



4th Global Conference on Psychology

21 - 23 August 2026

Oxford, United Kingdom

Transformational Experiences in Counselor Training Through Sandtray Therapy and the Integrated Developmental Model

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Abstract

Counselor development requires the ongoing integration of personal awareness and professional identity. This qualitative study explores master's-level counseling students' personal and professional development through sandtray therapy using the Integrated Developmental Model (IDM) as a conceptual framework. The study was guided by the research questions: *How does your personal self influence your perceived professional self?* and reflections on the tray representing *"My Journey as a Counseling Student."* Participants included counselors-in-training who completed an Advanced Sandtray Therapy course in Summer 2024.

Participants created sandtrays reflecting three themes: (a) personal self, (b) professional self, and (c) growth throughout the counseling journey. In alignment with visual qualitative methodologies, sandtray images were analyzed alongside written reflections and interview narratives to examine symbolic representations of developmental experiences.

Sandtray therapy offers a symbolic and experiential medium through which counselors-in-training can explore identity, self-awareness, and transformational growth. Foundational family therapy theorists, including Bowen and Satir, emphasized the integration of the therapist's personal self with professional competence. Similarly, the IDM highlights counselor growth through increasing levels of self-awareness, autonomy, motivation, and integration.

Using the IDM lens, this study examined how counseling students represented evolving counselor identities and described the reciprocal influence between their personal and professional selves through sandtrays. Findings contribute to counselor education by illustrating how expressive and visual methods such as sandtray therapy can deepen reflective practice, support developmental assessment, and foster holistic counselor growth. Implications for supervision, experiential pedagogy, and counselor training are discussed.

Keywords: counselor development, sandtray therapy, Integrated Developmental Model, counselor identity, experiential learning