sessions. These concerns varied in their nature, ranging from clarity issues to cognitive development to maturity levels. Each will be explored in the following paragraphs.

Clarity. Most of the school counselors simply reflected a lack of clarity by the students with some of the activities and concepts. For example, Mona noted that her student was “unsure” of the concept of needs, but was able to explain it thought a typical classroom interaction that reflected a basic need. She also noted that the total behavior puppet activity was “hard” for him to understand and required a great deal of explanation and review. Even with good attention by the student, Maude expressed her uncertainty of her student understanding the “connection between the needs and the impact needs have on his behavior.” Patty also expressed her “frustration” with her student because “he did not seem to totally get it.” The school counselors’ reactions could have stemmed from a lack of clarity in the activities or the perceived pressure of
having to complete the sessions in a certain amount of time resulting in enhanced frustration and uncertainty.

**Cognitive development.** Several of the school counselors referred to the students’ need to be of a certain cognitive developmental stage to fully grasp the reality play therapy concepts and activities. For example, Lisa noted:

I don’t know that I would’ve taken exactly the same sessions with a much younger child or a child who is not as capable cognitively as he is. Because he’s really bright and it made sense to him. He can talk about things with a good vocabulary and good understanding.

Selma made a similar comment expressing her reservations about using reality play therapy with a student who may not have the “same ability level” as her student. Edna furthered this idea by stating that “some of the constructs are hard to get down to an elementary kid level” and a need to put the counseling theory into “10 year old words.” These statements reflect both the counselors’ apprehension about students’ needed level of cognitive development and their self expectations for students’ ability to comprehend such concepts as reality play therapy.

The age level of the students and the materials may have also conflicted from a developmental perspective. For example, Maude noticed that some of her lunch group students were “excited” when they noticed the puppets, but quickly lost interest when they “looked at them like these are for little kids because they’re small.”

**Maturity.** Student level of maturity seemed to play a role for the school counselors as well in implementing reality play therapy. Edna struggled with this as her student was “not able to move very far because of his silliness and inability or unwillingness to focus on the task at hand.” She also mentioned that when he is in this “mood,” he can be very “controlling in doing and saying what he wants” and is “very
difficult to redirect.” As a result, the counseling sessions may not be as productive as they could be in developing a relationship or problem solving skills since the counselor is focused on discipline rather than counseling. Such concerns over time and development with the sessions also connected to the concept of structure for the sessions and activities.

**Structural Considerations**

The participants discussed the concept of structure with the implementation of reality play therapy. Mostly, this referred to the need for structure in the counseling sessions. The structural considerations raised involved organization of the activities, theory, counseling process, school system, and materials. Each of these areas will be covered in more detail in the following paragraphs.

**Continual instruction.** In regards to the activities, the participants noted the need for continual instruction. Edna noted “when I continually talked with him about what we were focused on, I was able to get him to respond to the four areas” indicating this need for constant interaction. She also noted that her student sometime had difficulty with this structure, especially with the drawing activities because “he likes to draw what he wants to draw.” Similarly, Maggie noted her student needed the most direction in the drawing activity. Their thoughts were that this continual direction potentially interfered with the structure of the session and the students’ processes.

**Review.** Similarly, the sessions outline utilized review at the beginning of each interaction. The counselors noted this structure as providing an appropriate review and aided in the understanding of the activities and concepts. This review also provided a time for outlining some of the “highlights” of the previous sessions allowing for a
jumpstart of the session. Additionally, Lisa noted this review helped to keep her student “organized” with the sessions and activities.

**Counseling structure.** Furthermore, there was a need for structure based in the counseling process. This structure included the use of basic counseling skills such as reflecting, empathy, questions, and tracking. For example, Maggie was able to recognize her student’s discomfort with a certain situation and decided it was not an appropriate time to push the issue. Additionally, Marge noted that when the session was getting “bogged down” that she simply referred back to the basic counseling skills of tracking and reflecting.

**Need for instruction.** Half of the counselors also expressed the need for more structure with the activities in that they needed more specific instructions to explain the activity to the students. Maude mentioned potentially using a more structured role play with the puppets rather than having an open discussion using the puppets. This concept was especially essential as some of the counselors noted discomfort with utilizing familiar materials in a different fashion. Maggie expressed this with the puppets as she was already “habituated” to using them in a certain way with her students as opposed to the reality play therapy activity. Conversely, the other half of the counselors noted a need for less structure and more choices in the activities and materials. Lisa conveyed this idea by offering an option of using the puppets in more of an “interactive conversation with the student” instead the students conducting the majority of the activity.

**Application.** Another structural component involved the students’ application of the techniques beyond the counseling sessions. For example, Mona expressed a need
for guidance for her student stating, “if we had someone to guide him to do it. I don’t know at elementary school age they would use this without having someone help them.” Her indication being that the student will likely not utilize the concepts and ideas from their sessions without individual guidance. Lisa also recommended the use of guiding materials such as “role plays or a workbook” to be used in the future by the students to remember and implement the concepts and activities on a regular basis.

All of these structural components relayed both the need for and reliance upon structure for the school counselors. Such structure is often desired when participating in a new way of conducting a counseling session or implementing unfamiliar activities with elementary school students. It also showed the differences among the counselors in regards to their levels of need for structure and how they conduct their counseling sessions with creative materials and techniques. The perception of the need for structure is often interconnected with the influence of others on an individual’s thoughts and behaviors.

**External Influences**

The final area of concern dealt with the impact of external control influences on the implementation of reality play therapy. External control is the crux of people avoiding responsibility for their actions by placing the blame on others for making them behave or causing them to act a certain way. From the choice theory and reality therapy perspective, external control is one of the major causes of suffering and disconnect in today’s school environment (Glasser, 1990; Wubbolding, 2000). The participants noted a variety of instances of external influence, including avoiding responsibility, blaming others, and influence of community, throughout the implementation of the reality play therapy sessions.
**Responsibility.** Often, external control is very subtle in its influence on people’s acceptance of responsibility for their behaviors. An example of this came from Marge’s student who stated her situation would improve if another student would “just stop bothering her” indicating that the other student’s actions are in need of changing as opposed to her own. Students may also try to include others in the situation. Maude’s student exemplified this by stating, “I get in trouble on the school bus, but other kids are talking a lot too.” While this may be the case, from the choice theory perspective, the only behavior the student can control is his own. By reflecting on the behavior of others rather than those of the student, the counseling session may not be as focused in a productive direction to develop new problem solving skills and behaviors.

**Blaming.** Students also tend to use external control to deflect the responsibility for their actions. Maggie noticed this as her student tried to “justify her actions and tended to direct the conversation to the teacher and what she [the teacher] could have done.” Students may also directly attempt to blame others despite the attempts to redirect by the counselor. For example, Maude shared the following experience:

I wanted the student to understand that it was his actions that caused the change. He understands that the referrals were the cause and that he had been warned what would happen, but right now, he still wants to blame others for his situation.

He also discussed how he “wasn’t sure what he could do to change her [the principal] mind to allow him in the program” and that “they” would not let him be a part of the afterschool program. Edna’s student also “had a really hard time taking personal responsibility. He has in his mind it is still the teacher doing this to me” relating to his difficulty following directions in the classroom. Again, this approach allows students to
defer the responsibility by placing it on other people in the situation rather than addressing their own behaviors to alter the situation.

**Community.** A final component of external control involved the influence of culture and community. This is perhaps the most influential and relevant external control component, especially for youth. In many cases, elementary school students do not have direct control over certain situations or may have their wants and needs shaped by culture. Edna notice this as her student was “unsure of his wants” due to pressure from home. It is in these instances where the school counselor must work with the student from the perspective of being able to control behaviors within the context of these cultural and environmental situations.

Both the positive aspects and areas for concern shed some important insight into the school counselors’ perceptions of implementing reality play therapy with their elementary school students. Through the data analysis, it became evident that there were certain positive aspects and areas of concern with the implantation of the sessions. In both areas, the school counselors were able to develop a meaning from their participation in the experience and gain valuable insight into the new approach, as well as their own counseling approaches and experiences. By experiencing both ends of the continuum with the implementation of reality play therapy, the school counselors were able to reflect upon and develop meaning of reality play therapy and its potential effectiveness as a counseling intervention.

That leads to the second major area to be considered in reality play therapy. This area relates to the school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy’s perceived effectiveness of the two vital components of the approach. These components include
relationship building and development of problem solving skills. Each of these areas will be discussed in the following sections.

**Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Relationship Building**

Because of the emphasis on relationships in both choice theory/reality therapy and play counseling, the perceptions of reality play therapy’s ability to build relationships is at the forefront of this research study. Both approaches emphasize the need for strong relationships built in the counseling sessions to allow for appropriate growth and development. This proposal also holds true for interactions beyond the counseling session to continue what was developed between the counselor and student. In the following sections, the participants’ perceptions of reality play therapy’s effectiveness in building relationships between the students and the counselor, materials, others, and self will be addressed.

**Relationships with the Counselor**

Perhaps the most vital relationship in the implementation of reality play therapy begins with the counselor. It is through this connection that students can feel accepted and understood while learning new skills for meeting their needs in appropriate ways. It can especially be the case when working with a new approach such as reality play therapy since both the counselor and student are experiencing it for the first time together. In regards to the counseling relationship, several areas arose from the participants’ reflection journals and interviews. Included among these are the actual counseling environment, the dual learning process, anticipation for the sessions, and familiarity with students.

**Counseling environment.** The counseling environment established by the counselors utilizing concepts of reality therapy and play counseling, along with basic
counseling skills, allowed for positive relationship building. In Marge’s session with the quality world sand tray, she was able to connect with her student in a discussion about the student’s father’s recent death. Further, the atmosphere of nonjudgmental acceptance from choice theory and play counseling allowed for complete “trust” in Selma’s relationship. Maggie was able to “clarify and reflect” in her session to gain a clear picture of who and what was important to her student. Lisa was able to “plant the seed” of change in her student and follow it throughout the counseling sessions to see his progress.

As this was an opportunity for both student and school counselors to be engaged in a novel learning experience, several new perspectives were gained about students. In Selma’s case, she noted the following:

One of the outcomes of this therapy that I did not expect is that I got to know him so well that I am going to do a prescreening for gifted eligibility with him to see if he might qualify for gifted testing by our school psychologist. He is so smart and I think because of the things that have been going on in his life, no one has really identified him for this up until now.

The reality play therapy sessions proved to not only enhance this relationship, but provide information for the counselor to advocate on behalf of the student to receive more appropriate services. Without the insights gained and relationship built during the reality play therapy process, Selma may not have garnered the information needed to advocate on behalf of her student.

**Dual learning process.** Maggie felt a comfort with her student and allowed her to “share with my student that I was learning at the same time” thus strengthening the bond between the two. Such bonding even existed in the school setting as Mona’s student would check in the hallways about “when are we working on our project again?”
The ability to connect while experiencing a novel situation together may have potentially aided in building the relationship between the school counselor and the student.

**Anticipation.** The anticipation for the sessions was observed early in the data analysis. Almost every counselor reflected this emotion from the students and how it impacted the relationship. Edna stated, “He absolutely wanted to come. He was very, it helped to build a relationship quite a bit.” The other counselors all expressed some variation of this including “he liked coming to see me,” “she felt like she was getting more special attention,” and “he was more excited about getting to spend time with me and having this fun thing to do.” Anticipation actually continued for some of the students beyond the six sessions as they expressed desire to extend the sessions. Marge shared an example of this with the following:

She asked it this means she cannot come back to see me since our sessions were finished and I reassured her that of course she can come and see me whenever she needs to and when her teacher permits her out of class. She also said, ‘Tell the man who is doing this project thank you for letting us spend this fun time together.’

The previous statement provides a great example of the importance of the relationship in the context of an accepting and fun, yet structured environment for both students and school counselors.

**Familiarity.** In several cases, the school counselors had a familiarity with the students through previous interactions. It was noted that the addition of the reality play therapy helped to enhance the relationships. Marge noted that the structure “helped create a framework for getting to the heart of her concerns,” adding to their preexisting relationship. Similarly, Lisa described her student as a boy who “craves” relationships and their familiarity with each other was enhanced through this experience.
The counselor-student relationships that emerged from the data emphasized the need for relationships in the counseling process. However, this relationship was not the only one to surface during the reality play therapy sessions. Students were also connected to the materials utilized in the activities; thus aiding in the overall relationship building process of reality play therapy.

**Relationships with the Materials**

When factoring in the use of play with students, one of the most important components was the toys utilized in the sessions. With toys serving as means of communication for the students, there needs to be a developmentally appropriate variety of materials for the activities to be conducted. Reality play therapy incorporated a selection of toys that addressed these needs, including sand trays, miniatures, drawing materials, and puppets. The following paragraphs will discuss some of the relationship components, including anticipation for, appropriateness of, and connection to the materials, that emerged during the reality play therapy sessions.

**Anticipation.** In conjunction with anticipation for the interaction with the school counselor, a trend toward eagerness for the use of the materials surfaced in the data. Maude’s student expressed this anticipation even beyond the toys to the actual sand as he “started playing in the sand before even touching the toys” indicating his desire for the tactile experience of the sand. Virtually every other school counselor mentioned the increased level of “excitement,” “engagement,” and “enjoyment” revolving around the materials. Such emotions denote the desire of this age range to be involved in the play process and see it as valuable.

**Appropriateness.** The school counselors also expressed an appreciation for the appropriateness of the materials in addressing the students and their issues. For
example, Patty noted that the drawing activity “didn’t take a whole lot of explaining or value weighing” allowing for them to focus on the issue and drawing components. Mona, too described the drawing activity as “a good way for the student to illustrate the problem situation” in a safe environment. Selma took note of the sand tray as a means of “developing rapport” with her student making the sessions “flow” in a positive direction. Maude mentioned her student’s ability to use his “hands” and “imagination” opened up the sessions and allowed in the space to talk about “things that wouldn’t have been brought out if I had just been asking questions.” An interesting occurrence was noticed by Lisa as her student “really seems to enjoy looking at and reviewing his QW [quality world] school ideas” demonstrating his appreciation of the introspective nature of the activity. Similarly, Maggie felt “at ease” with the puppets and their ability to help her student “express herself” in relation to the problem.

**Connection.** Yet another area of relationship with the materials was the actual connection that developed for some of the students. Mona’s student was so connected to the puppets that he decided to “name them” and share that information with her; thus showing the meaning he had given to them by taking the time and effort to name each individual puppet. In Selma’s session, her student connected the miniatures to memory he had of playing with similar toys with his brother and world they had built with them. With Edna’s sand tray, her student was able to connect with the chaos he feels on the playground with the “soldiers having war” during the recess time. The connections displayed with the toys helped to provide a view into the students’ perception of their relationships with others as well.
Relationships with Others

Considering the importance of relationships in both choice theory/reality therapy and play counseling, it was no surprise that student connections within the school and community began to emerge in the data. The school counselors were able to see the importance that others played in the lives of their students as depicted in the reality play therapy activities. These relationships mostly extended to the home and classroom for the students as these are the primary places of existence for them.

Home. Edna’s student included his parents in his quality world sand tray despite its intention to show the school environment. The fact that they were in positions of “fighting each other” and are currently going through a divorce exemplified the significance and distraction this situation is carrying for him. Similarly, Marge’s student included a giraffe that represented her deceased father as he “has gotten much bigger since he died” indicating the “enormity of the loss for her at this stage.” Experiences of family members also played a role in some of the students’ activities. In one case, Lisa’s student portrayed boot camp in his sand tray as his brother had just returned and “describe it to him.” As a result, this was a major theme was reflected in his portrayal of how he sees the school environment based on his brother’s knowledge.

Classroom. Students were also able to portray the need for classroom relationships through the play activities. Edna’s student eventually connected the need for friendship issues with his classroom behaviors during the planning phase of the drawing activity in that “if he listens to the teacher and the other students more, the kids would be more likely to be his friend.” This need for friendship was also exemplified in the sand tray by Selma’s student in which:
He added and removed characters in it representing a friend who he would like to make that was out of the sand, the predators that were around him making it difficult for the friend to get in or even make himself known and things he had tried to get the friend closer.

The “friend” outside of the sand represented a missing component of friendship in his quality world. Such a comment accentuates his understanding of the classroom dynamics and need for connection that factor heavily in the daily peer interactions of elementary school students.

Both of these environments helped to give the school counselors glimpses into the outside lives of the students. It helped portray the influence that perception, culture, experience, and interactions can have on the students and how they visualize and make sense of their worlds. This information is invaluable for school counselors as it helps to guide the sessions and potential activities and techniques that may be incorporated. Additionally, this information provided a view of how the students’ relate to themselves.

**Relationships with Self**

Another one of the relationship aspects to emerge from the data was the portrayals of self that emerged for the students. In many of the sessions, the students provided glimpses into their self-views from which the school counselors gleaned insight that could be potentially utilized in future interactions. These portrayals revolved around the students’ ability to recognize their needs, wants, behaviors, and depictions of self in relation to the world.

**Self reflection.** In several instances, the students utilized materials that they thought reflected themselves. For example, Maude’s student selected the tiger to represent himself in the sand tray “because it was fast” while Maggie’s student choose a lion to represent power. In Lisa’s session, her student placed himself in the Mercedes
Benz because this would “give him control, freedom, and a very cool ride.” Such reflection can provide school counselors with valuable insight into the student’s self-perception and how this affects their view of the world and school problems.

**Behaviors.** From a behavior perspective, some students were able to understand the relationship between their actions and the results. Mona’s student recognized that “his behavior was not getting him what he wanted.” In Lisa’s case, her student was able to “identify thoughts and actions as the things he could control…and connect behavior and thoughts to his larger goals and needs.” For example, Lisa’s student stated that “fighting and name calling he engaged in did not help him reach his goals.” Edna’s student was able to provide a thorough and specific example related to a recent incident as follows:

The student gave a specific situation that happened today in class. He was asked to move his card (behavior management) because his desk was not cleaned out. He stated that he had been doing what he was supposed to do (clean out his desk). He was able to identify his feelings (mad/sad), physiology (heart rate increased, muscles tense), thoughts (“You can’t mess with me. You can’t get me in trouble for nothing”), and actions (hitting his head on the table saying, “I hate this.”).

In all of these examples, the students, with the aid of the counselor, were able to develop and practice more “productive” thoughts and actions as a result of the recognition of the total behavior concept. The ability to identify each component of total behavior and how they interact in the choice of behaviors for a given circumstances helped the students understand how they can alter behaviors to alter the situation.

**Needs.** Several of the students were able to recognize their self-needs during the sessions as well. Mona’s student was able to provide examples of “love and belonging equals being with friends, teachers…power as doing well on a spelling test.” In Maggie’s sessions, her student was able to associate her needs of love and
belonging with her relationships with the teacher, counselor, and friend and the need for safety from the “bad people” in the school. Likewise, Marge’s student placed a “boulder in the center to separate her from the wild animals” representing her need for safety from the danger. Edna’s student was able to even categorize and order his needs ranking them with power as the base, followed by belonging, survival, fun, and freedom. One of the more poignant examples came from Selma’s student when he put a monkey in the tree to represent an imaginary friend, stating that “When you don’t have friends, sometimes you create imaginary ones.” Patty noticed the student’s need for order and organization as his tray featured “many cars in a row and many things in pairs.” This sort of self-exploration and recognition of needs is vital in the reality play therapy process.

The school counselors’ perceptions of the effectiveness of reality play therapy in building and enhancing relationships in the counseling sessions and beyond involved several levels. Each of these levels interacted with each other to provide meaning to the reality play therapy sessions. Based on these enhanced relationships, the school counselors noted a more positive and productive counseling environment. This productivity may have helped to provide a positive and safe setting for developing effective problem solving skills.

**Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Developing Problem-Solving Skills**

The second significant aspect of reality play therapy involves the development of problem-solving skills. In reality therapy and play counseling, it is an aspiration that students learn new skills for addressing problems. The reality play therapy activities, specifically the WDEP drawing, specifically addressed the development of plans to address their school related issues. During the sessions, all of the school counselors
noted increased problem solving skills related not only to the actual sessions, but beyond them into the school setting and life.

**Problem Solving Skills in Session**

With so much emphasis in reality therapy on problem solving, it was not surprising that the participants noticed the development of these skills within the counseling sessions. In most cases, they noted the relation of total behavior, wants, and needs to the problem. Further, the development and implementation of the students’ plan to address the problem situation were addressed in the sessions.

**Total behavior.** In some of the sessions, students and counselors were able to develop a plan linked to the total behavior concept. For example, Patty and her student resolved for a plan in which the total behavior aspects were addressed as “action walked away from the bully and thoughts wanted to tell a teacher.” Edna also worked with her student by “discussing him using nice words to ask for what he wants from friends instead of saying things like ‘you are mean’.” Selma and her student worked on a plan that addressed changing his actions and thoughts to see “what the new feelings and physiology might be” resulting in an overall total behavior change. During the puppet activity, Lisa and her student “replayed the argument, working each puppet appropriately, and were able to find a more positive choice and outcome.” By relating to the total behavior concept, both parties were able to break the situation down into workable and understandable parts for future implementation of the plan.

**Wants.** From the perspective of wants, the sessions provided an opportunity to develop options for addressing the wants of the student more effectively. In one example, Edna worked with her student to create a way for him to “change how he is working the situation and get things he likes.” Ultimately, addressing wants is important
in the development of plans to address the overall goal of meeting basic needs for students. By meeting these needs, students have the possibility of being more satisfied with the school setting.

**Needs.** Students’ needs, such as making and maintain friends to meet the need of belonging, were also addressed in the development of plans. For example, Selma’s student played out “taking the fence down” and “approaching one of the predators” in an attempt to connect and potentially develop a friendship. By addressing the students’ needs in the context of developing plans, a stronger investment may be made resulting in a more beneficial and effective outcome.

**Implementation.** The development and implementation of plans was emphasized in the WDEP drawing technique. Patty and her student worked on the plan as “we changed what he wants from making friends to keeping friends since he seemed to be comfortable with inviting people to start friendships.” Lisa was able to address unsuccessful patterns or habits that “just aren’t paying off” and redirect by asking “what do you want to have happen” and “what is working.” Such comfort and ability to explore options for developing a strategy provides the student’s the potential of formulating and implementing feasible and productive plans to appropriately and effectively address their problems. Once these problems are explored and developed in the counseling environment, it is possible that the students may be able to extend the problem solving skills to the school setting.

**Problem Solving Skills in School**

Once the school counselor and student develop problem solving skills and plans in the context of the session, the next logical step is to move them into the school environment. If the student is unable to extend the problem solving development to the
classroom, there is very little achieved in the session. As a result of the planning and development of plans to address the students’ issues in the reality play therapy sessions, the school counselors were able to notice the expansion of the ideas into the school environment. These observations were made during the sessions as students related activities to classroom situations. Most of the counselors’ observations related the plans to the classroom setting, interactions with peers, and students’ ability to adapt the plans as needed based on the presenting situation.

**Classroom setting.** In many of the plans, there was a component that addressed the classroom setting. For example, Lisa’s session, the student developed a plan of “ignoring, moving away from, and reporting the provocative behavior of others” to avoid his involvement in problem behaviors and the resulting consequences. In a similar example, Maude’s student worked out an option of “doing his reading and math assignments in school which will get him a green star at the end of the day which equals a good day” resulting in better interactions with his teacher and mother.

**Peer interactions.** Specific plans were also developed for interactions with peers in the school setting. One such plan utilized by Marge and her student involved how “choosing a different behavior might offer a different reaction” from the peer. This was accomplished with a puppet role play in which “several scenarios” were created with “different responses” which elicited “different reactions” from the peer. Her student ultimately reported the effectiveness of this strategy as she and the peer had “settled their differences by talking about how she feels about his teasing.” Patty and her student also discussed the continuation of his plan to “use positive words” with peers in an attempt to “help his friendships grow.” By creating a specific plan for direct
interaction with peers, the students are provided positive options for solving the problem while simultaneously developing new peer relationships.

**Adaptation.** Another important component of moving the problem solving skills beyond the counseling session involves the ability to adapt the plans in the context of the school environment. For example, Patty discussed the connection of total behavior and how changing actions can alter the other parts. This played a role in his plan for dealing with a bully and affected how his four components would be altered. By adapting his plan and actions, the situation takes on a different focus resulting in new outcome for the student. Maude also discussed how her student was able to draw an example of how he could “work harder and act better” in the classroom to potentially achieve his goal of better grades. Her student was also able to recognize the need to adapt his plan to include his mother and how it may affect the situation outside of the school setting.

**Problem Solving Skills in Life**

The ultimate goal in any counseling interaction is to potentially provide skills for the person to utilize in a lifelong endeavor of meeting needs. The reality play therapy approach is no different. As a result of participating in the activities, the goal was to provide students with opportunities to develop realistic and effective plans for not only dealing with school, but life as well. The participants were able to observe some of these skills at work in the sessions and their potential application to the real world setting of the students.

**Home.** In one of Selma’s session, her student played out a scene related to his parents constantly fighting. He drew himself with his “head popping off” and wrote the word “confusion” and ultimately talked about how he will be a different parent when he
is older. She talked of this experience for him as providing the prospect to discover “some good skills in terms of dealing with himself” and seeing “everything that happens to you as an opportunity to learn” thus potentially providing life-long skills and insights for problem solving. Additionally, she referred to this model as something you can go back to on a regular basis to see “what’s not working” and adapt accordingly.

**Future uses.** In preparing her student for life after the sessions, Maggie reintroduced the sand tray in the last session to see “how she could make a connection with what is important to her” with the hope of her student taking this information with her for future problem encounters. Maggie also recognized the drawing activity as one that “could be taken with the student” for use in connecting with feelings and wants in the future. Maude was hopeful that her student’s ability to “use the materials to say this is what should have happened” in the problem situation would be a skill he could take into future experiences. Maude also expressed her own use of these activities in her own future counseling endeavors as she had already used the sand tray in a crisis counseling situation with another student.

**Summary**

The data collected for this study were analyzed utilizing the methods of grounded theory from a constructivist perspective. The theory presented is grounded in the data as interpreted by the researcher. In three coding processes, open, axial, and selective, meaning was constructed that formed a grounded theory of perceiving reality play therapy as an effective tool in relationship building and problem solving. The theory proposes that there is a dynamic process in implementing reality play therapy and the development of the effective relationship building and problem solving skills for upper grade elementary school students. The results of the study are consistent with the
literature related to choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling; however, because reality play therapy is a relatively new approach, it also serves to inform the counseling profession of the potential effectiveness of utilizing this approach in elementary schools. Implications of these findings for practice and research will be explored further in the Chapter 5.
Figure 4-1. Theoretical model: school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to examine school counselors' perceptions of implementing reality play therapy and its effectiveness in building relationships and developing problem solving skills with upper grade elementary school students. Both choice theory/reality therapy (Glasser, 1993, 1997a, 2000b, 2005; Mason & Duba, 2009; Wubbolding, 2000; Wubbolding et al., 2004) and play counseling (Anderman & Kaplan, 2008; APT, 2008; Axline, 1947; Edwards et al., 2009; Gill, 1998; Landreth, 1991; Schor, 1995) emphasize the need for strong relationships between the school counselor and student plus the ability to develop problem solving skills in the context of the counseling interaction. Even though choice theory and reality therapy have been shown to be effective in counseling adolescents and adults (Erwin, 2003; Glasser, 1997b; Passaro et al., 2004), there has been minimal work regarding their potential application with elementary aged students. Because the concepts of choice theory and reality therapy require a certain level of cognitive ability, a connector is needed to bridge these concepts to elementary school students. Play provides a counseling process for children that is familiar and natural for their understanding and communication (Landreth, 1993; Ray et al., 2005). It was decided that by combining the concepts of choice theory and reality therapy with the child appropriate process of play counseling, a new and viable option could be created for elementary school counselors to enhance counseling relationships and aid in the development of problem solving skills for students.
In this study, eight elementary school counselors were trained in all aspects of reality play therapy including choice theory, reality therapy, play counseling, and the new reality play therapy activities. The trainings consisted of 4 one hour sessions utilizing lecture format, PowerPoint presentations, hands-on activities, and group discussions. Following each training, the school counselors participated in a fifteen minute feedback session related to the trainings. These feedback sessions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis methods.

Once the trainings were completed, the school counselors implemented the reality play therapy techniques with 4th and 5th grade upper grade elementary school students for six, thirty minute sessions. The school counselors completed a reflection journal following each session describing the content of the reality play therapy process. Each school counselor also participated in weekly individual supervision sessions with the researcher. Once all six sessions were completed, each school counselor was interviewed to gain insight into their perceptions of the reality play therapy counseling process. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The reflection journals and interview transcripts were analyzed utilizing grounded theory methods to develop a theory based on the school counselors’ perceptions of the implementation and effectiveness of reality play therapy in building relationships and developing problem solving skills.

The participants provided rich descriptions of their experiences and their constructed meaning of participating in the reality play therapy process. The three data points for this study included the transcriptions of the post training feedback sessions, the reflection journals, and the transcriptions of the individual interviews. The data were
analyzed using thematic analysis and grounded theory methods including three levels of coding, constant comparison, and theoretical sampling (Aronson, 1994; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The thematic analysis yielded insight into the training of reality play therapy. These insights associated with the theories of counseling utilized in the study, the school environment, and reality play therapy techniques were detailed in Chapter Four. A grounded theory was also developed and proposed from the data analysis related to the implementation of reality play therapy by the elementary school counselors. In Chapter Four, the researcher described the theory and the four elements of the process: 1) Positive Aspects of Implementing Reality Play Therapy, 2) Concerns About Implementing Reality Play Therapy, 3) Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Building Relationships, and 4) Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Developing Problem Solving Skills. The theory posits a dynamic, interconnected process in which school counselors implement the reality play therapy techniques to enhance the relationship building process as well as the development of problem solving skills. The developed grounded theory will be discussed in further detail in the following sections.

**Interpretation of the Theory**

In this section, an interpretation of the theory related to the school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy is offered. Connections will be made between the theory and my interpretations back to the relevant literature. Major interconnected elements of the theory were discussed in the previous sections of Chapter four including: school counselors’ perceptions of implementing reality play therapy and its effectiveness in building relationships and problem solving skills. In the following paragraphs, each of these two major elements will be interpreted in more detail.
My insights into how school counselors perceived their experiences in learning and implementing reality play therapy are novel because this approach is relatively new in the field of counseling. Despite this novelty, there is literature related to both the reality therapy and play counseling components of reality play therapy that reflect the consistency of the findings. The selective codes related to the major elements are: positive perceptions and concerns of reality play therapy’s implementation and perceptions of the effectiveness of relationship building and problem solving skills.

From the realm of play counseling with Axline (1947), Ray (2007), Gill (1998), and Landreth (1993) to choice theory and reality therapy’s development with Glasser (1986; 1990; 1998; 2005) and Wubbolding (1994; 1998; 2000), the outcomes and insights with students are consistent with the data from this study. Important axial codes such as relationships with counselors, materials, others, and self; problem solving skills in the session, school, and life; positive perceptions such as being an outlet for play and creativity, a new approach, and gaining insight; and concerns about time, development, structure, and external influences are all verified by previous literature. Each of these literature connections and the relationships with the school counselors’ perceptions will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Counselor anticipation. From the beginning of this research experiment, it was obvious that there was a great deal of interest from the school counselors. I attended the first elementary school counselor meeting of the academic year to garner volunteers and the excitement about this relatively new approach for working with elementary school students was apparent. This was not surprising due to the pressure placed on our school counselors to not only provide effective and developmentally appropriate
counseling services, but also meet the rigorous standards for state and national testing (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Eder & Whiston, 2006; Edwards & Cadenhead, 2009; Glasser, 1986, 1990). The school counselors seemed excited to embrace this new approach and were very willing to sacrifice the time needed for the trainings, sessions, supervision, and interviews required for the research study. The literature confirms this attitude of school counselors’ desire to improve themselves professionally and personally (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Daggett, 2005; Dollarhide & Lemberger; Ray et al., 2005).

**Relationship building in session.** One of the more important observations made from the data involved the target of building relationships. In the field of counseling, there is no more vital component than the relationship between counselor and client/student (Glasser, 1998; Landreth, 1993; Wubbolding, 2000). Additionally, from the constructivist perspective, all knowledge is created in the context of social interactions (Grbich, 2007; Sexton, 1997). In some of these instances, the school counselors had preexisting relationships with their students allowing for a familiarity with them and their school and home related issues. It became evident over the course of the sessions that these relationships were strengthened by the reality play therapy activities, materials, and concepts. Further, the school counsellors noticed the added benefit of gaining perspective on other significant relationships for the students, including with family, friends, teachers, and self. Such connections and insights can be of the utmost value in the counseling environment as they can add to the therapeutic quality and longevity of the skills learned in the sessions. In particular, choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling all recognize the importance of such interactions.
and connections in the counseling process to ensure appropriate growth and change for the students (Axline, 1947; Erwin, 2003; Glasser, 1997a; Landreth, 1993). The observation of relationships with the creative play materials served to enhance the relevance of the importance of relationships with the counselor, self, and others from the choice theory perspective (Glasser, 1986; 1998). This enhancement is a clear benefit of reality play therapy and can serve school counselors in future relationship development.

**Relationships beyond sessions.** Another insightful experience to develop during the data analysis was the importance of relationships beyond the reality play therapy research study into the need for professional connections of the school counselor. Because this data analysis is based in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Sexton, 1997) and postmodernism (Clarke, 2005), it is vital to note the social context in which the school counselors made meaning of the experience. This meaning was most evident in Lisa’s observations during her interview about her need for connection to the other school counselors. She stated:

> I also liked working with a small group of counselors. We have our big meetings, and there’s about 20 some odd of us and we sit around with little time for talking, but it was nice to get to know some of those counselors who I really don’t know so well.

Lisa continued by expressing her appreciation for the weekly supervision that focused on the counseling aspect. She noted that most of her observations and supervisions by her principal focused on the teaching aspect while the counseling components were “rarely discussed.” This desire for more social and professional interaction again links to the school counselors’ aspiration to find a more stabilized identity and need for professional development.
**Problem solving skills.** Choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling focus on the significance of the students’ ability to develop problem solving skills as a way of dealing with school and life related problems (Cochran, 1996; Wubbolding, 2000). The school counselors’ experiences validated this concept as they observed the use of reality play therapy to aid students in creating appropriate and realistic plans. Further, it was vital that these plans were developed by the student with the help of the school counselor to increase the students’ ownership and ability to develop strategies as suggested in the literature (Carmichael, 2006; Glasser, 1986; Toso, 2000; Wubbolding, 1998). Considering that all school counselors observed some aspects of the problem solving component beyond the individual sessions into the classroom, school environment, and community was significant for their meaning making experience. The fact that students were able to expand the problem solving skills from the sessions to the classroom setting, school environment, and life in general, serves as a fundamental principal of any counseling approach.

**Benefits.** According to the school counselors, participating in the research study had several significant benefits. Some of the benefits were anticipated while others provided new perspectives for the school counselors. For example, the insight gained from the quality world sand tray activity provided more powerful insights into the students’ worldviews than most of the school counselors expected based on their observations. This surprise could have stemmed from the fact that the school counselors were not prepared for students of this age to be so capable of deep and meaningful insight. However, the play counseling movement has recognized the ability of such interactions with play materials as being outstanding avenues for students to
express themselves in significant ways (Allen & Berry, 1987; Bratton et al., 2005; Landreth, 1993; Gill, 1998). The reality play therapy approach enabled the school counselors to experience the ability of the students to share profound insights related to their quality worlds, needs, wants, and behaviors with a familiar medium of play.

**Structure.** Correspondingly, the meaning made by the school counselors of experiencing a structured use of play and creativity was important. Despite the fact that several of the participants were familiar with and have utilized aspects of play, there was a lack of prior sufficient training of the play counseling process as is suggested in the literature (Carroll, 2000; Kao & Landreth, 1997; Kranz et al., 1998; Ray et al., 2005). The opportunity to conduct play counseling with the students in the context of a theory that specifically addressed relationship building and problem solving development was noteworthy for the participants. It gave them the ability to utilize recognizable approaches such a play and choice theory in a more productive manner. Ultimately, this insight gave meaning to the desire for a new approach that meets those qualifications. The participants were vocal about the ability to implement such approaches in a timely fashion since they are under such pressure to perform a variety of functions during the course of the academic day.

**Concerns.** Alternatively, the school counselors did note some concerns that arose during the implementation of the reality play therapy techniques. As with any new approach, problems are inevitable and require addressing. The concerns raised by the school counselors all had a significant meaning in their daily routines and interactions with students. First, the issue of time constraints related to school counselor roles and duties was prevalent in the sessions. The literature (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Dollarhide &
Lemberger, 2006; Fall, 2001) reiterates this concern, particularly from the perspective of increased duties and responsibility for the school counselor. Further, this literature confirms the confusion and frustration felt by the participants in lack of clarity of the school counselor job description. Even in the suggested amount of time for individual sessions being in the 6-10 range for potential growth and change (APT, 2008; Fall, 1999; Glasser, 2000b; Landreth, 1993; Landreth et al., 2009), some of the school counselors still noted conflicts with time related to student attendance, school calendars, and employment responsibilities. Despite these concerns, the school counselors still found the time to meet with the students. In analyzing the data, this conviction stemmed from their aspirations to serve the students in the best manner possible with an approach they deemed valuable.

**Development.** The concern of development for the students was one that is referred to in the literature. Piaget (1950, 1952) stated that students of this age range are capable of constructive thought and understanding; however, some of the school counselors were wary of this. Several of them noted hesitancy with students’ abilities to comprehend the choice theory concepts and apply them in the sessions and beyond. There was a connection between the tentativeness by the school counselors and their expectations for students. It seemed as though the school counselors had some preexisting low expectations of the students’ ability based observations and reports regarding their performances in the school settings. An explanation of this comes from students’ disconnect from school resulting in lower functioning and satisfaction (Glasser, 1986b, 1990). For many of the school counselors, there was a great epiphany as their students showed aptitude for insight, problem solving, and connection with others. The
fact that their relationships were based in the choice theory and play concepts of trust, consistency, and faith of abilities (Glasser, 1986a; 1993; Landreth, 1993) allowed both parties to experience an environment conducive to learning and development. As a result many of the school counselors came out with an increased appreciation for the use of reality play therapy’s ability to improve relationship and aid in problem solving.

**External influences.** Finally, from the choice theory and reality therapy perspective, one of the principle recognitions by the participants was that of the role of external influences. Constructivism also exemplifies this effect because society and culture influence the creation of knowledge (Crotty, 1998; Sexton, 1997). Choice theory and reality therapy emphasize the importance of keeping clients focused on the present and the behaviors they can control (Glasser, 1998, 2000a, 2004; Wubbolding, 1994, 2000). The fact that the school counselors were able to observe avoidance of responsibility by blaming others was significant to reality play therapy. By recognizing such behaviors, the school counselors were able to reframe the students to focus on their own controllable behaviors. When students and counselors are able to redirect toward these controllable behaviors, more productive interventions can take place allowing for better relationships and problem solving skills because students feel more connection and responsibility to the effects of their own behaviors.

Through the data analysis, it became clear that there was an interaction between the perceptions of the school counselors related to implementation of reality play therapy and its effectiveness in building relationships and developing problem solving skills. The positive aspects and concerns of implementing reality play therapy helped to inform the approaches’ ability to enhance the relationships building and problem solving
development processes and vice versa. By being aware of both the positive and concerning aspects of the approach, the school counselors were better able to understand how the implementation of reality play therapy could build relationships and aid in problem solving for the students. These components were enhanced by the school counselors focusing on the positive aspects while addressing the concerns to adapt to the inevitable issues that arise in a school counseling environment. This interconnectivity provided insight on a great many issues for the school counselors. The pressures and conflicts felt by school counselors related to the profession were evident; however, the dedication to professional development and providing the best services for students were also apparent.

The theory presented in this study posits that an outcome of implementing reality play therapy is better relationships and problem solving skills for the elementary school students. I interpreted what the school counselors intended when they experienced the implementation, supervision, and reflection of the activities resulting in stronger school relationships and extendable problem solving skills with their students. The influence of reality play therapy was exemplified as many of the school counselors used such powerful words as “amazing,” “great method,” “appreciation,” and “helpful” to describe the experience of implementing the techniques.

The theory provides new perspectives and knowledge on the relatively novel reality play therapy approach. This knowledge is vital to the development of a potentially new and effective means of counseling upper grade elementary school students. The implications of reality play therapy for the counseling theories, training
and practice, and schools along with future research recommendations will be explored in the following sections.

**Implications for Counseling Theories**

The grounded theory proposed in this study of school counselors’ perceptions of the effectiveness of reality play therapy adds to the already established works of choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling in a new and important fashion. Participants’ favorable perceptions of reality play therapy’s effectiveness in building relationships and developing problem solving skills seemly corresponds to the intentions of choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling. However, until this research study, these intentions were separate and focused on different populations. The combination of choice theory/reality therapy and play counseling constitutes a shift in the thinking of both approaches.

**Choice theory and reality therapy.** From the choice theory/reality therapy perspective, the addition of play materials and techniques creates a relatively novel direction. Despite the fact some work focusing on children has been conducted by Dr. Glasser’s wife, Carleen Glasser in My Quality World Workbook (1996), much of the theory’s emphasis is on working with adolescents and adults. Reality play therapy can provide an opportunity for reality therapists to teach and convey the concepts of choice theory in a more developmentally appropriate and effective means for younger children. By introducing these concepts at an earlier age, it is conceivable that students can gain a better insight of self, build stronger relationships with the counselor and others, develop stronger problem solving skills, have a positive outlet for creativity, gain a better sense of inner responsibility, and ultimately, a stronger connection to the entire school environment. As a result of all of these influences, the elementary school counselor can
address the academic, personal/social, and career components of the American School Counselor Association National Standards (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) and National Model (2005).

**Play counseling.** Since play counseling’s inception, many counseling theories have developed techniques utilizing the materials and activities associated with children’s play (Carmichael, 2006). To date, however, there has been no attempt at merging play counseling techniques with choice theory and reality therapy concepts such as the quality world, basic needs, and total behavior. The importance of this combination is that it potentially provides school counselors with another research confirmed, cognitive behavioral-based approach (Basic et al., 1997; Wubbolding, 1998, 2000) with the proven appropriateness of play counseling (Carmichael, 2006; Landreth, 1991; Ray, 2007) for working with elementary school students. With school counselors under pressure to provide efficient and effective counseling interventions, it can only serve them to have another approach to provide elementary school students creative outlets for development. Participants of this research study expressed the desire and need for such creativity in working with elementary school students because the opportunities for play are diminishing under the demands of increased testing standards. Similarly, the participants noted approval for choice theory and reality therapy, yet were unsure of the delivery method for the elementary school environment. Play counseling provides this bridge while increasing the opportunity for developmentally appropriate creativity and play.

**Implications for School Counselor Training and Practice**

Reality play therapy has implications for school counselor training and practice in a number of ways. These ways include: introducing reality play therapy to counselor
education programs; implementing reality play therapy into selected counselor education courses; and finally, utilizing reality play therapy as a counseling method for elementary school counselors.

**New approach.** In the field of school counseling, there are established methods and techniques for working with students. However, research (Curwin & Mendler, 2004; Glasser, 1986a, 2000a; Landreth, 1993; Ray, 2007; Wubbolding, 1998; Wubbolding & Brickell, 2000, 2007) suggests that there is a demand for new, innovative ideas for working with today’s school children. This demand was evident in this study from the very beginning, with the heightened interest of the school counselors through the actual implementation of the techniques. The elementary school counselors recognized their familiarity with, and approval of, the choice theory/reality therapy approach; yet, they expressed a need for a more appropriate intervention rather than traditional talk therapy. The combination with a creative process such as play counseling provided that bridge for the school counselors to teach the choice theory concepts to the students while developing appropriate relationships, gaining valuable insights, providing an avenue for creativity, and aiding in problem solving skills development (Wubbolding, 1998). Such favorable reactions and meaning constructed by the school counselors indicate the potential usefulness of the reality play therapy approach. Because of this feedback, there is a suggestion to introduce this approach to the counselor education community. It is the researcher’s goal to accomplish this through continued research, training, presentation, and development of the reality play therapy techniques and concepts.
Training. Once reality play therapy has the backing of solid research and recognition through national presentation and publication, it can potentially be included in a variety of counselor education courses for school counselors to include in their repertoire of interventions and techniques. Almost every counselor education training program offers courses specifically designed to address working with children. Reality play therapy may be a viable option for these classes including Introductory Play Therapy and Counseling Children and Adolescents. Further, it could be included in the Practicum and Internship experiences for school counselors working in elementary school settings. This inclusion will also require a working knowledge of reality play therapy by supervising professors and doctoral students. This knowledge can be increased and enhanced through published research studies, professional presentations, and reality play therapy trainings. By providing this awareness of reality play therapy, the goal of informing the school counseling literature and profession in reality play therapy can be accomplished.

School settings. As reality play therapy is introduced through counselor education training programs, there is a potential that its use may grow in the elementary school setting. School counselors could become familiar with and utilize the techniques with the students to develop healthy school relationships and provide appropriate problem solving skills to be used in and beyond the counseling sessions. Additionally, the insights gained through the activities could help the school counselors' knowledge of the student increase resulting in better connections and ability to work within the time parameters of the typical school counseling environment. Further, by viewing the students' world from their own culturally and developmentally based perspectives, the
school counselors could work within those contexts. Because of this, the hope of a better understanding of cultural, environmental, and developmental components can surface in the counseling relationship thus informing counseling, relationships, and academics. By conveying these key elements of reality play therapy, it is the ultimate goal of the approach to allow students to grow and develop in a healthy and productive manner in accordance with the original intent of choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling (Axline, 1947; Carmichael, 2006; Glasser, 1986a, 1990, 1993; Landreth, 1993; Wubbolding, 1998; 2000).

Implications for Schools

There is a great deal of pressure placed on school counselors due to increased standardized testing demands, federal funding requirements, and providing research based counseling interventions in a timely manner (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Curwin & Mendler, 2004; Daggett, 2005; Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Hart, 2004; Mason & Duba, 2009; Wittmer & Clark, 2007). These demands are also occurring in a time when many school counselors are struggling for more detailed and clearer professional identity. Despite the efforts of such professional organizations as the American School Counselor Association, there is still much confusion regarding the role of the school counselor. This confusion is not limited to the school counselors. Many of the school stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, and parents, are also unclear on the duties and responsibilities of today’s school counselor (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Mason & Duba, 2009; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Perhaps the most appropriate and effective way to address this confusion is for counselor education programs to provide the best practices for teaching and counseling in training so the school counselors can take this information into the school environment. One such option could be reality play therapy.
By providing school counselors with counseling approaches that effectively address elementary school students’ needs, they can exemplify the expectations and duties that are suitable in the school setting. Reality play therapy could be one such option for today’s elementary school counselor. The proposed outcomes of improved relationships and problem solving skills can help elementary school counselors provide evidence of their effectiveness in enhancing the entire school environment. This ability can give insight to the administrators and educators into the much needed role of the school counselor as a practitioner rather than the administrative and other non-counseling based duties seen in many of today’s schools. Ultimately, such approaches as reality play therapy can give shape and structure to the elementary school counselors’ list of duties and interventions that can be provided to their students; thus enhancing the entire school environment ranging from relationships to academics. Once the school counselors gain a definitive understanding of reality play therapy, a logical step may be to introduce the techniques to teachers and parents so they can use the activities when working with the elementary students. It will be the school counselors’ responsibility to introduce and educate the teachers and parents on the reality play therapy techniques by providing appropriate literature, training, and opportunities to practice the activities.

Limitations

Qualitative research uses the researcher as the primary analytical tool (Bogden & Biklin, 2007; Patten, 2007). Because of this, the researcher’s personal subjectivity has the potential of influencing the findings and conclusions. Although the researcher’s own personal experiences with choice theory, reality therapy, play counseling, and school counseling shaped the interest of this research study, a sincere attempt was made to
remain neutral and open to the perceptions of the participating school counselors. The researcher was careful to disclose his subjectivity in the beginning of the research, requisitioned feedback through member checking, and kept written records of my personal reflections throughout the entire process to avoid bias from invading the research. The subjectivity statement is available for review in Chapter 3 and a sample of the researcher’s theoretical memo including personal reflections appears in Appendix I.

An initial concern revolved around the reality play therapy trainings. The school counselors expressed a need for additional time to gain a better understanding of the reality play therapy concepts and activities. This need for extended training could have resulted from unfamiliarity with choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling as well as the school counselors’ ability to understand the concepts. Additionally, the trainer may have caused discomfort in the speed of the trainings to ensure the timeline accommodated the research study deadlines. The feedback sessions and weekly individual supervision sessions did provide an opportunity to address these concerns allowing the researcher and school counselors to discuss any questions or concerns.

Additionally, the study deliberately elicited the positive perceptions of the elementary school counselors’ experiences with reality play therapy. As a result, the data in this study are from participants who believed they had actively implemented a viable counseling option. The core themes of positive aspects of implementation, perceptions of relationship building, and perceptions of developing problem solving skills would potentially vary for a variety of school counselors. In an attempt to address these possible effects, the researcher did include the concerns raised by the school
counselor participants during the training and implementation of reality play therapy. These concerns were addressed through alterations made in the techniques and discussions during the individual supervision sessions.

The study’s limited participant group prohibits confident application of study conclusions to other elementary school counselors. Although the findings of this study would provide insights to perceptions of the effectiveness of reality play therapy, it should not necessarily be generalized to the entire population of elementary school counselors at this point in the research. The criterion sampling in the study sought to include all eligible elementary school counselors in the selected area. However, this population reflects the typical elementary school counselor makeup of White, middle class females with seven of the eight participants matching this demographic. Even though this study did represent the majority of elementary school counselors based on demographics, it may not have covered as much diversity as originally envisioned.

Similarly, the elementary school student distribution sought to work with all upper elementary school students. In comparison to the school counselor population, this sample was somewhat more balanced and diverse. The distribution of gender, age, race, and grade was fairly even. Also, the issue related to connections with teachers, peers, and schoolwork were also even across the students. In each case, the selected students were having difficulty in each of the three areas. However, there could be a better control of the relationship components and diversity of student population could be addressed.

**Implications for Future Research**

Because of the novelty of the reality play therapy approach, there is a need for additional future research. To continue the development of the proposed grounded
theory, future researchers may wish to include a more heterogeneous mix of ethnic groups for both the school counselor and elementary student populations. It would be interesting to see if ethnicity and gender differences could have an effect on the school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy’s implementation, relationship building, and problem solving skills. Additionally, focusing on more specific elementary school student populations, including special education students, non-English speaking students, and specific behavior problems, could provide a more thorough picture of reality play therapy’s effectiveness. Further, it could provide useful information to follow-up with the school counselors to investigate their continued use of and attitude adjustment toward the reality play therapy techniques following the conclusion of the research study.

Due to ethical and legal issues, students are often a difficult population to study in a qualitative manner. However, it may of interest to study the elementary school students’ perceptions of reality play therapy’s effectiveness in addressing the aforementioned issues. Interviews, observations, and feedback journals could be of great benefit in gaining student insight into the reality play therapy approach and techniques. Further, the perceptions of other school personnel, including teachers and administrators, could provide more diverse perspectives on reality play therapy’s use and effectiveness in elementary schools. Finally, the research may be extended to the home environment with the elementary school students’ caregivers through trainings and interactions.

By addressing each of these diverse populations, the proposed grounded theory has the potential of being expanded and enhanced. Future research can examine the
relationship building and problem solving skills aspects of reality play therapy from a variety of elementary school stakeholders. Further, a more diverse selection of ethnicities, races, genders, and ages could provide rich insights into cultural and development applicability of the reality play therapy approach and techniques for work with upper grade elementary school students.

Another component of future research may include training aspects. Included among these aspects could be the redefinition and envisioning of the reality play therapy techniques. Once these techniques are more developed, the reality play therapy training can be adjusted to address the changes. Additionally, the abovementioned diversity issues can be covered in more depth with the training sessions by addressing the usefulness of this approach with a wide variety of students from varied backgrounds. Finally, the trainings will need to be adapted if the trainings are to be conducted with teachers, administrators, and caregivers.

A final area of interest for future research could involve adding a quantitative methodology to prospective studies. The inclusion of quantifiable aspects with theoretical components could serve to enhance the future research of reality play therapy by providing both statistically-based information with in-depth personal narratives offered by the participants. Such mixed methods can potentially increase the knowledge base of the novel reality play therapy approach and its possible effectiveness of student relationship building and problem solving skills development in the elementary school environment.

**Conclusion**

This study was undertaken to gain elementary school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy’s effectiveness in building relationships and developing problem
solving skills. Data were collected in three different methods: 1) feedback sessions following the trainings, 2) reflection journals following each session, and 3) interview conducted after all six sessions. This current research study findings tentatively suggest that the meanings made by the elementary school counseling participants attribute favorable perceptions of reality play therapy’s effectiveness in student relationship building and problem solving skills development. The conclusions developed from this study’s findings offer additional information concerning the process by which elementary school counselors perceive, experience, and implement reality play therapy concepts and techniques with upper grade students. Implications were also provided for a broader response to the needs of elementary school counselors, students, and overall environments. Not only do elementary school counselors and students potentially benefit from a broader understanding of the reality play therapy approach, but so could the entire school environment and counselor education institutions. Therefore, research related to culturally and developmentally creative approaches that address the needs of the entire elementary school population are also recommended for the future.
APPENDIX A
REALITY PLAY THERAPY INTRODUCTION

Who I am: Hi! My name is Eric Davis and I am a Counselor Education Doctoral Student at the University of Florida. I am working with Bill Goodman for my internship this semester and I need your help.

What I am doing: I am creating a series of play techniques based on Dr. William Glasser’s Reality Therapy. These techniques will be studied with 4th grade students looking at a certain peer issue (i.e. making friends, anger, etc.).

What I need from you: This study will require the following:
• Attend a series of trainings describing Reality Therapy and the play techniques
• Implement the techniques with a 4th grade student for 6 sessions
• Maintain a reflection log for each session
• Participate in an interview regarding the experience

What I will provide for you: To ensure you have the things you need for this, I will provide the following:
• A series of trainings explaining Reality Therapy and the play techniques
• Weekly supervision sessions to discuss your progress and answer questions
• A selection of toys needed for the study including markers, crayons, paper, miniatures, sand trays, and puppets—THESE WILL BE YOURS TO KEEP 
• A follow-up meeting to describe my findings and future research considerations

I hope you will think about helping me out with this. Both Reality Therapy and Play Therapy have shown to be effective and developmentally appropriate for students. It is my belief that combining these will provide you with yet another tool in your box for working with students. Feel free to contact me with any questions and if you are interested in participating.

Eric Davis (edavis76@ufl.edu)

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND CONSIDERATION
APPENDIX B
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELOR PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Name: ________________________________________________________________

Elementary School: ____________________________________________________

Elementary School Address: ____________________________________________

City: ___________________________ Zip Code: ____________________

Phone: _________________________ E-mail: ____________________________

Race/Ethnicity: ___________________ Age: ________________________

Years of Elementary School Counseling Experience: ______________________

This information will be used only for contact and demographic purposes. All information will be kept confidential in a secure location.
APPENDIX C
STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET

Please complete this form for your child participating in the study.

STUDENT INITIALS: ________________________________________________

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: ____________________________________________

RACE/ETHNICITY: ____________________  AGE: ______________

GENDER: ____________________  GRADE: ______________

This information will be used only to describe the study participants. All information will be kept private in a secure location.
Hour 1: Overview of choice theory and reality therapy
   A. tenets of choice theory
   B. 5 basic needs
   C. quality world pictures
   D. total behavior
   E. counseling environment
   F. WDEP

Hour 2: Overview of play counseling
   A. purpose and rationale
   B. language
   C. puppets
   D. sand tray
   E. drawing

Hour 3: Reality play therapy techniques
   A. quality world sand tray
   B. questions and practice
   C. total behavior puppets
   D. questions and practice

Hour 4: Reality play therapy techniques (continued)
   A. WDEP drawing
   B. questions and practice
   C. review of sessions and questions
**EXTERNAL CONTROL PSYCHOLOGY**

- People and things outside myself make me behave.
- I can control the behavior of others.
- Not only do I know what is good for me, I know what is right for everyone.

**3 TENETS OF CHOICE THEORY**

- Self-awareness and personal problems
- The ego and how we respond to others
- Independence and interdependence

**5 BASIC NEEDS**

1. Power
2. Freedom
3. Survival
4. Love & Belonging

**The Quality World**

Defined as a very specific, personal world at the core of our lives.

Includes people, things, and beliefs

**REALITY THERAPY ENVIRONMENT**

- Stay in the present
- Create a safe and warm environment
- Avoid coercion and punishment
- Express genuine concern and empathy
- Be positive and optimistic
Our Behaviors

Disconnected:
1. CRITICIZING
2. BLAMING
3. COMPLAINING
4. NAGGING
5. THREATENING
6. PUNISHING
7. BRIBING

Connecting:
1. CARING
2. TRUSTING
3. LISTENING
4. SUPPORTING
5. NEGOTIATING
6. ENCOURAGING
7. ACCEPTING

TOTAL BEHAVIOR
ACTION
THOUGHT
FEELING
PHYSIOLOGY

WDEP
- Wants
  What do you want?
- Evaluation
  Is what you are doing getting you what you want?
- Planning
  How can you make a better plan to get what you want?

The WDEP Formula
- Simple
- Attainable
- Measurable
- Immediate
- Consistent
- Contingent
- Commitment
- Person

PROCESS QUESTIONS

Direct Questions
- Talk about the pictures/visual things in
  - Talk about a time when you were
  - Tell me about your

Wend Questions
- What do you want to be different in this

Every Questions
- Follow what you think about when you
- What is your body telling you about
  - What are you doing to get

Evaluation Questions
- Is...getting you what you want?
- Could this situation have been worse?
- What was good about that situation before
  - What could have been done differently?
Some notes on play

- Aristotle and Plato recognized the importance of play in children's development.
- Numerous fields recognize the importance of play including anthropology, pediatrics, and education.
- Helps children develop needed skills to adapt to the world.
- Important for social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Play in Schools

- School counselors' responsibility to meet needs of all students in a developmentally and culturally appropriate manner.

73% of school counselors rate play as effective.
- Teachers report improved classroom behaviors.
- Increases self-control and coping abilities.
- Lack of training in university settings.
- Increased support by administrators and training programs.

Styles of Play Counseling

Directional
- Counselor provides direction of the play.
- Counselor tends to interact more with the student.
- Has a specific learning goal in mind.

Non-directional
- Allows child to direct the counseling.
- Counselor tends to be more of an observer.
- Follows the direction of the student to final goal.

Communication in Play Counseling

- Introduction
- Limits
- Tracking
- Reflection
- Observation
- Questions

Toys in Play Counseling

For this study, the following toys will be utilized by the school counselor:

- Sand Trays
- Puppets
- Drawing Materials
**Sand Trays**
- Expressive & projective mode of counseling
- Variety of miniatures (people, animals, cars, etc.) used to build a representative world in the sand
- Three stages include chaos, struggle, and resolution
- Help develop choice-making and problem-solving skills

**Puppets**
- Helpful in developing trust and rapport while allowing children to identify with a symbol
- Can symbolize a variety of things in counseling, allow children to project feelings, and try out new ideas
- Spontaneity provides the best option for revealing true feelings
- Allows for practice potential future actions once externalized

**Drawing Materials**
- Helpful with social and emotional issues
- Important nonverbal tool for experiencing social and emotional issues for children
- Allows great freedom of expression
- Provides a tangible image for later use
- Allows storytelling, visual representation, and solution-development
- Use of markers, crayons, and paper is comfortable for children
Each elementary school counselor was provided the following materials:

- One 9x12 scribble pad with 60 sheets of paper
- One box of 24 count crayons
- One set of 10 count markers
- One military miniature play set with 55 pieces
- One jungle miniature play set with 25 pieces
- A variety of 8 miniature vehicles with the following selection:
  - Emergency vehicles
  - Sports vehicles
  - Sport utility vehicles
  - Construction vehicles
- A variety of 2 miniature fairy figures
- One 104 ounce plastic container with lid
- One 12 quart plastic container with lid
- 10 pounds of play sand
- A variety of 4 hand puppets with the following animals:
  - Lions
  - Tigers
  - Bears
  - Dogs
  - Elephants
  - Cats
  - Giraffes
  - Lambs
  - Monkeys
  - Cows
  - Rabbits
Dear Parent/Caregiver,

I am a doctoral graduate student in Counselor Education working under the supervision of Drs. Mary Ann Clark and Andrea Dixon at the University of Florida studying school counselors’ perceptions of the effectiveness of a new counseling approach known as reality play therapy. This approach seeks to help students improve school relationships with faculty, peers, and schoolwork. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Florida. The results of the study may help educators and counselors to improve ways of working with students and their families. We are requiring permission for your child to participate in the reality play therapy experience this semester.

Your child will participate in 6 reality play therapy sessions with the school counselor. During this time, the school counselor will be using play involving sand trays, puppets, and art. The sessions will last approximately 30 minutes and will not interfere with the student’s academics. Supervision will be provided weekly to the school counselors to aid in any questions they may have.

Throughout this 6-week period, the school counselor who meets with your child will write brief reports about the experience in the sessions with your child. The school counselors will also be interviewed about the experience in the sessions by the research following the 6 week period. Your child’s privacy will be given the highest priority and the data will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Any identifying information will be removed from the summary report so that his/her identity will not be revealed in any report.

There are no anticipated risks or compensation to your child as a participant in this study. As a result of participating in the study, it is expected that benefits will occur related to your student’s relationships with the school counselor, teachers, peers, and schoolwork. You are free to withdraw your consent for your child to participate in the study at any time without consequence. If you have any questions about this research study, please contact me (contact info) or my supervisory professors (contact info).

Sincerely,
Eric Davis, Doctoral Student

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to allow my student(s) to participate in the study and I have received a copy of this description.

My child’s name _______________________

____________________________
Parent/Guardian Date 2nd Parent/Witness Date
APPENDIX G
REALITY PLAY THERAPY SESSIONS OUTLINE

Session 1
Materials Needed: 1) Sand trays
2) Selection of miniatures (animals, cars, people, etc.)

Instructions: 1) Explain the counseling procedure and ethics
2) Explain the purpose of the counseling sessions
3) Introduce the idea of 5 basic needs; offer example of each
4) Discuss idea that we need our needs through behaviors
5) Introduce idea of quality world pictures and how this drives our behaviors; offer examples of each focusing on school pictures
6) Begin quality world activity
7) Direct student to make a sand tray showing their quality world picture of school including people, things, and beliefs; during the process, track the students behaviors
8) Discuss the tray with the student; keep it in tack for next week
9) Wrap up and review

Objective: Student will
1) Learn the 5 basic needs
2) Learn quality world pictures
3) Provide insight into his/her view of school (i.e. what is important, what is missing, etc.)

Session 2
Materials Needed: 1) Sand tray from previous session
2) Selection of miniatures

Instructions: 1) Review the previous session
2) Bring out the sand tray and review it with student; ask for any changes
3) Discuss people, things, and beliefs on the outside of the tray
4) Ask student to show you where they are on the outside (i.e. are they far away, close to being in the tray, etc.)
5) Discuss ways to bring them into the tray
6) Begin discussion regarding total behavior (action, thoughts, feelings, and physiology-ATFP) and how this affects choices and behaviors; offer examples of each
7) Wrap up and review

Objective: The student will:
1) Be able to discuss the quality world concept
2) Be able to draw comparisons to world build and their school world

Session 3
Materials Needed: 1) Variety of puppets (animals)

Instructions:
1) Review previous session
2) Review total behavior (ATFP); provide examples of each
3) Talk about how this affects our choices and behaviors
4) Discuss problems that arose from the sand tray activity (i.e. missing parts of quality school picture, improvements, etc.)
5) Begin ATFP activity
6) Have student think about a time this problem occurred recently; instruct them to think about what they did, thought, felt, and how their body reacted
7) Have the student use the puppet to describe each of these aspects
8) Begin discussion of which aspects we control directly and indirectly
9) Wrap up and review

Objectives:
The student will:
1) Discuss the concept of total behavior
2) Be able to talk about all aspects of total behavior as it relates to the presenting problem

Session 4
Materials Needed: 1) Variety of puppets (animals)

Instructions:
1) Review previous session
2) Go back through the puppet ATFP activity dealing with previous problem
3) Talk about new ways of working on pieces of total behavior we can control (thoughts and actions); come up with a variety of options
4) Discuss how these two aspects affect the others that are not directly in our control (feelings, physiology)
5) Begin discussion of how total behavior relates to the quality world and our basic needs
6) Discuss how we can make plans to meet these needs
7) Wrap up and review

Objectives:
The student will:
1) Be able to differential between total behavior aspects we can directly control versus indirectly
2) Be able to relate total behavior to quality world
Session 5
Materials Needed: 1) Crayons  
                    2) Markers  
                    3) Paper  

Instructions: 1) Review previous session  
               2) Introduce the WDEP (wants, doing, evaluation, planning ) concept  
               3) Discuss how this gets us what we want to meet basic needs  
               4) Begin the WDEP activity  
               5) Instruct student to create comic book panels with each aspect of WDEP focusing on the previous problem identified by student in the past  
               6) Have student evaluate the doing aspect that did not work  
               7) Help them conceptualize new plans to address wants and needs  
               8) Have student continue to draw these ideas in the comic book form  
               9) Discuss having them try this new idea with the problem situation  
               10) Wrap and review  

Objectives: The student will:  
            1) Evaluate his/her wants for the given problem  
            2) Evaluate his/her doing behaviors to meet the needs  
            3) Conceptualize and plan new ways to dealing with the problem and needs  

Session 6
Materials Needed: 1) Crayons  
                    2) Markers  
                    3) Paper  

Instructions: 1) Review previous session  
               2) Discuss the new doing behavior they implemented  
               3) Evaluate this behavior to determine it s effectiveness  
               4) Create a new plan or encourage ways to continue with an effective intervention  
               5) Complete the comic book with these aspects  
               6) Review the overall concepts of the sessions (quality world, total behavior, and WDEP)  
               7) Encourage student to seek further help if needed  
               8) Thank student for participating in the sessions  

Objective: The student will:  
           1) Gain a full understanding of the WDEP activity
2) Be able to utilize the WDEP activity to aid in developing positive interventions for problem situations
3) Be able to discuss all aspects of counseling sessions (quality world, total behavior, and WDEP)
1. What were your overall perceptions of this counseling process using reality play therapy techniques?
2. How effective do you think these techniques were in gaining insight into the student’s needs?
3. How effective do you think these techniques were in helping student’s make choices?
4. What are your thoughts on how these techniques affected your interaction with the student?
5. What are your thoughts on the potential effectiveness on these techniques for the classroom (i.e. academics, peer interactions, making choices, etc.)?
6. What changes would you make to the techniques?
7. How do you see yourself incorporating these ideas and techniques into your counseling strategies?
8. What other insights do you have on this experience?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Counselor:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Initials:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session #:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please describe your thoughts concerning this session (i.e. what happened, what went well, etc.)
DATE: September 29, 2009

TO: Eric S. Davis
1810 NW 23rd Blvd. #211
Gainesville, FL 32605

FROM: Ira S. Fischler, PhD; Chair
University of Florida
Institutional Review Board

SUBJECT: Approval of Protocol #09-0931
TITLE: Elementary School Counselors’ Perceptions of the Implementation of Reality Play Therapy in Student Relationship Building and Problem Solving Skills

SPONSOR: Association for Counselor Education & Supervision Grant

I am pleased to advise you that the University of Florida Institutional Review Board has recommended approval of this protocol. Based on its review, the UPIRB determined that this research presents no more than minimal risk to participants. Your protocol was approved as an expedited study under category 7: Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Given your protocol, it is essential that you obtain signed documentation of informed consent from each participant over 18 years of age and from the parent or legal guardian of each participant under 18 years of age. Enclosed is the dated, IRB-approved informed consent to be used when recruiting participants for the research.

| Given your protocol, it is essential that you obtain signed documentation of informed consent from each participant over 18 years of age and from the parent or legal guardian of each participant under 18 years of age. |

If you wish to make any changes to this protocol, including the need to increase the number of participants authorized, you must disclose your plans before you implement them so that the Board can assess their impact on your protocol. In addition, you must report to the Board any unexpected complications that affect your participants.

The approval of this protocol is valid through September 29, 2010. If you have not completed this study by this date, please telephone our office (392-0433), and we will discuss the renewal process with you. It is important that you keep your Department Chair informed about the status of this research protocol.

ISF:dl
APPENDIX K
PARTICIPANT ACCENT FORM

Protocol Title: School counselors’ perceptions of reality therapy’s effectiveness in elementary schools.

Please read this assent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this study is to gain school counselors’ perceptions of reality play therapy’s effectiveness in elementary schools.

What you will be asked to do in this study:

You will be asked to participate in four hours of training in reality play therapy. The trainings will be held weekly at a time and location agreed upon by the participants. Following the training, you will be interviewed regarding your perceptions and experiences during the training. You will then implement the reality play therapy into six, 30 minute sessions with an upper grade elementary school student (grades 4-5) presenting one of the following relationship problems: 1) difficulty following classroom instructions, 2) difficulty making friends, or 3) difficulty completing school work assignments. Following each session, you will complete a feedback form related to your experiences during the sessions. Additionally, weekly on-site supervision sessions will be offered for questions and feedback. After the six sessions, a second interview will be conducted related to the implementation experiences and perceptions. Each interview will be recorded for transcription. Once the data have been collected and initial analysis conducted, a follow-up meeting will be conducted to request your feedback and provide an update on the research.

The reality play therapy trainer:

Eric Davis, M. Ed., will be conducting the training. He has received training in both reality therapy and play counseling. Eric is a current doctoral student at the University of Florida and a former school counselor. He is a certified school counselor in Tennessee and Florida.

Time required:

The reality play therapy trainings will last four hours. The first interview will last between 30-45 minutes. You will conduct six, 30 minute sessions weekly with the elementary student. The feedback forms will take approximately 10 minutes each to complete. The on-site supervision sessions will depend upon school counselor need. The second interview will last 30-45 minutes. The follow-up session will last up to one hour.

Risks and benefits:
There is no anticipated risk anticipated in participating in this study. The benefits of the study will be its contribution to school counseling techniques, richer understanding of school relationships, and insights into reality play therapy’s potential effectiveness.

**Compensation:**

Each of the participants will receive the materials needed to implement the reality play therapy sessions. These materials will include: 1) 2 puppets, 2) one sand tray, 3) a variety of miniatures, 4) markers, 5) crayons, and 6) drawing paper. No other compensation will be offered for participation.

**Confidentiality:**

Identifying information will be removed from the transcript of your interview. Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by the law. Your name will not be used in any report. The recording of the interview will be destroyed following the analysis. All materials will be stored in a secure location by the researcher.

**Voluntary participation:**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. You may choose not to answer any question in the interview, complete any portion of the feedback form, or participate in the supervision sessions without consequence. You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence.

**What will be done with the results of the study:**

The results of the study will be analyzed as part of the doctoral dissertation of the researcher and may be submitted for publication. Participants may request a copy of the results.

**Who to contact if you have questions about the study:**

Eric Davis, EdS, Doctoral Candidate, Counselor Education, College of Education, University of Florida, (contact information)

Mary Ann Clark, PhD, Associate Professor, Counselor Education, College of Education, University of Florida, (contact information)

Andrea Dixon, PhD, Associate Professor, Counselor Education, College of Education, University of Florida, (contact information)
Who to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

UFIRB Office, Box 1112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; ph 392-0433.

Agreement:

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: _______________________________           Date: ___________

Principle Investigator: _______________________________       Date: ___________
## APPENDIX L
CODING TRAIL

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APPENDIX M
EXAMPLE OF THEORETICAL MEMO

Positive perceptions of implementing reality play therapy with elementary school student: Gaining insight

Gaining insight must be one of the most important aspects of this approach. Both reality therapy and play counseling address the need to be with the student to see how they interpret and perceive the world around them to address life issues. Included are:

- Wants
- Needs
- Feelings
- Behaviors
- Relationships

How does each of these interact and help the counselor see the student better?

- Provides glimpse into quality world for school (home and classroom for some)

What roles do the materials play?

- Military miniatures can show violence they see in their worlds
- Animals can be used to represent self and others from a variety of perceptions (lions as aggressive, giraffe as passive, gorilla as strong, etc.)
- Sand itself can show need for tactile support
- Puppets can show how they view behaviors (aggressive, passive, thoughtful, etc.)

How does this interact with the other activities?

- Impacts and influences total behavior and drawing activities
- Gaining insight into students’ view can help with better problem solving
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Eric Davis was born and raised in Winchester, Tennessee. His decade plus career in education began at the University of Tennessee-Martin where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology in 1998. While there, Eric worked at a local juvenile detention facility. This experience led to a brief change in career. Fortunately, this change was short lived as he rediscovered his passion for teaching and counseling at the school level. Eric received a Master of Education degree from Middle Tennessee State University in school counseling in 2002. Prior to and during his training, Eric gained valuable experience working as a counselor at a special education school and a substitute teacher and teacher's aide at Erma Siegel Elementary School in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Following the completion of his degree, Eric worked at Coffee County Central High School as a school counselor from 2002 to 2006. During this time, he also served as the Student Council sponsor and psychology teacher. Both of these opportunities enhanced his experience of working in the school system. As a result of these educational endeavors, Eric has discovered his path for the future. Choice theory, reality therapy, and play counseling have all surfaced as important to Eric's understanding and development in the realm of counseling. He has attended numerous trainings and conferences on each and had developed a research agenda addressing all three areas. His future goals include training prospective counselors, with a focus on school counseling, as a counselor educator and furthering his research on reality play therapy.