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Beyond Words: Exploring School Counselors' Experiences of Implementing Sandtray Therapy with Secondary School Students from Low-Income Families

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Abstract

School counselors increasingly encounter secondary school students from low-income families who experience complex emotional, behavioral, and psychosocial challenges. Although sandtray therapy is widely recognized as an expressive therapeutic approach, limited research has examined how school counselors implement it in authentic school settings. This study explored school counselors' experiences of implementing sandtray therapy with secondary school students from low-income families in Malaysian secondary schools. A qualitative multiple case study design, underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, was employed. Five full-time school counselors with formal training in sandtray therapy participated in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and multiple documentary sources, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis with support from NVivo. Four interrelated themes emerged: (1) therapeutic relationship as the foundation of intervention, (2) symbolic expression as a medium for emotional exploration, (3) professional adaptation in managing the therapeutic process, and (4) psychological growth through symbolic engagement. The findings indicate that effective implementation extends beyond symbolic play techniques and requires therapeutic relationships, professional flexibility, and responsive intervention strategies tailored to students' individual needs. This study contributes to school counseling literature by providing an in-depth understanding of sandtray therapy implementation in educational settings and highlights its potential as a developmentally appropriate expressive intervention to strengthen comprehensive school mental health services.

Keywords: Sandtray therapy, School counseling, School counselors, Low-income families, Qualitative case study

Resumo (Português)

O crescente número de estudantes do ensino secundário provenientes de famílias de baixa renda que apresentam desafios emocionais, comportamentais e psicossociais complexos tem ampliado as responsabilidades dos orientadores escolares. Embora a terapia com caixa de areia (*sandtray therapy*) seja amplamente reconhecida como uma abordagem terapêutica expressiva, poucos estudos investigaram como os orientadores escolares implementam essa intervenção em contextos escolares autênticos. Este estudo explorou as experiências de orientadores escolares na implementação da terapia com caixa de areia junto de estudantes do ensino secundário provenientes de famílias de baixa renda em escolas secundárias da Malásia. Foi adotado um desenho qualitativo de estudo de casos múltiplos, fundamentado no paradigma interpretativista. Participaram cinco orientadores escolares em tempo integral com formação formal em terapia com caixa de areia. Os dados foram recolhidos por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas e de múltiplas fontes documentais, e analisados por meio da análise temática de Braun e Clarke, com o apoio do software NVivo. Emergiram quatro temas inter-relacionados: (1) a relação terapêutica como fundamento da intervenção, (2) a expressão simbólica como meio de exploração emocional, (3) a adaptação profissional na gestão do processo terapêutico e (4) o crescimento psicológico por meio do envolvimento simbólico. Os resultados indicam que a implementação eficaz vai além das técnicas de jogo simbólico, exigindo relações terapêuticas sólidas, flexibilidade profissional e estratégias de intervenção responsivas às necessidades individuais dos estudantes. Este estudo contribui para a literatura sobre aconselhamento escolar ao fornecer uma compreensão aprofundada da implementação da terapia com caixa de areia em contextos educativos, destacando o seu potencial como intervenção expressiva, adequada ao desenvolvimento, para fortalecer serviços abrangentes de saúde mental escolar.

Palavras-chave: Terapia com caixa de areia; aconselhamento escolar; orientadores escolares; famílias de baixa renda; estudo qualitativo de casos múltiplos.

Resumen (Español)

Los orientadores escolares atienden cada vez con mayor frecuencia a estudiantes de educación secundaria procedentes de familias de bajos ingresos que presentan desafíos emocionales, conductuales y psicosociales complejos. Aunque la terapia con bandeja de arena (*sandtray therapy*) es ampliamente reconocida como un enfoque terapéutico expresivo, existe escasa investigación sobre cómo los orientadores escolares implementan esta intervención en contextos escolares reales. Este estudio exploró las experiencias de los orientadores escolares en la implementación de la terapia con bandeja de arena con estudiantes de educación secundaria de familias de bajos ingresos en escuelas secundarias de Malasia. Se empleó un diseño cualitativo de estudio de casos múltiples, sustentado en el paradigma interpretativo. Participaron cinco orientadores escolares de tiempo completo con formación formal en terapia con bandeja de arena. Los datos se recopilaron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y múltiples fuentes documentales, y se analizaron utilizando el análisis temático de Braun y Clarke con el apoyo del software NVivo. Surgieron cuatro temas interrelacionados: (1) la relación terapéutica como base de la intervención, (2) la expresión simbólica como medio para la exploración emocional, (3) la adaptación profesional en la gestión del proceso terapéutico y (4) el crecimiento psicológico mediante el compromiso simbólico. Los resultados indican que una implementación eficaz va más allá de las técnicas de juego simbólico, ya que requiere relaciones terapéuticas sólidas, flexibilidad profesional y estrategias de intervención adaptadas a las necesidades individuales de los estudiantes. Este estudio contribuye a la literatura sobre orientación escolar al ofrecer una comprensión profunda de la implementación de la terapia con bandeja de arena en contextos educativos y al resaltar su potencial como intervención expresiva, adecuada para el desarrollo, destinada a fortalecer los servicios integrales de salud mental escolar.

Palabras clave: Terapia con bandeja de arena; orientación escolar; orientadores escolares; familias de bajos ingresos; estudio cualitativo de casos múltiples.

1. Introduction

Mental health has become one of the most significant public health and educational concerns affecting children and adolescents worldwide. Increasing rates of anxiety, emotional distress, behavioral difficulties, and psychosocial problems have highlighted the importance of schools not only as institutions for academic learning but also as environments that promote students' psychological well-being (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Since students spend a substantial proportion of their daily lives in school, educational settings provide valuable opportunities for early identification, prevention, and intervention for emerging mental health concerns (Fazel et al., 2014). Consequently, school-based mental health services have become an essential component of comprehensive educational support systems, reflecting a global emphasis on integrating psychological care within routine school practice (Hoagwood et al., 2007; Weist et al., 2017).

Within this context, school counselors play a pivotal role in supporting students' emotional, behavioral, social, and psychological development. Their responsibilities extend beyond crisis intervention to include preventive, developmental, and remedial counseling that promotes resilience, healthy adjustment, and psychological well-being (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2022). However, the increasing complexity of students' emotional and psychosocial needs has created new challenges for school counselors. Many students experience family conflict, socioeconomic hardship, emotional distress, and interpersonal difficulties that affect both their academic performance and overall well-being (Evans et al., 2013; Reiss, 2013). These challenges require counselors to employ interventions that are developmentally appropriate, therapeutically effective, and practical within the realities of school counseling practice (Evans et al., 2013; Reiss, 2013).

Among the student populations requiring particular attention are those from low-income families. Socioeconomic disadvantage is consistently associated with increased exposure to family instability, financial hardship, limited educational resources, emotional stress, and reduced opportunities for healthy psychological development (Yoshikawa et al., 2012; Evans et al., 2013). Such adversities may contribute to emotional dysregulation, behavioral difficulties, reduced self-esteem, and poorer school adjustment (McLaughlin & Sheridan, 2016). Because schools provide continuous access to students throughout their developmental years, school counselors are uniquely positioned to identify psychosocial concerns early and implement appropriate interventions that support students' emotional and psychological functioning (ASCA, 2019).

Despite the availability of various counseling approaches, establishing meaningful therapeutic engagement with secondary school students remains challenging. Many adolescents experience difficulties expressing emotionally painful experiences through conventional talk-based counseling, particularly when these involve family conflict, neglect, trauma, poverty, or feelings of shame. Expressive therapeutic approaches therefore offer valuable

alternatives by allowing students to communicate internal experiences through symbolic and creative forms of expression rather than relying solely on verbal interaction (Landreth, 2012; Malchiodi, 2020).

Sandtray therapy has emerged as one of the most widely recognized expressive therapeutic approaches for children and adolescents. Using sand and miniature figures, students can externalize emotions, personal experiences, relationships, and conflicts in symbolic form within a psychologically safe environment. Previous studies have demonstrated that sandtray therapy contributes positively to emotional expression, self-awareness, resilience, and psychological adjustment across educational and clinical settings (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). Its flexibility and developmental appropriateness make it particularly suitable for school counseling, where counselors frequently work with students who experience difficulties verbalizing complex emotional experiences (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022; Landreth, 2012).

Although the therapeutic benefits of sandtray therapy have been widely documented, existing research has predominantly focused on intervention outcomes, symptom reduction, and changes in students' emotional or behavioral functioning (Zhang et al., 2021). Comparatively little attention has been given to understanding how school counselors themselves implement sandtray therapy within authentic school counseling settings. In particular, limited research has examined how counselors establish therapeutic relationships, facilitate symbolic emotional expression, adapt therapeutic interventions according to students' individual needs, and support students' psychological development throughout the counseling process (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022). Furthermore, studies involving secondary school students from low-income families remain relatively scarce despite the unique psychosocial challenges experienced by this population (Reiss, 2013; Evans et al., 2013).

Addressing these gaps, the present study explores school counselors' experiences of implementing sandtray therapy with secondary school students from low-income families in Malaysian secondary schools. Using a qualitative multiple case study design, the study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the therapeutic processes, professional practices, and contextual factors that influence the implementation of sandtray therapy within school counseling. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing literature on school counseling and expressive therapeutic interventions while providing practical implications for counselor education, school-based mental health services, and future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Adlerian Individual Psychology as the primary theoretical foundation guiding the implementation of sandtray therapy in school counseling. Adlerian theory emphasizes that individuals are goal-oriented and interpret life experiences through subjective meanings shaped by family relationships, social interactions, and early life experiences (Adler, 1956). Rather than focusing solely on psychological symptoms, Adlerian counseling seeks to understand individuals holistically by exploring their lifestyle, beliefs, social interest, and personal strengths. Within school counseling, this theoretical perspective encourages counselors to establish collaborative therapeutic relationships that foster encouragement, self-understanding, and positive behavioral change.

The implementation of sandtray therapy in this study is guided by the practical framework proposed by Homeyer and Sweeney (2022), which conceptualizes symbolic play as a therapeutic medium for facilitating emotional expression and psychological exploration. Through miniature figures and sand, students can externalize thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences that may be difficult to express verbally. Instead of relying on direct questioning, counselors facilitate reflective dialogue that enables students to construct personal meanings from their symbolic representations. Consequently, sandtray therapy complements Adlerian counseling by providing a developmentally appropriate and non-threatening approach for exploring students' internal experiences within school settings.

The study also draws upon Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Model to interpret the psychological changes observed throughout the counseling process. Ryff (1989) conceptualizes psychological well-being as a multidimensional construct comprising self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others. Although the present study does not quantitatively measure psychological well-being, these dimensions offer a useful conceptual lens for understanding the psychological development described by school counselors during sandtray therapy implementation.

Together, Adlerian Individual Psychology, Homeyer and Sweeney's Sandtray Therapy framework, and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Model provide a complementary theoretical foundation for this study. Adlerian theory explains the counseling process and therapeutic relationship; sandtray therapy provides the intervention framework through symbolic expression; and Ryff's model assists in interpreting students' psychological growth throughout the intervention. The integration of these perspectives offers a comprehensive understanding of how school counselors implement sandtray therapy to support secondary school students from low-income families.

2.1 Tables

Table 1: *Theoretical Framework Underpinning the Study*

Theory/Framework	Key Concepts	Application in the Present Study
Adlerian Individual Psychology (Adler, 1956)	Encouragement, lifestyle, social interest, goal-directed behavior	Guided the counseling process and therapeutic relationship established by school counselors.
Sandtray Therapy (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022)	Symbolic play, metaphor, emotional expression, reflection	Guided the implementation of sandtray therapy as an expressive therapeutic intervention.
Psychological Well-Being (Ryff, 1989)	Self-acceptance, personal growth, autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations, purpose in life	Provided a conceptual lens for interpreting students' psychological changes observed throughout counseling.

Source: Developed by the authors based on Adler (1956), Homeyer and Sweeney (2022), and Ryff (1989).

3. Methodology

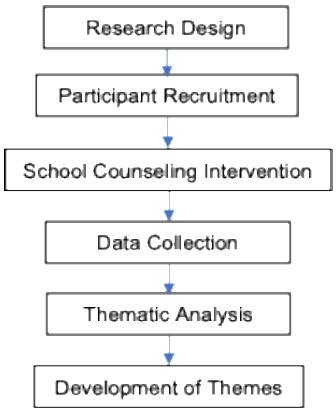
This study employed a qualitative methodology to explore school counselors' experiences of implementing sandtray therapy with secondary school students from low-income families. The methodological approach was designed to obtain an in-depth understanding of counselors' perspectives within authentic school counseling settings. This section describes the research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, data analysis, and strategies adopted to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to explore school counselors' experiences implementing sandtray therapy with secondary school students from low-income families. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' subjective experiences, interpretations, and professional practices within authentic school counseling settings rather than measuring predetermined variables. The multiple case study design enabled the researcher to examine similarities and differences across several school counselors while preserving the contextual richness of each case.

The study was underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed through individuals' experiences and social interactions. This philosophical perspective was appropriate because the implementation of sandtray therapy is shaped by counselors' professional judgment, therapeutic relationships, and the unique contexts in which counseling sessions occur. Consequently, the findings were developed through participants' lived experiences and supported by multiple sources of qualitative evidence. The study followed a systematic research process encompassing participant recruitment, implementation of the school counseling intervention, data collection, and thematic analysis. The overall workflow of the study, from research design to theme development, is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *Overview of the Research Workflow*



3.2 Research Context

This study was conducted in government secondary schools in the Hulu Langat District, Selangor, Malaysia. The participating schools were selected because they employed full-time school counselors who had received formal training in sandtray therapy and routinely provided counseling services to students experiencing a range of emotional, behavioral, family-related, and psychosocial challenges. The participating students were identified as coming from low-income families based on school administrative records and socioeconomic information maintained by the schools.

Within the Malaysian education system, school counselors play a central role in promoting students' mental health and psychosocial well-being through preventive, developmental, and remedial counseling services. In addition to addressing academic, career, and personal-social concerns, school counselors are increasingly required to respond to students experiencing psychological distress associated with socioeconomic disadvantage. Consequently, school counseling has become an important platform for implementing therapeutic interventions that are accessible within students' everyday educational environment.

Sandtray therapy was implemented within the natural context of routine school counseling services rather than as a researcher-controlled intervention. Counseling sessions were conducted in designated counseling rooms during school hours and were integrated into existing counseling programs according to students' individual needs and counselors' professional judgment. Examining sandtray therapy in authentic school settings therefore enabled the study to capture counselors' real-world experiences implementing expressive therapeutic approaches in everyday educational settings.

3.3 Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with direct experience implementing sandtray therapy in secondary school counseling practice. Five full-time school counselors participated in the study. All participants were officially appointed by the Malaysian Ministry of Education, held professional counseling qualifications, and had completed formal training in sandtray therapy. In addition, each counselor had several years of professional experience providing counseling services in secondary schools and had implemented sandtray therapy with students from low-income families.

The participating school counselors conducted sandtray therapy with 10 secondary school students aged 13 to 17 years. The students were identified by their respective schools as coming from low-income families based on school administrative records and eligibility criteria established by the Malaysian education system. They presented a range of psychosocial concerns commonly encountered in school counseling, including family-related issues, emotional distress, behavioral difficulties, peer relationship problems, and challenges associated with socioeconomic disadvantage.

Although the counseling intervention involved both school counselors and students, the primary unit of analysis was the school counselors' experiences of implementing sandtray therapy. Accordingly, data interpretation focused on counselors' reflections, professional decision-making, therapeutic practices, and observations of students' psychological development throughout the intervention.

Table 2: *Characteristics of the participating school counselors*

Participant	Gender	Years of Counseling Experience	Professional Qualification	Sandtray Therapy Training	Students
SC 1	Female	22	Registered Counselor	Level 3 Certified	2
SC 2	Female	15	Registered Counselor	Level 3 Certified	2
SC 3	Female	23	Registered Counselor	Level 3 Certified	2
SC 4	Female	26	Registered Counselor	Level 3 Certified	2
SC 5	Female	20	Registered Counselor	Level 3 Certified	2

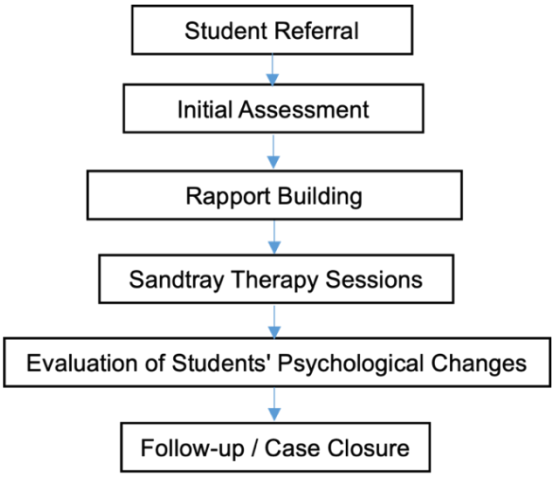
3.4 School Counseling Intervention

Sandtray therapy was implemented by the participating school counselors as part of their routine school counseling services rather than as a researcher-administered intervention. The intervention was conducted within the natural context of secondary school counseling, where counselors addressed students' emotional, behavioral, family-related, and psychosocial concerns in accordance with professional counseling practice. The researcher did not participate in delivering the intervention but assumed the role of observer and interpreter by examining counselors' experiences through interviews and multiple qualitative data sources.

The implementation of sandtray therapy followed the therapeutic procedures proposed by Homeyer and Sweeney (2022), which provide a structured yet flexible framework for facilitating symbolic expression and emotional exploration. Across all participating schools, counselors prepared the counseling environment, introduced students to the sandtray and miniature figures, facilitated the construction of symbolic scenes, encouraged reflective exploration of the symbolic representations, and documented each counseling session. While the core therapeutic procedures remained consistent, counselors adapted the pace and focus of the intervention according to each student's presenting concerns, emotional readiness, and therapeutic progress.

Unlike standardized intervention programs, sandtray therapy was integrated into ongoing school counseling services. Consequently, the number and duration of counseling sessions varied across students based on their individual needs and the professional judgment of the participating counselors. This flexible implementation reflects authentic school counseling practice, in which therapeutic interventions are continuously adjusted to accommodate students' psychological needs within the educational setting.

Figure 2: *School Counseling Sandtray Therapy Intervention Process*



3.5 Data Collection

Data were collected from multiple qualitative sources to obtain a comprehensive understanding of school counselors' experiences in implementing sandtray therapy. The primary source of data consisted of semi-structured individual interviews conducted with the five participating school counselors. The interviews explored counselors' experiences implementing sandtray therapy, including the development of therapeutic relationships, the facilitation of symbolic emotional expression, challenges encountered during counseling, and the perceived psychological changes observed among students throughout the intervention.

Table 3: *Sources of qualitative data*

Data Source	**Purpose**
Semi-structured interviews	Explore counselors' experiences
Session reports	Verify intervention process
Reflection notes	Understand professional counselors' reflections
Sandtray photographs	Support interpretation
Session sketches	Examine symbolic representations

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, interview data were complemented by multiple documentary sources generated during the counseling process. These included counselors' session reports, reflective notes, photographs of completed sandtray constructions, sketches of symbolic scenes, counseling records, and relevant supervision documentation. The use of multiple data sources enabled methodological triangulation and provided richer contextual understanding of counselors' experiences beyond verbal interview accounts.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Documentary materials were organized alongside interview transcripts to facilitate systematic comparison during data analysis. The integration of interviews and documentary evidence allowed the researcher to examine consistency across different sources while capturing the complexity of implementing sandtray therapy within authentic school counseling settings.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis followed six iterative phases: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Interview transcripts and supporting documentary materials were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarisation before meaningful units were inductively coded. Similar codes were subsequently organized into broader categories and refined into coherent themes that reflected shared patterns across the participating school counselors' experiences of implementing sandtray therapy.

Qualitative data management was supported by NVivo software, which facilitated systematic coding, retrieval of data segments, cross-participant comparisons, and organization of emerging themes. Throughout the analytical process, the researcher moved iteratively between the original data, coded extracts, and developing thematic structures to ensure that the themes remained grounded in participants' accounts.

3.7 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was established following the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, triangulation of multiple data sources, and member checking, whereby participating school counselors reviewed the accuracy of interview transcripts and interpretations. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining a detailed audit trail that documented methodological decisions, coding development, and analytical procedures throughout the study.

Confirmability was addressed through continuous researcher reflexivity and peer discussions regarding theme development to minimize potential researcher bias. Transferability was supported by providing rich descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, counseling processes, and analytical procedures, thereby enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational contexts.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant university research ethics committee prior to data collection. Approval to conduct the study within secondary schools was also obtained from the Malaysian Ministry of Education and the relevant educational authorities. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all participating school counselors. Permission for students' involvement in the counseling intervention and the use of relevant counseling documentation was obtained in accordance with institutional and ethical requirements.

To protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all school counselors and students, and identifying information was removed from interview transcripts and supporting documents. All electronic and printed research data were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. Throughout the study, ethical principles relating to confidentiality, voluntary participation, beneficence, and respect for participants' rights were strictly maintained.

5. Results and Discussions

The analysis generated four interrelated themes that represent school counselors' experiences of implementing sandtray therapy with secondary school students from low-income families. The findings demonstrate that sandtray therapy was not merely a therapeutic technique involving symbolic materials, but a dynamic counseling process requiring relational competence, sensitivity to students' emotional experiences, professional adaptation, and continuous support for psychological development. The four themes identified were: (1) therapeutic relationship as the foundation of intervention, (2) symbolic expression as a medium for emotional exploration, (3) professional adaptation in managing the therapeutic process, and (4) psychological growth through symbolic engagement. Table 4 presents the themes and subthemes derived from the analysis.

Table 4: *Themes and Subthemes Emerging from the Data*

Theme	Subthemes
Therapeutic Relationship as the Foundation of Intervention	• Creating a safe therapeutic environment • Developing trust and rapport • Encouraging collaborative engagement • Promoting emotional openness
Symbolic Expression as a Medium for Emotional Exploration	• Externalizing emotions through symbolic play • Using metaphors to communicate lived experiences • Encouraging emotional exploration through miniature figures • Supporting multisensory engagement during counseling
Professional Adaptation in Managing the Therapeutic Process	• Adapting interventions according to students' emotional readiness • Interpreting symbolic behaviors therapeutically • Respecting students' autonomy during counseling • Applying professional judgment and therapeutic flexibility
Psychological Growth Through Symbolic Engagement	• Enhancing self-awareness • Improving emotional regulation • Strengthening interpersonal understanding • Encouraging autonomy and adaptive decision-making

5.1 Therapeutic Relationship as the Foundation of Intervention

All participating school counselors emphasized that establishing a therapeutic relationship was the essential foundation for students to meaningfully engage in sandtray therapy. Participants explained that students from low-income families often entered counseling with emotional difficulties associated with family conflict, financial challenges, neglect, and interpersonal struggles. These experiences frequently influenced students' willingness to communicate openly, particularly during the initial counseling sessions. Previous literature has highlighted that adolescents experiencing psychosocial adversity may demonstrate difficulties in emotional disclosure and therapeutic engagement, particularly when their experiences involve sensitive personal and family-related concerns (Gil, 2017; Landreth, 2012).

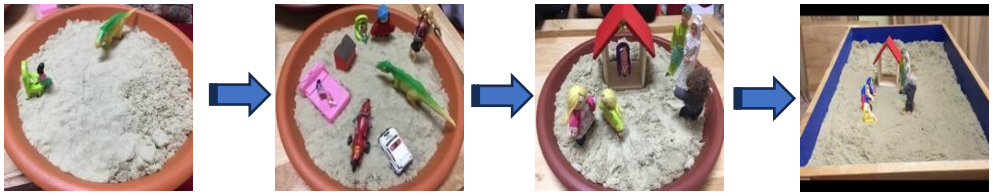
Rather than encouraging immediate verbal disclosure, counselors described how sandtray therapy provided a less threatening pathway for communication. Through the creation of symbolic scenes, students gradually developed confidence to share personal experiences while maintaining emotional distance from sensitive issues. One school counselor explained:

"Trust comes first. Students become more willing to trust because they realize they are not talking directly about themselves. Instead, they communicate through the miniature figures, which makes it easier for them to share their experiences." (SC1)

Participants further highlighted that psychological safety was developed through acceptance, respect, and non-judgmental interactions. Counselors intentionally allowed students to select miniatures, construct scenes, and interpret meanings according to their own experiences rather than imposing external interpretations. This collaborative approach strengthened students' sense of ownership and encouraged greater openness throughout the intervention. Such relational processes are consistent with child-centered counseling perspectives, which emphasize acceptance, empathy, and the therapeutic relationship as essential conditions for psychological growth (Landreth, 2012; Ray, 2011).

These findings also align with Adlerian Individual Psychology, which views encouragement, belonging, and social connectedness as important elements in facilitating positive psychological development (Adler, 1956). In the context of sandtray therapy, the counselor's role extends beyond facilitating symbolic activities to creating a relational environment where students feel secure enough to explore their internal experiences.

Figure 3: *Depiction of sandtray scenes and narrative sharing of clients' experiences throughout counseling sessions using sandtray therapy.*



Counseling session 1 Counseling session 2 Counseling session 3 Counseling session 4

5.2 Symbolic Expression as a Medium for Emotional Exploration

The second theme illustrates the central role of symbolic communication in facilitating emotional expression among students. Participants consistently reported that many students initially experienced difficulty identifying and verbalizing emotions related to family problems, rejection, loneliness, and personal struggles. However, through the use of miniature figures, sand arrangement, and symbolic representations, students gradually expressed experiences that were difficult to communicate through conventional talk-based counseling.

One counselor described:

"Some students could not explain how they felt, but once they started arranging the miniatures, the whole story gradually unfolded. The sandtray became their language." (SC2)

Counselors observed that symbolic representations frequently reflected students' relationships with family members, significant others, personal fears, and aspirations. The use of symbols enabled students to externalize emotional experiences, allowing them to explore difficult feelings from a psychologically safe distance. This finding supports previous conceptualizations of sandtray therapy as an expressive approach that allows individuals to communicate internal experiences through symbols, metaphors, and visual representations rather than relying solely on verbal expression (Carey, 1999; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022). School counselors also highlighted the importance of metaphorical expression, where students represented complex life experiences through objects and symbolic scenes rather than direct explanations. Such symbolic processes are particularly valuable when working with children and adolescents who may have limited emotional vocabulary or experience difficulty discussing distressing experiences directly (Gil, 2017).

In addition, counselors identified multisensory engagement as an important element of the therapeutic process. Manipulating sand and miniature figures provided students with tactile and visual experiences that fostered emotional involvement and sustained engagement, particularly for students who had difficulty with verbal communication. Previous literature suggests that the experiential and sensory characteristics of sandtray therapy contribute to deeper self-exploration by engaging cognitive, emotional, and embodied processes simultaneously (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022).

These findings are consistent with previous understandings of sandtray therapy as a symbolic and experiential intervention. Homeyer and Sweeney highlighted that sandtray provides individuals with opportunities to communicate internal experiences through symbolic representation. From an Adlerian perspective, symbolic constructions may reflect students' subjective meanings, private logic, and lifestyle patterns (Adler, 1956). Therefore, sandtray therapy provides counselors with opportunities to explore students' experiences without imposing predetermined meanings.

5.3 Professional Adaptation in Managing the Therapeutic Process

The third theme highlights the professional adaptability required by school counselors when implementing sandtray therapy within school settings. Participants explained that effective implementation required more than knowledge of therapeutic procedures; it involved continuous observation, clinical judgement, and adjustment according to students' developmental and emotional readiness.

School counselors reported that students expressed emotions not only verbally but also through interactions with sandtray materials. For example, some students demonstrated anger, sadness, or emotional conflict through the placement, separation, or destruction of miniature figures. Rather than controlling these behaviors, counselors interpreted them as meaningful symbolic expressions requiring sensitive therapeutic responses. This approach reflects the principles of play therapy, where children's play behaviors are understood as meaningful forms of communication rather than merely recreational activities (Landreth, 2012; Ray, 2011).

One participant stated:

"The sandtray allowed students to release emotions naturally. My role was not to control the activity but to understand what the symbolic actions represented before responding therapeutically." (SC4)

Participants also emphasized the importance of respecting students' autonomy throughout the intervention. Counselors avoided directing students towards specific interpretations and instead encouraged reflection based on students' personal meanings. Such flexibility is consistent with the fundamental principles of sandtray therapy, which emphasize allowing clients to construct and interpret symbolic worlds according to their own subjective experiences (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022).

The findings indicate that sandtray therapy implementation requires flexibility rather than rigid adherence to procedures. Within school counseling environments, where students present diverse emotional and contextual challenges, counselors must integrate technical knowledge with professional sensitivity. This adaptive role is consistent with comprehensive school counseling models that emphasize responsive services, developmental appropriateness, and counselor responsiveness to students' individual needs (ASCA, 2022; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012).

5.4 Psychological Growth Through Symbolic Engagement

The final theme reflects school counselors' observations of students' psychological changes throughout the sandtray therapy process. Participants described these changes as gradual developments that emerged after students established trust, expressed emotions symbolically, and engaged in reflective exploration.

School counselors identified increased self-awareness as one of the most significant changes observed. Through symbolic representations, students gradually recognized their emotional experiences, personal difficulties, and patterns of interaction with others. Participants also reported improvements in emotional regulation, including greater ability to express feelings appropriately and reduced tendencies towards emotional withdrawal or self-rejection. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that expressive therapeutic approaches support self-reflection by enabling individuals to organize and make meaning of complex internal experiences (Carey, 1999; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022).

Beyond emotional changes, counselors observed improvements in students' understanding of interpersonal relationships. Symbolic exploration enabled students to reconsider family and peer relationships from different perspectives, contributing to greater empathy and awareness of others' experiences. Participants further noted that students became more confident in making decisions and identifying possible solutions to personal challenges.

These findings suggest that psychological growth occurred as a cumulative outcome of the therapeutic process rather than as a direct result of symbolic play alone. Through therapeutic relationships, symbolic communication, and reflective exploration, students developed greater understanding of themselves and their circumstances. This interpretation is consistent with Adlerian concepts of insight, encouragement, and social interest, where individuals develop healthier ways of responding to life challenges through increased self-understanding (Adler, 1956).

The observed changes also correspond with Ryff's psychological well-being dimensions, particularly self-acceptance, personal growth, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relationships (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Although psychological well-being was not quantitatively measured, counselors' observations indicated qualitative improvements consistent with these dimensions.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that sandtray therapy provides a meaningful therapeutic approach for supporting secondary school students from low-income families. The intervention enables counselors to access students' emotional experiences, facilitate symbolic communication, and support psychological development within authentic school counseling contexts.

5.5 Limitation and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged in interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study involved five school counselors from secondary schools within a single district in Malaysia; therefore, the findings provide contextual understanding of sandtray therapy implementation rather than statistical generalization. Second, the findings were primarily derived from counselors' perspectives, although multiple data sources were incorporated to enhance credibility.

Future studies may include students' perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their therapeutic experiences. In addition, further research involving diverse school contexts and longitudinal designs is recommended to explore the sustained contribution of sandtray therapy to students' psychological development.

6. Conclusions

This study explored school counselors' experiences of implementing sandtray therapy with secondary school students from low-income families within the Malaysian school counseling context. The findings demonstrate that sandtray therapy involves more than the use of symbolic materials; it is a dynamic therapeutic process shaped by therapeutic relationships, symbolic communication, counselors' professional adaptability, and students' psychological development. Through the perspectives of school counselors, the study highlights how sandtray therapy provides an alternative medium for students to express emotional experiences, explore personal meanings, and develop greater self-awareness.

This study contributes to the limited literature on the application of sandtray therapy within school-based counseling, particularly among students from low-income backgrounds in Malaysia. The findings emphasize the importance of strengthening school counselors' competencies in expressive therapeutic approaches, including symbolic interpretation, relational skills, and reflective practice. Future research may further explore students' perspectives and examine the long-term contribution of sandtray therapy in supporting students' psychological well-being across diverse educational contexts. The findings support the integration of sandtray therapy as a developmentally appropriate expressive intervention within comprehensive school counseling services, particularly for vulnerable adolescents from low-income families.

7. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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