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Using Graphic Memoirs in a Counseling Children and Adolescent Course: A Phenomenological Arts-Based Study

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Using Graphic Memoirs in a Counseling Children and Adolescents Course: A Phenomenological Arts-Based Reflexive Study

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Abstract

Graphic memoirs in learning environments can facilitate deep educational processes, such as dismantling stigmas and biases. There is limited research on the use of graphic memoirs in counselor education. This arts-based phenomenological investigation explored 26 CITs' experiences with a graphic memoir assignment in a counseling children and adolescent course. There were four themes identified: (a) understanding the deaf experience and advocacy, (b) professional growth and counseling insights, (c) personal reflection and connection, and (d) educational impact and engagement. One subtheme — using bibliotherapy and creative activities in counseling practice — was also identified. Discussion and implications for counselor educators are provided.

Significance to the Public

Bibliotherapy is often used as a counseling intervention, specifically with children; however, there is limited literature on how it impacts counselors-in-training. This study explores the experiences of 26 counselors-in-training who read a graphic memoir as an assignment in a children and adolescent counseling course.

Keywords: graphic memoir, arts-based, counselor education, bibliotherapy, creative pedagogy

Expressive arts can take many forms like poetry, music, drama, dance, or visual art (Malchiodi, 2023). In the classroom, expressive arts, such as graphic memoirs, can capture deeper understandings and can provide avenues for expression that may not be communicated in narrative terms, or language (Maranzan, 2016; Panhofer et al., 2011). The utilization of expressive arts has been used in a wide range of clinical settings, yet inconsistently used in the training of mental health professionals (Domyancich-Lee et al., 2022; Myers et al., 2020; Norcross et al., 2001). Despite its inconsistent use, graphic memoirs can facilitate deep educational processes, such as dismantling stigmas and biases (Domyancich-Lee et al., 2022; Maranzan, 2016). While minimal research

appears to indicate that graphic memoirs can be impactful as a pedagogical tool in psychology training, more counselor education-specific research is needed. This arts-based phenomenological investigation sought to explore counselor trainees' experience with a graphic memoir and related expressive arts reflection.

Bibliotherapy

The use of books to assist clients in healing has been in practice for around 100 years (Bate & Schuman, 2016). The use of books in healing is not limited to typical fiction or nonfiction readings but can include comics and graphic novels. The existing literature on the use of graphic novels remains

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scant; however, bibliotherapy principles appear to apply to considerations and the use of graphic novels in classroom and clinical settings (Bollinger, 2022; McNicol, 2018). Bibliotherapy has numerous benefits including knowledge of self and how to process stressful situations (Jack & Ronan, 2008), and has shown to be effective in clinical and school settings in reducing psychological symptoms in children and adolescents (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015; Redman et al., 2024; Yuan et al., 2018). Bibliotherapy can be efficacious in both counselor education and clinical settings. The value of bibliotherapy has been utilized in counseling supervision with bibliosupervision (Brown & Carrola, 2022; Graham et al., 2014) and has shown to be effective in developing self-efficacy and awareness in counselors-in-training (CITs) working with diverse clients (Graham & Pehrsson, 2008; Schoonover, 2022).

Although literature exists supporting bibliotherapy's use in counseling supervision, there is none on utilizing it in counselor education courses. CITs must learn evidence-informed interventions in their children and adolescent counseling course, such as bibliotherapy, that can be used with children and adolescents. There is no literature on content CITs should learn and focus on when taking a counseling children and adolescent course. A Delphi study from Clark and colleagues (2022) found that experts agreed on 10 competencies that counselors who work with children and adolescents should know: a passion for children; authenticity; advocating for children; evidence-based treatments; knowledge of legal and ethical issues with counseling children; using congruence, empathy, and nonjudgement; meeting children where they are; multicultural competence; speaking the language of the children; and self-reflection. The competencies could be addressed by infusing creative assignments, such as bibliotherapy, in a counseling children and adolescent course, to increase students' awareness of evidence-based treatments, multicultural competence, empathy, and self-reflection.

There is research to support bibliotherapy as an evidence-informed intervention to use with children

and adolescents. It has been shown to increase a counselor's self-efficacy and awareness, which could make it an effective pedagogical tool to prepare CITs to work with children and adolescents. Since COVID-19 there has been an increase in the sale of comics and graphic novels, with a 2% increase for kids (Curcic, 2023). Therefore, if counselors who work with children and adolescents want to implement bibliotherapy, they need to be knowledgeable about graphic novels. We sought to explore the impact of a graphic novel, pulling from bibliotherapy principles, in teaching CITs about counseling children and adolescents.

The Power of Graphic Novels

Graphic novels are stories in comic strip format. Graphic memoirs communicate nuanced facets of the human experience through the use of visual media (Venkatesean, 2021). Unique attributes of graphic memoirs exist that can appear to have the potential to be beneficial within the context of a counselor education curriculum. Most of the research on graphic memoirs in the training of mental health professionals has taken place in psychology training programs (Norcross et al., 2001) and one conceptual article in social work (Domyancich-Lee et al., 2022). Graphic memoirs have been highlighted as potentially effective ways to engage classes in social justice conversations and to provide further context to textbooks (Norcross et al., 2001; Robbins, 2015). Additionally, graphic memoirs also can help students connect course material to events in the real world, by providing first-person accounts of mental disorders (Banyard, 2000). Graphic memoirs and autobiographies also reduce stigmas about mental disorders and increase empathy for individuals who have experienced psychological problems (Corrigan & Shapiro, 2010; Maranzan, 2016). One study found that the use of a graphic memoir about a person with Parkinson's increased clinicians' empathy (Myers et al., 2020).

Previous research on the impact of graphic memoirs in education settings has shown a positive impact on students (Corrigan & Shapiro, 2010; Maranzan, 2016; Myers et al., 2020; Robbins, 2015). The proposed impact it might have on the

development of students in helping professions (Domyancich-Lee et al., 2022) and connection to counseling children and adolescent competencies (Clark et al., 2022) makes it imperative to study the experiences of CITs who were assigned a graphic memoir in counseling children and adolescent course. This arts-based phenomenological study sought to explore the impact of CITs' experience engaging with a graphic memoir in the counseling children and adolescents course.

Method

Phenomenological research is a type of qualitative research design with deep philosophical roots originating in the work of Edmund Husserl (Cohen, 1987; Peoples, 2020; Spiegelberg, 1994). This type of qualitative methodology was used to explore the lived experiences and meaning-making of CITs engaging in the graphic memoir assignment. According to Peoples (2020), meaning-making is essential to phenomenological inquiry as phenomenological research does not seek to predict but rather to gain a deeper understanding of a lived experience. This study used an arts-based phenomenological approach to understand students' experiences. Gupta and Zieske (2024) define arts-based phenomenological research as "the umbrella methodology for any phenomenological research studies that incorporate art-making into the research process to evoke rich insight into the essence of human experiences." There has been an increase in the writing and use of arts-based phenomenological research (Gupta & Zieske, 2024; Haire & MacDonald, 2021; Woodgate et al., 2021).

Researchers

Two of the authors are counselor educators and one is a doctoral student in counselor education. Two authors are registered play therapists, and one author has extensive experience implementing bibliotherapy with children, adolescents, and adults. All three authors have extensive experience counseling children and adolescents in various clinical settings and identify as specializing in

counseling youth. The first author counseled children in schools and communities. The second author has counseled children in residential treatment centers and nonprofits, and continues to counsel youth in a group private practice setting. The third author has counseled children in nonprofit, school, and agency settings. Two of the authors have taught the children and adolescent counseling course multiple times. All three authors have experience conducting qualitative research and have published phenomenological studies. Two of the researchers have no disabilities, and one researcher is a person with a disability with a rare genetic disorder, immune deficiency, and an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis.

Participants

Following IRB approval, we utilized a convenience sampling method and collected qualitative data from 26 CITs at two different universities. One university ($n = 13$) was located in a Hispanic-serving, CACREP-accredited institution in the Southwest of the United States. The other institution ($n = 13$) is a CACREP-accredited university in the Midwest of the United States. At the former institution, CITs were in the final semester of their master's program and the children and adolescent counseling course was an elective in the program. At the latter institution, CITs were in the second year of their master's program and were all clinical mental health counseling students who were required to take the course. Selection criteria for the study were as follows: (a) enrolled in a counseling program at either of the two universities, (b) enrolled in the children and adolescent counseling course, and (c) consented to participate in the study. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

The classes were taught by the first and second authors, with the first author having one section and the second author having two sections. The first author's class was in-person and the second author's two classes were hybrid (50% online and 50% in-person). During the first class of the semester, we described the study and provided students with informed consent forms to complete if they wanted to participate in the study.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

<u>Race</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Sexual Orientation</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Class</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Track</u>	<u>N</u>
White	7	Male	19	Heterosexual	15	Low	8	School	5
Latinx	15	Female	5	Lesbian/Gay	1	Middle	13	Counseling	
Black	3	Other	2	Bisexual	10	Upper	5	Clinical	21
Asian	1							Mental Health	

We then prompted students to complete a Qualtrics form if they agreed to participate in the study. We ensured that students knew that participating or not participating in the study would not negatively impact their grades. To ensure that the professors did not know who was in the study, we did not access the Qualtrics results until after final grades had been submitted. When the semester had ended, the data was downloaded and sent to the third author for masking.

Data Collection

The Assignment

In a children and adolescent counseling course at two universities, CITs were asked to read a graphic memoir about a young person with hearing loss called *El Deafo* (Bell, 2014). The researchers met and discussed the options of what graphic memoir could be assigned for the course. The researchers narrowed down the list to four options and decided on *El Deafo* due to its focus on children and adolescents, being easy to purchase, and inclusion of children with disabilities. CITs then engaged in two journal reflections, one halfway through the graphic memoir and one after completing the memoir. The journal reflection assignment prompts read:

When completing your reflection for *El Deafo* you have multiple options on how you can submit it. First, you can write a reflection paper. Second, you can create a comic strip that describes your experience reading the book. Third, you can create another piece of art that

describes your experience reading the book. Fourth, you can create your own assignment! You will need to get prior approval from your professor before choosing this option. You will submit two reflections, one at the halfway point of the book and the other at the end of the book. Regardless of which option you choose for the assignment, you will need to respond to the prompts below.

The follow-up prompts included: (a) What was the experience reading and reflecting on “*El Deafo*” like for you? (b) What were some of your biggest personal and professional takeaways from the experience reading “*El Deafo*”? (c) What would you describe as the meaning behind “*El Deafo*”? and (d) How did the graphic memoir help you learn about counseling children and adolescents, if at all?

Students received the same prompt for both submissions. Per the assignment directions, CITs created and submitted diverse, creative reflections on their experience with *El Deafo* and the reflection. Students chose what medium they wanted for each submission, and variety in format was noted throughout submissions (e.g., a student might submit a paper for the first submission and a comic strip for the second, while another student might submit two comic strips). Examples of assignment submissions included comic strips, reflection papers, haikus, paintings, and an interview with their children after reading the graphic novel at bedtime. Sample comic strip submissions, with student information redacted, are provided in Appendices A, B, and C.

Data Collection

We collected multiple forms of data for this arts-based phenomenological investigation. Data collection included two reflections from each of the 26 students, for 52 total reflections (one reflection was halfway through the graphic novel and the other was at the end of the graphic novel). Reflections included diverse data types, from reflective papers to comic strips. We also invited the CITs to participate in two focus group interviews, totaling 25 participants. Moreover, we conducted two semi-structured individual interviews with students. The third author, who was not an instructor of a course and had not met the students previously, facilitated the interviews. Sample questions from the interview protocol included: (a) How has reading this memoir impacted your understanding of counseling children and adolescents? and (b) If you had to name a word or an image that captured your overall experience reading *El Deafo*, what comes to mind? The goal of phenomenological research is to understand the essence of a participant's experience and this might include long structured individual interviews. The researchers for this study felt confident that two reflections, focus groups, and individual interviews were sufficient to understand and identify themes of participants' experiences reading *El Deafo*. Data saturation was met across the three forms of data collection.

Data Analysis

We followed the seven steps from Moustakas (1994) that he modified from Van Kaam (1966), which included: horizontalizing; reducing and eliminating; clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents; identifying final invariant constituents and themes; constructing individual textural descriptions; constructing individual structural descriptions; and constructing a textural-structural description of meanings and essences of the experience. First, we organized the data based on the source category and student pseudonyms. In horizontalization, we were receptive to every statement of the participant's experience, with ample value placed on each comment (Moustakas,

1994). During reduction and elimination, we reviewed the horizons listed for each participant and removed any overlapping and repetitive statements using Moustakas' (1994) guiding questions, such as "Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?" (p. 121). We clustered and thematized the invariant constituents by gathering the meaning units to form core themes for each of the participants in the study and crafted textural descriptions for each individual. Following this, we formed composite textural descriptions for the group of students based on the individual textural descriptions. After merging the composite textural and structural descriptions, we wrote a composite description that captured the participants' lived experiences in the course.

Because the research study involved collecting and analyzing pieces of art, we integrated phenomenological arts-based research principles. Similar to Haire and MacDonald's (2021) and Woodgate et al.'s (2021) research designs, we facilitated a phenomenological arts-based reflexive study. Broadly, we followed practices outlined by other phenomenological arts-based researchers wherein we used visual arts as a tool for phenomenology (Cohen-Miller, 2018). Like Cohen-Miller (2018), we invited participants to create artistic representations in addition to interviews and collaboratively reflected on the art for further insight into their lived experiences. While phenomenological methodology traditionally relies on textual analysis, "art can be utilized to complement the methodology by providing insights into human thought by allowing participants to articulate their experience in multiple manners" (Cohen-Miller, 2018, p. 6).

The researchers reviewed the interviews, written assignments, creative art submissions, and focus groups to identify codes and themes. Researchers reviewed artifacts in alphabetical order of student pseudonyms, so reviewing Student A's first and second submission, then Student B's first and second submission, and so on. All materials, including student submissions and interviews, were analyzed by researchers individually through coding

and then collectively in thematic development. Two rounds of coding were completed by each researcher. While some portions of the data set were divided amongst researchers, the researchers engaged in comparative and consensus coding to maintain reflexivity. The researchers found common themes between the creative art submissions, interviews, and written assignments.

Trustworthiness

According to transcendental phenomenology, we, as the researchers, bracketed our biases so that they were not woven into the analysis. Bracketing included research introspection before data collection as well as critical reflective exercises through dialoguing to make assumptions explicit. To illustrate, one of the authors had an assumption entering the process that students had minimal understanding of deaf culture and would learn how to be more inclusive through the process of the assignment. We engaged in reflexive dialoguing before, during, and after data collection to challenge that assumption, including another team member identifying that some students entered with an awareness of deaf culture, and others might not debunk the stereotypes through one reading assignment. Broadly, the research team engaged in ongoing reflexive dialogue through research meetings to challenge one another to refrain from judgment and biased preconceived notions. Moreover, we utilized data triangulation by collecting and analyzing different data sources, including assignment submissions, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. We compared and contrasted the data sources in alphabetical order based on the assigned pseudonym. Because the first and second authors were the instructors of record, the third author, who was unaffiliated with the courses, facilitated the individual interviews. We sought to have an unbiased third party conduct the interviews due to the power differential that students might feel and the potential impact on the data collection and analysis.

Findings

The superordinate themes included:

(a) understanding the deaf experience and advocacy, (b) professional growth and counseling insights, (c) personal reflection and connection, and (d) educational impact and engagement. Additionally, there was one subtheme of using bibliotherapy and creative activities in counseling practice.

Understanding the Deaf Experience and Advocacy

One prominent theme was how the course assignment illuminated the deaf experience and the importance of advocacy. Participants shared that learning about the challenges and social impacts of hearing loss elucidated the counselors' role as advocates. Additionally, they stated the course assignment promoted acceptance, inclusivity, and kindness toward individuals with disabilities. Students also shared that the course assignment led them to recognize and value the importance of representation and avoiding assumptions in interactions. Specifically, one student shared in their reflection that they previously lacked knowledge of working with people who are deaf or hard of hearing, stating, "I didn't know, not louder, not slower, be mindful and respectful, protection and validation."

The theme of understanding the deaf experience and advocacy was exemplified by student responses in their reflections, such as, "I believe the assignment also encourages awareness and advocacy in schools. As a school counselor, I could develop programs to celebrate and educate on differences." Another student shared in the focus group, "It made me think of all the differences that educators should be aware of in their classroom and how it's important to educate school staff on how to best support students who might be different from the norm."

The theme of advocacy for deaf individuals was not siloed to school counselors, as the importance of

advocacy extended to clinical mental health counseling, as exemplified in the following student quote in the focus group, “As a professional, I realize the importance of asking clients what their preferences, needs, and experiences are so that I can provide them with the best services possible.” This quote, in particular, speaks to CITs learning the importance of self-advocacy and what they need from their counselor. Additionally, one student reflected in their assignment on how Cece (the main character in *El Deafo*) was motivated by being deaf, stating, “Reading ‘*El Deafo*’ was genuinely eye-opening and heartwarming, especially as the story described every adverse challenge they faced and the emotions fueled by them.” In addition to written and focus group responses, they were also shared in the assignments that chose a creative option for the assignment. In Appendix A, the student included a drawing of the ear canal in their comic strip, with the appropriate labels of parts of the ear. This provides more support that students’ knowledge of the deaf experience grew.

Students shared in their creative arts submissions that the way Cece viewed her disability was important and exemplified earlier findings, emphasizing the importance of allowing clients to share their own experiences in their own words. For example, in Appendix B, the student who created that comic strip reflected on Cece’s process of accepting her deafness, “One of the biggest impacts was how Cece viewed her deafness as a superpower.... I think it’s important that when we train others on this topic, we deliver information from that perspective as well.” Disability often is seen as a deficit and thus advocacy for disabled individuals may require counselors to reframe and redefine disability as more than just “negative.” Insights into educational aspects, including the normalization of disabilities and adaptation to life with a disability, were reflected in one student’s response: “So far, I would describe the meaning of ‘*El Deafo*’ as showcasing the creativity and resiliency of humans, particularly children, when faced with difficult circumstances.”

Another student shared the importance of disability pride in an interview, stating, “I think the

meaning behind *El Deafo* is finding pride and appreciation for those things that sometimes make us feel different.” Overall, students found that “one of my biggest takeaways from this novel was advocacy and intentionality ... making sure the whole child is being cared for is so important.” The overall theme of the book centered around advocacy, according to numerous students, as emphasized by one student in the focus group who stated, “I think the meaning behind ‘*El Deafo*’ is to embrace who you are, regardless of differences and regardless of what other people may think of you.” The theme of understanding the deaf experience leads into the next theme, which is the impact of the graphic memoir on professional growth for counselors.

Professional Growth and Counseling Insights

An additional theme that emerged was how the course assignment provided insights into specific skills for counseling children and adolescents, such as empathy, patience, social justice, and creativity. One student shared that they learned open-mindedness through the memoir assignment in their reflection, stating, “My biggest personal understanding is keeping an open mind when interacting with people and kids with disabilities.”

Students shared additional comments in the focus group that showcased how the course assignment shaped the way they will work with children and adolescents going forward. As one student noted, “taking part in this reading was very enjoyable and truly shaped the way I interact with the children in my life.” Another student shared that *El Deafo* “encouraged me to keep learning more about the things that I am not familiar with and has taught me to not be afraid to ask questions.”

This was also evident in creative assignment submissions. In Appendix C, the student shared in their comic strip that they tried to put themselves in Cece’s shoes and expanded in the next slide by stating “trying to be a ‘normal’ kid, when you have a disability, would be tough. Feeling like others are condescending when maybe they just don’t

understand.” The student expressed this with a bumble bee getting frustrated at a grasshopper that called them “special.”

The importance of listening to one’s client was crucial as students considered how they could use the course content, stating, “my personal and professional takeaways from this book was always listening to your client and that having someone who looks to be in a similar position makes the situation not scary.” Valuing the person/client in front of you was highlighted by another student in their reflection, who stated “this showed me to not think that you know better than the person in front of you about their situation.” Moreover, another student shared that “as a counselor in training, it helps inspire me to work towards fostering a safe and understanding atmosphere for my clients, as I should with all my clients.”

Developing a strengths-based approach and building therapeutic alliances was identified, as one student shared in an interview by stating:

...as a professional, I realize the importance of asking clients what their preferences, needs, and experiences are so that I can provide them with the best services possible. ‘*El Deafo*’ reminded me as a counselor in training to be attentive to the emotional difficulties of identity development and the challenges of feeling different, providing guidance and support to help young clients navigate this critical aspect of their personal growth.

The student who created Appendix A also expressed similar feelings. In their comic in the second slide, they drew themselves with a client and encouraged them to identify their superpower, utilizing a strengths-based approach. The student in Appendix C also had a similar realization when they drew a bumble bee celebrating with a butterfly and snail, recognizing that each child has unique skills that make them special.

Understanding the impact of social dynamics, peer relationships, and family support on development was reflected by the students. *El Deafo* also highlights the importance of having a strong support system to be surrounded by, with

students sharing in the focus group that “her happiest moments occur when she is surrounded by her family and playing with friends who appreciate her for who she is.” Additionally, “Cece’s story portrays how her impairment also impacted her parents and siblings.”

Using Bibliotherapy and Creative Activities in Counseling Practice

Using creative activities in counseling practice was a subtheme within the broader theme of professional growth and counseling insights that emerged. Students shared that using creative interventions allows for person-centered care. One student reflected stated in an interview: “As a professional, I realize the importance of asking clients what their preferences, needs, and experiences are so that I can provide them with the best services possible.” Another student linked the course content to play therapy techniques and elaborated in their assignment, stating, “This concept connects to play therapy, highlighting the importance of allowing the child to experience life as they perceive it.” The student from Appendix A drew themselves having a realization that utilizing creative activities, such as a graphic memoir, with clients can assist clients in healing.

One student specifically mentioned in their assignment how she felt she could use bibliotherapy with clients, stating, “Since this was a child and adolescent counseling course, I thought about how this graphic novel would be a good intervention to use with a child.” Another mentioned in the focus group that “this book inspired me and reminded me that I can help kids create internal resources by planning interventions that stimulate their imaginative and creative energy. Let’s bring them to life!”

Personal Reflection and Connection

Students explored their reflections and connections to *El Deafo*. Some students had reactions to the way that Cece was treated in the book, with one student saying in their assignment: “I felt sad for Cece when she lost her hearing. Hearing isn’t just about

getting information from the world around us; it's also a vital way to communicate and connect with others." Another student reflected in their assignment on the way people treated Cece, stating, "I felt angry when some people were insensitive to Cece." Other students reflected in the focus group on the positive feelings they felt for Cece, stating, "I also felt proud of Cece. When facing tough times, she imagined herself as a superhero, and her hearing aid was her superpower. She turned her challenges into strengths and empowered herself." Another student expressed positive feelings when they said, "it brought me happiness to see how Cece uses her superhero alter ego to boost her self-confidence." There was also a personal connection that some students felt to Cece. One student stated: "I felt I could relate to Cece. Many of the difficulties Cece faced were similar to what I've gone through. The way she dealt with friendships showed that she's just like many other girls when it comes to peer relationships."

In addition to students having reactions and connections to Cece in the story, some shared their reactions to the entire story. One student shared their thoughts in the focus group about the book when they said, "One of my biggest takeaways from the second half of *El Deafo* is that you don't always appreciate things until they are gone." Another student shared in an interview how the book made them reflect on developing empathy for people when they said, "One of my takeaways so far is that you can never fully understand another person's situation unless you are that person." The student who created the comic strip in Appendix B reflected on the meaning behind *El Deafo* when they said in their comic strip, "I think the meaning behind *El Deafo* is finding pride and appreciation for those things that sometimes make us feel different." Another student explained in their assignment how the book impacted them, stating, "reading *El Deafo* was genuinely eye-opening and heartwarming, especially as the story described every adverse challenge they faced and the emotions fueled by them." Finally, a student summarized their main takeaway from the book in the focus group, stating, "I genuinely felt that *El Deafo* highlights the

universal human quest to find our place in the world and understand the true meaning of our identity."

Educational Impact and Engagement

Students shared their experiences reading *El Deafo* as an assignment for a class. At first, one student was not excited, but their views changed, as they explained when they said in their assignment, "I had to sit and actually force myself to read, but once I did start reading it, it was pretty interesting for me." Another student had a similar experience in their assignment when they said, "Once I did start reading it, it was pretty interesting for me. I do think it's a cute book and was interesting once I started to read and get through it." Some students shared their overall enjoyment and appreciation for the reading experience, particularly the graphic novel format, sharing how "reading *El Deafo* was a pleasant experience because it was the first comic I've read since my teenage years." This was also shared in the comic strip in Appendix A, where the student drew a picture of them sitting on the couch reading *El Deafo*, and included a word bubble that said, "It's been a while since I've enjoyed reading a book for class! It's relaxing and COMICAL — LOL's @ self." Moreover, a student noted in their assignment that through the process of reading *El Deafo*, "I still felt so intrigued to continue reading and reading this book. I haven't felt like this in a while reading a book." Another student captured the collective experience when they said, "I had a great time reading and reflecting on *El Deafo*." Another student indicated something similar when they said in an individual interview that "I truly loved the experience of *El Deafo*."

Discussion

Counselors have utilized books in therapy to assist clients in healing for around 100 years (Bate & Schuman, 2016), which is shown to be effective with children and adolescents with multiple symptoms (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015; Redman et al., 2024; Yuen et al., 2018). In addition to its use with clients, it has been used in the

education process for CITs during counseling supervision (Brown & Carrola, 2022; Graham & Pehrsson, 2008; Graham et al., 2014; Schoonover, 2022). Previous research has supported the use of bibliosupervision to increase CITs' self-efficacy (Graham & Pehrsson, 2008; Schoonover, 2022). Additionally, the use of a graphic novel has been proposed to be a valuable tool for supporting the development of students in helping professions classes (Domyancich-Lee et al., 2022). This study explored the experiences of CITs who read a graphic memoir during their children and adolescent counseling course.

The results of this study showed that CITs had gained awareness in working with people who are deaf. Students shared many experiences that helped them have more awareness in creating a safe space for clients, knowing what questions to ask, and how to be supportive of their clients. These experiences reflected a growth in awareness of working with clients with and without disabilities. This is similar to previous research on CITs' growth in working with diverse populations from bibliosupervision (Graham & Pehrsson, 2008; Schoonover, 2022).

Additionally, these results provide support that these students had an increase in empathy for clients who are deaf. These results of students experiencing a deeper understanding and empathy for people after reading a graphic memoir are connected to previous research (Corrigan & Shapiro, 2010; Maranzan, 2016; Myers et al., 2020). Myers and colleagues' (2020) results showed that people presented with a graphic memoir focusing on one topic would develop deeper empathy and insight into working with people with Parkinson's. The experiences of our students align with that, with our students sharing that they had a deeper understanding and empathetic connection to Cece and people who are deaf. Furthermore, these results connect with Maranzan's (2016) suggestions that graphic memoirs assist in dismantling stigmas and biases. Maranzan (2016) also suggests that graphic memoirs can create a deep education process for students.

Participants discussed their reactions to the content of *El Deafo*. Students had a range of

feelings reading about Cece's story, from anger to sadness, to feeling proud of Cece and her progress. Some students reflected on struggling to begin the project, but once they did, there was a deep connection to the material. Some students reflected on *El Deafo*, summarizing the meaning and process of understanding our own identity. These results support Maranzan's (2016) hypothesis that graphic memoirs create a deeper education process for students. Although including a graphic memoir in a course syllabus and assignment might sound unorthodox, the results from this study indicate that the experiences of CITs who have a graphic memoir assigned experienced an increase in their awareness, empathy, and deep educational experience.

The results also aligned with the proposal by Domyancich-Lee and colleagues (2022). They proposed that the utilization of a graphic novel in a helping profession class would increase a student's ability to have diverse perspectives. This emerged through the participant's theme of understanding the deaf experience and advocacy, specifically when a student said, "One of the biggest impacts was how Cece viewed her deafness as a superpower.... I think it's important that when we train others on this topic, we deliver information from that perspective as well." Additionally, Domyancich-Lee and colleagues (2022) suggested that graphic novels increase engagement and discourse, and the theme of understanding the deaf experience is connected to this suggestion. One student discussed their deeper understanding of the oppression people who are deaf face when they said, "Reading '*El Deafo*' was genuinely eye-opening and heartwarming, especially as the story described every adverse challenge they faced and the emotions fueled by them."

In addition to overlap with the proposed benefits from Domyancich-Lee and colleagues (2022), there are some impacts with the proposed counseling children and adolescent competencies from Clark and colleagues (2022), specifically empathy, multicultural competence, speaking the language of the children, self-reflection, advocating for the child, meeting the child where they are, and using evidence-based interventions. These results are

important. Counselor educators who are planning a children and adolescent counseling course must implement assignments that increase the competence of CITs in working with children, specifically, the competence of using evidence-based interventions. The theme from students of using bibliotherapy and creative activities in counseling practice supports that the assignment addressed this competency. One student reflected on this when they said, “this book inspired me and reminded me that I can help kids create internal resources by planning interventions that stimulate their imaginative and creative energy. Let’s bring them to life!” Another had shared how they might use books with future children and adolescent clients, stating, “I thought about how this graphic novel would be a good intervention to use with a child.” These quotes and this theme indicated that students had an increased understanding of the importance of utilizing creative interventions, specifically bibliotherapy, with children and adolescents. Bibliotherapy has been shown to support children’s and adolescents’ mental health (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015; Redman et al., 2024; Yuan et al., 2018), and now these students have a deeper understanding of how to implement it and the impact it might have.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations exist in the present study. As a qualitative study, it could be difficult to make the results of this study transferable. The participants for this study were at two universities in two different parts of the country, which increases the transferability of the results. Both of the universities in this study are regional universities that have a diverse population of students. This increases the transferability due to the diverse populations. Second, the first and second authors were the professors of the course where the assignment was implemented. This could increase the chance of participants feeling pressured to participate in the study; however, we attempted to mitigate this by the first and second authors being unaware of who completed the informed consent until final grades were submitted, and having the third author conduct

the interviews. Due to measures that were put in place to assure student anonymity, the study does not encapsulate detailed demographic information. Future researchers may explore the impact of graphic memoirs in the knowledge acquisition process during more detailed demographic data collection. Future research should include quantitative measurements and a larger sample size.

Implications

There are multiple implications from the results of the study for the counselor education field. The results of this study can help counselor educators when they are planning course readings for their classes. Counselor educators who are planning assignments and assigned readings for the course could consider adding a graphic memoir to complement the textbook that they use. This could be especially beneficial for classes focusing on diagnosis, multiculturalism, or children and adolescents. Having the graphic memoir as a complementary reading assignment can assist students in bringing the material together, creating deeper empathy, increasing self-efficacy, and having a positive educational experience. The authors recommend that if a counselor educator decides to include a graphic memoir in their course readings or assignments, they read the material before assigning it. Counselor educators want to ensure that their chosen graphic memoir is appropriate for the course.

An additional implication for counselor educators is to include a creative assignment connected to the graphic memoir. Providing students with the opportunity to choose between multiple options to submit their assignment for their graphic memoir can increase their willingness to complete the assignment and their engagement in the material. Additionally, it can create a deeper connection with the material. A final implication is when planning a counseling child and adolescent course, infusing a graphic memoir in the course will assist in connecting the course to the children and adolescent competencies identified by Clark and colleagues (2022).

Conclusion

The use of books to help CITs learn has been shown to increase self-efficacy (Graham & Pehrsson, 2008; Schoonover, 2022). Books are not the only way to increase healing and learning, but graphic memoirs create an opportunity for students to have a deep educational experience where they can create empathy and increase self-efficacy (Corrigan & Shapiro, 2010; Maranzan, 2016; Myers et al., 2020). Although there has been some research, there has been limited qualitative research on the experiences of CITs who read a graphic memoir in a graduate counseling course. This study sought to explore the experiences of CITs who were assigned a graphic memoir in a children and adolescent counseling course. The researchers utilized a phenomenological approach and found four themes: understanding the deaf experience and advocacy, professional growth and counseling insights, personal reflection and connection, and educational impact and engagement. The researchers recommend including graphic memoirs as complementary assigned readings in their graduate counseling courses to increase self-efficacy and empathy, and to deepen the educational experience.

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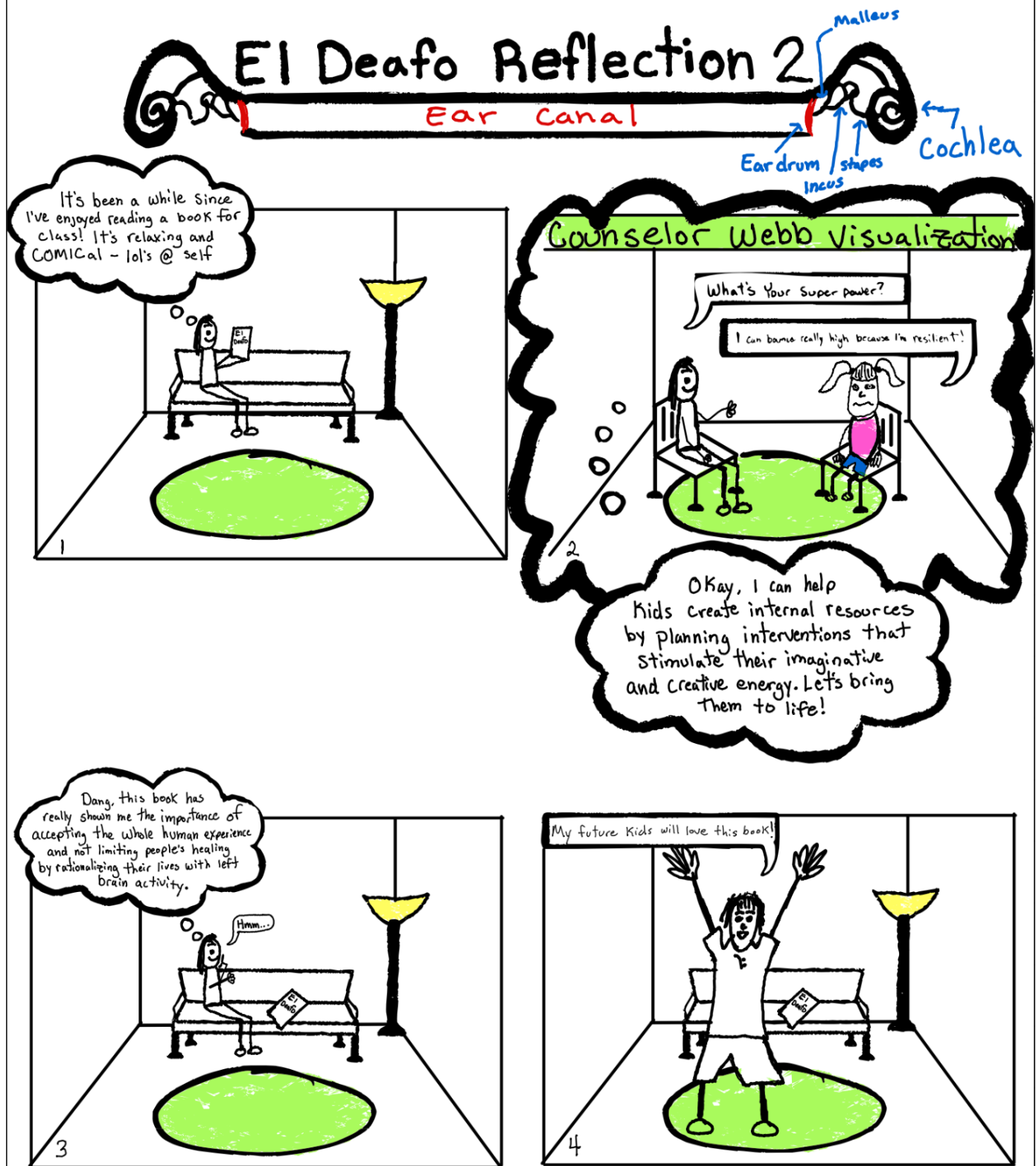
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Appendix A



Appendix B

What was the experience reading and reflection on "El Deafo" like for you?

I really enjoyed reading about Cece's story and the feelings that shaped her experience as an individual with deafness. It made me think of all the differences that educators should be aware of in their classroom. I think as a school counselor, it's important to educate school staff on how to best support students who might be different from the norm.

One of the biggest impacts was how Cece viewed her deafness as a superpower and not something to be ashamed of as the story developed. I think it's important that when we train others on this topic, we deliver information from that perspective as well.

What were some of your biggest personal and professional takeaways from the experience reading "El Deafo"?

One of my biggest takeaways from this novel was advocacy and intentionality. In schools, students who receive accommodations such as Cece would often fall under 504 or SPED services. However, making sure the whole child is being cared for is so important.

At the school I work at, there is a student who uses a hearing aid, but I am not aware of the stage of comfort and confidence that he's at. I think it's important to reach out and give him a space to process his experience.

What would you describe as the meaning behind "El Deafo"?

I think the meaning behind El Deafo is finding pride and appreciation for those things that sometimes make us feel different.

It's an important story on what perspective does to the way we approach our lives and relationships. It brings awareness on what individuals with deafness or similar experiences go through and what feelings may surround their development. Listening to others' stories are important. What society may deem as a handicap or something that needs to be fixed, may not be seen that way by that person - they may see it as their superpower.

How did the graphic memoir help you learn about counseling children and adolescents, if at all?

Throughout this novel I kept thinking of an intervention that I have in my resources from QuaverReady that I have yet to use with a client. It encourages students to list on one half of a body outline how they believe the rest of the world sees them and on the other half of the body, what others don't see about them. I think this would be a great intervention to do with individuals like Cece.

I think it's important to help clients develop awareness of their perspectives as well as helping them increase their toolbox of confidence builders.

JOURNAL REFLECTION 2

POSSIBLE

What would you describe as the meaning behind "El Deafo"?

How did the graphic memoir help you learn about counseling children and adolescents, if at all?

Appendix C

