

Learning Through Experience: Providing Play Therapy as a School Counselor

| WOODY BELT, MA, SB-RPT

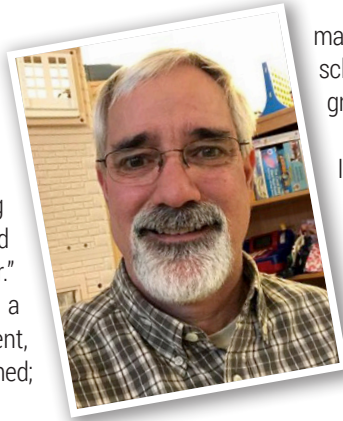
At the ripe age of 6 or 7 my grandfather said, "You have been watching for a while, it's your turn," and handed me the boat's oars. Plopping them in the water, it was clear, we were going nowhere fast! After looking for help, he said, "Take that oar and pull it toward you. What happens to the boat? Now try the other." Through experience, I was learning how to row a boat and to cope with frustration, disappointment, and failure with confidence. Grandpa fished; I learned; we both got wet.

Growing up, the people who supported my wellbeing were all non-clinicians who fostered experience-based growth. I would like to think that my grandfather saw my struggle and used the boat to help me build resilience and confidence, but I am sure my growth was an unintended consequence of his need to catch a fish.

I wanted to pay forward what others had given me. In college and beyond, I backpacked, canoed, mountain biked, and climbed with youth. Each trip provided opportunities to guide them in learning about resilience, self-worth, goal setting, and to communicate that they were valued. I sounded like my grandfather. "What are you feeling on that cliff? What kept you going? Any connection to home, your life, you? Let's make something to represent your growth."

I heard someone talk about John Dewey, Outward Bound, and experiential education. I got a metaphoric oar smack! "THERE IS A NAME FOR WHAT I AM DOING?" I pursued adventure education and wilderness therapy more formally with my now life partner helping to guide me.

The seasonal work felt good, but I needed a change. How could I fuel my passion working with youths year-round? In schools? I never liked schools! I was convinced that I had something to offer the local public school, though. I led project-based learning with a group of awkward hormone-poisoned middle school students. I was rowing a boat again: enrolled in a



master's degree program with peers half my age and learning about school counseling while doing it! My glossy grad student eyes had grand visions: "I'm gonna' save the world!"

In reality, being a school counselor means working with about 300 pre-K through 6th graders; providing three to five guidance lessons a day; managing 504 plans and truancy reports; supporting local agencies and families as an ad hoc social worker; counseling students on conflict, grief, friendships, and issues regarding private parts; providing food and/or presents during the holidays; attending every alphabet soup meeting possible (IEP, EST, CSP, MTSS, etc.); chairing/sitting on committees; running groups every lunch period and during recess; not to mention handling every student/parent/teacher crisis... rarely taking time for a bathroom break or even eating lunch, myself! But I love what I do!

Deep within this exhausting list lies the joy and the hardship of therapeutically supporting students, especially those living in and with all kinds of trauma. With long wait lists for area clinicians and a lack of resources preventing many parents from being able to take their child to outside clinicians, I realize that my students are left with me. Better know what I am doing!

I heard one my graduate interns mention that what I am doing with students looks like play therapy. "THERE IS A NAME FOR WHAT I AM DOING?" I must find out more, do more, experience more, and practice more! I went to school again, but this time it felt right. Supervision is key, the best part of learning, and helps me understand why what I do is so important for my students. Then, after obtaining many hours of training and supervision, I applied for and obtained APT's School Based - Registered Play Therapist credential.

There is a name for the things we do, and sometimes the water is deep. But, if we row the boat with a friend and learn, we can keep moving forward.



ABOUT THE MEMBER

Woody Belt, MA, SB-RPT has been working in rural Vermont public schools for over 10 years and is presently an elementary school counselor in Johnson, VT. Woody lives with his best friend and their son who keeps teaching mom and dad the value of love and patience through his disabilities.

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