

From sandtray to strength: Exploring school counselors unlocking emotional transformation in B40 children in Malaysia



Nor Azita Buyong^a | Ku Suhaila Ku Johari^a ✉ | Mohd Izwan Mahmud^a

^aFaculty of Education, National University of Malaysia, UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

Abstract This study aims to explore the experiences of school counselors, known as Guru Bimbingan dan Kaunseling Sekolah Menengah (GBKSM), in facilitating positive changes among B40 children through sandtray therapy (STT). The B40 group represents households with a monthly income of less than RM5,250. Guided by Adler's Individual Psychology theory, this qualitative case study investigates how GBKSM utilizes STT as a creative counseling intervention to support the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development of marginalized school children. The study involved nine B40 children from several secondary schools referred for counseling services by the school. Data were gathered from five school counselors formally trained in sandtray therapy, who conducted 52 counseling sessions in total. Multiple qualitative data collection methods were employed, including semi-structured interviews, direct observations, counselors' STT session notes, photographs of completed sandtrays, video recordings of counseling sessions, and client progress reports. Thematic analysis of the data uncovered four key themes that reflect the experiences of GBKSM when implementing sandtray therapy with B40 children: (1) building meaningful and trusting therapeutic relationships with participants, (2) supporting the emotional development and self-expression of participants, (3) guiding positive behavioral changes through creative and symbolic play, and (4) enhancing participants' cognitive growth and problem-solving abilities. The findings underscore the vital role of school counselors in adopting innovative and expressive therapeutic techniques such as STT within the school environment. Furthermore, this study highlights the challenges and significant outcomes encountered by GBKSM when integrating STT into their counseling practice. The use of sandtray therapy benefits the psychological well-being and personal development of B40 children and enriches the professional growth of school counselors. This study recommends broader implementation and further research on STT's effectiveness across diverse student populations.

Keywords: school counselor, sandtray therapy, B40 children, creative counseling intervention

1. Introduction

As one of the school units entrusted by the Ministry of Education (KPM) to support students' character development, the School Counselor (GBKSM) has taken on this responsibility by implementing interventions to address issues in schools, particularly disciplinary misconduct, in collaboration with discipline teachers (Sapora & Ruhaya, 2022). As the number of adolescents in secondary schools seeking counseling services increases, school counselors must consider appropriate interventions and techniques for this specific population. When brought to counseling, adolescents in schools present various issues, including domestic problems, bullying, relationship conflicts, depression, generalized anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Schwarz, 2009). This group also includes children from B40 families, who may face additional socioeconomic challenges.

Children from low-income backgrounds often face unique emotional and psychological challenges that hinder their personal and academic growth. In Malaysia, 40% of schoolchildren belong to the B40 group, representing households with a monthly income of less than RM5,250. These children frequently face socioeconomic stressors, including unstable home environments, caregiving responsibilities, and limited access to emotional support resources. These challenges contribute to emotional distress, low self-esteem, and behavioral difficulties, making it essential for school counselors to adopt innovative interventions that go beyond traditional talk therapy (Rahim & Cederblad, 2002). Therefore, effective counseling services are crucial for the psychological well-being of school students. In his study, Mundia (2011) emphasized that school counselors need to increase their skills to strengthen the school community's trust in counseling services. One such intervention gaining traction among school counselors is sandtray therapy (STT).

Unlike conventional counseling methods, which rely heavily on verbal communication, STT offers a nonverbal, expressive medium that allows children to process and communicate emotions through miniature figures and symbolic play in a sandtray. This multisensory approach enables students to externalize hidden emotions, facilitating deeper self-exploration and emotional healing (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023). School counselors play a pivotal role in unlocking the emotional



transformation of B40 children through STT. Their experiences revealed that this method strengthens counselor–student relationships and fosters emotional regulation, behavioral improvements, and cognitive development in children who struggle with self-expression. Counselors have reported that STT provides a safe, judgment-free space where children can work through trauma, anxiety, and self-doubt, ultimately empowering them to develop resilience and emotional strength (Carmichael, 1994).

This study explores the experiences of school counselors in the use of STT to support B40 students' emotional well-being. By examining how counselors facilitate emotional transformation through this creative therapy, this research aims to highlight the effectiveness, challenges, and potential for broader implementation of STT in Malaysian schools. Understanding these experiences is crucial in advocating for more student-centered, innovative counseling approaches, ensuring that every child, regardless of their socioeconomic background, has access to meaningful emotional support.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research design, theoretical perspective and research paradigm

This study employs a qualitative case study design, exploring the critical role of school counsellors (GBKSMs) in implementing sand tray therapy for B40 students in daily secondary schools. A case study approach provides a real-life context in which GBKSMs are key facilitators in guiding students through therapeutic activities, helping them express their emotions and overcome challenges (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2018). The embedded case study design (Yin, 2018) enables an analysis of multiple sub-units within the main case, focusing on how GBKSM tailors therapy sessions to meet the needs of the students. In qualitative research, the interpretivist paradigm emphasizes a deep understanding of the meanings individuals assign to their experiences, particularly within specific contexts rich in symbols and subjective interpretations. In this study, sandtray therapy aligns directly with the interpretivist paradigm, allowing participants to explore and express their emotions, experiences, and perspectives through symbolic and metaphorical representations. Through this approach, researchers can gain a rich and multilayered understanding of participants' experiences, rather than relying solely on conventional conversations or surveys.

This study also focuses on applying Adler's individual psychology counseling theory as the foundation and guiding principle throughout the counseling process using sand tray therapy for B40 students in schools. Adler strongly suggested that children's issues in school stem from their lifestyle, inability to integrate into society, heightened feelings of inferiority, and lack of clear life goals. He emphasized that children's lives should be understood from their own perspective. Adler's approach, often referred to as individual psychology, emphasizes that individuals strive to develop their self-concept while navigating social relationships. Adlerian therapy, developed by Alfred Adler, consists of four phases that guide the therapeutic process (Sapora & Rohaya, 2022). These phases are structured to help clients gain self-awareness, develop insight into their behaviors, and make positive life changes. The four phases of Adlerian therapy are 1) establishing the therapeutic relationship, 2) exploring the individual's psychological dynamics (assessment phase), 3) encouraging insight and self-understanding, and 4) reorientation and education (application of insight to action). Adlerian therapy is goal-oriented, holistic, and socially driven, helping individuals move from self-doubt and maladaptive patterns to confidence, purpose, and social connection. These four phases provide a structured approach to personal growth and self-improvement.

2.2. Participant characteristics

The study focuses on dedicated GBKSM counselors and B40 students from five daily secondary schools, with an emphasis on the impact of sandtray therapy. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants to ensure that only those actively engaged in treatment were included. This study explores the professional qualifications and experience of five school counselors (GBKSMs) who utilize Sandtray Therapy. The following section summarizes key details about their academic qualifications, their certification in Sandtray Therapy, and the extent of their experience with the therapy. Counselor 1 (GBKSM 1) has 24 years of experience and holds a Master's degree in Educational Guidance and Counseling from UKM. They are certified in Sandtray Therapy and have been utilizing this therapeutic technique for 6 years. Counselor 2 (GBKSM 2) has 25 years of experience and holds a Bachelor's degree in Educational Guidance and Counseling from UPM. Like the other counsellors, they are certified at Level 3 in Sandtray Therapy but have been applying it for 4 years. Counselor 3 (GBKSM 3) also has 25 years of experience and holds a Master's degree in Educational Guidance and Counseling from UKM. They are certified at Level 3 in Sandtray Therapy and have 6 years of experience in using the therapy. Counselor 4 (GBKSM 4), with 27 years of experience, holds a Master's degree in Educational Guidance and Counseling from UKM. They are certified at Level 3 in Sandtray Therapy and have been practicing the therapy for 5 years. Finally, Counselor 5 (GBKSM 5) is 23 years old and holds a Master's degree in Educational Guidance and Counseling from UPM. They are certified at Level 3 in Sandtray Therapy and have been using the technique for 4 years. The data reflect their extensive qualifications and professional experience, indicating a solid foundation in both educational counseling and the application of Sandtray Therapy. This format ensures that the information is presented clearly and effectively, providing a concise yet thorough description of each counsellor's background and expertise in Sandtray Therapy.

The key participants consisted of ten B40 students undergoing sand tray therapy sessions under the guidance of five GBKSM counselors. Each GBKSM counsellor conducted counseling sessions via the sand tray therapy approach with two B40 students. These counselors play crucial roles in facilitating therapy, providing emotional support, and assessing student progress. The operational definition of the case should be a group of daily secondary school children from B40 families. These children have undergone sandtray therapy with their GBKSM in their respective school counseling rooms. The primary unit of analysis is the sand tray representations created by these B40 children. Ethical considerations were strictly upheld by obtaining informed consent from all participants and maintaining confidentiality throughout the study. Additionally, the study adheres to ethical research standards, ensuring a safe and supportive environment for participants. This approach strengthens the study's credibility and reliability while safeguarding participants' well-being.

2.3. Concepts

This study explores the implementation of sand tray therapy for children from B40 communities, focusing on their psychological well-being and the experiences of counselors in administering this intervention. Sand tray therapy is widely recognized for its effectiveness in expressive therapies, particularly for children experiencing socioemotional distress (Lowenfeld, 1993; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2021). This research examines the structured six-step protocol of sand tray therapy and its impact on both clients and counselors.

2.3.1. School counselor

In Malaysia, school counseling plays a crucial role in supporting students' academic, emotional, social, and career development. School counselors, known as Guru Bimbingan dan Kaunseling (GBKSM), offer a comprehensive range of services designed to promote students' holistic development. They offer guidance in academic matters, assist in career planning, and provide personal counseling to address emotional and psychological challenges. The primary goal of school counseling in Malaysia is not only to help students overcome problems but also to assist them in developing essential life skills. A key concept in school counseling is holistic development, which focuses on students' cognitive, emotional, social, and moral growth. GBKSM professionals strive to cultivate well-rounded individuals who can manage academic pressures while developing their social skills, emotional resilience, and ethical values. This approach aligns with Malaysia's overall educational philosophy, which aims to produce well-rounded individuals who can make positive contributions to society. In addition to being reactive in times of crisis, GBKSM counselors take preventive and developmental approaches. They work proactively through counseling programs that focus on developing life skills, including leadership, decision-making, conflict resolution, and self-esteem. These developmental programs help students become better equipped to manage challenges both inside and outside of the classroom. Given Malaysia's multicultural society, with its diverse ethnic groups, including Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous communities, school counselors must demonstrate multicultural awareness. They are trained to work sensitively with students from various cultural backgrounds, ensuring that counseling practices are relevant and inclusive. Understanding cultural differences is essential for providing effective support to all students. School counselors in Malaysia also align their work with national educational goals. They contribute to the national vision of developing a balanced and competitive workforce by supporting students in their academic journeys and career development. Through counseling, GBKSM professionals help students set clear goals and aspirations for their future, which is essential for the country's socioeconomic development.

Another critical aspect of this role is providing specialized support for diverse needs. GBKSM counselors are often called upon to assist students facing unique challenges, such as disabilities, mental health issues, or difficult family circumstances. They offer individualized counseling and collaborate with other professionals to ensure that students receive the support they need, including creating tailored educational plans for those with special needs. School counselors are also guided by the ethical and professional standards of the Malaysian Board of Counselors (LKM), adhering to the principles set by the Malaysian Association of Counseling (PERKAMA). These standards ensure that GBKSM professionals maintain confidentiality, set appropriate boundaries, and prioritize the well-being of students in all of their interactions. Collaboration is another key aspect of the role of a GBKSM. Counselors often work closely with teachers, parents, and community organizations to provide comprehensive support for students. This includes engaging parents in their children's progress and connecting students to community resources for additional assistance. Through these collaborations, counselors help create a strong support system around each student. Finally, school-wide programs organized by GBKSM counselors aim to improve the overall school environment. These programs include antibullying campaigns, mental health awareness initiatives, and peer support activities. These programs are designed to promote a positive school culture, reduce stress, and ensure that students feel supported throughout their educational journey. In conclusion, school counselors in Malaysia, or Guru Bimbingan dan Kaunseling (GBKSM), play a vital role in supporting the comprehensive development of students. They provide guidance across academic, emotional, and social domains, align their work with national goals, and promote holistic well-being. By working closely with students, teachers, parents, and the community, GBKSM professionals contribute significantly to students' success and overall well-being.

2.3.2. Children

Garry Landreth, a leading figure in child-centered play therapy (CCPT), emphasized the inherent worth, self-direction, and growth potential of children. He believed that children have an innate ability to self-heal when provided with a safe, accepting, and empathetic environment (Landreth, 2021). His work aligns with Adlerian principles, particularly in how play therapy allows children to express emotions, resolve conflicts, and build resilience without relying solely on verbal communication. According to Landreth (2012), children communicate their thoughts, emotions, and struggles through play rather than words. This aligns with the use of sand tray therapy, where children symbolically represent their inner world via figures, objects, and spatial arrangements. Landreth stressed the importance of unconditional acceptance and nondirective therapeutic approaches, allowing children to explore their emotions freely without judgment. Landreth also highlighted that children's behaviors are purposeful and goal-directed, reflecting their attempts to gain control, seek validation, or process past experiences (Landreth, 2021). He viewed self-esteem and emotional security as fundamental aspects of healthy child development, emphasizing that therapeutic interventions should nurture autonomy, emotional expression, and problem-solving skills. In the context of this study, Landreth's philosophy supports the use of sand tray therapy as a nonverbal, expressive medium for B40 children to process emotions, develop self-awareness, and build emotional resilience. By integrating Adlerian principles with Landreth's child-centered approach, this study explores how structured yet emotionally safe therapeutic environments empower children to confront challenges and foster personal growth.

2.3.3. B40 children

The B40 group refers to the bottom 40% of income earners in Malaysia, and is often characterized by economic hardship, limited access to education and healthcare, and social vulnerabilities (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). Children from B40 families face multiple challenges, including financial instability, a lack of educational resources, and psychological stress due to their socioeconomic conditions. Studies suggest that children from low-income households are more likely to experience emotional distress, lower self-esteem, and academic struggles than their peers from higher-income families are (UNICEF Malaysia, 2021). From a psychosocial perspective, B40 children often develop feelings of inferiority and social exclusion, aligning with Adler's theory of individual psychology, which states that a child's environment plays a crucial role in shaping their self-concept, motivation, and social belonging (Adler, 2011). Owing to financial limitations, many B40 children lack access to high-quality psychological support, increasing their risk of emotional suppression and behavioral issues (Razak et al., 2023). Interventions such as sandtray therapy provide a safe space for B40 children to express their emotions and develop coping mechanisms. Expressive therapies, grounded in Adlerian psychology and child-centered approaches, have been shown to improve emotional resilience, enhance self-acceptance, and foster a sense of control over life circumstances (Landreth, 2021). This study explores how sand tray therapy can serve as a psychological support system for B40 children, promoting well-being, emotional expression, and positive identity formation despite socioeconomic challenges.

2.3.4. Sandtray therapy

The concept of "sandtray" refers to a therapeutic tool used primarily in psychology, particularly in play therapy and other forms of psychotherapy. It involves the use of a small sandbox filled with sand, along with various miniature figures (such as animals, people, buildings, and objects) that clients can use to create scenes or stories within the sand. The idea is that the client can express themselves symbolically and project their inner thoughts, feelings, and experiences onto the sand and figures, which may help them process emotions, work through trauma, or explore personal issues in a nonverbal way (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2021). In sandtray therapy, there are several key protocols that are used to guide the therapeutic process. First, clients are encouraged to engage in free play, creating whatever scenes they feel drawn to in the sand. This allows for spontaneous expression, with the therapist observing and refraining from direct intervention, thus providing the client space to explore their emotions freely. In some cases, the therapist may introduce a specific theme to focus the session, such as topics such as conflict, relationships, or self-image. This thematic approach helps direct the client's exploration toward specific concerns they may wish to address. As the client creates scenes, the therapist may intervene by asking questions or inviting the client to describe what they are creating. This dialog deepens emotional exploration and helps the client make sense of their work. Another protocol is the opportunity for re-enactment, where the client is encouraged to recreate past events, whether real or imagined, using the sand and miniatures. This process can assist clients in reframing past experiences or gaining new insights into them. In addition to re-enactment, clients may also be asked to construct a narrative around the scenes they have created. By telling a story about the figures and the environment they have built, clients can further process their emotions and experiences. At the end of a session, the therapist often guides the client in reflecting on their creations, helping them gain closure and insight from the experience. Sandtray therapy can be used with individuals of all ages, but it is especially effective with children, who may have difficulty articulating their emotions through words (Kalff, 2003). The process allows for creativity, exploration, and a safe space for expression. It can also provide valuable insights to therapists, who can interpret the images or scenes created in the sand as metaphors for the client's psychological state or struggles (Schaefer & O'Connor, 2016). The approach is based on the idea that the physical act of creating and manipulating the sand and figures can help bring

unconscious material to the surface, making it easier to address and heal. It is often used in conjunction with other therapeutic techniques, such as talk therapy, but it is also effective on its own (McMahon, 2018).

2.3.5. Psychological well-being

Carol Ryff's model of psychological well-being (PWB) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human flourishing and personal development. Ryff (1989, 2021) proposed that well-being is not merely the absence of distress but rather a multidimensional construct that includes six core dimensions. Autonomy refers to the ability to self-regulate behavior and make independent decisions, resisting external pressures. Environmental mastery is the capacity to manage life's demands and create environments that support personal needs. Personal growth is a continuous process of self-improvement, learning, and personal expansion. Positive relationships with others reflect the ability to form meaningful, trusting, and supportive social connections. Purpose in life involves having a sense of direction, goals, and meaning. Self-acceptance is characterized by a positive attitude toward oneself, recognizing personal strengths and weaknesses. Ryff's well-being framework aligns with Adlerian psychology and child-centered therapy, as both emphasize self-actualization, emotional resilience, and social integration (Ryff & Singer, 2008). This model is relevant for understanding how sand tray therapy can enhance children's psychological well-being by fostering self-expression, emotional regulation, and self-discovery (Ryff, 2021). Specifically, therapy allows children to explore their emotions, develop self-acceptance, improve their social relationships, and gain a sense of control over their experiences, contributing to overall well-being.

2.4. Data collection

A combination of semistructured interviews, observations, and document analysis was employed to capture the full scope of the therapy experience, with a particular focus on the role of GBKSM. This study employs four data collection methods: a) a visual sand tray protocol, b) semistructured interviews with GBKSM, c) reports from each sand tray therapy session by GBKSM, and d) field notes recorded by the researcher. Each GBKSM followed six protocols for sandtray therapy as outlined by Homeyer and Sweeney (2021). GBKSM completed a standardized session report after each therapy session, which included details such as the sandtray title, list of miniatures used, evaluation of themes, conceptualization of the client's progress, and recommendations for future sessions. In-depth interviews with GBKSM counselors explored their experiences, strategies, challenges, and observations regarding students' emotional and behavioral changes. Ten meetings were held for GBKSM, offering valuable insights into how GBKSM facilitates meaningful interactions and encourages student expression. To provide further depth, the researcher also conducted observations through video recordings of therapy sessions led by five GBKSM. These recordings were analyzed to identify recurring themes, observe theoretical approaches, and assess the implementation of the six sandtray therapy protocols. Additionally, field notes documented behaviors, activities, and other key observations during the sessions. The triangulation of the sandtray reports, video recordings, field notes, and interview data ensured the richness and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, offering a comprehensive understanding of the children's experiences and the effectiveness of sandtray therapy in this context.

The analysis of sand tray representations helps uncover symbolic expressions, which GBKSM interprets to gain a deeper understanding of student emotions. Additionally, the review of session notes and reflections maintained by GBKSM counselors validated key findings and provided a comprehensive record of therapy effectiveness. This multimethod approach ensured a thorough understanding of how sand tray therapy impacts students' emotional well-being and development, emphasizing the crucial role of GBKSM in guiding and interpreting the therapeutic process.

2.5. Data analysis

The raw data were analyzed following systematic data analysis procedures, including organization, representation, and interpretation (Creswell, 2018). According to Yin (2018), data analysis involves examining, categorizing, tabulating, testing, or integrating numerical and descriptive data gathered to examine the initial assumptions of the study. This comprehensive process ensures that the data are systematically processed and meaningful conclusions are drawn. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize that thematic analysis is a crucial method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, which enhances the depth of qualitative research.

The researcher maintained detailed descriptions of 10 children from the B40 group throughout the data collection process. These descriptions were gathered from in-depth interviews and observational notes from sand tray therapy sessions, were carefully coded, categorized, and systematically analyzed (Miles et al., 2014). The data were coded and tabulated, then grouped into broader themes to identify significant patterns. During this stage, the researcher meticulously examined, refined, and cross-checked the raw data to ensure accuracy and consistency. Each characteristic, trait, and recurring pattern was carefully identified, allowing the researcher to track and compare patterns systematically across multiple sand tray therapy sessions (Nowell et al., 2017). The process involved matching patterns from the first sand tray to the last for each child, facilitating a deeper understanding of behavioral trends and emotional expressions. The initial analysis phase involves describing and contextualizing each case to establish an in-depth understanding of individual experiences. The study focuses

on multiple cases categorized under the GBKSM school counselor to examine behavior patterns, responses, and thematic expressions. Each GBKSM case consists of two participants (P1–P10), whose data were collected through interviews, observations, and session notes. These rich qualitative data sources enhance the depth of analysis and validity of findings (Miles et al., 2014).

The data analysis process within case analysis begins by identifying patterns, themes, and relationships within each case and across multiple cases of GBKSM (Stake, 1995). A cross-case analysis was conducted to compare similarities and differences among cases, identifying key themes (Eisenhardt, 1989). This process played a crucial role in enhancing the depth of understanding and extracting meaningful insights from raw data. The structured analysis ensured the findings were systematically categorized and aligned with the study's objectives. This step involves systematically comparing themes emerging from each GBKSM case, ensuring the identification of recurring patterns and deviations. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), the use of thematic analysis enables the classification of significant data points into broader themes that contribute to the study's theoretical framework. A data analysis flowchart was developed to provide a clear and structured overview of the methodology, as illustrated in Figure 3.

The next stage involves recognizing patterns of similarity and divergence between cases. This comparative approach strengthens the analytical depth by revealing the contextual factors influencing participants' responses and behaviors. The thematic coding process adheres to established qualitative research standards, ensuring consistency and reliability (Nowell et al., 2017). The information collected from interviews and archival data underwent rigorous content and thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012). The case study approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of intricate details, repetitive occurrences, and the unique nature of each case. Moreover, thematic and content analysis reinforced the validity and reliability of the findings (Patton, 2002). The ultimate aim of this study was to identify recurring patterns on the basis of commonalities and differences in findings, which could provide deeper insights for effectively answering the research questions.

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to examine the core contributions of GBKSM in sand tray therapy, offering a structured framework for data interpretation. The analytical process commenced with an in-depth familiarization phase, during which transcripts and notes from GBKSM-led therapy sessions were thoroughly reviewed. This phase enabled a nuanced understanding of counseling interactions, laying the groundwork for systematic data coding. Through this coding process, key interventions, strategies, and counseling techniques utilized by the GBKSM were identified and categorized. A cross-case thematic analysis is performed to synthesize findings and develop a comprehensive interpretation of the data. This analytical approach facilitates the understanding of interconnected themes, reinforcing the study's validity and contributing to theoretical advancements in qualitative research (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Following coding, emerging themes were analyzed to evaluate the impact of GBKSM on students' emotional well-being and the overall effectiveness of the therapy. Special attention was given to identifying patterns that demonstrated the role of GBKSM in fostering resilience, emotional regulation, and self-expression among students. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, triangulation was incorporated by cross-verifying data from multiple sources, including interviews, session transcripts, counselor reflections, counselor counseling reports, and sandtray pictures. This methodological approach enhanced the depth and validity of the analysis, ensuring a well-rounded perspective on the contributions of the GBKSM.

The final stage of analysis involves interpreting the findings to draw meaningful conclusions that address the research objectives. The integration of qualitative data sources ensures a holistic understanding, enhancing the credibility of the study. The use of structured qualitative analysis methods supports the robustness of the findings and aligns with high-impact qualitative research methodologies (Patton, 2002). By integrating diverse data sources and emphasizing the pivotal role of the GBKSM, this study underscores the essential function of school counselors as change agents. Through sand tray therapy, GBKSM facilitates emotional resilience and personal growth, particularly among B40 students, who may face socioemotional challenges. The findings reinforce the importance of therapeutic interventions within school counseling practices, highlighting their potential in promoting students' psychological well-being. Ultimately, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how structured counseling techniques, such as sand tray therapy, support students in navigating emotional difficulties and developing essential coping mechanisms for personal and academic success.

3. Results

The objective of this study is to explore the transformative changes experienced by B40 students (clients) through the experiences of school counselors (GBKSM) in conducting counseling sessions involving sandtray therapy. Findings were derived from qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation provided by five GBKSMs who facilitated these sessions. Table 1 presents four key themes: (1) the relationship between GBKSM and clients, (2) the development of clients' emotional quality, (3) changes in clients' behavioral quality, and (4) improvements in clients' cognitive quality. Table 2 shows examples of the themes and subthemes obtained from the school counselor statements during the in-depth interviews.

3.1. Relationship between the GBKSM and client values

The therapeutic relationship between school counselors (GBKSMs) and clients is a fundamental factor in the effectiveness of sandtray therapy. The findings indicate that the therapeutic relationship between school counselors (GBKSMs) and participants plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of the intervention. All participants (100%) successfully established a safe and trusting relationship with the counselor, with 100% reporting an increased sense of trust. Additionally, 90% of the participants engaged in cooperative relationships and demonstrated openness in the therapeutic process. These results underscore the importance of creating a secure and supportive environment that facilitates meaningful counselor–client interactions. These results highlight the importance of creating a safe and trusting environment, which fosters client openness and cooperation. Clients gradually develop trust in GBKSM through empathetic communication, active listening, and consistent validation of their emotions. The interactive nature of sandtray therapy further reduces hierarchical barriers, promoting a more collaborative and engaging counseling process. As trust deepens over time, clients are more willing to share their thoughts and emotions, strengthening the counselor–client alliance. This relationship is essential not only for providing emotional support but also for enhancing the overall effectiveness of therapeutic interventions.

Table 1 Exploration of school counselors' experiences with sandtray therapy.

No	Theme	Subtheme	P value
1	Relationship Between GBKSM and B40 Children	1. Building Trust with the Client	100
		2. Creating an Attitude of Openness	100
		3. Establishing Collaborative Relationships	100
		4. Fostering a safe relationship	90
2	Development of Clients' Emotional Quality	1. Easier Emotional Expression	100
		2. Reduction of Self- rejection	100
		3. Presence of Transference Use	100
		4. Presence of Multisensory Use	100
		5. Presence of Metaphor Use	100
3	Release of Clients' Behavioral Quality	1. Clients' Aggressive Behavior	100
		2. Increase in Clients' Autonomy	100
		3. Congruence in Clients	100
		4. Improvement in Clients' Verbal Quality	100
		5. Management of Clients' Kinesthetic Quality	100
4	Improvement in Clients' Cognitive Quality	1. Ability to Identify Self, Others, Themes, and Metaphors	100
		2. Ability to Make Decisions	100
		3. Increase in Mental Literacy	100
		4. Ability to Explore Self	100

3.2. Development of client emotional quality

Sandtray therapy significantly enhances clients' emotional expression, self-acceptance, and ability to process past experiences. These findings indicate that clients, particularly those who struggle with verbalizing emotions, benefit from the visual and tactile elements of sandtray therapy. Using symbolic representation through miniatures enables clients to externalize complex emotions, thereby reducing self-rejection and fostering greater self-acceptance. Additionally, sandtray therapy facilitates emotional transference, allowing clients to project unresolved emotions onto miniatures, leading to deeper emotional exploration. Moreover, the multisensory engagement inherent in sandtray therapy provides a calming and grounding effect, promoting relaxation and emotional regulation. The study revealed substantial improvements in participants' emotional quality. By the end of the intervention, all participants (100%) demonstrated an enhanced ability to express emotions, reduced self-rejection, and effective utilization of transfer techniques. Furthermore, all participants (100%) engaged in multisensory approaches and the use of metaphors, suggesting that sandtray therapy provides an effective medium for emotional expression and self-acceptance. These findings highlight the transformative potential of sandtray therapy in supporting clients' emotional growth and self-discovery.

The theme is becoming clearer and more focused, although some doubts remain regarding the placement of miniatures. Over time, the theme has become more confident and directed, with miniatures placed with assurance, reflecting emotional stability. The progression from doubt to emotional certainty indicates increased self-confidence and emotional stability. The development of emotional expression patterns among participants can be observed through emerging themes that illustrate their emotional transformation during sand tray therapy sessions. The participants demonstrated significant progress in their emotional experiences, transitioning from distress and uncertainty to more stable and constructive emotional expressions.

Table 2 Themes and subthemes with example statements from school counselors.

No	Theme	Subtheme	Example Statement From GBKSM
1	Relationship Between GBKSM and B40 Children	1. Building Trust with Clients	<p>“First, it’s about trust. The client quickly builds trust with us because they feel that when engaging in sandtray therapy with the miniatures, it’s not directly about them. That’s why they are willing to share. For example, they might say, “This soldier represents my mother, and this soldier holding a gun to someone’s head is taking another figure. Therefore, they share stories like this, which makes them feel safe because it doesn’t seem to be directly about them.”</p> <p>(GBKSM1/TB1/HAGP/MKP/B156-164)</p>
		2. Creating an Attitude of Openness	<p>“There are also career issues; we shouldn’t assume it’s only personal issues. If we were to say, indeed, the use of miniatures and sand allows these students to open up, become creative, and share more easily. For secondary school students, especially those from the B40 group, as I mentioned earlier, it is difficult for them to speak, to identify their feelings, or even admit their own emotions. However, with this approach, whether they like it or not, these feelings will naturally come out. It’s true, yes, yes, I’ve experienced it. By conducting these sessions, I’ve experienced it with my clients.”</p> <p>(GBKSM3/TB3/HAGP/MSK/B223-228)</p>
		3. Establishing Collaborative Relationships	<p>“No problem, meaning when they know, ‘Okay, you need to meet the teacher to do this and that,’ they respond, ‘Alright, teacher, I’ll come.’ This shows they are willing to cooperate. Cooperation here means they attend the session and actively participate during the session. It’s truly enjoyable; they genuinely find it enjoyable. They are ready to receive help and cooperate.”</p> <p>(GBKSM4/TB4/HAGP/MHK/B700-703)</p>
		4. Fostering a safe relationship	<p>“Therefore, they talk about those things, and they feel safe because they’re not talking about themselves. Second, when they are inside the box, they feel safe because they perceive themselves as being within that space and its boundaries. This makes it easier for them to trust us. As they begin to trust us through the storytelling process, we provide support and assistance, which further builds that trust. Sometimes, we ask, ‘How do you feel now? Do you feel safe?’ They often respond that they feel safe and that everything is fine, as it’s all about storytelling within the sand tray.”</p> <p>(GBKSM1/TB1/HAGP/MHS/B160-167)</p>
2	Development of Clients’ Emotional Quality	1. Easier Emotional Expression	<p>“Okay, when we conduct sand tray therapy, the primary goal is to encourage students to talk and facilitate their sharing process. Through sand tray therapy, we can automatically observe that students find it easier to express their emotions, such as sadness, anger, happiness, or disappointment. There have even been sessions where as soon as they arranged the miniatures—without uttering a word or us initiating the session—they began to cry. Perhaps the miniatures they chose represented what they truly felt in their hearts. This clearly shows how valuable sand tray therapy is in helping students.”</p> <p>(GBKSM5/TB5/PKEP/MEE/B93-104)</p>
		2. Reduction of Self-rejection	<p>The advantage of sand tray therapy is, first, it doesn’t create resistance with the client. I haven’t encountered any sessions where they show resistance. They are already prepared. Yes, that’s right... it means they are ready. When they come back the next day, they’re already prepared. They’re ready. When we revisit and reflect, they already know what miniature they want to use that day. You can see their readiness in the session, meaning they don’t reject or refuse to have a session with us—no, not at all! It’s simply because the miniatures truly capture their interest.</p> <p>(GBKSM2/TB2/PKEP/PPDD/B310-323)</p>
		3. Presence of Transference Use	<p>It’s like when they choose something shaped like a superhero. It means they want to express their desire to be like that. In reality, they might not be that kind of person, but they want to be, so they project that onto the miniature they choose. They align themselves with that character. Indirectly, we understand that this student actually</p>

			wants to be brave, like a superhero if possible. They want to be strong and full of spirit. That's what we gather. (GBKSM1/TB1/PKEP/TF/B252-257)
	4. Presence of Multisensory Use		Yes, that's right. First, if we ask a student to pick a miniature, arrange it, and feel the sand, for students who find it hard to talk, we can observe their reactions through how they arrange the items and play with the sand. This multisensory approach activates everything; there's no room for them to remain still. When they hold something, we can immediately see their feedback. Holding a miniature lets them experience it in 3D. They engage their hand senses, their eyes—everything is actively involved. Truly, this happens in every session, I believe. (GBKSM4/TB4/PKEP/PMS/B168-172)
	5. Presence of Metaphor Use		Alright. When they placed it, it wasn't just an empty cup. At first, I didn't understand what the empty cup meant. I thought they wanted to be a chef since they were planning to go to a vocational college (KV). However, when we explored further about the cup—what they meant by it and why they chose it—that's when they said, "I'm like an empty cup, teacher." Then, they picked up some sand and said, "Now this cup is useful, right, teacher, when it's filled with sand? Before, it seemed useless, didn't it?" That's what they said. (GBKSM3/TB3/PKEP/PMF/B279-287)
3	Release of Clients' Behavioral Quality	1. Clients' Aggressive Behavior	Through this sand tray therapy, there was once a student who threw sand—picking it up and then throwing it again. The miniature figures they selected were described as representing their mother or father, with whom they were dissatisfied. Their aggression is evident during sessions, particularly through actions like forcefully burying miniatures, reflecting their emotional struggles. (GBKSM1/TB1/PKTL/AG/B84-90)
		2. Increase in Clients' Autonomy	Through sand tray therapy, we actually teach independence from the start. We ask clients to select their own miniatures, then discuss what they want to address, offering several alternatives for them to choose from. This process provides them with a path toward greater self-reliance, reducing their dependency on others. (GBKSM5/TB5/PKTL/PAutoP/B261-268)
		3. Congruence in Clients	When we don't use sandtray therapy, I notice that students tend to be less honest and more guarded. However, with sandtray, they unconsciously become more truthful with us. During subsequent sessions, their narratives remain consistent—they remember the miniatures they used, where they placed them, and the areas they focused on. This consistency reflects their deeper engagement and openness, making the therapy more effective in uncovering their thoughts and emotions. (GBKSM3/TB3/PKTL/KG/B180-185)
		4. Improvement in Clients' Verbal Quality	Sand tray therapy is a facilitator, making it easier for clients who struggle to express themselves verbally. For instance, I've had sessions with students who could speak but found it difficult to articulate their thoughts, possibly feeling the need to use more formal or structured language with teachers. Through sand tray therapy, the miniatures help bridge this gap. By selecting miniatures that resonate with them, they communicate more effectively and comfortably, expressing emotions and experiences in a natural way. (GBKSM4/TB4/PKTL/PKV/B231-242)
		5. Management of Clients' Kinesthetic Quality	Kinesthetic therapy involves movement, and sandtray therapy is different from conventional methods where a counselor and client sit passively. In sandtray therapy, clients use their hands, think critically, and actively engage by standing up, selecting, and arranging miniatures. This repeated motion of standing, sitting, and moving keeps them physically and mentally engaged, leaving no room for boredom during the session. It transforms the process into an interactive and stimulating experience, enhancing their focus and participation. (GBKSM2/TB2/PKTL/PKnP/B136-141)
4		1. Ability to Identify Self,	Through sand tray therapy, clients can identify their emotions and recognize their capacity to change certain behaviors. For example, a student might say, "Teacher, I'm

Improvement in Clients' Cognitive Quality	Others, Themes, and Metaphors	not ready to bury all these tigers because I feel I still need them." This reflects their understanding that they still rely on certain threatening traits to a small degree, acknowledging the balance they need while gradually working toward positive change. (GBKSM3/TB3/PKKP/KPD/B638-647)
	2. Ability to Make Decisions	By the fourth session, clients are often able to make decisions. For example, at the start, a student might be unsure about their ambitions. However, through the sessions, they may express a desire to become a pilot, arranging fighter jets in the sand tray, or aspire to wealth as a way to overcome hardships. This process helps them clarify their goals and make thoughtful decisions about their aspirations, reflecting the progress and insights gained during therapy. (GBKSM1/TB1/PKKP/BMK/B293-306)
	3. Increase in Insight	Through the sessions, we can truly see cognitive insight. For instance, when a student shares their aspirations, they may first talk about conflicts with siblings and feeling burdened with household chores, leaving no time to study. However, as we guide them through the sandtray process, they suddenly realize something important. One student, for example, lifted a miniature and placed it outside, saying, "Ah, yes, teacher, if I study hard and do well, I can go to university." This moment reflects their realization that their efforts and hard work can lead to positive outcomes and change. (GBKSM2/TB2/PKKP/PCA/B239-249)
	4. Ability to Self Explore	In situations like that, they can see the consequences from a different perspective. For example, we put them in someone else's shoes—perhaps their parents, like their mother, someone they love. Let's say their mother is harshly criticized by others because of their behavior. At that moment, they might feel something like, "I don't want this, teacher. I don't want my mother to go through this. I will change. I don't want to be a bully anymore. I don't want my mother to be humiliated by others." (GBKSM5/TB5/PKKP/DED/B390-394)

One notable pattern involves the shift from conflict and fear to harmony and peace. Participants P1, P3, and P7 demonstrated an initial struggle with the themes of conflict, indecision, and emotional turmoil. Over time, they transitioned toward emotional stability, self-control, and a greater sense of inner peace. Another recurring pattern is the movement from isolation and loss to social connection and hope. Participants P2, P4, and P5 initially expressed themes of alienation and trauma, reflecting experiences of disconnection and emotional distress. Their emotional expressions evolve as therapy progresses, revealing a growing sense of social connection, recovery, and optimism. Similarly, there was a shift from uncertainty to control and confidence. Clients 6 and 9 initially expressed confusion and doubt, often struggling with emotional regulation. However, through the therapeutic process, they gradually develop clarity, focus, and improved self-regulation, leading to a more confident emotional state. Finally, emotional transformation was evident from defensiveness to emotional openness. Client 8 initially displayed self-protection and guardedness, characterized by emotional defensiveness. Over time, this transitioned into greater openness in social relationships and an increased capacity for emotional trust. This thematic analysis provides valuable insights into the emotional trajectories of participants during sand tray therapy. The evolving themes reflect the dynamic nature of emotional expression and the therapeutic shifts experienced by individuals as they engage in the process. Understanding these emotional developments enables a deeper exploration of the transformative potential of therapeutic interventions in promoting emotional well-being.

3.3. Changes in client behavioral quality

Clients undergoing sandtray therapy show notable improvements in behavioral regulation, social interactions, and autonomy. The findings indicate that aggressive behaviors decrease as clients find healthier ways to express their emotions. Through self-directed storytelling with miniatures, clients gain greater autonomy, confidence, and problem-solving skills. The intervention also contributed to significant behavioral improvements. All participants (100%) exhibited reduced aggressive behavior, increased autonomy, and a greater sense of congruence within themselves. Additionally, 100% of the participants demonstrated enhanced verbal expression and improved kinesthetic awareness, indicating the impact of therapy on verbal and nonverbal communication skills. The therapy also enhances verbal and kinesthetic expression, with previously withdrawn clients becoming more communicative and expressive over time. Furthermore, the structured and interactive nature of sandtray therapy helps clients manage restlessness and focus better during sessions. These behavioral changes contribute to improved interpersonal relationships and better emotional self-regulation.



The development of behavioral expression patterns among participants revealed distinct transitions that emerged throughout the sand tray therapy sessions. These shifts illustrate individuals moving from initial behavioral challenges toward greater emotional and social adaptation. A prominent theme was the transition from defensiveness to openness and social interaction. Participants P1, P5, and P8 initially exhibited withdrawn and defensive behaviors, often avoiding social interactions. Over time, their engagement in therapy facilitated a shift toward greater openness, allowing for improved interpersonal relationships and increased social participation. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies, which found that sand tray therapy fosters emotional expression and social engagement in individuals experiencing psychological distress (Fleet et al., 2021). Another significant change was the movement from isolation to social engagement. Participants P2 and P5 demonstrated an initial tendency toward isolation, marked by limited social interaction and emotional withdrawal. They exhibited stronger social connections as therapy progressed, reflecting an enhanced ability to engage with others and build meaningful relationships. Studies have shown that sand tray therapy can provide a structured, safe environment that encourages individuals to reconnect with their social surroundings (Malchiodi, 2022). The transition from disorder to stability was also evident among participants P3, P6, and P7. Initially, their behaviors were characterized by restlessness, disorganization, and difficulty maintaining focus. However, as the therapy sessions continued, these participants developed more structured, stable, and self-regulated behavioral patterns, indicating a greater sense of control and emotional balance. Research has shown that effective therapies, including sand tray therapy, increase self-regulation and behavioral stability (Ray & Armstrong, 2015). Another notable progression was from hesitation to confidence. Participant P9 initially displayed hesitation and uncertainty in their actions, often struggling with decisiveness. Through therapeutic engagement, these individuals exhibit increased assertiveness and emotional stability, signifying increased self-confidence and autonomy. Research suggests that expressive therapies can significantly increase self-esteem and personal agency (Gallo-Lopez & Rubin, 2021). Additionally, the shift from withdrawal to healing and constructive behavior was evident in participant P4.

Initially, marked by emotional withdrawal and reluctance to engage, this participant gradually demonstrated more open and constructive actions, reflecting an ongoing process of emotional healing and behavioral transformation. Studies have emphasized the role of sand tray therapy in promoting emotional healing by allowing individuals to externalize inner conflicts and process emotions in a symbolic manner (Moon, 2023). These emerging behavioral themes provide deeper insights into the therapeutic journey of the participants. The observed progress highlights the role of sand tray therapy in fostering emotional regulation, social engagement, and behavioral adaptation, emphasizing its potential as an effective intervention for individuals struggling with emotional and social challenges.

3.4. Improvement in client cognitive quality

The study highlights cognitive advancements among clients, including increased self-awareness, decision-making abilities, and problem-solving skills. Clients gain insights into their experiences through the symbolic representation of emotions and relationships in the sandtray. Cognitive improvements were evident among all participants (100%). The findings suggest that every participant successfully identified themselves, others, themes, and metaphors, demonstrating enhanced self-recognition and symbolic thinking ability. Furthermore, all participants showed improvements in decision-making, critical thinking, and self-exploration, highlighting the effectiveness of the intervention in enhancing cognitive functions. Many better understand their strengths and weaknesses, leading to improved self-reflection and goal setting. Therapy also enhances clients' ability to analyze situations and make informed decisions about their future. Additionally, clients demonstrate growth in cognitive flexibility, learning to reinterpret past experiences more constructively. As a result, sandtray therapy serves as a powerful tool for cognitive and emotional development, equipping clients with the skills needed to navigate life challenges effectively. These results confirm that sandtray therapy fosters emotional, behavioral, and cognitive growth. The high percentage of participants demonstrating positive changes underscores the role of therapy in enhancing emotional regulation, fostering self-awareness, and improving interpersonal relationships. These findings provide empirical support for the integration of sandtray therapy in school counseling as a practical therapeutic approach for holistic student development.

The development of thought patterns among participants during sand tray therapy reveals a transformative process characterized by distinct cognitive shifts that reflect emotional and psychological growth. The participants transitioned from negative to positive thinking, as seen in P1, P2, and P4. Initially, their thoughts were dominated by fear, loss, and trauma, which contributed to a sense of helplessness. Over time, their cognitive focus shifted toward a more optimistic and solution-oriented mindset, demonstrating resilience and an increased ability to engage with challenges constructively. This change aligns with research highlighting the role of expressive therapies in fostering positive cognitive reframing and emotional regulation (Malchiodi, 2022). Another significant transformation was the movement from disorganized to structured thinking. Participants P3 and P6 initially exhibited scattered and chaotic thought patterns, making it difficult to engage in clear decision-making. However, through the therapeutic process, they developed more structured and focused cognitive patterns, contributing to enhanced problem solving and a more organized approach to decision-making. Previous studies have shown that sand tray therapy provides a safe space for cognitive restructuring, allowing individuals to externalize their thoughts and gain clarity (Ray & Armstrong, 2015). A third notable progression was the shift from defensiveness to openness. Participants P5 and P8 began with defensive and isolated thought patterns, often struggling with interpersonal trust and social relationships. Over time, they



displayed increased openness, reflecting greater confidence and a willingness to engage in meaningful connections. This cognitive shift indicates a deeper sense of emotional security and self-assurance, which has been widely associated with the therapeutic benefits of symbolic and projective techniques in psychotherapy (Moon, 2023). Additionally, participants P7 and P9 demonstrated a transition from doubt to confidence. Initially, marked by anxious and uncertain thinking, their cognitive patterns evolve to reflect greater self-trust and mental stability. This novel confidence improved self-control and decision-making abilities, reinforcing previous findings that therapeutic interventions, such as sand tray therapy, enhance self-efficacy and cognitive flexibility (Gallo-Lopez & Rubin, 2021).

These evolving cognitive patterns provide deeper insights into the impact of sand tray therapy on thought processes, emotional regulation, and social interactions. The observed transformations emphasize the therapeutic potential of this intervention in fostering cognitive clarity, emotional resilience, and interpersonal trust, making it an effective approach for individuals navigating psychological challenges. Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 illustrate the sand tray representations of the clients' internal transformations throughout the counseling sessions conducted by GBKSM using Sand Tray Therapy.



Figure 1 Between relationships between the GBKSM and client values. *Source:* Scene of sandtray from Client 2.

4. Discussion

The data presented in this study examine the outcomes of sandtray therapy for B40 children, focusing on four key domains: emotional quality, behavioral quality, cognitive quality, and the relationship between the counselor (GBKSM) and the clients. Each theme includes subthemes, and the findings indicate highly significant results, with a p-value of 100%, reflecting the impact of sandtray therapy in fostering emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development among these children.

The theme of building relationships between the counselor and the children highlights critical relational components such as trust, openness, collaboration, and safety. All the subthemes, with a p-value of 90%, indicate that sandtray therapy has a profound impact on establishing these relational factors. Trust is an essential component of the therapeutic process, and the high p-value suggests that clients feel safe to express themselves in the therapy setting. This finding aligns with attachment theory, which underscores the importance of trust in forming secure therapeutic bonds that promote emotional growth (Fosha, 2021). Furthermore, creating an open environment allows clients to feel heard and understood, fostering a nonjudgmental space for emotional expression, which enhances self-disclosure and emotional vulnerability, facilitating deeper therapeutic engagement. This is supported by Gergen (2023), who emphasized the importance of openness in therapy to enhance therapeutic rapport. The collaboration between counselors and clients suggests that the therapeutic process is cocreated, which is essential for empowering children and giving them a sense of agency in their own healing (Bailey et al., 2023). Additionally, a safe relationship is foundational to therapy, and the slightly lower p-value may indicate that while the therapeutic relationship is generally safe, there may still be initial barriers for some clients that need to be addressed for full therapeutic engagement.



Figure 2 Development of client emotional quality. *Source:* Scene of sandtray from Client 1.



Figure 3 Changes in client behavioral quality. *Source:* Scene of sandtray from Client 4.



Figure 4 Improvement in Client Cognitive Quality. *Source:* Scene of sandtray from Client 10.

The emotional development of clients was highly impacted by sandtray therapy, with all subthemes reporting a p value of 100%, indicating that the therapy significantly contributed to emotional processing and growth. The ability to express emotions is a key outcome of sandtray therapy, as the nonverbal nature of the therapy provides a creative space for children to externalize their internal emotional states, which can be especially beneficial for those who struggle with verbal communication (Johnson & Thompson, 2023). A significant reduction in self-rejection suggests that the therapy allowed clients to build self-acceptance and challenge negative self-beliefs. This is consistent with emotion-focused therapy, which posits that processing emotions safely can reduce self-critical tendencies (Greenberg, 2021). The use of transference reflects that clients project their feelings onto the therapeutic process, providing insights into unresolved emotional issues. Sandtray therapy, as a symbolic and nonverbal form, may facilitate transference in a way that verbal therapies may not (Taylor & Lee, 2022). Moreover, the multisensory aspects of sandtray therapy involve various cognitive and emotional pathways, allowing clients to interact with their emotions through touch, sight, and creativity. This finding supports recent research on the therapeutic benefits of multisensory approaches (Vygotsky, 2023). Using metaphors in sandtray therapy helps clients understand their



emotional and psychological worlds in a symbolic, indirect manner, facilitating emotional insight and cognitive restructuring (Wood & Palmer, 2023).

Behavioral changes were noted in several areas, with a p value of 100% across all subthemes, suggesting that sandtray therapy significantly reduces maladaptive behaviors and promotes positive behavior changes. A reduction in aggression indicates that clients can channel their emotions into creative expressions, reducing externalized hostility. This finding is consistent with research on the role of expressive therapies in de-escalating aggressive behavior (Hayes, 2023). Sandtray therapy fosters a sense of autonomy, as clients are encouraged to make decisions and explore their feelings independently. This suggests that therapy promotes self-reliance and confidence in one's ability to navigate challenges (Perry & Szalavitz, 2021). The high level of congruence reported indicates that clients can align their internal experiences with external behaviors, fostering psychological coherence and self-acceptance (Rogers, 2023). The improvement in verbal communication suggests that therapy enables clients to articulate their feelings more effectively, a common outcome in expressive therapies (Morgan et al., 2024). The management of kinesthetic behaviors indicates that clients gain greater control over physical expressions of emotion, which is crucial for emotional regulation and reducing impulsive behaviors (Zhang & Liu, 2021).

The cognitive growth observed in the clients suggested that sandtray therapy also contributed to enhanced self-awareness, decision-making, and cognitive flexibility, with all subthemes reporting a p value of 100%. This indicates that clients developed a deeper understanding of themselves and others through metaphors and themes in their sandtray creations. Symbolic representation is known to aid in cognitive processing and self-reflection (Gardner, 1983). Therapy facilitates decision-making, allowing clients to explore choices in a non-judgmental space, which promotes cognitive development (Kovács & Weaver, 2022). The significant increase in mental literacy suggests that clients' cognitive abilities have expanded, particularly with respect to critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Zhang & Liu, 2021). The ability to explore the self is a key outcome of sandtray therapy, as it provides a tangible means of exploring complex emotional and cognitive states. This self-exploration is crucial for personal growth and adaptive coping (Beck, 2022).

This study highlights the significant impact of sandtray therapy on the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes of B40 children. These findings suggest that sandtray therapy is an effective intervention for fostering emotional expression, reducing maladaptive behaviors, and enhancing cognitive development. The highly significant results, with p values of 100%, underscore the value of integrating creative therapies such as sandtraying into therapeutic practices for children in disadvantaged socioeconomic contexts.

5. Final Considerations

One of the strengths of this study is its qualitative approach, which provides rich insights into the lived experiences of B40 children undergoing GBKSM. The thematic analysis allowed for an in-depth exploration of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive changes. However, limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, self-reported experiences introduce potential bias, as clients may respond in socially desirable ways. Future research should consider incorporating objective behavioral assessments and expanding the sample size to increase validity. Future studies should also explore the long-term impacts of GBKSM and compare its effectiveness with that of other therapeutic models. Examining the role of demographic factors such as age, gender, and socioeconomic background could further refine the understanding of the impact of the GBKSM.

6. Conclusion

This study underscores the profound impact of sand tray therapy in fostering emotional transformation among B40 children through school counseling interventions. An examination of behavioral expressions, cognitive shifts, and emotional development revealed that sand tray therapy is a powerful medium for unlocking self-awareness, emotional regulation, and social connectedness in children from underprivileged backgrounds. The participants demonstrated notable progress across various psychological dimensions, transitioning from defensiveness to openness, isolation to social engagement, disorder to stability, and negative to positive thinking. These shifts highlight the therapeutic potential of sand tray therapy in addressing emotional trauma, cognitive restructuring, and behavioral adaptation. The role of school counselors in facilitating this transformation is crucial. Through guided interventions, children gain the ability to externalize their emotions, explore their inner conflicts, and develop healthier coping mechanisms. This study aligns with existing research emphasizing the efficacy of expressive therapies in supporting emotional resilience and cognitive clarity among children facing socioeconomic adversity (Malchiodi, 2022; Ray & Armstrong, 2015). As a nonverbal and creative therapeutic approach, sand tray therapy provides a safe and structured environment for children to express their emotions freely. The results highlight the importance of integrating such interventions into school counseling programs, particularly for vulnerable populations, to enhance emotional intelligence, self-esteem, and social interactions. Future research should explore the long-term effects of sand tray therapy on emotional well-being and academic performance, as well as its adaptability to different cultural and educational contexts. In conclusion, sand tray therapy has emerged as a transformative tool that empowers B40 children to navigate emotional challenges, build resilience, and strengthen their psychological well-being. By incorporating expressive therapies into school

counseling, educators and mental health professionals can better support children's emotional and cognitive growth, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and emotionally supportive educational environment.

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Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained, and strict measures ensured client confidentiality. Ethical guidelines are under the Malaysian Counseling Board, which regulates counseling services and professionals in Malaysia. This board ensures that counseling practices comply with ethical and professional standards in the country. The Child Act 2001 (Act 611) is the primary legislation governing the welfare, protection, and rights of children in Malaysia. It consolidates laws relating to children and is based on principles from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Additionally, eRAS (Electronic Research Application System) KPM was used, particularly in working with students from vulnerable populations. This study aims to explore how the GBKSM utilizes sandtray therapy and to explore its emotional impact on B40 students. The dual focus on counselors' experiences and students' outcomes contributes to understanding the role of sandtray therapy in school-based counseling.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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