



# Pre-Service Elementary School Counselors' Perceptions of the Play Therapy Training in Taiwan

Ya-Ting Juang<sup>1</sup> · Szu-Yu Chen<sup>2</sup> · Zachary Pietrantonio<sup>3</sup>

Accepted: 13 August 2023 / Published online: 4 September 2023  
© De La Salle University 2023

**Abstract** School counselors play key roles in recognizing and addressing students' social-emotional and academic needs and providing short-term counseling and crisis interventions focusing on mental health concerns. Research shows that play therapy is a developmentally responsive intervention for school-aged children (Ray et al., 2014). Many school counseling programs in Taiwan offer play therapy as an elective course in school counselor preparation programs. In the current study, we conducted a phenomenological research to examine 21 pre-service elementary school counselors' perceptions of play therapy training in Taiwan. Analysis of qualitative data yielded four major themes: (a) enhanced understanding of children's world, (b) the power of toys and play, (c) value of play sessions and observers' feedback, and (d) enhanced self-awareness and professional growth. Findings of this study have the potential to inform school counselor education and teacher education training regarding therapeutic skills and attending to children's social-emotional and behavioral growth. Limitations of the study, implications for counselor educators, and recommendations for future research are discussed.

**Keywords** Play therapy · Child-centered play therapy · School counseling · Counselor education · Pedagogy

A national epidemiological study of child mental health disorders indicated that DSM-5 disorders are common in Taiwanese children and the prevalence rates of such disorders correspond to those reported in Western countries (Chen et al., 2020). Specially, the most prevalent mental disorders in children were anxiety disorders and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, followed by sleep disorders, tic disorders, oppositional defiant disorder and autism spectrum disorder (Chen et al., 2020). The Ministry of Health and Welfare in Taiwan (2021) report from 2017 to 2019 found an increase of about 20,000 children (0.6%) aged 0 to 14 seeking mental health services. These findings suggested a need to increase public awareness of youth mental health and prioritize youth mental health policies, including prevention, early detection, and intervention in Taiwan. Many mental health issues are initially identified when children enter the school system; thus, it is recommended to implement mental health interventions at this point (Perryman, 2016). Therefore, education legislation in Taiwan has demanded that primary and junior high schools establish counseling centers and increase the number of school counselors, clinical counselors, or social workers to provide mental health services in school settings (Ministry of Education in Taiwan, 2016).

School counselors play crucial roles in supporting youth mental health (American School Counselor Association, 2019). According to the Ministry of Education in Taiwan (2014), qualifications for elementary school counselors include possessing a minimum of a bachelor's degree in Counseling Psychology or Education with a double major or minor in Counseling Psychology. School counselors are also required to be certified elementary teachers. Pre-service training curricula of school counselors require knowledge in psychology, development, assessment, counseling theories and techniques, and crisis and trauma counseling to address and promote optimal growth in the academic,

✉ Szu-Yu Chen  
dchen@paloalto.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology and Counseling, University of Taipei, Taipei, Taiwan

<sup>2</sup> Department of Counseling, Palo Alto University, 1791 Arastradero Road, Palo Alto, California, CA 94304, USA

<sup>3</sup> Department of Counseling, Recreation, and School Psychology, Florida International University, Florida, USA

social-emotional, and behavioral needs of all children. School counselor training does not meet the requirements for clinical counselor licensure in Taiwan to provide psychotherapy in community agencies or hospitals settings. Clinical counselors are required to possess a master's degree or higher. However, following the multitiered system of support framework, school counselors are charged with providing services for students, teachers, school personnel, and parents to promote children's academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and moral development and/or issues regarding school/classroom climate; enhance teachers' classroom management/discipline; facilitate achievement test/interpretation; provide resources and referrals for parents (Sink, 2016). Consequently, receiving professional training in child counseling is essential and critical for Taiwanese school counselors to meet the complex needs of schools.

### Child-Centered Play Therapy in Elementary School Setting

Play therapy is an evidence-based and developmentally appropriate counseling intervention for children at various academic levels and with diverse needs (Landreth, 2012; Trice-Black et al., 2013). A meta-analysis review of 93 play therapy outcomes studies has supported its effectiveness across age, gender, and presenting issues, including emotional and behavioral concerns (Bratton et al., 2005). Researchers further indicated the positive impact on children when play therapy is implemented early in the elementary school setting (Ray et al., 2014). Consequently, there is an increasing demand for well-trained school counselors to utilize play therapy to support school-aged children in Taiwan (Lin & Cheng, 2017).

Developed by Virginia Axline (1947), child-centered play therapy (CCPT) is an approach to person-centered counseling that blends Rogerian tenets with play, children's natural language of self-expression. In CCPT, counselors follow Axline's (1969) principles to guide the therapy process. Grounded in the belief that the therapeutic relationship is the primary healing factor for children's challenges, counselors facilitate a safe and consistent environment where children can experience empathy, understanding, and unconditional positive regard. Counselors allow children to lead the way and express themselves freely through symbolic play. Counselors recognize and reflect children's needs and feelings back to them, facilitating children's insight into their inner world and further creating positive changes.

CCPT is not only a developmentally responsive intervention but also a culturally affirming approach as CCPT provides children with an opportunity to express themselves through nonverbal and symbolic means that transcend language and other cultural barriers (Lin & Bratton, 2015). Although the

majority of CCPT studies have been conducted in the U.S. context, research efforts to examine the application of CCPT has been made in Asia, such as China, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines (Siu & Pon, 2017), and has been demonstrated its effectiveness across diverse cultures (Landreth, 2012). Globally, CCPT has shown to be a promising in-school intervention for elementary-aged children's internalizing behaviors (e.g., Burgin & Ray, 2022; Hateli, 2022; Shen, 2002; Stulmaker & Ray, 2015; Tsai, 2018), externalizing behavior (e.g., Bengwasan, 2023; Cochran & Cochran, 2017; Ritzi et al., 2017; Tsai, 2018; Wilson & Ray, 2018), social-emotional assets (e.g., Blalock et al., 2019; Cheng & Ray, 2016), and academic achievement (e.g., Blanco et al., 2012, 2017, 2019). Given the existing evidence of the efficacy of CCPT within the school setting and the Asian context, CCPT has become the key training and most commonly practiced approach in Taiwan (Lin & Cheng, 2017). Considering the urgency of offering mental health interventions to Taiwanese children, it is imperative that pre-service school counselors gain knowledge and skills in play therapy and CCPT as well as its implementation in the school setting.

To date, only one quantitative study examines the effects of CCPT training on Taiwanese college students' learning outcomes (Tsai & Lin, 2019). Tsai and Lin investigated the immediate and retained effects of CCPT training on 35 Taiwanese undergraduate students' attitudes, knowledge, and skills in the beginning of taking the CCPT class, after class, after three months of class, and after 6 months of class. The results indicated that students responded to play therapy training with positive changes and were able to retain these changes across time. Tsai and Lin further recommended that future researchers conduct qualitative studies to gain a deeper understanding of students' learning effects, the influences of supervision on students' growth, and play therapy experiences.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to fill the research gap by examining Taiwanese pre-service elementary school counselors' learning experiences in play therapy training. The current study addressed the following guiding research question: (a) What are students' perceptions of the play therapy curriculum? and (b) What are students' perceptions of the impact of play therapy training on their play therapy knowledge and skills, their beliefs about children, and their interactions with children?

## Method

### Research Design

In the current study, we employed a phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis to gain an in-depth understanding of pre-service school counselors' perceptions of the Introduction to Play Therapy course. Phenomenology focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The fundamental goal of the approach is to seek a description of the meaning of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Aligned with this research method, we analyzed in-depth individual session notes and reflection papers to acquire the essence of participants' experiences and collective perceptions (Creswell, 2013; Wertz, 2005).

### Play Therapy Curriculum Structure

Currently, over 25 mental health-related and education degree programs in Taiwan, such as counseling psychology, social work, and early childhood education, offer introductory play therapy courses and many of programs focus on CCPT as a fundamental play therapy approach (Lin & Cheng, 2017). In the present study, Introduction to Play Therapy is an undergraduate-level elective course designed for students who major in Counseling Psychology or Education with a minor in Psychology Counseling and sought to become elementary school counselors in Taiwan. This course aims to facilitate a deeper understanding of children's needs and a developmentally appropriate approach to addressing them. The first author is the course instructor who is a counselor educator with extensive play therapy and supervision experience. Classes are held once a week for 2 hours over an 18-week semester. Assignments and class activities of this course aim to increase students' awareness of self and others, provide opportunities for skills practice, and facilitate self-reflection. Students completed weekly readings, in-class discussion, roleplay, and a mid-term exam. An integral part of the course is to conduct supervised play sessions.

Regarding the weekly course structure, in the first 11 weeks, students learn about play therapy history, child-centered play therapy (CCPT) philosophy, basic play therapy skills and language, including tracking, reflections of feelings and content, returning responsibilities, choice-giving, esteem-building, and therapeutic limit setting. In addition, playroom setup, play behavior themes, and treatment evaluations are introduced. Students roleplay skills with peers during the course period and receive immediate feedback from the instructor. From week 12 to 17, students are paired up to either facilitate or observe six 30-min weekly play sessions with kindergarten children aged 5 to 6 at an urban affiliated experimental elementary school followed by six

20-min peer feedback sessions. Students aimed to practice CCPT language and skills instead of conduct therapy; thus, identified children were those who did not exhibit severe behavioral and emotional issues, receive special education, and receive any counseling treatment. A total of 21 students served as therapists directly facilitating play sessions with children, and 21 students served as observers providing peer feedback after observing weekly play sessions in person. Students submitted weekly play session notes evaluating their skills, areas for improvement, and responses to the experience. Students take turns presenting their cases and recorded videos and receive supervision in class. Last, students completed a final reflection paper to process their overall learning, growth, and experiences. In the final week, the instructor overviews the course materials and provides students with opportunities to process their significant learning and self-reflection.

### Participants

We gained university human subjects approval prior to the start of the study. This study was conducted at a four-year public university in an urban city of Taiwan. The research assistant recruited participants through explaining the purpose of the study to undergraduate students enrolled in the Introduction to Play Therapy class and the voluntary nature of participating in the study. Participants met the following criteria: (a) undergraduate students majoring or minoring in counseling, (b) completion of the Introduction to Play Therapy course, and (c) completion of six play sessions as a facilitator. Forty-two students enrolled in the Introduction to Play Therapy course and 21 students met the criteria as they were assigned to be a play session facilitator. All 21 students participated in the study, with 16 Asian women and five Asian men aged 20 to 21.

### Research Team and Positionality

The research team comprised two counselor educators and one research assistant who is a master's student in a counseling program at a public university in Taiwan. All research members have experience conducting qualitative studies. The first author is a Taiwanese Assistant Professor employed at a public university in Taiwan. She has elementary school education and school counseling backgrounds and specializes in school counselor education, play therapy, expressive arts therapy, and clinical supervision. The second author is a Taiwanese Associate Professor at a private university in the U.S. Her research focus includes play therapy, play-based teacher intervention, and international students and immigrants' mental health issues. The first and second authors have experience teaching play therapy classes with undergraduate and graduate students in Taiwan and U.S. context

respectively. The research assistant completed a play therapy course in a master's level counseling program. Before conducting the current research and during data analysis stage, the first and second authors reflected their positive teaching experience and areas to improve the course based on cultural context and student body. The research assistant also reflected her learning experience with the first and the second author. The research team approached this study with an attempt to be open to getting a better understanding of pre-service school counselor students learning experience and receiving constructive feedback to enhance future training.

### Data Collection

We collected data from multiple sources to gain a thorough description of participants' lived experiences in receiving therapeutic play training. Each participant completed three major written assignments throughout the semester, including six play session notes, six play session reflection papers, and one final reflection paper. Participants used play therapy session note prompts that consisted of analysis of the child's use of toys, emotions, play behavior, and themes; counselor's skills and intervention; counselor's assessment. Play session reflection paper prompts included identifying the counselor's strengths and areas for improvement, examining the peer's live observations and feedback, identifying moments during the play session where they struggled, and listing feedback questions for in-class support and supervision. The guidelines for the final reflection paper are to process their overall learning experience of CCPT, role as a counselor, and supervised practice sessions.

### Data Analysis

Although all assignments were identifiable when graded, the first author was blinded to the students' study participation status. The research assistant collected and deidentified participants' papers before sending them to the first and the second authors. All papers were analyzed in Mandarin and translated into English for the purpose of study dissemination. The second author and the research assistant carried out data analysis and coding procedures under the direct supervision of the first author. We followed the recommended procedure of translating and analyzing data between Mandarin and English (Ho et al., 2019) coupled with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) as the method of analysis for this study. Thematic analysis strategy aligns with the perspective that "phenomenology tends to look at data thematically to extract essences and essentials of participant meanings" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 8). Following the six-step process, we first familiarized ourselves with the responses within the entries by reading and re-reading participants' deidentified papers in Mandarin and noting our initial reactions in the

margins of each paper. In the second step, we met to generate preliminary codes in Mandarin in which the words, phrases, or sentences stood out as describing the participant's experience or phenomena under study. We then scheduled another research meeting to generate themes by grouping similar meaning codes into categories. After independent coding, we next facilitated a deeper review of themes and named themes in Mandarin by engaging in analytical and interpretive discourse to achieve consensus. Specifically, we closely examined various phrases, sentences, and paragraphs and connected them to attributes, themes, and patterns relevant to our research questions. We discussed discrepancies among our individual coding until we met consensus. Later, we developed codes in English, compared the two versions of codes, and developed meaning-based translated findings. Finally, we transformed the analysis into a report (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Ho et al., 2019).

### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness indicates a study's strength and demonstrates the quality of the methodology (Patton, 2002). To ensure the trustworthiness of the current study, we kept a record of every step of data collection and analysis. We performed analyst triangulation based on the coders of the research team. We conducted three peer-debriefing meetings among the research team members to establish accountability. These peer-debriefing meetings allowed us to acknowledge and reflect on potential researcher bias throughout data collection and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Patton, 2002).

Additionally, we invited a colleague having expertise in school counseling and experience in qualitative research to serve as an auditor. The auditor is a U.S.-born Assistant Professor employed at a public university in the U.S. where he trains clinical mental health counselors and school counselors about culturally responsive counseling practices. His professional interests include interdisciplinary collaboration and leadership, international school counseling practices, and the prevention of child maltreatment. As an auditor, he independently reviewed all entries to determine trustworthiness. He primarily consulted with the second author to clarify information and suggest alternative themes, and ensure data were accurately captured in the findings. The second author discussed the auditor's feedback and recommendation with the research team to further refine the findings.

### Findings

This phenomenological study examined pre-service school counselors' perceptions of the Introduction to Play Therapy course. Analysis of the 21 undergraduate students' extensive

reflection papers revealed four major themes, including (a) enhanced understanding of children's world, (b) the power of toys and play, (c) value of play sessions and observers' feedback, and (d) enhanced self-awareness and professional growth. All participants' names are under pseudonyms.

### Enhanced Understanding of Children's World

All participants ( $n=21$ ) made comments that aligned with the theme of *enhanced understanding of children's world*. The researchers applied this code when students commented on their beliefs and understanding about children's behaviors and emotions that have shifted due to the therapeutic play training. Ming reflected on how children can demonstrate their capabilities when adults demonstrate patience and trust.

"When I was reading the textbook, I was wondering if children can really take the lead and work through self-discovery and mastery. I think most adults, including me, don't fully trust children's capacity. Because of this concern, we are used to helping children right away and making decisions for them. But at the same time, I think we take away children's opportunity to grow. Throughout the play sessions, I tried to apply CCPT philosophy and skills to my interaction with the child. I was very surprised to observe that this child was able to use his own way to learn and bloom and he looked very proud. Just like what the professor shared in class."

Similarly, Sun commented on their increased understanding of children's growth because of the therapeutic play training.

"I learned so much about my therapy approach with children, especially the aspect of following children's lead and trusting them. Initially, I was very concerned about my child not being talkative and not showing many emotions. I asked my professor several times if there was anything I could do to let this child talk more. However, the professor responded it's fine as long as this child was playing with the toys. I decided to let go of my own expectation and just let the child use her most comfortable way of interacting with me. Once I changed my perception and started to accept and trust the child's way of play, surprisingly I noticed that our relationship became more relaxing and the child started to show different emotions which was such a huge progress considering a child needed to spend a long period of time with a stranger."

Chen illustrated "This course enhanced my experience interacting with children, especially potential situations I might encounter when doing play therapy in the future. This training also facilitated my understanding of children's needs

and the importance of trusting children. I think this learning can be very helpful for my future career as a teacher and school counselor."

### The Power of Toys and Play

*The power of toys and play* referred to students' beliefs in using play as a therapeutic approach. Sixteen of the participants commented on experiencing the positive outcomes of using play as a method to work with children. One participant, Ying noted "It was my first time learning to use play as a therapeutic approach working with children which gave me new perceptions of child therapy. When I roleplayed with my peers in class and conducted play sessions with children at school, I was immediately able to feel the magic of play. The process made me see the child's needs and concerns in a short period and the play therapy experience allowed the child to realize they do have the ability to make the changes."

Fang indicated that "During the play sessions, I practiced providing undivided attention for the child and facilitating therapeutic techniques. This experience made me realize sometimes children do not just play with toys. They communicate many things with us through their play." Another participant, Ting, further reflected "Through the play sessions, I realized that children's play truly could reflect their reality. The way they play with toys also shows me who they really are in real life, such as their personalities, reactions to certain situations, and problem-solving skills which was an interesting learning for me."

### Value of Play Sessions and Observers' Feedback

*Value of play sessions and observers' feedback* referred to participants' perspectives of play sessions and feedback sessions on their learning. This theme also includes participants' feedback on the structure of play sessions. Twenty participants illustrated their experience of conducting play sessions with real children and receiving constructive feedback from their professor and peers. Jen described her appreciation of having a peer's observation during the play sessions.

"Pairing up with a peer who served as an observer was so helpful. My observer carefully observed the details, including my interactions with the child and the child's behavior and emotions that I might have missed. Right after each play session, she would share her opinions and alternative ways she would do it. When our thoughts differed, we sought the professor's supervision."

Other participants noted the advantage of practicing with the same child and having a peer observer in the session. For instance, Shao noted that "Different from simply roleplaying

with peers in class, I found it beneficial to practice skills with a real child. I also really like having the same child for six sessions so that we can establish a safer relationship and I can see the child's progress over time." Ting shared "I was so nervous about the play sessions, but having a peer sitting in the playroom with me made me feel less anxious; we can also discuss the solutions together if something happened."

On the other hand, a few participants hoped that the professor could modify the structure of skills practice and supervision as exemplified by the following quotes.

"Although having the same therapist every week can create a sense of safety and consistency for children, and serving as an observer can also learn about the play therapy process, I just wish the observer could also have an opportunity to facilitate play sessions." Another participant, Ling, commented "I understand the importance of consistency, but it's a pity and unfair that my observer didn't have an opportunity to practice skills with a real child. Maybe we can take turns to facilitate three sessions respectively."

Another example specific to the structure of in-class supervision is "In addition to weekly assigned case presentations and supervision, I wish the professor could leave 10 to 15 min at the end of the class allowing everyone to ask urgent questions related to their play sessions and we can process solutions together."

### Enhanced Self-Awareness and Professional Growth

This theme was characterized by participants' descriptions of their perceived areas of growth and increased self-awareness as a result of the therapeutic play training. The majority of the participants ( $n = 19$ ) commented on their significant learning and growth from this training experience. Chia detailed the importance of providing children with unconditional positive regard.

"I was discouraged and frustrated by my first play session experience because the child didn't play with any toys, avoided having eye contact, and didn't want to interact with me when I attempted to play puppets with him. Thus, I got anxious in my second play session and thought the child would remain the same. However, somehow the child became more relaxed, started to play with some toys, and even smiled. I still don't know what happened, but I realized I shouldn't jump to a conclusion based on my first impression of the child. My assumption kept me from providing an understanding of the child's behavior. Perhaps this child also tried to get to know me and adapt to the new environment. I should be more open and accepting of children's way of being."

Another participant, Tang, emphasized the reciprocal relationship between the child and the adult's emotions, behavior, and relationship.

"I usually feel anxious when there's silence in the session, so the biggest growth for me is my tolerance of silence and ambiguity. I remember one time I was reviewing my session video, and I observed when the child was silent, my tone of voice and speaking speed sounded overwhelming. I realized the child might have picked up my uneasiness and reflected it back to me which worsened my anxiety and my perception of the child's shyness. Instead of having my own expectation and agenda, I decided to provide a positive experience for this child where I wanted to show the "be with" attitude, and my goal was not to discover underlying problems or to heal since that is not my role."

A third participant, Hong, reflected "I was proud of my growth this semester. Initially, I was aware of my anxiety in the first play session preventing me from being present with the child, tracking the child's play, and reflecting on the child's feelings. With my peer's and professor's encouragement, I became more relaxed and confident in my play therapy skills later on. I was able to facilitate a variety of reflections, and I noticed an improved therapist-child relationship and child behavior."

### Discussion

In the current study, we examined Taiwanese pre-service school counselors' perceptions of the play therapy training curriculum and its influences on their play therapy knowledge, skills, beliefs about children, and interactions with children. Responses from 21 participants yielded four major themes that connected to one or more of these constructs. The Introduction to Play Therapy course aims to facilitate students' deeper understanding of children's needs and promote a therapeutic play approach to addressing children's challenges. *Enhanced understanding of children's world* emerged as a major theme during data analysis procedures. All 21 students reflected on their increased understanding of children's needs and described their process and outcome of shifting perspectives of children's behavior and emotions as a result of play sessions and supervision. The findings suggest that the learning materials and skills practice seemed to provide participants with a better understanding of the experiences of children.

Sixteen out of 21 participants noted they witnessed *the therapeutic power of play and toys* and how children express their feelings and thoughts through play when feeling safe in the playroom. Participants further detailed these new insights into their future interactions with

children as interns, teachers, or school counselors. Regarding participants' perception of the training curriculum, participants described their learning experience in the Play Therapy class as meaningful, insightful, and beneficial to their professional growth. Theme *value of play sessions and observers' feedback* illustrated participants' positive statements about the class structure (e.g., in-class roleplay, play sessions, and supervised and peer-observed skills sessions). Twenty participants described these activities as influential to their understanding and skills in implementing play therapy and CCPT when working with real children. The instructor intentionally designed a variety of assignments and activities to promote students' learning in theoretical underpinnings and techniques of CCPT inside and outside of the classroom context. Thus, experiential learning extending beyond the classroom appeared to strengthen the educational process.

The majority of the participants ( $n = 20$ ) comments are aligned with the theme of *enhanced self-awareness and professional growth*. In particular, participants described their awareness of how their biases, agenda, and nervous/anxious emotions may negatively impact therapeutic relationships and children's behaviors and emotions. Moreover, participants shared their positive experience of practicing Rogerian core conditions: empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard, and Axline's eight basic non-directive play principles.

This current research expands the literature because to the best of our knowledge, this is the first qualitative study examining pre-service school counselors' play therapy learning experience in Taiwan. Consistent with previous results of the positive effects of CCPT training on Taiwanese undergraduate students' perceived attitude, knowledge, and skills (Tsai & Lin, 2019), the findings in the current study reveal that participants appeared to gain a deeper understanding of children's social-emotional and behavioral needs, advance their developmentally appropriate skills working with children, and demonstrate personal and professional growth due to the play therapy course. The findings also support previous qualitative research conducted in the United States (Meany-Walen et al., 2014). Although the cultural context differs, both studies indicate that undergraduate students valued the learning process and perceived positive outcomes in their relationships with children as a result of the CCPT course. Moreover, these results potentially support CCPT training and intervention to be a culturally appropriate intervention for therapists and children with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The findings also revealed CCPT to be a potential prevention model as evidenced by participants' observation of children's freely expressing feelings and thoughts through toys or words as a result of the therapeutic relationship.

## Implications for School Counselor Educators

The findings of the present study provide support for pre-service school counselors to receive play therapy training to better understand children's social-emotional and behavioral needs and equip them to interact with and facilitate children's growth. It is worth noting that Introduction to Play Therapy is an elective course for students enrolled in the counseling psychology program or education program minoring in counseling. However, given students' positive learning outcomes on understanding and attending to children's needs, educators can consider advocating and implementing basic play therapy curriculum not only in school counselor preparation programs but also in early childhood and elementary education programs. Numerous researchers have shown the effectiveness of training teachers to apply basic play therapy skills to enhance teacher-child relationships, to increase knowledge of children's needs, to respond to children's challenging classroom behavior, and to improve classroom management (e.g., Chen & Cheng, 2021; Chen & Lindo, 2018; Elmadani et al., 2022; Gonzales-Ball & Bratton, 2019; Lindo et al., 2014; Post et al., 2022). Due to the increasing demand for children's mental health services in Taiwan, teachers are well positioned to enhance the well-being of children. Teachers' awareness of children's early warning signs and implementation of preventative or early intervention in the classroom setting may potentially prevent children's social-emotional and behavioral issues from a downward spiral (Maclean & Law, 2021; Moor et al., 2007; Reinke et al., 2011).

Next, although the majority of participants commented on the invaluable play session experience in their learning and growth, they expressed hopes of taking turns with peer observers to facilitate play sessions. Thus, we recommend that educators provide all students with opportunities to practice skills with real children. Educators may consider designing a total of six to eight play sessions in a semester so that each student has at least three practice sessions. Additionally, when scheduling play sessions in the school setting, it is recommended that educators provide clear communication with classroom teachers in advance regarding the course learning objectives, the purpose of the skills practice, and tentative schedules so that teachers would understand their students are not receiving psychotherapy from pre-service school counselors.

## Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Specific limitations to this study include the lack of generalizability and the potential for researcher and participant bias. Given the qualitative nature of the study, we determined a smaller number ( $n = 21$ ) of participants would provide us with the method to deeply understand pre-service school

counselors' learning experiences and perceptions of play therapy training. The research participants of this study represented one geographic location, which limited diverse inquiry. Although we were able to gather rich descriptions of participants' experiences and perceptions, we acknowledge the limitation of the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the first author's role as the course instructor and researcher may have affected analysis procedures. Likewise, there was the potential for participants to provide socially acceptable responses to the reflection papers because students may have felt obligated to share only positive experiences with researchers despite that their names were de-identified in the analysis. To minimize possible biases, we facilitated trustworthiness through respondent validation, audit trail, and the use of multiple coders to establish the validity and reliability of emerging themes (Patton, 2002).

Areas for future research include conducting follow-up interviews to investigate pre-service school counselors' experience facilitating play therapy in their internship and post-graduate internship phases. This study examined undergraduate students' learning experience, and it would be beneficial to further explore effects of play therapy training with graduate-level students to discuss any similar or different themes. Additionally, research participants were from the same program, so recruiting participants from different school counselor training programs is suggested for future studies. Given that students are expected to video record their play sessions for supervision purposes, conducting observational or case studies may allow researchers to better examine therapeutic relationship development and both pre-service school counselors' and children's progress over time. Last, recognizing play therapy as a Western psychological counseling approach and the curriculum adapted from Western education contexts, it can be valuable to explore undergraduate students' experience of learning CCPT philosophy and skills and its implementation within East Asian cultural context.

## Conclusion

Elementary school counselors play vital roles in children's mental health. Play therapy has been considered an evidence-based and developmentally effective approach to working with children. Hence, there is an increase in school counselor and clinician preparation programs in Taiwan offering play therapy as an elective course in the curricula. The results of this study indicated that an undergraduate-level introduction of play therapy course focusing on CCPT helped pre-service school counselors gain an understanding of children's underlying needs and enhance competencies in incorporating CCPT concepts and skills into child counseling interventions. Experiential learning, including

in-class roleplay activities, peer observed play sessions, and supervision contributed to students' positive perceptions of the course process and learning outcome. The current study further offers research support for school counseling and teacher education programs in Asia-Pacific countries to implement therapeutic play training in the program of study.

**Funding** This research was funded by Ministry of Education Teaching Practice Research Program, Taiwan (Project No. 1080174).

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

## References

- American School Counselor Association (2019). *School counselors matter*. Retrieved from <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/b079d17d-6265-4166-a120-3b1f56077649/School-Counselors-Matter.pdf>
- Axline, V. (1947). *Play therapy: The inner dynamics of childhood*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Axline, V. (1969). *Play therapy*. Ballantine Books.
- Bengwasan, P. D. (2023). Short-term child-centered play therapy for school-aged Filipino boys with externalizing problem behaviors. *International Journal of Play Therapy, 32*(1), 22–36. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pla0000191>
- Blalock, S. M., Lindo, N. A., & Ray, D. C. (2019). Individual and group child-centered play therapy: Impact on social-emotional competencies. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 97*(3), 238–249. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12264>
- Blanco, P., Holliman, R. P., Muro, J., Toland, S., & Farnam, J. (2017). Long-term child-centered play therapy effects on academic achievement with normal functioning children. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 26*(7), 1915–1922. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0701-0>
- Blanco, P. J., Holliman, R. P., Ceballos, P. L., & Farnam, J. L. (2019). Exploring the impact of child-centered play therapy on academic achievement of at-risk kindergarten students. *International Journal of Play Therapy, 28*(3), 133–143. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pla0000086>
- Blanco, P. J., Ray, D. C., & Holliman, R. (2012). Long-term child-centered play therapy and academic achievement of children: A follow-up study. *International Journal of Play Therapy, 21*(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026932>
- Bratton, S. C., Ray, D. C., Rhine, T., & Jones, L. D. (2005). The efficacy of play therapy with children: A meta-analytic review of treatment outcomes. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 36*, 376–390. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.36.4.376>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Rome: Sage.
- Burgin, E. E., & Ray, D. C. (2022). Child-centered play therapy and childhood depression: An effectiveness study in schools. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 31*, 293–307. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-021-02198-6>
- Chen, S.-Y., & Cheng, Y.-J. (2021). Effects of kinder training on pre-school children's externalizing behavior: A single-case design.



- Journal of Child and Adolescent Counseling*, 7(3), 176–192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23727810.2021.1948270>
- Chen, S.-Y., & Lindo, N. A. (2018). The impact of kinder training on young children's on-task behavior: A single-case design. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 27(2), 78–91. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pla0000066>
- Chen, Y. L., Chen, W. J., Lin, K. C., Shen, L. J., & Gau, S. S. (2020). Prevalence of DSM-5 mental disorders in a nationally representative sample of children in Taiwan: Methodology and main findings. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, 29, e15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796018000793>
- Cheng, Y.-J., & Ray, D. C. (2016). Child-centered group play therapy: Impact on social-emotional assets of kindergarten children. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 41(3), 209–237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2016.1197350>
- Cochran, J. L., & Cochran, N. H. (2017). Pre-post demographic study of child-centered play therapy for students with highly disruptive behavior in high-poverty schools. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Counseling*, 3(2), 88–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23727810.2017.1294919>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Elmadani, A., Opiola, K. K., Grybush, A. L., & Alston, D. M. (2022). Exploring the experiences of elementary teachers after completing child teacher relationship training (CTRT): Implications for teaching in diverse school settings. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 31(2), 71–81. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pla0000163>
- Gonzales-Ball, T. L., & Bratton, S. C. (2019). Child teacher relationship training as a Head Start early mental health intervention for children exhibiting disruptive behavior. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 28(1), 44–56. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pla0000081>
- Hateli, B. (2022). The effect of non-directive play therapy on reduction of anxiety disorders in young children. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 22(1), 140–146. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12420>
- Ho, S.-S., Holloway, A., & Stenhouse, R. (2019). Analytic methods' considerations for the translation of sensitive qualitative data from Mandarin into English. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919868354>
- Landreth, G. L. (2012). *Play therapy: The art of the relationship* (3rd ed.). Brunner-Routledge.
- Lin, M.-J., & Cheng, J.-A. (2017). Play therapy in Taiwan. In A. F. Y. Siu & A. K. L. Pon (Eds.), *Play therapy in Asia* (pp. 219–233). The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- Lin, Y.-W., & Bratton, S. C. (2015). A meta-analytic review of child-centered play therapy approaches. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 93(1), 45–58. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2015.00180.x>
- Lindo, N. A., Dillman Taylor, D., Meany-Wale, K. K., Purswell, K., Jayne, K., Gonzales, T., & Jones, L. (2014). Teachers as therapeutic agents: Perceptions of school-based mental health initiative. *British Journal of Guidance & Counseling*, 42, 284–296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2014.896452>
- Maclea, L., & Law, J. M. (2021). Supporting primary school students' mental health needs: Teachers' perceptions of roles, barriers, and abilities. *Psychology in the Schools*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22648>
- Meany-Walen, K. K., Lindo, N. A., Opiola, K., Chung, C.-F., Chen, S.-Y., Cheng, Y.-J., Yousef, D., & Turley, E. (2014). Therapeutic play: Undergraduate students' perceptions of the process and outcome of supervised play-based training. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4(14), 45–51.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook and the coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.
- Ministry of Education in Taiwan (2014). Student guidance and counseling act. Retrieved from <https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=H0070058>
- Ministry of Education in Taiwan (2016). *Primary and junior high school act*. Retrieved from <http://law.moj.gov.tw/Eng/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?PCode=H0070001>
- Ministry of Health and Welfare in Taiwan (2021). *National mental health statistic report*. Retrieved from <https://dep.mohw.gov.tw/DOS/lp-4445-113.html>
- Moor, S., Ann, M., Hester, M., Elisabeth, W. J., Robert, E., Robert, W., & Caroline, B. (2007). Improving the recognition of depression in adolescence: Can we teach the teachers? *Journal of Adolescence*, 30(1), 81–95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2005.12.001>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Perryman, K. L. (2016). Play therapy in schools. In K. J. O'Connor, C. E. Schaefer, & L. D. Braverman (Eds.), *Handbook of Play Therapy* (pp. 485–503). Wiley.
- Post, P. B., Grybush, A. L., García, M. A., & Flowers, C. (2022). Child-teacher relationship training exclusively in the classroom: Impact on teacher attitudes and behaviors. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 31(2), 97–106. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pla0000173>
- Ray, D. C., Armstrong, S. A., Balkin, R. S., & Jayne, K. M. (2014). Child-centered play therapy in the schools: Review and meta-analysis. *Psychology in the Schools*, 52(2), 107–123. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21798>
- Reinke, W. M., Stormont, M., Herman, K. C., Puri, R., & Goel, N. (2011). Supporting children's mental health in schools: Teacher perceptions of needs, roles, and barriers. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 26(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022714>
- Ritzi, R. M., Ray, D. C., & Schumann, B. R. (2017). Intensive short-term child-centered play therapy and externalizing behaviors in children. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 26(1), 33–46. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pla0000035>
- Shen, Y.-J. (2002). Short-term group play therapy with Chinese earthquake victims: Effects on anxiety, depression, and adjustment. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 11(1), 43–63. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0088856>
- Sink, C. (2016). Incorporating a multi-tiered system of supports into school counselor preparation. Retrieved from <http://tpcjournal.nbcc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Pages203-219-Sink.pdf>
- Siu, A. F. Y., & Pon, A. K. L. (2017). *Play therapy in Asia*. The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- Stulmaker, H. L., & Ray, D. C. (2015). Child-centered play therapy with young children who are anxious: A controlled trial. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 57, 127–133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.08.005>
- Trice-Black, S., Bailey, C. L., Kiper Riechel, M. (2013). Play therapy in school counseling. *Professional School Counseling*, 16(5), 303–312. <https://doi.org/10.5330/PSC.n.2013-16.303>
- Tsai, M.-H. (2018). Application of standardized observation form in school counselling in Taiwan: Exploratory study with children exhibiting internalizing and externalizing behavior concerns. *International Journal of Psychological Studies*, 10(2), 25–40. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijps.v10n2p25>
- Tsai, M.-H., & Lin, Y.-W. (2019). Immediate and retained learning effects of child-centered play therapy training with college students in Taiwan on attitude, knowledge, and skills. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Counseling*, 5(2), 175–188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23727810.2019.1586418>
- Wertz, F. J. (2005). Phenomenological research methods for counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 167–177. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.167>
- Wilson, B. J., & Ray, D. C. (2018). Child-centered play therapy: Aggression, empathy, and self-regulation. *Journal of Counseling*

*& Development*, 96(4), 399–409. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12222>

Bengwasan, P. D. (2023). Short-term child-centered play therapy for school-aged Filipino boys with externalizing problem behaviors. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 32(1) 22-36. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pla0000191>

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.