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Trusting play to be meaningful data: using sand tray as a play-based research method with an adapted interpretative phenomenological analysis

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ABSTRACT

Play-based research methods wherein play itself is analysed as valuable and insightful data is sparse. This methodology article details one method for play-based research, sand tray, in conjunction with one option for data analysis, adapted interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Sand tray is a developmentally responsible, flexible, and adjustable method for a wide range of study topics that uses sand, symbolic miniatures, and a sand tray to gather insights and perspectives. The adapted IPA allows for not only the content of the sand tray creations to be analysed but also the play process. This data collection and data analysis combination is explored step by step to demonstrate its usefulness and support future research.

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Sand tray; play-based research method; interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA); methodology

Introduction

Play is evocative, a powerful avenue for symbolism, and a meaningful method of communication particularly for children and young people (CYP) for their perspectives to be heard (Axline, 1989; Frost & Reifel, 2012; Jennings, 1993). Communication for the purpose of this paper refers to: a means of facilitating expression through symbols, such as toys, and non-verbal cues. This type of communication is alluded to when people discuss play as the natural language of children (Hoxter et al., 1977; Ray, 2015). Play therapy is valued as a therapeutic intervention (Lin & Bratton, 2015; Pester & Dell'Aquila, 2019), play-based evaluations for mental health are employed to gather insight (Jäger & Ryan, 2007; Jäger, 2013), and learning through play is championed (Frost & Reifel, 2012; Zosh et al., 2017). However, play has yet to consistently be valued as data worthy of analysing on its own, outside of efficacy studies of play-based therapeutic interventions for example (Dobretsova & Wiese, 2019; Kosanke et al., 2016). Play in research often becomes the conduit to gather spoken or written data like in sand tray interviews (Lytje & Holliday, 2022) or the story stem assessment (Martin et al., 2022), or its function is cited as supporting the development of the relationship between child and adult, researcher and participant (Vialet, 2021). Play appears

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to be valued for its ability to bring about verbalization; however, it often falls short of being highlighted as meaningful in and of itself as communication. As researchers pursue methods that are 'fair and respectful to children as the subjects rather than the objects of research' (Barker & Weller, 2003, p. 208), play-based research methods wherein the play is the data appears to rarely be used. In this article, one play-based research method, sand tray, is described and then briefly demonstrated to highlight the insight it can elicit. It is paired with one option for analysis that keeps the validity of play as what is analysed to support future research. Both are presented following an introduction to the history and theoretical grounding of the method.

Sand tray: history, therapy, and research

Sand has a long history connected to psychological experiences, particularly in relation to the healing process (Tennessen & Strand, 1998). Indigenous communities to Turtle Island (Kimmerer, 2013), otherwise called North America, such as the Navajo have healing ceremonies that use sand in paintings (Tennessen & Strand, 1998). People in Turpan City, in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China, travel to heal themselves by burying themselves in high-temperature sands (Wang & Xu, 2018). Carl Jung wrote that sand castles supported him in moving through his emotions 'after his fallout with Freud' (Tennessen & Strand, 1998, p. 109; Jung, 1961). There is a powerful relational component to the landscape of earth (Kimmerer, 2013; O'Donohue, 1997) that is connected to when engaging with sand, whether in a desert (Wang & Xu, 2018), amongst mandalas of the Buddhist monks (Rogers, 2007), or in a sand tray (Tennessen & Strand, 1998). To use material so deeply connected and meaningful to human beings across time and space is to call in this history when used (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023).

Sandtray, as a compound word, is a therapeutic modality that originated from Lowenfeld's world method in the 1930s (Lowenfeld, 1979). The world method uses sand, miniatures, and water as tools for processing psychological material (Kosanke et al., 2016). It allows for mental and physical assimilation, metaphor and symbolic language to be engaged, and the chance for a narrative retelling as well as play that can promote change and other insights (Gil, 2012). Sandtray has also been adapted with different theoretical groundings into, for example, sandplay which Dora Kalff developed with a Jungian lens or Sandtray–Wordplay developed by Domenico (2002) with a humanistic method that links psychodrama, music, and dance movement (Kosanke et al., 2016). Just as there is flexibility in what theory grounds you, there is also flexibility to engage with directives – a prompt to build the tray about – or use a nondirective practice that allows the client to create whatever is on their mind. The Adlerian theory has a distinction for semi-directive to describe prompts such as 'attract/repels' or a 'my world' prompt with an undefined world (Kottman, 2023). For sandplay therapy with trauma specifically, therapists have found directives helpful to facilitate exploration and resolution of the trauma (Tennessen & Strand, 1998). It is believed that 'by actively engaging in physical creation, one can reestablish order in the midst of chaos, while also enabling a process of recuperation and restoration' (Bhattacharyya et al., 2023, p. 2).

Sandtray has also been used as an informal and formal assessment tool, but since this research is outside of the clinical realm, it does not make an appearance in this literature review.

Regardless of theoretical groundings, the materials are consistent. Sand trays are typically 30" by 20" and 3" deep, and blue on the bottom to elicit water and also on the sides to call in the sky (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023). The miniatures are a curated gathering of objects that represent, as much as possible, 'everything that is in the world, everything that has been, and everything that can be' (Kosanke et al., 2016, p. 504). This typically accounts for at least 250 miniatures with an upwards of 500. Details about categories of miniatures are addressed below.

Sand tray, two words, describes the materials of the tray, sand, and miniatures. The materials allow for a three-dimensional scene to be created that can be understood to be a 'reflection of one's past and present experiences, emotions, and reality' (Dobretsova & Wiese, 2019, p. 404). While sand tray materials are popularly used therapeutically, they are not bound to that realm. The world method itself is documented to have been inspired by and influenced by a British philosopher (Lowenfeld, 1979) who described 'the epistemological drive human beings have from creating meaning from culminations of units' (Mattson & Veldorale-Brogan, 2010). The materials are meant to provide 'an opportunity to process life experiences through a tangible, visible procedure which is both fun and intensely meaningful, both intimately revealing and symbolically concealing' (Hunter, 1998, p. 4). It is a story-telling method with value expanding beyond the therapeutic relationship.

A growing number of researchers (Bingley & Milligan, 2007; Linzmayer & Halpenny, 2013; Lytje & Holliday, 2023; Sawetz-Glasener, 2024), many who are child therapists or play therapists, have begun to engage with sand trays as a research method – outside of therapy. The study topics have ranged from children's experiences with nature (Linzmayer & Halpenny, 2013), grief (Lytje & Holliday, 2023), education experiences of high schoolers with refugee status (Ramirez & Matthews, 2008), long-term mental health impacts of childhood play experiences (Bingley & Milligan, 2007), the lived experience of siblings of children with cancer (Sawetz-Glasener, 2024), and collective traumas such as 9/11 in the United States (Yeh et al., 2015) and preschoolers experiences of indirect exposure to a tsunami (Lacroix et al., 2007).

Sand tray as creative methods research should, in most cases, be a directive practice. This is an ethical choice that acknowledges nondirective sandtray therapy is posited to be a powerful therapeutic medium because of the safety of the therapeutic relationship (Heiko, 2018; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023). The bounds of that relationship supports the depth to which a client can go into the psyche, which within safety (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023), is believed to 'have an innate drive toward healing and wholeness' (Tennessen & Strand, 1998). The research–participant relationship is much different, limited in time and depth, and therefore directives support minimizing a venture into territory that requires different relational dynamics. Prompts are also aligned with verbal semi-structured interview recommendations for sensitive topics (Galletta, 2013). Additionally, in sand tray interviews, the ethical importance of allowing children to 'determine what is important within [a given] area of exploration' (Lytje & Holliday, 2022, p. 4) was achieved through providing a prompt toward a topic of investigation.

Keeping play as the data in sand tray

The play that unfolds within the sand tray kinesthetically engages the participant to 'tell the story of their speechless pain' (Kosanke et al., 2016) or otherwise share what is

challenging to express (Dobretsova & Wiese, 2019). Just as in play therapy, where the toys are the words and play is the story, the same applies to sand trays as research. Therefore, to trust play as meaningful enough data to analyse on its own can be increased where and when it is aligned to do so.

Outside of efficacy research for sandtray therapy, there is scantly literature on engaging with sand tray as a research method that interrogates the communication play allows for. A play-based research method is to trust play and is in alignment with the literature on the powerful insights play can provide (Malchiodi, 2020). This type of research design is the modern day validation of what 'hundreds of separate cultures across the thousands of generations independently converg[e] on rhythm, touch, storytelling, and recommendation to community' (Perry, 2015, p. xii); that it is powerful, a valid way to create and sustain knowledge, and engaging. Just as sand has a history around the world, so does communication and processing via stories, play, art, ritual, and music (Saul, 2022; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). There does not appear to be a consistent commitment to treat the play itself as the data, even with acknowledgement that expressive activities like play can restore equilibrium and mediate the aspects of self that can maybe be sensed but not articulated (Malchiodi, 2020). Sand tray has been utilized as part of a mixed methods design (Bingley & Milligan, 2007; Linzmayer & Halpenny, 2013), to support verbal interviews (Dale & Wagner, 2003; Lytje & Holliday, 2022), and group discussions (Ramirez & Matthews, 2008), but within published literature sand tray had not yet been used on its own in a play-based design. While the other designs still gather valuable insights, they miss out the analysis of miniatures, the process of play construction such as burying or manipulating the sand, as well as the live iteration of the scene that captures the adjustments, removal, and rearranging that happens. To exclude these in the analysis is to undervalue the extensive amount of information that play can provide.

Method

Recruitment and participants for 'Set in Sand'

Participants were recruited for the study, titled Set in Sand, through a research centre's email registry, social media recruitment (Twitter/X, Instagram, LinkedIn) with an informational flyer about the study, study aims, researcher, and criteria for participation. The participant criteria were: (1) 5–13 years old, (2) experienced COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns in the UK, and (3) could travel to the research centre for in-person participation. If a caregiver responded to the contact email, they were then sent the caregiver information form, a copy of consent form for additional time to read before the study meeting, an introduction video from the researcher, and a background form that provided the researcher with contextual information related to lockdowns. Sand tray was first introduced to children in the video as a small sandbox with miniature toys. I provided one prompt example and explained that instead of me asking questions and them verbally responding, playing with the toys and sand would be another way to build or create an answer. Eleven children, across development and age, participated in the study from July to September 2023. All gender and ethnicity categories were self-reported by caregivers,

and no trauma history or diagnosis were reported. The pseudonyms were chosen by the child participants after their sandtrays were complete (Table 1).

Data collection process for 'Set in Sand'

While there are a variety of sand tray handbooks and manuals, this study used Homeyer's & Sweeney's newest edition of their manual (2023) due to accessibility, theoretical alignment, and its introduction for beginners.

Sand tray materials

The sand tray miniatures were curated in alignment with thematic categories (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023) that aim to represent all that is in the world past, present, and future:

- People
- Animals
- Buildings
- Transportation
- Vegetation
- Fences/Gates/Signs
- Natural Items
- Fantasy
- Spiritual/Mystical
- Landscaping
- Household Items
- Miscellaneous Items

Between 250–300 miniatures were provided for study participants, with approximately 215 miniatures from Play Therapy Supplies Premium Kit and additional pandemic related symbols. These pandemic symbols included but were not limited to a vaccine, face masks, an open/ closed sign, virus representation, organs, and toilet rolls. The tray itself was clear, a departure from the sandtray therapy recommendation of a blue interior, but did retain the dimensions and shape that has been understood to be central to the containment – a boundaried space wherein the internal and external world can be represented – of what is played out in the sand (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023).

Room setup

The study took place in a child-friendly research lab setting, see Figure 1. The tray was set up in the centre of the room on a table adjustment for easy access depending on the participant's height. A camera with video and audio capability was situated at one end of the table. While this removed easy access to one side of the table for the participant, they could still utilize and build from all four sides of the tray. The positioning of the camera also allowed for the researcher to only capture the hands/arms of the participant, rather than their faces or other identifiable features such as clothing, as well as capture the entire creation process of the sand tray scene. The miniatures were laid out for participants before every research session on tables separate from the tray to allow for the participants to have easy access to all of the miniatures and clarity of what was available through sight alone, as opposed to scouring through piles or in containers. The miniatures were laid out in thematic continuums as is recommended for consistency and promoting safety by predictability (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023).

Before starting the sand trays

Caregivers and children were introduced to the research lab together upon arrival. They signed consent and assent forms for Set in Sand following a brief introduction on the

Table 1. 'Set in Sand' participant demographics

Participant	Alex	Bob Marley	Burty Woster	Ivy	JIW	Katie Owl	Meercat	Pete Rock	Scarlet	Winifredthethird	WJB
Age	8	12	11	7	11	11	6	6	9	11	8
Gender	M	F	M	F	M	F	F	M	F	F	M
Ethnicity	W	WB	W	BS	BS	W	WB	W	BS	W	WB

W, White; WB, White British; BS, British-Swiss.

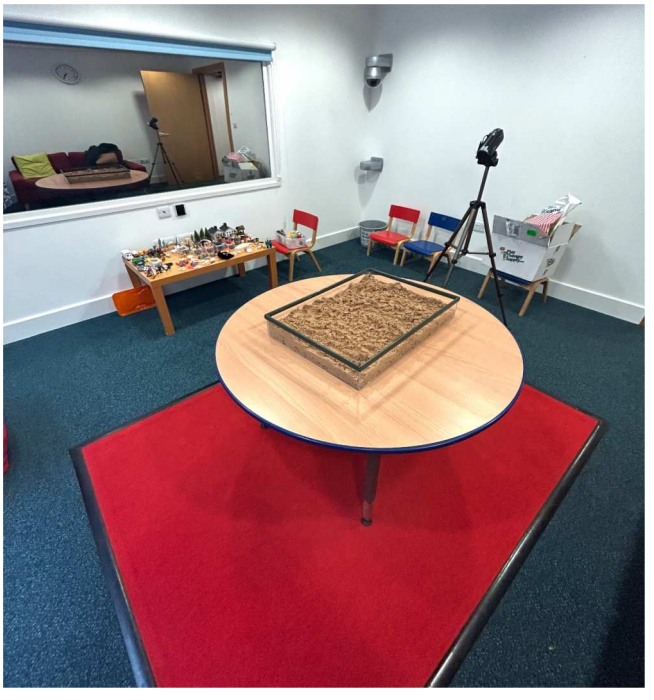


Figure 1 Set in Sand research step up.

topics and agenda. All were reminded they had the right to change their mind at this point or any other point during the research without rebuke. Child participants in particular were addressed to confirm they would not be in trouble or hurt my feelings if they no longer wanted to participate. Once consent and assent forms were filled out, activity options were presented for participants, including a colouring sheet of a teddy bear with a face mask and cape, a word search related to pandemic vocabulary, and written journal prompts about lockdowns and the child's pandemic experience as a whole. Participants were then introduced to expectations for the research session regarding the amount of time as well as how many prompts the researcher would ask. As is true of sandtray therapy, where it is the therapist responsible for timekeeping, it is the researcher's job to monitor and appropriately provide reminders for the end of time. This allows the participant to not have any additional responsibilities. The last step before the sand tray and miniatures was to introduce the two rules for the room and materials: (1) the sand can be moved around and played with and, as much as possible, should stay in the sand tray and (2) the miniatures are not to be broken or destroyed on purpose.

Sand tray prompts and process questions

The prompts were created to be open-ended and not play into the deficit framing of lockdowns and their impact (Alwani et al., 2024). They were constructed based on survey data with play therapists on the COVID-19 pandemic mental health impact (Conroy & Ramchandani, 2024). The four research prompts for the sand trays were:

1. Show me in the sand tray what lockdown was like for you

2. Without removing anything from the tray, show me how your life changed after lockdown ended? (participants were made aware more miniatures could be added for this tray)
3. If all of your feelings or emotions, from across the whole time of the pandemic, were in this tray together, what would it look like?
4. Create how your life looks as of now, and if COVID-19 is a part of it or not.

During the creation of the sand trays, it is important for the researcher to be fully present: listening, observing, and participating both cognitively and empathically (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023). It is 'admittedly hard work to be fully present without talking' (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023, p. 55) and is part of the reason sand tray as a research modality has typically succeeded with researchers who have experience with nonverbal therapeutic modalities such as play therapy, art therapy, or sandtray therapy (Bingley & Milligan, 2007; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023; Linzmayer & Halpenny, 2013). If the participant chose to create the sand trays in silence, I honoured that choice and did not ask for clarifications on items or explore meanings until they were finished. The process questions were the same for each participant. However follow up questions and clarifications were flexible and responsive to each participant.

For process questions, I utilized techniques outlined to be supportive of trauma survivors when using directives. For example, I phrased one question as 'is there anything you would like to change in the tray' which communicates to the participant that they 'are powerful enough to decide and implant changes on their own' (Tennessen & Strand, 1998, p. 111). This was an important detail as lockdowns were a time of frequent uncertainty, fear, and misery (Stanley et al., 2021). The four process questions were:

1. What is the title of this tray?
2. What is the story here?/Can you tell me what is happening?
3. Are you in the tray?
4. Is there anything you would like to change in the tray?

A small note on process questions, these require flexibility for children's development and how much they spoke during the process – be open to being corrected if you misidentify a miniature and also be curious towards metaphors or other symbolism based on the responses.

Participants were then asked for their consent to take a picture of the tray in its completed form. I continued on a practice from sandtray therapy sessions, asking participants from what angle the photo should be taken from. This provides an extra layer of consent or agency (participants could tell the researcher to take the photo only capturing the ground or the miniatures on the table for example). It also provides the participant with the ability to highlight the most meaningful miniatures or angles to be memorialized in still form.

Diverging from therapeutic training of the client not deconstructing their sand tray, for Set in Sand each participant was given the choice after each tray (1) if they would like to have me clear out the tray, (2) if the participant would like to clear out the tray on their own, or (3) if the tray should be reset together. The latter suggestion follows the typical protocol in a therapeutic sandtray session, wherein the scene is dismantled

together, if the client so chooses (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023). When we reset the tray together, to honour the research participant's work, I always waited for participants to remove the first few miniatures (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023).

After the final tray had been processed, I verbally checked in with the participant about how they were feeling. They were offered to complete any of the introduction activities as well as play in the sand freely. From there, the participant and I went back to the caregiver and ended the research session.

Data analysis decision: adapted interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) for 'Set in Sand'

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

IPA has the primary goal of understanding how people make sense of their experiences through how they interpret the events, objects, and people in their lives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). It can be characterized as 'our stories about their stories' (Bruner, 1986, p. 10; Halling, 2002, p. 27).

IPA as adapted before with mixed media data

IPA has predominantly been employed with written data (both the written word and transcription of verbal data). However, the 'fullness of lived experience is not easy to communicate verbally' (Boden & Eatough, 2014), and many aspects of the human condition can be beyond or outside of words (Boden et al., 2019). Previously adapted versions of IPA with other types of data that are not verbal or written entries, have ranged from video analysis of music therapy (Lee & McFerran, 2015), creation of images to understand a first episode of psychosis (Attard et al., 2017), analysis of chosen visual materials by new managers in Children's Services (Bartoli, 2020), experiences of ageing through photographing physical activity (Orr & Phoenix, 2015), and pictorial representations of pain (Nizza et al., 2018). It does not appear that play as data being analysed up until this point using IPA.

IPA with children's perspectives

Power imbalances and adult supremacy (Bergman & Burlison, 2022) are particularly important to be thoughtful about when doing research with CYP. The limits to which we can represent another's perspective are the responsibility of the researcher to engage with and address. It is not possible to access someone else's world directly (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Heidegger, 1927/2010; Levinas, 1969); 'experience-near' as some describe (Boden et al., 2019, p. 2018). It is particularly important when working with children and young people to acknowledge where the perspective of the participant begins and ends, and where you as the researcher begin and end with interpretations and engagement.

IPA is upfront about where the researcher is interpretative and provides room to acknowledge that Dasein, Heidegger's 'being-there' (1927/2010), is ever changing; a 'situation of recall, revision, and readjustment in response to what we do and, not attend to'

(Engward & Goldspink, 2020, p. 2). Heidegger supposes that we cannot be objective in engagement with anything as we always exist within culture, history, relationships, and environments to which we cannot step outside of wholly (Engward & Goldspink, 2020; Heidegger, 1998). Pertaining to CYP in particular, it is helpful to consider that every choice, including which quotes of their direct voice to include, is part of where the researcher is present within interpretation.

Positionality is critical to engage with when undertaking IPA. 'Through our analytic engagement, the data gains access to our everyday lives, new lodgers who come to dwell in the domains of our cognition, affective and behavior' (Engward & Goldspink, 2020, p. 3). The clarity of this acknowledgement allows for psychosocial history, understandings of extant literature (Smith, 2004), and the researcher's lived experience to interact with the participants' lived experience.

Positionality and IPA

'Language is the house of being and in its home man dwells' (Heidegger, 1978, p. 217)

I was trained in existential phenomenological psychology, where I learned as a therapist and academic, reflexivity is a way of being rather than a task to be done. I began to consider, for the first time, that congruence is another way to think of rigour; the places where a researcher, author, academic, therapist can name and live into their world view consistently and clearly (clarity in terms of identifying what is being wrestled with or what is shifting rather than always having easy non-meandering ways to communicate) is where trust can be built and credibility gained. 'Simply noting or recording our thinking at any one time, without recognizing the interplay between the before, the now and what might be' is the opposite of reflexivity which is 'dynamic, interaction, multi-faceted, complex, long, and often very frustrating' (Engward & Goldspink, 2020, p. 4).

IPA as a method is often laced with warnings about epistemological and ontological knowledge, familiarity with the hermeneutic process, and moving beyond the operationalizing of the 'seemingly straightforward' (Engward & Goldspink, 2020, p. 7) six steps as crafted by Smith et al. in 2009. I am familiar with the process of deconstructing, rearranging, and existing differently than before. I feel comfortable highlighting my experience in and through this process previously; I know what hard won insights (Engward & Goldspink, 2020; Moran, 2000) can look and feel like.

Data analysis: step by step through 'Set in Sand' analysis

As a psychotherapist trained in play therapy, a meaningful assumption brought into the research analysis below is that I would find 'something' in the play because of my experiences in the playroom. My background knowledge and training provides me with a level of comfortability with valuing play as a form of communication for children. However, I opted for a creative methods analysis, over clinical assessment tools, to avoid any ethical concerns of pathologizing or overstepping into clinical work as a researcher.

The IPA process begins with familiarity of the recordings. For the purpose of being able to get slightly more granular, this example goes through only the first sand tray. I went case by case, watching the video first to refamiliarise with the emotional and visceral experience of the participants' story. On the second watch, I took notes on interesting

moments, miniatures, and play in both the video and audio. I did this for the 11 trays individually, in alphabetical order of pseudonyms. Following the same order, I watched the videos for the third time and documented, with timestamps, the miniatures, movements, play, changes, and creation process. Before the fourth watch, notes were added into the margins from my reflexivity notebook from following the research session, then added in exploratory comments on the fourth watch with current emotions, thoughts, and connections. Individual emerging themes were constructed with the goal in mind to 'formulate a concise phase at a slightly higher level of abstraction which may refer to a more psychological conceptualization … [that] is still grounded in the particular detail of the participants account' (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 367).

Next, each of the final photos were printed out, labelled with the title of the tray and put into a folder with the time stamped transcript of play (see Figure 2). These were taken to a solo writing retreat location where I spent a week playing around with themes.

During this retreat, I used the adapted IPA tables for 'Expanded Phenomenological-Hermeneutic Analysis' (2014) crafted by Boden and Eatough on two Excel spreadsheets: (1) content and (2) process. This means that not only the symbols of the miniatures and the content of the stories they create is analysed but also the play itself (the readjustments, removals, burying). Relevant categories from Boden and Eatough's analysis (2014) were chosen from this adopted IPA to use play as data.

Below you will find the categories as I used them to analyse the 'Set in Sand' data.

Content categories:

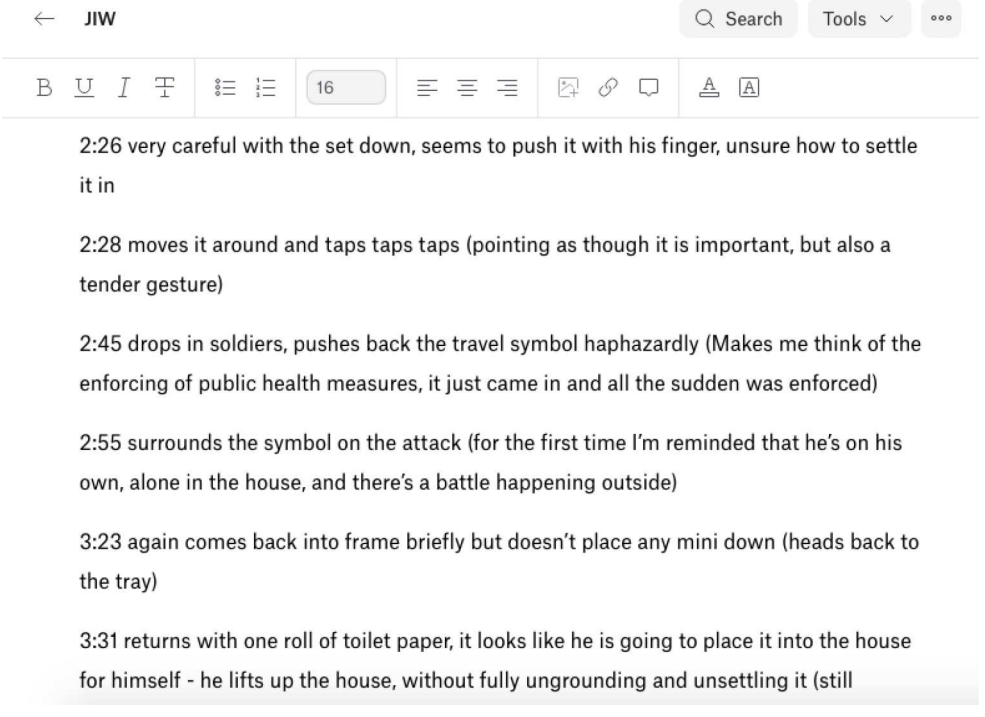


Figure 2. Minute-by-minute play transcript with author analysis notes.

Composition: spatial layout of the sand tray (blank space, crowded areas)
Balance: interplay of elements (disequilibrium, symmetry)
Temporality/dynamism: rhythm/movement (snapshot, continuity, duration)
Focus: visual focus (what is the researcher's eye drawn to)
Expression: what feelings does the researcher have in response to viewing
Signs/Symbols: overt symbols or cultural references
Text: title of sand tray or quotes while building
Distraction/Noise: elements that draw attention away from the focus, sense of confusion or clarity

Process categories:

Speed: how quick or slow was the sand tray created; where did they linger (if at all)
Pressure: pressure with the sand or miniatures
Expression: participants facial, gestural, or verbal expression while making the sand tray
Mood: how did the room feel to the researcher during the sand tray creation/what was the tone
Emotion: what emotions did the participant express or emote during the creation?
Gestures: notable gestures or movements during the sand tray building
Absorption: how involved or distanced from the sand tray throughout
Hesitancy: any false starts, pauses, movements of uncertainty or changes in the sand tray building

Using the play transcripts, the categories above, and the personal experiential themes, it was now time to create the group experiential themes (GETs). I held these guiding questions in mind while creating GETs: (1) does this theme capture something meaningful? (2) is it coherent? (3) does it have clear boundaries? (Braun & Clarke, 2021). These questions grounded me from shifting too much into what is simply interesting into what is important in this narrative of the sand trays. The photos and play transcripts were organized and reorganized through a variety of groupings and iterations of themes that explored both convergences and divergences of the stories of the eleven participants.

Abbreviated results for 'Set in Sand'

Through analysing the 11 sand trays for both content and process, 3 group experiential themes (GETs) were formed: (1) devoid and desolate – missing signs of wellness, (2) bigger than reality – tangible experience represented by symbols of fantasy, and (3) signs of wounding in play.

Devoid and desolate – missing signs of wellness speaks to: empty space within the trays, lack of vegetation or other symbols of growth and vitality (see Figure 3), the participant alone in the tray or where there were other people, their presence did not equate to the participant feeling connected. This theme highlights the loneliness, isolation, and disconnection these children felt.

Bigger than reality – tangle experiences represented by symbols of fantasy encompasses the frequency with which the fantasy category of miniatures was chosen as symbols within the tray. The three headed dragon was the most frequent miniature chosen to represent COVID-19 (see Figure 4), and humans most frequently showed up as either knights or the queen. Fantasy symbols to depict a recent experience in their lives might be communicating a desire to put more space between the participants and remembering this time. This may allude to unprocessed or overwhelming feelings related to the lockdown.

Signs of wounding in play encapsulates the process and construction of the tray, and the way these behaviours of building might speak to lingering hurt and wounding from lockdowns. Participants overwhelmingly built from the side of the tray, with



Figure 3. Tray without symbols of growth or vitality.

many not touching or manipulating the sand, and most leaving the impact or imprint of other moments in lockdown, rather than resetting to even sand, when creating a tray that represented the duration of lockdown. These are similar patterns and choices from other research with trauma and collective trauma in sand trays.

The comprehensive findings, with a discussion on the impact of the wide age range included, can be found in a separate publication under the title 'Dragons, Toilet Rolls,



Figure 4. Tray with the three headed dragon representing the COVID-19 pandemic.

and Emptiness: Signs of Collective Trauma in Sand Trays of British Children of the COVID-19 Lockdowns'.

Strengths and limitations of sand tray as a play-based research method

Sand tray, like other phenomenological research methods, has great strength in capturing 'the ambiguous, ambivalence and richness of live experience whole touching the diversity and complexity of the social world' (Finlay, 2011, p. 270). It also is a developmentally responsible (Merahn, 2017) research method for CYP that can be utilized in a variety of settings and topics. Sand tray as a play-based research method removes some of the common criticisms of other research methods employed with CYP: the pressure of artistic ability, developmental stage restrictions, and manual dexterity (Linzmayer & Halpenny, 2013). To account for sensory needs, low-income contexts, and cultures in which sand may be viewed as dirty (O'Connor et al., 2015), sand tray work can be adapted using white paper as the 'sand box' for participants to place miniatures in. Additionally, the use of prompts in this play-based research methodology allows for researchers to avoid a deficit-based framing, particularly for mental health research.

A limitation of this approach is it appears to thrive in the care of researchers who are also practitioners/therapists, or those with specific child development knowledge (Lytje & Holliday, 2022), which might reduce some of the accessibility of the method (Barry, 1996). It is not within the scope of the paper to determine the stewards of this method; however, the lineage of use has overwhelmingly been with child mental health professionals. Additionally, it requires a significant amount of materials that are not easily transportable making it somewhat costly, time consuming, and bounded to location. As with other qualitative studies, this method is not 'for the purpose of making claims about the distribution of the experience in a population (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 140), and therefore if generalizability is sought after rather than deepening the understanding of an experience for a sample, this method will not be a good fit.

Conclusion

Trusting play to be meaningful data opens up an avenue for play-based research methods, such as sand tray, to create and engage in research with CYP that is developmentally responsible, adaptable, and interesting. When play data is recorded there is also the added benefit of being able to review the construction of the sand tray many times and pick up on bodily language, small movements, and changes in the play that may not be obvious during the data collection period or even from the still photograph afterwards. Paired with adapted IPA, analysing this type of data can be playful and powerful, and provide rich findings. Future engagement with this method and analysis across contexts, ages, and topics will enhance and refine this play-based research methodology.

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