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Sandtray as a Means of Discernment: A Case Report on the Use of the Sandtray as a Career Counseling Intervention



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Abstract

The role of a school counselor is unique in that it incorporates multiple counseling domains in which other counselors may specialize. Especially for secondary school counselors, their occupation tasks them with career, social-emotional, academic, and often family and relational counseling. For that matter, this may include drug counseling, pregnancy counseling, and prevention. Over time, the emphasis on mental health counseling has waxed and waned depending on current trends; however, the focus on career counseling has existed since the birth of the counseling movement. The authors argue in favor of a holistic approach to school-based career counseling that incorporates exploring intersecting aspects of self-identity as significant to career discernment. This case report details the use of sandtray counseling as a means of further defining the career aspirations and expectations of two twelfth-grade female students completing their high school coursework while discerning their post-graduation plans. The results of the sandtray exercise suggest that adolescents may sometimes be unaware of the differences between their own aspirations and the societal/familial expectations placed upon them. The school counselor's office offers a safe space to untangle the factors that influence students' college and career readiness.

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Sandtray Therapy as a Means of Discernment:

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School counselors guide students through academic, social-emotional, and career exploration starting in elementary school and ultimately culminating in graduation from high school. Many tools are available to assist students of all ages through the development of college, career, or military readiness, which is one of the key components of the *Texas Model for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs, 5th Edition* (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2018). Choosing a career path is one of the most daunting tasks students face, and it can begin as early as middle school. Career awareness and development start in adolescence and require developmental skills such as gaining a sense of autonomy, developing critical thinking skills, and metacognition (Salma & Septiana, 2022). Students often have outside influences that play into their decision-making and may experience a conflict between their own interests, goals, desires, and parental or familial expectations for their future (Zhou, 2024).

The authors present an exercise in using sandtray counseling as a medium for the post-secondary exploration of career interests and goals, taking into consideration developmentally appropriate desires for autonomy from one's parents while also honoring one's parents. Sandtray counseling lends itself to helping students and/or clients discover unconscious biases, obstacles, and self-awareness of one's true goals and aspirations in a non-threatening, exploratory, and supportive environment. In this case report, the authors will describe the process of using sandtray therapy with two students to differentiate their own experiences of career exploration from what they assumed were their parents' expectations.

Background

The Role of the Secondary School Counselor

The birth of the school counseling movement is essentially synonymous with the birth of the counseling movement in the United States. Frank Parsons, considered the father of modern counseling, initiated his work in 1909, emphasizing guidance for individuals. Specifically, he established the first formal career counseling center in the United States (Hartung & Blustein, 2002). Shortly thereafter, the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 mandated guidance in schools, including funding for vocational education (Leahy, Rak, & Zanskas, 2011). As such, the marriage of school counseling and career counseling in the United States is a long-standing relationship built on years of development and research into best practices, both nationally and at the state level. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) utilizes a comprehensive school counseling program called the *Texas Model for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs, 5th Edition*, that focuses on four domains: responsive services, guidance curriculum, system support, and individual planning (TEA, 2018).



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The *Texas Model* delineates the specific services a counselor should provide, including the percentage of time a counselor should spend working in each domain. This time varies according to the student's grade level with whom the counselor works. The state of Texas considers these ratios important to meeting the developmental needs of the students they support "to assist them in establishing goals and exploring post-secondary options" (TEA, 2018, p. 3). It is crucial to note that this statement is not explicitly geared toward secondary students; exploring post-secondary plans starts early. The TEA does not differentiate elementary and secondary when defining the school counselor as "the educational professional who has the holistic view of the students' overall academic plans and progress" (TEA, 2018, p. 3). Rather, it is noteworthy that the *Texas Model* emphasizes guidance programs in elementary school and individual planning in middle and high school to support children in developing needed skills and mastery of post-secondary readiness.

Texas expects elementary counselors to spend the most time teaching guidance curriculum related to social skills, safe relationships, and navigating school in general (35-45%). Elementary students are years away from fine-tuning their education to meet their post-secondary needs, but the goal of post-secondary readiness is set early, starting with a focus on pre-requisite vocational skills such as social interactions and problem-solving. As such, approved guidance curriculum programs focus on teaching transferable skills to larger groups of children to prepare them for independent decisions later on. Much as learning to read must be scaffolded into developmental steps, eventual mastery of post-secondary skills must begin with mastery of basic life skills. Elementary guidance curriculum focuses largely on skills such as intrapersonal effectiveness, interpersonal effectiveness, and personal health and safety.

Conversely, by the time students are in high school, the state expects counselors to spend 25-35% of their time on individual planning. Guidance curriculum and skill building are still very important to developing post-secondary readiness and are included in the *Texas Model*; however, counselors in high school spend a greater amount of time working individually with students to plan and manage their educational, career, personal, and social needs with the hope that students will be College, Career, or Military Ready (CCMR). In other words, the state of Texas believes that all students should have a clear pathway to seeking higher education, employment, or military enlistment by the time they graduate (TEA, 2024), so the school counselor is the educator guiding the student along said path. In short, Frank Parsons' emphasis on career counseling remains highly pertinent to the school counselor's work to this day.

Responsive services are the second most prioritized domain for elementary and secondary school counselors to target (TEA, 2018). Texas expects elementary school counselors to spend 30-40% of their time on responsive services, while high school counselors should spend 25-35% of their time working within this domain (TEA, 2018). Whereas guidance curriculum and individual planning align well with career counseling, responsive services include those services that most people might associate with mental health counseling: addressing social-emotional



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learning, preventative services, remedial services, and crisis services. As the word "responsive" suggests, this is the domain of the school counselor's role that can be most unpredictable: student concerns such as homelessness, grief, social interactions, depression or anxiety, suicide or substance abuse, domestic violence, abuse or neglect, truancy, and financial difficulties, to name a few examples (TEA, 2018).

Interestingly, the *Texas Model* includes "college or career choice, indecision, and financial aid" as student concerns addressed under the umbrella of responsive services (TEA, 2018, p. 91). This supports the idea that school counseling domains overlap significantly, and it would be extremely difficult to carry out a comprehensive and holistic school guidance program without addressing the whole individual. It follows that there is no way to fully prepare a student for college, career, or military readiness without addressing concerns related to social-emotional development. This was evident early on in the counseling movement and remains pertinent to this day despite conflicting opinions on the roles of the school counselor over the years (Aubrey, 1982); if nothing else, social-emotional health became an extremely important part of the school counselor's job during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, a phenomenon that upended and changed not only student's lives and mental health but also how we as humans engage in both education and career practices (Alexander et al., 2022).

Two Theoretically-based Career Counseling Interventions According to the Literature

In some ways, expecting a preadolescent to begin the process of career discernment seems unfair. While exploring career paths and interests is a key part of building one's identity, many adolescents are uncertain about who they are, much less what they want to study (Tocu, 2018). In fact, Gati and Saka (2001) found that many students seek assistance from multiple adults in their lives when discerning career paths, even to the point of expecting significant adults to make the decisions for them. It makes sense that given school is compulsory in the U.S., children may not experience much agency in determining their next steps. Tocu (2018) finds that students across rural and urban settings all struggle with independently determining their interests, relying on parents, teachers, and other stakeholders to support them. Clearly, school counselors play an important role as career counselors, not only because it is part of their occupation but also because students need help finding a starting place for discernment (Salma & Septiana, 2022).

Cognitive Information Processing

In order to best counsel students, the counselor should learn about the theories of career counseling. Salma and Septiana (2022) found success with Florida State University's Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) approach to career counseling, wherein one examines the client's cognitive and affective knowledge alongside problem-solving abilities and executive functioning



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to help drive career decisions (Sampson et al., 2020). Initially focusing on identifying one's interests, preferences, temperament, and needs alongside acquiring knowledge about careers supports adolescents in the initial step of obtaining the self-knowledge needed to proceed further (Gati & Saka, 2001; Tocu, 2018). A counselor subscribing to the CIP theory would then focus on the decision-making process related to career discernment. The school counselor, in this case, would encourage a student to engage in the Communication, Analysis, Synthesis, Valuing, and Execution (CASVE) Cycle of the CIP approach (Sampson et al., 2020): communicate with other stakeholders about career options, analyze their previous knowledge alongside new information to gain a better understanding, use career assessments to identify and synthesize various careers with their self-knowledge to refine their list of career options, evaluate the costs and benefits of career options allowing for narrowing down of potential career choices, and finally create and execute a plan of action to achieve their chosen option. A final step involves revisiting the decision-making process so that the student develops self-awareness concerning their role in the decision-making process. As such, the individual is better able to continue discerning independently (Salma & Septiana, 2022).

Narrative Career Theory

Narrative therapy models center on the research of Michael White and David Epston and focus on the notion that the individual is the expert in their life (Ekinici & Tokkas, 2024). As such, the individual creates stories about one's life to make sense of difficulties and move past them by restorying their roles and responsibilities. The counselor helps the client deconstruct ineffective stories and rewrite them to enable the client's success and well-being (Corey, 2015). An example might be a student with financial difficulties who dreams of pursuing undergraduate studies but strongly believes they will be unable to do this because they have to maintain a job to support their family. A narrative therapist might work on deconstructing the story that working while going to school is impossible and support the student in restorying their dream to include both work *and* school instead of work or school. Perhaps the most important aspect of narrative therapy is helping the client describe their experiences using positive and encouraging language (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Narrative career therapy (NCT) builds upon the original ideas of White and Epston to help inform career choices and pursuits by focusing on distress within one's career exploration as the 'problem-saturated story' to be addressed (Shefer, 2018). How the student presents this story does not need to be synonymous with the traditional writing process, as NCT does not dictate the way the story is told. NCT draws on the idea that stories are told and developed in numerous ways. One effective NCT intervention for adolescents is the incorporation of expressive arts. Pirog and Rachwal (2019) found that utilizing the comic strip method of storying is very successful for adolescents engaged in early career counseling. Unlike traditional career assessments designed to measure aptitudes and abilities, NCT interventions such as the narrative comic draw upon past



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experiences and autobiographical memory in creating a career story. A person is, after all, a sum of their experiences and abilities rather than their skill set alone. Adolescents who participated in the narrative experience of storytelling through comic strips showed much greater interest and self-efficacy in career planning due to engaging in their experiences (Pirog & Rachwal, 2019; Pordelan, Hosseinian, & Lashaki, 2021).

Sandtray Exploration with Adolescents

Sandtray is a powerful tool in counseling adolescents because it meets them developmentally, emotionally, and socially and provides the environment in which they can share their stories in a safe and non-threatening way (Draper, Ritter, & Willingham, 2003; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023). Adolescence is a time of significant change, cognitively, socially, and emotionally, and includes many developmental stressors (Burns, 2010; Guidry, 2018; Shen & Armstrong, 2008; Swank & Jahn, 2018). During this unique stage in life, adolescents grow in abstract and rational thinking, the ability to view others' perspectives, and begin the process of considering and reflecting on their futures (Burns, 2010; Guidry, 2018). Students in middle and late adolescence begin to develop a sense of independence and autonomy from their parents, gain a sense of self-awareness and identity, and start focusing on goals for higher education, vocation, or employment after high school. Adolescents thrive on peer-to-peer interactions but also look to family members for direction and guidance pertaining to their future careers (Swank & Jahn, 2018), which can lead to a sense of confusion and inner turmoil due to the conflict that can occur between their wishes and desires and those of their families and friends.

Sandtray goes hand in hand with the adolescent client's developmental, cognitive, and emotional characteristics. The safe and non-threatening environment provided by the counselor, along with the sensory nature of the sand and "necessary therapeutic distance" (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023, p. 8) provided by the use of the miniatures, serves as a powerful means for adolescents to explore their goals, wishes, fears, and desires. The adolescents' ability to use metaphor and symbols to represent their "inner and outer worlds" (Pearson & Wilson, 2001, p. 2), lends itself to sandtray, in which they can use the miniatures to gain insight and self-awareness, creating congruence between those worlds.

In the school setting, group work is an effective way for school counselors to provide the direct student services set forth by the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2018) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2020). Group sandtray is beneficial for working with adolescents because it allows for peer-to-peer support and the opportunity to gain insight from their own and others' experiences (Draper et al., 2003; Shen & Armstrong, 2008; Swank & Lenes, 2013).



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Case Presentation

Method

For the current case, the school counselor obtained informed consent from one 18-year-old high school female student and from the parents of a 17-year-old high school female student to participate in a group sandtray exercise to fulfill a requirement of the first author's graduate school training. The counselor presented each student with two sand trays, each with an assigned prompt. In the first tray, the students were tasked with creating "a scene in the sand about their career interests and goals." In the second tray, the counselor gave the prompt, "Complete a scene in the sand about the obstacles they faced in achieving their career goals." The students were then given approximately 15 minutes to complete the trays using an assortment of miniatures. Upon completing their trays, the counselor drew upon career and interpersonal counseling skills with a primary focus on narrative and client-centered techniques.

The first student created a career interest sandtray depicting a crime scene investigation. She expressed that she was somewhat interested in forensic science. However, she noted she wasn't entirely sure what such a career entailed other than further studies at the post-secondary level. She indicated that she had not made further plans as she was planning to work to save money for school. The student referenced this issue in her second tray in which she had placed a depiction of her childhood home, parents, a car, and several coins. In describing her second tray, she noted that the primary obstacles she faced included concrete barriers such as living at home with her parents and needing to work, which are both college/career-related financial uncertainties that many students face when contemplating college (Yavuz, 2019). At the same time, she noted that her parents were supportive of her plans and recommended working until she was more certain of what she wanted to study.

The second student's career interest sandtray depicted a scene where she was surrounded by miniatures representing people of all different ages and races. She also included a house, a cat, and a tree, representing factors her future career would allow her to obtain - financial stability and contentment. She noted that she might help people in many ways, and she wasn't sure the exact modality she would pursue; the diversity in her tray represented her helping people whoever they were. Meanwhile, she placed herself within a fenced-off area in her second tray. Outside of the fence were representations of various high-earning professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and the mayor. She appeared somewhat reluctant to talk about the obstacles because they represented a significant internal struggle between meeting her parent's expectations and pursuing her interests and goals.



Discussion

The authors found literature related to sandtray work with children and adolescents in elementary and middle schools (Foster, 2024; Shen & Armstrong, 2008), as well as adolescents in alternative education settings such as substance abuse facilities (McCormick, 2019; Swank & Lenes, 2013). Additionally, research exists related to using sandtray work with adults who are in the process of career exploration after graduating high school (Sangganjanavanich & Magnuson, 2011; Swank & Jahn, 2018). However, there appears to be limited research into using sandtray work as a modality for adolescent career counseling and exploration in the high school setting. Sandtray therapy is an amazing expressive arts technique that incorporates all learning styles. Initially developed by Margaret Lowenfeld (1979), sandtray taps into neurobiological circuits that words alone may not access. When stressors such as trauma have impacted the brain, using the modality of play may have a great healing power due to the tactile and non-verbal modalities in addition to verbal transactions. For that matter, sandtray encourages the participant to tell the story they want to tell, using visualization and allowing feelings to surface organically through the experiential process (Kestly, 2022). While adolescents and adults may not choose to participate in play, the sandtray is a tool that allows adults to access the benefits of play while allowing them to create something they find purposeful.

Similar to Pirog and Rachwal's (2019) comic strip narrative activity, the sandtray obstacle prompt presented an opportunity to identify and further explore the conflict in each student's career story. Nan Zhou (2024) found that the more congruent parent expectations were with student goals, the more confident adolescents were in their career goals and the more self-efficacy adolescents developed in pursuing career plans. This is evident for the first student in the case report, whose parents were very supportive of taking her time in determining what she wanted to study in college. This student's conflict in her career story included concrete obstacles that she could address through education, such as financial aid that her school counselor can help provide as part of college readiness (Yavuz, 2019). In fact, this student found that what were obstacles at first were actually resources - supportive parents, the ability to live at home while commuting to school, and the opportunity to work a job until she was ready to start school. She expressed that she felt more comfortable with her plans because she realized that she could write time into her career story as an asset her family had provided her. In short, the first student expressed feeling more confident in her plans given the opportunity to participate in the sandtray exercise.

The second student experienced much less congruence between her parents and herself with regard to her career interests and aspirations. Her parents strongly encouraged her to explore careers such as doctors or lawyers with high-earning potential. In contrast, the student was more interested in pursuing helping professions with less earning potential, such as teachers, social workers, psychologists, or therapists. Her sandtray reflected this by turning these parental



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expectations into obstacles, fencing herself into a box (Figure 1). She noted that she felt "trapped" by what others expected of her. One might see this as a lack of congruence between her desires and her parents' expectations, greatly limiting her self-efficacy to the point where she doubted her ability to independently determine her next steps following graduation from high school (Brown & Lent, 2015). As Kestly (2022) notes, using expressive arts and play in the counseling session allowed the second student to think more flexibly about her career goals and created a safe environment for exploring the incongruence she had not acknowledged aloud.

Figure 1
Student 2 Obstacle Tray



Note. Student 2 fenced a depiction of herself into a pen surrounded by miniatures representing various career professionals.



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From here, the school counselor can further help the student write a career story that includes parental involvement and the student's interests. One might say that the exercise afforded the student the agency to edit the fence out of her career story by reducing ambivalence associated with incongruence (Zhou, 2024). The exercise also illustrated the importance of communicating with stakeholders, the first step of the CASVE cycle (Sampson et al., 2020). Whereas she may have gotten stuck avoiding the needed communication with her parents, this student may now be able to have those conversations and allow herself permission to analyze and learn more about careers of her interest and to develop greater self-efficacy.

A further takeaway from this case is how using sandtray created a group climate where the students felt comfortable sharing their vulnerabilities. Sandtray therapy eliminates the pressure to explain oneself and one's thoughts in front of an audience, especially a group audience where individuals are not bound to ethical principles like the leader. The sandtray allows participants to "achieve clarity by visually and kinesthetically explicating their histories, current situations, ambivalence, and hopes for the future" (Sangganjanavanich & Magnuson, 2011, p. 265). Lowenfeld (1979) might say that participants can access their inner world without worrying about words. In fact, Lowenfeld's contemporary Kalff (1981) noted that words may be less important as sand therapy offers clients a window into their unconscious, as communicated through symbols. McCormick (2019) found that sandtray counseling in the group setting has shown improved group climate and therapeutic factors because it offers the chance to process one's unconscious while observing other members' insights and obtaining feedback. For example, had the one student not opened up about her incongruence with her parents' expectations, the other student may have never realized that what she thought were obstacles were actually supporting her career discernment. Meanwhile, the other student learned the importance of self-efficacy to reduce ambivalence (Zhou, 2024).

Conclusion

The authors find that research exists supporting the use of sandtrays in younger children and preadolescents in the school setting, adolescents in alternative settings, as well as the use of sandtrays in adults (Foster, 2024; McCormick, 2019; Sangganjanavanich & Magnuson, 2011, Shen & Armstrong, 2008; Swank & Jahn, 2018; Swank & Lenes, 2013). However, information is lacking with regard to using sandtrays, specifically with high school adolescents exploring career aspirations. This case report demonstrates the benefits of sandtray in career exploration with high school students. It suggests a need for further research into the use of sandtray within secondary school counseling programs with a focus on college and career readiness. The case suggests that tapping into the unconscious through this form of expressive arts therapy may benefit adolescents in developing self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to discern career interests and address identified barriers to pursuing those interests.



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