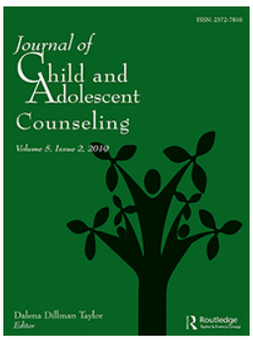

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Teacher–Child Relationship Building: Trainers' Perceptions of a Play-Based Intervention

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Teacher–child relationship building (TCRB) is a play-based professional development program designed to strengthen the teacher–child relationship, improve student behavior, enhance academic involvement, and develop classroom management skills of early education teachers. Although researchers have

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examined the process and impact of play-based interventions from the perspective of teacher participants, no study to date has explored trainers' perspectives. As part of a larger intervention, in the current study the research team utilized a phenomenological approach to examine five trainers' perceptions of a play-based intervention, including their views of teachers' skill development, teacher–child relationships, and student behavior. Analysis of the trainers' reflexive journals yielded five major themes: relationships, play therapy skills, emotional response to the learning process, supervision, and child's experience. Findings of this study have the potential to inform professional development models, particularly related to school-based interventions and the training of paraprofessionals.

Keywords: teacher–child relationships, play therapy, mental health in schools

Identifying early mental health interventions designed to meet the unique needs of children is a growing concern in many countries throughout the world (Belfer, 2014; Insel, 2014; Polanczyk, Salum, Sugaya, Caye, & Rohde, 2015). In the United States alone, approximately 20% of children have a mental health problem that is diagnosable, yet more than 65% of these children will not get the help they need (Mental Health America [MHA], 2011). If their needs are not promptly addressed, these children are at high risk of dropping out of school and developing conduct problems, antisocial behaviors, delinquency, and mental health disorders later in life (National Center for Children in Poverty [NCCP], 2009). These findings highlight the need for schools to provide prevention and early mental health intervention services to young children to address emotional and behavioral problems and increase academic engagement.

The American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2012) provides guidelines to develop comprehensive school counseling programs that attend to the needs of students. According to the Ed Trust (2009) "A transformed school counselor focuses on the relations between students and the school to reduce the environmental and institutional barriers impeding student academic success" (p. 2). School counselors are leaders and advocates within the educational system; utilizing a comprehensive school counseling program addresses inequalities and promotes systemic changes that allow students to reach their full potential.

The Role of the School Counselor

School counselors have the responsibility to implement comprehensive school counseling programs that focus on addressing students' academic, career, and socioemotional development (ASCA, 2012). Due to a variety of factors, such as poverty, parental negligence, social stigma, and lack of access to medical insurance (NCCP, 2009), children who face risk factors tend to underutilize community mental health services. This significant need and lack of services creates the charge for school counselors to implement innovative approaches that can help maximize their efforts in meeting the unique needs of students. These innovative approaches must include attention to efficient use of resources and a focus on capacity building.

Capacity building, commonly linked to community engagement, involves maximizing resources, increasing potential, and improving overall effectiveness of a system (McKay, Sanders, & Wroblewski, 2011). Within the school context, capacity building often involves developing the socioemotional and academic prowess of students through engaging and training key such stakeholders as administrators, parents, and teachers (Kelly et al., 2010). Childs and

Russell (2017) corroborate that capacity building in schools includes addressing the skills, attitudes, and knowledge of teachers and other stakeholders.

Often, students are referred to school counselors because of disruptive classroom behaviors (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Meany-Walen, Teeling, Davis, Artley, & Vignovich, 2016). Research has found that high levels of externalizing behavioral problems in children increase teachers' stress (Friedman-Krauss, Raver, Morris, & Jones, 2014). In addition, there is a negative correlation between teachers' stress levels and their ability to create positive classroom environments (Friedman-Krauss, Raver, Morris, & Jones, 2014). This is important because positive classroom environments are linked to children's academic and socioemotional development (Raver et al., 2009). In response, Zhai, Raver, and Li-Grining (2012) emphasized the importance of providing teachers with skills to best address students' mental health concerns within the classroom environment. The authors stated that teachers' trainings serve "[to] reduce preschool children's disruptive behaviors and improve teachers' self-efficacy in classroom management, as well as the overall quality of classrooms with high concentrations of low-income children" (p. 442). When school counselors are unable to provide teacher trainings directly, they can build partnerships with outside stakeholders who can serve as direct providers.

Through facilitating consultations and trainings, school counselors provide teachers with knowledge and skills that can positively impact classroom management and teacher–student relationship (Dinkmeyer, Carlson, & Michel, 2016). In addition, teachers can use the skills learned not only to deal with current student issues but also to prevent future problems (Stone & Dahir, 2016). In turn, this can have a positive impact on the entire system. Because the impact of the teacher–child relationship on the socioemotional and academic adjustment of students is significant (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012), especially for minority children exposed to risk factors (Murray & Zvoch, 2011), scholars advocate for school counselors to focus on facilitating interventions aimed at strengthening such relationship (Morrison & Bratton, 2010).

Teacher–Child Relationships

Development of secure relationships with caregivers is an important life task for young children as it fosters and promotes their socioemotional growth and helps them develop a positive view of themselves and the world (Morrison & Bratton, 2010). Because children tend to spend a significant amount of time at school, teachers play a critical role in children's socioemotional development. Improved relationships between students and teachers have been linked to improved student classroom behavior (Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008). On the contrary, Hamre and Pinta (2001) found that children who developed negative relationships with their teachers were likely to disengage in class, do poorly academically, avoid school, and exhibit conduct problems.

Professional development programs usually focus on academic content rather than child development and relationship-building skills (Koles, O'Connor, & McCartney, 2009). Interventions aimed at training teachers to meet their students' socioemotional needs benefit teachers as well as children by promoting teachers' sense of competence and reducing their level of stress (Pianta, Downer, & Hamre, 2016). Whereas it is important to provide teachers with specific training geared at improving their relationship-building skills and promoting students' socioemotional adjustment, professional development programs also should be tailored to meet children's' unique maturational needs. This includes employing developmentally appropriate programs, such as play-based interventions.

Teacher–Child Relationship Building

Teacher–child relationship building (TCRB; Lindo et al., 2014) is an adaption of kinder training (White, Flynt, & Draper, 1997) and filial therapy (Guerney, 1964). TCRB is rooted in the principles of child-centered play therapy (CCPT; Landreth, 2012) and combines principles of child development, classroom management, and teacher consultation. TCRB is a professional development program that utilizes the teacher–child relationship to promote positive outcomes for the student and teacher. An improved teacher–child relationship can lead to the child's improved social, behavioral, and academic functioning.

TCRB is an in-service play-based program in which counselors train teachers to be therapeutic agents for their classroom children. Two major training modules make up the TCRB program: (a) play session training and supervision and (b) classroom training (Lindo et al., 2014).

The purpose of the current study was to examine trainers' experiences implementing TCRB with early education teachers. This study was developed within the context of a larger study examining the effect of TCRB on teacher stress, the teacher–child relationship, and student behavior. Whereas the quantitative component of the study focused on evaluations of the intervention from the teachers' perspectives, the current study explored the perspectives of the TCRB trainers.

Research Question

This study addressed the following guiding research question: What are trainers' perceptions of the process of TCRB and its impact on the teacher–child relationship, students' socioemotional behavior, and teachers' classroom management skills?

METHOD

Research Design

Although researchers have examined the process and impact of play-based interventions from the perspective of teacher participants (Lindo et al., 2014), no study to date has explored trainers' perspectives. When there is limited information on a topic or when there are unknown constructs, qualitative methodology may be used to determine the parameters of a phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). In the current study, the researchers utilized a phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis to gain an in-depth understanding of trainers' perceptions of the process and impact of TCRB. Phenomenology is designed to investigate the ways in which participants extract meaning from their unique experiences (Patton, 2002). In line with this methodological approach, the researchers analyzed TCRB trainers' reflexive journals to gain knowledge of their unique lived experiences as well as their collective perceptions (Wertz, 2005), specifically within the framework of conducting the TCRB intervention.

Setting

The intervention site was an early-learning academy in the southwestern United States composed of 18 prekindergarten classrooms and one special education classroom. The school had a diverse population of 264 students, including 3.8% Asian, 9.8% Black/African American, 20.8% White, 65.2% Hispanic/Latino, and 0.4% Native American.

Participants

Teachers

Eighteen teachers in the general prekindergarten classrooms participated in the TCRB training. The participants were 17 women and one man ages 22 to 53. The participant sample was a racially and ethnically diverse group, including Hispanic (n = 8), Caucasian (n = 9), and Asian (n = 1). Years of teaching experience ranged from two to 28 years (M = 8.6 years). Of these 18 teachers, 14 held bachelor's degrees and four held graduate degrees.

TCRB Trainers

TCRB is an in-service professional development program intended for implementation by the school counselor. However, because the intervention site did not have an on-site school counselor, the principal invited the training team to conduct TCRB with the teachers. The training team was composed of five doctoral counseling students with specialized training in play therapy, TCRB, and school-based interventions. This number is consistent with Creswell's (2013) recommendation of between five and 25 participants for a phenomenological study. Led by the first author, the five doctoral counseling students conducted the initial two-day TCRB training. The first author then assigned each of the five doctoral counseling students to work with three to four teachers for the duration of the eight-week TCRB intervention.

During the subsequent eight-week intervention period, trainers provided their assigned teachers with play session training, supervision, and classroom support, and utilized reflexive journals to record detailed observations of their experiences. The reflexive journals were analyzed for themes related to the trainers' perceptions of the process and perceived impact of the TCRB intervention, including their views of teachers' skill development, teacher–child relationships, and student behavior.

Research Team

The research team was composed of the first author and two doctoral counseling students not directly connected to TCRB training. All three researchers had training and experience in qualitative research methodology. The first author was an associate professor and play therapy course instructor at a large suburban university in the southwestern United States. The doctoral counseling students assisted the first author with data analysis and coding procedures.

In-Service Professional Development Program

Initial Training

The TCRB intervention began with a two-day training program of lectures, group discussions, video demonstrations, and role-plays. Day one of the training consisted of CCPT and child development principles. The teachers learned specific CCPT skills, including tracking nonverbal behaviors, reflection of content and feelings, and facilitating decision making, self-esteem building, and limit setting (Landreth, 2012). The training content covered child development concepts that included typical play and classroom behavior of children ages three to five.

On day two, the trainers taught teachers to transfer CCPT skills from the playroom to the classroom. This involved practice worksheets and role-plays. The teachers were divided into practice groups where they role-played and received live supervision from the trainers.

Play Session Training and Supervision

Teachers were directed to choose a student they identified as having emotional, behavioral, or academic challenges. For four consecutive weeks, during a nonstructured teaching time (e.g., center time), a substitute (e.g., office worker, research assistant) watched the class while teachers conducted weekly 30-minute video-recorded play sessions with their focal student. During prearranged supervision sessions, after viewing each recorded play session, the assigned trainer provided 20 to 30 minutes of feedback regarding skill demonstration and personal awareness, and helped teachers make connections between the child's playroom and classroom behaviors.

Classroom Training

For four consecutive weeks after the play session and supervision sequence, the trainers provided weekly classroom training sessions to model the use of CCPT skills in the classroom. Based on Patton's (2002) participant-observation concept, trainers transitioned from direct involvement and modeling of CCPT skills to observing teachers using the skills. Throughout this module, trainers were available for support and feedback. When necessary, trainers provided in-classroom guidance and examples to demonstrate the accurate implementation of skills in the classroom and to ensure treatment fidelity.

Reflexive Journals

In qualitative methodology, the reflexive journal records the researchers' thoughts, reactions, concerns, and potential influence on data analysis and synthesis (Varjas, Nastasi, Moore, & Jayasena, 2005). Because of the trainers' close involvement with the research participants and children of focus, the researchers modified the use of the reflexive journal to include the in-depth experiences of the trainers. The reflexive journals included specific comments or observations about teachers' skill acquisition and demonstration as well as student behavior.

The researchers used the reflexive journals as a measure of integrity as well as the primary data source for the current study.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the strength of a study (Patton, 2002) and indicates the quality of the methodology. To enhance the trustworthiness of the current study the researchers employed (a) an audit trail, which is a record of all the steps in data collection and analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012), including informed consent materials and the coding manual; (b) analyst triangulation based on a research team composition of three independent coders; and (c) peer debriefing among the research team members. Consistent with analyst triangulation, the aim of peer debriefing was to ensure accountability and minimize potential researcher bias throughout data collection and analysis procedures. Table 1 provides details of the steps involved in intercoder agreement and development of the coding manual.

Data Analysis

The researchers employed an adaptation of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) data analysis strategy and adopted an inductive-deductive approach to coding procedures. The early stages in

TABLE 1
Steps in Data Analysis

Steps	*Procedures*
Taking notes	Three coders independently analyzed five reflexive journals. This involved writing notes in the margins of the journals. As the coders pored over the data, they noted their initial reactions to the written material.
Summarizing notes	During weekly coding meetings, the coders discussed their reactions to the journals, compared and contrasted margin notes, highlighted shared perspectives and discrepant viewpoints, and developed a summary sheet.
Playing with words	The coders generated metaphors based on the summary sheet. This stage involved developing phrases that represented their interpretation of the trainers' journal reflections. Creswell (2013) considered this a preliminary stage in code development.
Making comparisons	The coders compared key phrases and grouped them into categories. This facilitated reduction of data as they combined similar phrases and merged overlapping categories.
Developing preliminary codes	The coders continued to merge categories and reformulate category headings. From this, they developed preliminary themes based on the data (Miles et al., 2014).
Initial coding	The coders established intercoder agreement (Marques & McCall, 2005) by independently applying the preliminary coding manual to the five reflexive journals. During weekly coding meetings, they discussed discrepancies, adjusted the preliminary coding manual, and reapplied it to the data set. The coders continued this process until they reached a mean agreement that approached or exceeded 90% (Miles et al., 2014) and finalized the coding manual.
Final coding	The coders applied the final coding manual to each of the five journals. During weekly coding meetings, they continued to discuss discrepancies and coder drift (Marques & McCall, 2005). Intercoder agreement ranged from 85% to 92% throughout the final coding period.

qualitative data analysis entailed an inductive process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This allowed for the development of data patterns and themes. The later stages of coding were primarily deductive and included confirming codes developed during the inductive stages (Patton, 2002). This data analysis strategy is consistent with the view that "phenomenology tends to look at data thematically to extract essences and essentials of participant meanings" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 8). The coding team, consisting of the first author and two doctoral counseling students, independently analyzed the five reflexive journals following steps adapted from Miles et al. (2014). Table 1 provides details of the data analysis process.

RESULTS

The researchers employed a phenomenological approach to examine TCRB trainers' perceptions of the process and impact of TCRB, including their views of teachers' skill development, teacher–child relationships, and student behavior. The researchers conducted analysis of the reflexive journals and developed five major categories, including (a) relationships, (b) play therapy skills, (c) emotional response to the learning process, (d) supervision, and (e) child's experience.

Relationships

The researchers coded relationships when trainers commented on teachers' interactions with and emotional or behavioral responses to their child of focus or other children in the classroom. This code also included teachers' demonstrations of an understanding (or lack thereof) regarding children's needs.

Trainer 1 described a teacher's process of moving from a focus on her own goals regarding her identified student to a deeper understanding of the student's needs. In her journal entry for play session 1 with this teacher–student dyad, Trainer 1 stated, "It is really important to [the teacher] for her student to talk during her play session. She chose this child because of her speech delay. Therefore, she emphasized to me how important it is to get her to talk during the session." However, after play session 2, Trainer 1 commented on a shift in the teacher's perspective.

> [The teacher] indicated that she was worried after their last session that her student was not enjoying their play time and would refuse to return to the playroom. She also stated noticing the child's ability to be in charge and in the lead [in the play session] was more important than her talking.

Trainer 1 also reflected on this teacher's reaction to her focal child's behavior as well as her desire to be more responsive to the child's needs.

> [The teacher] was really excited that her student was almost running to the playroom because she was so excited to get to their special playtime. She noticed that [her student] only played with multicultural dolls or toys and therefore feels she should get some for her classroom. She also noticed a change in [her student's] behavior such as being more cooperative in the classroom and she genuinely feels like their relationship is growing.

Similarly, during her reflections on the second supervision session, Trainer 2 recounted another teacher's perspective of her focal student's behavior and the teacher–child relationship:

> [The teacher] stated that [her student] was excited about the play sessions, eager to leave for the play sessions, asked about them during the week, and told his mom about them. [The teacher] has not seen a huge change in [her student's] classroom behavior but does reflect that she enjoys spending the extra time with him and seeing him play in ways that she does not in the classroom.

Play Therapy Skills

Play therapy skills related to teachers' demonstration of CCPT skills both in the playroom and the classroom. This code also included teachers' challenges with skill acquisition. In her reflexive journal, Trainer 3 described a teacher's initial struggles with demonstrating CCPT skills during play session 1.

> [The teacher] was clearly nervous at the beginning of the session. Her voice was off (seemed high), she struggled for responses, and she sat stiffly on the floor. It took about ten minutes until she settled into being with [the child]. Once her nervousness subsided, [the teacher] consistently tracked [the child's] play throughout the session, making "you" statements with the majority of reflections. She reflected content of the child's play for most of the session. She used feeling responses sparingly; "you look happy, you seem interested" were the only two feelings addressed. She was in "teacher mode" for some of the session, directing play at times, and asking some questions.

However, in her reflections on play session three, Trainer 3 noted a marked difference in this teacher's skill demonstration: "[The teacher] was like a new person today! She tracked reflections and feelings the entire session with only a few questions. She returned responsibility several times and was able to encourage [the child] throughout the session."

Trainer 4 had a similar experience with a teacher who made significant progress when moving from playroom to classroom application of the CCPT skills: "In play session 2, [the teacher] expressed particular difficulty with the child breaking the limits." However, during the classroom training component of the intervention, Trainer 4 reflected, "[T]his was the first in-class visit. [The teacher] appeared to be very warm and friendly with her children. She also used limit setting several times throughout the session when some kids were not following directions." This demonstrated improvement in skill demonstration as well as the teacher's ability to generalize the CCPT skills to the classroom context.

Emotional Response to the Learning Process

Emotional response to the learning process referred to teachers' emotional reactions to CCPT skill acquisition and its integration into the classroom. This code included teachers' feelings about their play session performance and their degree of comfort with the TCRB learning experience. In her reflexive journal, Trainer 5 noted that "[the teacher] seemed eager, comfortable, and confident about her [play] session. She stated it went well and that she did not have any trouble." In contrast, Trainer 4 described the teacher as "feeling insecure about her play therapy skills. She reported feeling like she did everything wrong." Trainer 1 described her observations of a teacher's reactions to supervisory feedback as well as ongoing challenges with classroom application of CCPT skills:

> [The teacher] struggles with receiving feedback. She wants to defend her responses. She also mentioned that she is nervous about the classroom observations and modeling the CCPT skills. She stated that she still uses praise in the classroom quite a bit but is trying to encourage the effort more than praising the product.

Supervision

The researchers coded supervision in response to trainers' experiences regarding supervision sessions, including specific teaching strategies, processing of teachers' emotions, and efforts to support teachers' overall learning experience. Trainer 4 recounted her attempts to review limit setting with a teacher, utilizing role-plays during their supervision session: "I encouraged [the teacher] to be clearer in her limit-setting statements and follow all steps of the limit-setting model. We then role-played several situations that happened in the play session to practice implementation of the limit-setting model." Trainer 3 described taking a collaborative approach to supervision after discussion of a teacher's skill development:

> As I processed with [the teacher], it became apparent that she wanted to do well in this process. She asked many questions and wanted specific feedback about her performance. After the first ten minutes [of the play session], her responses and her tone matched [the child's] play and expressions. [The teacher] is six months pregnant. After we processed her "stiffness" in her responses, she revealed that her stiffness was about not being able to move. We concluded that she would need to sit in the rolling chair for the remaining sessions as opposed to remaining on the ground.

Child's Experience

Child's experience related to children's emotional and behavioral responses to various aspects of the TCRB experience, including play session activities and specific teacher–child interactions. Trainer 2 described perceived changes in the child's level of comfort in the playroom. During the first play session, the child seemed to have had a negative reaction to the frequency of the teacher's reflections. "At times, it appears that the child feels uncomfortable or crowded by the tracking [of nonverbal behaviors], even angry perhaps." However, during session 2, the child seemed to have a very different reaction to the play session experience. "The child appears to have become more comfortable in the [play]room, and frequently checks and smiles at [the teacher]." In another teacher–child dyad, Trainer 5 noted an overall positive experience for the focal child. "[The child] really enjoyed his session and utilizes his time in the playroom, using all the toys. He always plays with the shark and the animals and makes noises for them." Similarly, during her observation of the final play session with a teacher and child dyad, Trainer 3 described that the child seemed integrated, able to fully express a range of emotions, and appeared connected to both the teacher and the overall play session experience.

> [The child] started hitting the Bobo. As he hit the Bobo, he began to show all kinds of emotion to the teacher, who reflected, "determined," "happy," and "excited." After each reflection, [the child] nonverbally acknowledged that [the teacher] in fact understood what he was feeling. [The child] skipped out of the playroom.

DISCUSSION

TCRB is a professional development program designed to strengthen the teacher–child relationship, improve student behavior, enhance academic involvement, and strengthen classroom management skills. In the current study, through analysis of reflexive journals, the researchers sought to examine trainers' perceptions of TCRB, including their views of teachers' skill development, teacher–child relationships, and student behavior.

The findings of the current study indicate teachers' increased awareness of their focal students' needs and their efforts to be responsive to those needs, both in the playroom and in the classroom. Analysis of the trainers' reflexive journals also revealed improved teacher–child relationships as evidenced by enhanced teacher–child connections in the playroom and, in some cases, in the classroom as well. This finding is important considering research that indicates the positive correlation between the teacher–child relationship and students' academic and socioemotional development (Pianta et al., 2012). There also seemed to be a connection between the teacher–child relationship, the child's experience of the one-on-one play sessions, and the teacher's perceptions of the focal child's behavior. This latter finding is consistent with previous research on the reciprocal relationship between student behavior and the quality of the teacher–child relationship (Baker et al., 2008).

In addition to utilizing play-based language and skills to build relationships with one child, an important goal of the TCRB model is to help teachers improve classroom management skills and support all children in the classroom. Analysis of the trainers' reflexive journals reflected mixed perspectives on CCPT skill acquisition; some teachers were able to learn and demonstrate the skills throughout the intervention period, while others needed additional supervisory support and time to learn the basic skills. This finding aligns with research on differential learning (Tomlinson & Murphy, 2015) and supports a teaching model that is tailored to meet the unique needs of participants. Although TCRB is designed to provide individual training, diversity of experience among teacher participants in the current study may indicate the need for adjustments to the training protocol to include additional didactic training, play sessions, supervisory support, and in-class training. These adjustments could allow teachers more time to learn CCPT skills and effectively apply them to the classroom context. To support capacity-building initiatives, follow-up training could be especially beneficial for those schools without an on-site school counselor. Given the importance of classroom management for creating a positive learning environment (Back, Polk, Keys, & McMahon, 2016), it is vital to make necessary adjustments to TCRB to enhance teachers' ability to use CCPT skills for classroom management.

Although it is ideal for school counselors to provide teachers with support and training through collaborative relationships (ASCA, 2012; Stone & Dahir, 2016), in some cases such support is not possible due to large caseloads (Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016) or the school not having an on-site counselor. The results of this study indicate it is possible for outside stakeholders to be successful in providing teachers with professional development trainings like TCRB. However, we caution that a school counselor who has positive established relationships with teachers may be more impactful in the delivery of the intervention. Similarly, even when outside stakeholders can be successful, an on-site school counselor would be able to do follow-up and to continue to provide support to teachers within the system. School counselors can also provide other services (e.g., group counseling for students with high socioemotional

needs, classroom guidance) that would strengthen the positive impact of TCRB. This ongoing support could be helpful in ensuring the sustainability of positive changes within the system.

Limitations

Although the researchers were able to gather in-depth descriptions of trainers' perceptions, the participants in the current study represented an isolated geographic location. Future studies that include multiple school sites or multiple partnerships might help expand our knowledge regarding the process and impact of TCRB. Although data analysis demonstrated some positive outcomes related to the implementation TCRB, there was potential for trainers under the supervision of the first author to record only socially acceptable statements in their reflexive journals. Trainers may have felt obligated to share only positive experiences with the researchers. To minimize this potential bias, the research team also included two doctoral counseling students not directly connected to TCRB training. In addition, analysis of the reflexive journals also revealed challenges experienced by the teacher participants, suggesting some objectivity on the part of the trainers.

In this study, the trainers did not address their perception of multicultural factors. For example, trainers did not reflect on how teachers' cultural background may have influenced their perception and application of the skills taught in TCRB; similarly, the trainers did not reflect on any cultural interchange they witnessed between children and teachers. It would be helpful for future research to specifically ask trainers to reflect on multicultural variables to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural adaptations that may be needed. Although the data provided some insight for the need to extend the time of the training, the data did not reveal the specific challenges experienced by teachers that the trainers observed. For example, it can be challenging for teachers to find the extra time to be involved in an intensive training like TCRB, yet the themes that emerged did not reflect these types of challenges. Future research can focus on exploring potential challenges to ensure that the training is feasible for teachers.

CONCLUSION

Given the extensive amount of time that children spend at school and the crucial role that teachers play in children's academic and socioemotional development, professional development programs could help teachers improve their relationship-building skills and promote students' optimal development (Lindo et al., 2014). As suggested by Pianta et al. (2012), improved relationships between teachers and children can have positive effects on students' academic and socioemotional development. Given the importance of the teacher–child relationship, school counselors can offer teacher trainings to increase awareness of students' needs, cope with students' problem behaviors, encourage cooperation, and communicate more effectively with students. Delivering such training to teachers facilitates the development of useful skills while also taking a systems approach; one school counselor or researcher-practitioner could potentially reach all students in a single school (Morrison & Bratton, 2010; Sink, 2011).

TCRB is a play-based professional development program designed to improve the teacher–child relationship, improve student behavior, and improve the classroom management skills of early education teachers. Based on the findings of the current study, TCRB appears to be an appropriate intervention for improving teachers' ability to be aware of and respond to individual student needs.

Thus, the teaching and learning environment can be nurturing and more productive through teachers' application of TCRB concepts. Because the skills used with the focal students are transferred into the classroom and used with all students, it seems reasonable to believe that TCRB has the potential not only to positively affect the relationship between the teacher and the focal student but also to impact the relationship between the teacher and all students in the classroom.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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