

**EFFECTIVENESS OF GROUP SANDPLAY
THERAPY MODULE ON LEARNING BURNOUT
AND TEST ANXIETY AMONG HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS IN ANHUI PROVINCE OF CHINA**

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STUDENTS IN ANHUI PROVINCE OF CHINA**

by

GAO PING

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACT	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
CBT	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
GASC	General Anxiety Scale for Children
GST	Group Sandplay Therapy
HSSB	High School Students' Burnout
HTP	House-Tree-Person
MBSR	Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction
REBT	Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy
RET	Rational Emotive Therapy
RGST	Restrictive Group Sandplay Therapy
RIT	Rorschach Inkblot Test
SAD	Social Avoidance and Distress scale
SPT	Sandplay Therapy
SSCT	Sacks Sentence Completion Test
TAQ	Test Anxiety Questionnaire
TAS	Test Anxiety Scale
TASC	Test Anxiety Scale for Children
TAT	Thematic Apperception Test
UKT	Uchida-Kraepelin Psychological Test

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Appendix L	Semi-structured Interview Protocol Experience Assessment Transcript (English Version)
Appendix M	Semi-structured Interview Protocol Experience Assessment Transcript (Chinese Version)

**KEBERKESANAN MODUL TERAPI *SANDPLAY* BERKUMPULAN DALAM
MENGURANGKAN KELESUAN PEMBELAJARAN DAN KEBIMBANGAN
UJIAN DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR SEKOLAH MENENGAH DI
WILAYAH ANHUI, CHINA**

ABSTRAK

Pelajar sekolah menengah di China berdepan dengan tekanan akademik yang sangat tinggi, yang sering mengakibatkan kelelahan pembelajaran dan kebimbangan ujian. Keadaan ini sekali gus mewujudkan keperluan mendesak untuk intervensi psikologi yang berkesan. Kajian ini bertujuan menilai keberkesanan modul Terapi Bermain Pasir Berkumpulan (*Group Sandplay Therapy*, GST) dalam menangani cabaran tersebut, terhadap pelajar Tingkatan 6 (Gred 12) di Anhui, China. Berpandukan kerangka reka bentuk pengajaran ADDIE serta berasaskan Teori Projeksi Psikologi, Teori Dinamik Kumpulan, dan Teori Keberkesanan Diri, modul GST telah dilaksanakan melalui reka bentuk kuasi-eksperimen yang melibatkan 60 orang pelajar yang mengalami kelelahan pembelajaran dan kebimbangan ujian, yang diagihkan secara rawak ke dalam kumpulan eksperimen dan kumpulan kawalan, di samping temu bual separa struktur susulan dengan peserta terpilih. Skala piawai digunakan untuk mengukur tahap kelelahan pembelajaran dan kebimbangan ujian sebelum dan selepas intervensi. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa modul GST berjaya mengurangkan kedua-dua kelelahan pembelajaran dan kebimbangan ujian secara signifikan. Data kualitatif turut mendedahkan bahawa modul ini memudahkan ekspresi simbolik tekanan akademik, menggalakkan interaksi rakan sebaya, dan meningkatkan keberkesanan diri. Dapatan ini menyumbang kepada bidang psikologi pendidikan dengan membuktikan nilai integrasi pendekatan terapeutik yang relevan secara budaya

serta sesuai dari segi Psikologi, perkembangan dalam intervensi berasaskan sekolah. Kajian ini juga memberikan panduan praktikal kepada kaunselor dan pendidik dalam menyokong kesejahteraan psikologi remaja dalam konteks akademik yang penuh tekanan.

**EFFECTIVENESS OF GROUP SANDPLAY THERAPY MODULE ON
LEARNING BURNOUT AND TEST ANXIETY AMONG HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS IN ANHUI PROVINCE OF CHINA**

ABSTRACT

Chinese high school students face intense academic pressure that often leads to learning burnout and test anxiety, creating an urgent need for effective psychological interventions. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a Group Sandplay Therapy (GST) module in addressing these challenges among Grade 12 students in Anhui, China. Guided by the ADDIE instructional design framework and grounded in Psychological Projection Theory, Group Dynamics Theory, and Self-Efficacy Theory, the GST module was implemented through a quasi-experimental design involving 60 students with both learning burnout and test anxiety randomly assigned to experimental and control groups, along with follow-up semi-structured interviews with selected participants. Standardized scales were used to measure learning burnout and test anxiety before and after the intervention. Results indicate that the GST module significantly reduced both learning burnout and test anxiety. Qualitative data further revealed that the module facilitated symbolic expression of academic stress, promoted peer interaction, and enhanced self-efficacy. These findings contribute to educational psychology by demonstrating the value of integrating culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate therapeutic approaches into school-based interventions. The study provides practical guidance for counselors and educators seeking to support adolescents' psychological well-being in high-pressure academic contexts.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter serves as an introduction to the research, laying the groundwork for the study. It focuses on how the utilization of sandplay can mitigate learning burnout and test anxiety among high school students in China. Additionally, it delves into the existing application of sandplay therapy, its relevance to Chinese high school students, underscores the significance of the study, identifies the research challenges, and provides clear definitions of essential research concepts. Lastly, it offers a concise summary of what to expect in the upcoming chapter.

1.2 Research Background

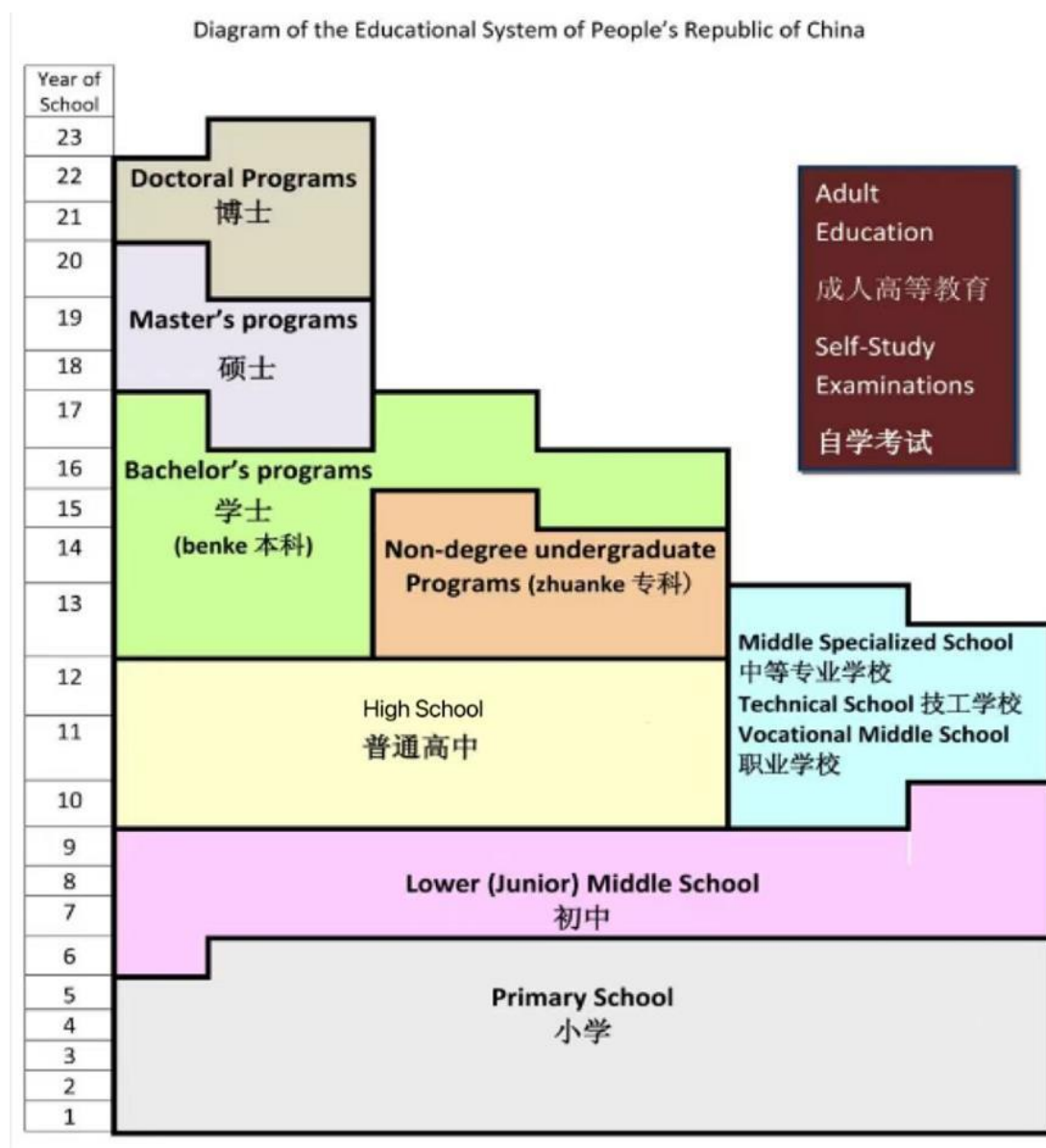
With the rapid development of society, the popularity of education makes the competition increasingly fierce (Wan et al., 2020). In China, there's a deep-rooted cultural belief in China that academic success is a key to upward social mobility and a better life (Poole, 2016). However, with a large population, there's intense competition for limited educational resources, especially for top universities and job opportunities (Zhao, 2016). This leads to immense pressure on students to excel academically, particularly for grade 3 high school students in China.

In China, the education system spans 12 years, divided into primary, junior middle, and senior high schools. Primary education covers six years, from Grade 1 to 5 or 6, starting at age six. This is followed by junior middle school, which includes three years, from Grade 7 to 9 or 6 to 9. Finally, students attend senior high school for

three years, from Grade 10 to 12, culminating in the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao).

Figure 1.1

The Education System in China



Source: William (2014)

China's modern education system and its examination framework (Guo et al., 2019), particularly the Gaokao or the National College Entrance Examination, play a central role in shaping the educational and career trajectories of Chinese students (Wang et al., 2022). The Gaokao is one of the most challenging and competitive exams globally, taken in the final year of high school (Pires & Duarte, 2019). It covers a wide range of subjects, including Chinese, mathematics, English, and additional subjects based on the student's focus in science or humanities. The high stakes associated with this examination put immense pressure on students and their families, often influencing the entire educational journey from a young age.

The Gaokao's scores are the primary criteria for university admissions in China (Liu & Helwig, 2022). Achieving high scores can lead to acceptance into prestigious universities and better career opportunities, while lower scores may limit educational and professional options (Ogunniran et al., 2019). This system, while creating a merit-based path to higher education, is often criticized for perpetuating regional and socio-economic disparities and for placing excessive pressure on students (Yang et al., 2023).

Apart from the Gaokao, China's examination system includes standardized tests for various professional qualifications, echoing practices in other countries. However, recognizing the limitations of over-reliance on a single exam like the Gaokao, the Chinese government has initiated educational reforms (Tang et al., 2020). These reforms aim to diversify university admission criteria, reduce student pressure, and promote a more holistic educational approach. In line with global trends and the increasing pursuit of international education by Chinese students, the education system is also adapting to include pathways that recognize international standardized tests and proficiency in languages like English. Additionally, the integration of technology in

education has led to the growing use of digital tools for both exam preparation and administration (Knox, 2020).

However, China's current education policy and examination system, still with the Gaokao at its core, reflect a blend of traditional emphasis on academic achievement and a response to contemporary educational needs and challenges. The system continues to evolve, balancing the legacy of its historical examination system with the demands of modern education and global integration.

The Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination) is the culminating assessment of China's 12-year compulsory and senior secondary education system, taken at the end of Grade 12 by students typically aged 17 to 18 years old. As the primary pathway into universities, its results largely determine admission to prestigious institutions and future career opportunities. Because of this decisive role, the Gaokao has become not only an academic milestone but also a profound social and psychological stressor for millions of adolescents each year.

The examination system in China, particularly the Gaokao, significantly impacts students' psychological well-being, often leading to high levels of stress and anxiety due to the intense pressure to excel in these competitive exams (Yang et al., 2023). This environment, compounded by societal and familial expectations, can result in chronic anxiety disorders, depression, and feelings of inadequacy, especially when performance falls short of expectations (Yang et al., 2023). Students frequently experience burnout from prolonged, intense preparation, affecting their ability to study effectively and enjoy life (Qin et al., 2022). This focus on academics often leads to self-esteem issues, social isolation, sleep disorders, unhealthy eating habits, especially learning burnout and test anxiety, which can have long-term health risks (Xie et al.,

2019). In extreme cases, the relentless pressure can even lead to suicidal thoughts or behaviors. The long-lasting psychological effects of this academic pressure during formative years shape how individuals handle stress and failure in their adult lives. Addressing these issues requires a more balanced educational environment, with support for emotional and psychological well-being, healthy study habits, a broader definition of success, and multiple pathways for career and personal development.

While there are loads of psychological problem under Gaokao, learning burnout and test anxiety are two typical and significant mental health issues among Chinese high school students, which can lead to other various physiological, psychological, and behavioral problems such as fatigue, depression, and insomnia. These issues seriously impact students' academic performance and physical and mental health. Therefore, learning burnout and test anxiety have impact on students' mental and physical health, their prevalence among high school students, and the need for effective and targeted intervention strategies.

The problem of learning burnout is a common psychological phenomenon among students. Many college students, high school students, middle school students and even some primary school students have experienced learning burnout to varying degrees, losing their learning goals and motivation (Aubret et al., 2023). Learning burnout is very harmful to senior high school students. When learning burnout occurs, students will feel tired, depressed, unable to concentrate, inefficient, tense relationship with teachers, and even some serious physical discomfort (Xu et al., 2022), such as poor appetite, stomach pain, chest tightness and so on. Learning burnout will not only hinder the improvement of teaching quality, but also affect the healthy development of students (Zis et al., 2021). In view of this, the problem of learning burnout has attracted more and more attention from educators and psychologists, but most studies mainly

focus on the relationship between learning burnout and other variables, and how to take effective countermeasures or intervention techniques against this phenomenon is less, which needs further discussion.

Test anxiety presents a substantial challenge for high school students, who often experience heightened stress due to academic pressures and future educational choices (Alamri & Nazir, 2022; Li, 2023). While a moderate level of anxiety can indeed stimulate alertness and potentially enhance exam performance, the reality is that the majority of students suffer more negative consequences from test-related stress (Hu et al., 2022). This form of anxiety can manifest physically, causing cardiovascular issues, respiratory problems, and disturbances in the endocrine and digestive systems (Alamri & Nazir, 2022). It can also lead to neurological conditions like neurosis by disrupting the balance between brain nerve activity's excitement and inhibition. Psychologically, test anxiety can be equally damaging, with students experiencing intense emotional turmoil and a difficulty in returning to a calmer state. Their focus narrows, often overwhelmed by intrusive negative thoughts, which can deteriorate their ability to make sound cognitive judgments (Li, 2023).

One of the hurdles in managing test anxiety is the reluctance of students to actively seek help, potentially exacerbating their condition. School counseling services currently offer individual sessions, which, while effective, are resource-heavy and cannot meet the demand at scale (Çetinkaya & Bulut, 2023; Holman et al., 2019). Lectures aimed at addressing anxiety tend to be informative but fail to significantly alleviate the emotional stress students experience.

In recognition of the psychological toll of the Gaokao, the Chinese government and educational authorities have introduced several policies and support mechanisms

aimed at safeguarding students' mental health. For example, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China issued the Mental Health Education Guidelines for Primary and Secondary Schools (2021, updated 2023), which mandate schools to integrate psychological education into the curriculum and provide access to counseling services. Many high schools have established school psychological counseling centers, staffed with trained counselors, to offer individual or group sessions on stress management, test anxiety, and emotional regulation.

Additionally, some provinces have piloted "psychological service hotlines" and online counseling platforms during the Gaokao preparation season, enabling students to seek timely support. Schools also organize exam-preparation workshops, mindfulness training, and relaxation programs to help students manage anxiety and develop healthier coping strategies. Despite these initiatives, however, the demand for mental health support often exceeds available resources. Counseling services tend to focus on individual interventions, which are not always scalable for the large number of students in need.

Therefore, many schools have started to incorporate sandplay therapy within their psychological services (Cao et al., 2019). Sandplay therapy offers a creative outlet for students to express and work through their anxieties. However, existing research predominantly emphasizes individual sandplay therapy in clinical or counseling settings, with limited attention to its structured application in group formats within schools (Tan et al., 2021). While group sandplay has been practiced informally, few studies have systematically designed and validated a Group Sandplay Therapy (GST) module tailored to the high-pressure academic environment of Chinese senior high schools (Gao et al., 2025).

With the continuous development of psychology, many scholars have become interested in sandplay therapy, and the research scope of sandplay therapy has been expanding, and the research objects have become more and more extensive (Kim & Han, 2016). The existing research shows that in the field of education, the subjects are not only graduate students and college students, but also many middle school students and primary school students (Cao et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2011a). The intervention fields of sandplay therapy are also very extensive, such as students' anxiety, depression, interpersonal communication, etc (Jang & Kim, 2012a; Kim & Han, 2016). This study attempts to use group sandplay therapy to intervene high school students' learning burnout and test anxiety, which not only enriches the theory and practice of sandplay therapy, but also provides a new method to solve high school students' learning burnout and test anxiety.

1.3 Problem Statement

Typically, mentally healthy middle school students can actively and appropriately cope with various issues related to their studies, interpersonal relationships, and self-awareness (Yuan, 2022). According to the mental health guidelines for middle school students proposed by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2023), in terms of their learning, mentally and physically healthy middle school students fully embody themselves as active participants in their studies. They hold positive attitudes and interests towards their academics. They not only derive satisfaction from the learning process but also promote the holistic development of their mind and body through continuous learning practices (Yu 2023). Therefore, mentally and physically healthy middle school students exhibit positive attitudes and good habits in their studies.

However, due to China's highly competitive educational system and society's strong emphasis on academic performance, high school students often face immense academic pressure (Chen et al., 2020), the learning burnout and test anxiety being widespread phenomena.

According to the National Civil Servant Mental Health Application Research Center (2022), the number of depression patients in China has reached a staggering 95 million, with 50% of them being students. The China National Mental Health Development Report similarly confirms that the risk of developing depression increases with students' age, with approximately 40% of high school students affected (Fu & Zhang 2023).

Among high school students, about 50% of students with test anxiety and learning burnout problems are Grade 12 high school students (Li et al., 2010). The anxiety and depression of senior high school students is significantly higher than that of other grades (Su, 2002). Stress-dominant suicide cases constitute the majority of student suicide cases, primarily resulting from students' lack of willpower, high academic pressure, and severe leaning burnout. Students experiencing test anxiety due to leaning burnout account for as much as 60.37% (Huang 2021), surpassing half of all high school students in China. The data underscores significant mental health issues among Chinese high school students, particularly related to leaning burnout and test anxiety, and they are accompanied by various physiological, psychological, and behavioral problems, such as fatigue, depression, behavioral disorders, nervous breakdowns, and insomnia (Bolatov et al., 2021; Mosleh et al., 2022). These issues seriously impact high school students' academic performance, physical and mental health (Zis et al., 2021). Therefore, addressing the issues of leaning burnout and test anxiety among high school students has garnered the attention of researchers.

Researchers have conducted studies on the issues of learning burnout and test anxiety among high school students. In China, Liu et al. (2020) shows that leaning burnout among middle school students is closely related to emotional experiences. Positive emotions can reduce middle school students' levels of leaning burnout, while negative emotions can enhance leaning burnout. Hao et al. (2021) also indicates that high school students' academic stress positively predicts their levels of leaning burnout, with higher academic stress leading to higher levels of leaning burnout.

To address the issues of learning burnout and test anxiety among high school students, researchers have found that cognitive-behavioral therapy is the mainstream and effective intervention for anxiety and fatigue (Abeditehrani et al., 2020; Albano et al., 1995; Apolinário-Hagen et al., 2020; Shareh & Robati, 2021). There is also use of mindfulness therapy (Cheung et al., 2020) and acceptance and commitment therapy (Yu et al., 2025). As a well-established psychological therapy, the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral therapy is recognized. However, it has some limitations. For example, in terms of cognitive-behavioral therapy, some individuals may have cognitive impairments or other issues that prevent them from actively participating in therapy. Additionally, cognitive-behavioral therapy is limited to addressing an individual's negative thoughts and behaviors, overlooking the mutual influences of the social environment, relationships, and cultural background. Therefore, it has limitations in addressing broader psychological and emotional issues.

Therefore, existing intervention methods, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and mindfulness training, although effective to some extent, might not be entirely suitable for treating learning burnout and test anxiety among high school students in China. CBT requires time and effort to understand and apply, which could add to the stress of students already feeling burnout. Moreover, CBT primarily focuses

on thought patterns and might overlook deeper emotional or physiological responses related to learning burnout. For some students, maintaining regularity in mindfulness practices can be challenging. If they cannot continue these practices consistently, the effectiveness might be compromised. Additionally, for students with severe traumatic backgrounds, mindfulness exercises can sometimes trigger adverse reactions, such as flashbacks or anxiety.

The past research has had its limitations, necessitating a fresh look at the issues of high school students' academic stress and test fatigue (Abeditehrani et al., 2020; Albano et al., 1995; Apolinário-Hagen et al., 2020; Shareh & Robati, 2021, Cheung et al., 2020, Yu et al., 2025). The reason for choosing group sandplay therapy as an intervention measure is that Sandplay therapy was selected over mindfulness therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) because it is more developmentally appropriate (Gao et al., 2025). Unlike mindfulness and ACT, which demand sustained cognitive engagement and individual practice that many adolescents struggle to maintain, sandplay offers a non-verbal, symbolic medium that reduces stigma and encourages emotional expression (Evans et al., 2021; Assaz et al., 2018). Moreover, it adapts well to group settings, leveraging peer support and group dynamics, while simultaneously addressing both learning burnout and test anxiety (Lee et al., 2018). Thus, sandplay therapy provides a more practical and holistic intervention for Gaokao-related stress. This method utilizes psychological projection theory, enabling students to externalize and face their learning burnout, creatively explore and integrate their experiences, enhance their self-efficacy in dealing with learning burnout, and benefit from the supportive dynamics and shared experiences within the group. Group sandplay therapy module offers students a framework to externalize and recognize their strengths, creatively integrate these strengths into their self-concept, thereby

enhancing their sense of self-efficacy, and benefiting from the supportive and encouraging dynamics of the group.

This study employs group sandplay therapy, since it can address the shortcomings of cognitive-behavioral therapy. Research has confirmed that members in group sandplay therapy can not only connect with their inner worlds but also touch upon the inner worlds of their respective groups. This can make visitors more sensitive and clearer about their own cognition. However, sandplay research has involved students from various educational levels, including primary school students (Khojasteh, 2020), middle school students (Cao et al., 2019), and college students (Yu & Zhan, 2021; Zhang et al., 2011b). Among these, there has been limited research on high school students, even though fatigue and anxiety are prevalent issues among them. Additionally, most existing studies have focused on either fatigue or anxiety in students (Khojasteh, 2020, Qiu-qiang et al., 2022), with little attention given to high school students experiencing both issues (fatigue and anxiety).

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To develop the structure and content of a Group Sandplay Therapy Module that decreases students' learning burnout and test anxiety problem in Chinese high school Grade 12 students.
2. To address the learning burnout problem of Chinese high school Grade 12 students.
3. To address the test anxiety problem of Chinese high school Grade 12 students.

4. To explore participants' experiences in undergoing the group sandplay therapy module.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What is the structure and content of a Group Sandplay Therapy Module that decreases students' learning burnout and test anxiety problem in Chinese high school Grade 12 students?
2. Does the use of group sandplay therapy module address the Chinese students' learning burnout problem in high school Grade 12?
 - 2a: Is there any significant decrease on post-test scores in group sandplay therapy to address students' learning burnout problem between the experimental and control groups?
 - 2b: Is there any significant decrease in the experimental group's learning burnout problem based on the pre-test and post-test scores after group sandplay therapy?
3. Does the use of group sandplay therapy module address Chinese students' test anxiety problem in high school Grade 12?
 - 3a. Is there any significant decrease on post-test scores in group sandplay therapy to address students' test anxiety problem between the experimental and control groups?
 - 3b. Is there any significant decrease in the experimental group's test anxiety problem based on the pre-test and post-test scores after group sandplay therapy?

4. What is the participants' experience in undergoing the group sandplay therapy module?

1.6 Research Hypothesis

Regarding to the research objectives and research questions presented in advance, the following research hypotheses were shown as follows:

H01: There is no significant decrease on post-test scores in group sandplay therapy to address students' learning burnout problem between the experimental and control groups.

H02: There is no significant decrease in the experimental group's learning burnout problem based on the pre-test and post-test scores after group sandplay therapy.

H03: There is no significant decrease on post-test scores in group sandplay therapy to address students' test anxiety problem between the experimental and control groups.

H04: There is no significant decrease in the experimental group's test anxiety problem based on the pre-test and post-test scores after group sandplay therapy.

1.7 Significance of the Research

This study contributes new theoretical knowledge to the field of psychological counseling by empirically validating the use of Group Sandplay Therapy (GST) as an intervention for high school students experiencing learning burnout and test anxiety. Traditionally applied in clinical and individual settings, sandplay therapy is here extended to the domain of school-based counseling, offering a framework for group-oriented interventions in high-pressure academic environments.

By integrating psychological projection theory, Kalff's integration theory, self-efficacy theory, and group dynamics theory, the research establishes a multi-theoretical foundation for counseling practice that emphasizes symbolic expression, self-efficacy building, and peer support. This theoretical synthesis highlights how GST can function as a culturally adapted counseling approach, enabling students to process stress and anxiety through creative, non-verbal means within a supportive group context.

In doing so, the study advances the theoretical discourse in psychological counseling by positioning GST as an innovative, group-based counseling model that expands current understanding of effective interventions for adolescents under intense academic pressure.

1.8 Definition of Terms

Conceptualization stands as the fundamental idea employed by scholars in their research, offering a cohesive explanation of these notions (Babbie, 2015). The principal factors of this investigation are sandplay therapy, learning burnout, test anxiety, group sandplay therapy module, high school student,

1.8.1 Learning Burnout

Learning burnout was first put forward in 1981, which refers to a continuous negative psychological state caused by excessive learning pressure or lack of interest in learning, which is manifested in energy consumption and physical exhaustion, loss of enthusiasm for learning-related activities, negative attitude towards studies, lack of sense of achievement in learning, and so on (Pines & Aronson, 1981). Schaufeli further deepens the scope of burnout and puts forward the specific concept of learning burnout. He thinks that learning burnout refers to the phenomenon that students have

emotional exhaustion, academic alienation, depersonalization and low sense of achievement due to learning pressure, homework load or other personal psychological factors in the learning process (Schaufeli et al., 2002). The three-dimensional model put forward by Maslach is the most recognized at present, including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

In this study, learning burnout refers as a state of exhaustion, reduced motivation, and decreased academic performance resulting from prolonged and intense academic demands and stress. It is measured by Qiao and Chunlin (2007)'s High School Students' Burnout (HSSB) scale which consists 21 questions.

1.8.2 Test Anxiety

As a psychological concept, test anxiety is given different meanings by different researchers because of its complexity. For example, Mandler put forward that test anxiety is an emotion in a state of helplessness and disorder, and that test anxiety is a habitual and conditional emotional response as the result of a high degree of automatic awakening in the test situation (Mandler & Sarason, 1952). Through empirical research, Liebert deemed that test anxiety contains two components: anxiety and emotion, which are related to the evaluation and expectation of the test, as well as emotional experience and physical reaction symptoms such as flustered and nervous (Liebert & Morris, 1967). Zeidner (1991) believed that test anxiety refers to a series of psychological and behavioral reactions in evaluation situations, including cognition, emotion and behavior (Zeidner, 1991). This study adopts Sarason's view that test anxiety should be regarded as a nervous state associated with attention and cognitive evaluation (Sarason, 1984).

In this study, test anxiety refers to a common experience among students and can be characterized by feelings of fear, nervousness, and unease that can significantly interfere with a person's ability to perform well on exams. It is measured by (Sarason & Stoops, 1978)'s Test Anxiety Scale (TAS) which consists of 37 questions.

1.8.3 Group Sandplay Therapy Module

Sandplay therapy, also known as Sandtray, is accompanied by a therapist, which allows visitors to freely choose small molds (toys) from the shelves where all kinds of miniature molds (toys) are placed, place them in a special Sandplay filled with fine sand, and create some scenes. Then, the therapist uses Jung's psychoanalytic theory to analyze visitors' works (Enns & Kasai, 2003). Sandplay therapy is based on the unconscious theory of psychoanalysis, pays attention to empathy and induction, plays a prototype and symbolic role in sandplay, and realizes the comprehensive effect of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, which is the basic feature of sandplay therapy. Dora Kalff, a Swiss Jungian analytical psychologist, is the official founder of sandplay therapy (Kalff, 1980). However, as a widely accepted psychotherapy method and technology, sandplay therapy has its own historical evolution process of development and formation, which has been accumulated and studied for decades before Kalff.

In this study, sandplay therapy is seen as a form of therapeutic intervention that combines elements of play therapy and psychodynamic therapy, the client is encouraged to use the sand and miniatures to create scenes or landscapes that represent their inner thoughts, emotions, conflicts, and experiences. A module consisted of 8 topics guide the sandplay therapy process.

According to Russell (1974), a module is a teaching package consisting of a single concept unit that deals with a particular topic. As an independent unit, a module

provides diversity and adaptability to the teaching process. It can be used by individual learners or small groups in various situations. Modules also facilitate active engagement by learners, reinforcing the theorem that we learn by doing. It is an attempt at personalized learning, allowing students to master the content of one unit before moving on to another unit (Russell, 1974). The duration of each module varies from a few minutes to several hours.

This study is guided by the ADDIE model in instructional design, exploring the content and structure of the sandplay therapy module. In this study, the module is operationally defined as a group sandplay therapy teaching package guided by the ADDIE model in instructional design. It is used to assist students in school environments who experience learning burnout and anxiety issues. The group sandplay therapy module is based on sandplay activities in the Chinese high school standard curriculum and is developed in the form of sandplay game activities. It includes a set of guidelines that encompass analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation. In the group sandplay game activities, it serves as a tool for counselors or facilitators, and students are expected to follow and engage in all activities guided by the counselor or facilitator.

1.8.4 High School Student

In China, high school education spans Grades 10 to 12 and typically serves students aged 15 to 18. Grade 12 students, usually between 17 and 18 years old, represent the final stage of secondary education and face the most intense academic pressure, as this year culminates in the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) (Fiş Erümit, 2021). At this level, students often specialize in either the sciences or the humanities, and their daily schedules are dominated by extended study

hours, frequent examinations, and preparation for university admission (Sarmiento & Orale, 2016). The structure and operation of high schools are governed by the educational standards and regulations enforced by Chinese educational authorities (Ozinga et al., 2018), which oversee curriculum content, teacher qualifications, and school facilities (Bonifacio, 2013).

In the context of this study, the population is specifically Grade 12 high school students, who are at the critical transition point between secondary and higher education. They not only carry the academic expectations of schools and families but also experience heightened psychological stress. This group is particularly vulnerable to learning burnout and test anxiety, making them an appropriate and necessary focus for the present research.

1.9 Summary

Chapter 1 introduces the study on the effectiveness of Group Sandplay Therapy (GST) in alleviating learning burnout and test anxiety among high school students in Anhui Province, China. The chapter outlines the increasing academic pressure faced by students in the Chinese education system, particularly due to the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao), which contributes to widespread mental health issues such as learning burnout and test anxiety. These psychological challenges adversely affect students' academic performance, physical health, and emotional well-being, necessitating innovative intervention strategies. The problem statement emphasizes the limited efficacy and scalability of conventional therapeutic methods in addressing the dual issues of burnout and anxiety.

The research objectives and questions focus on developing a GST module tailored for Chinese high school students, determining its effectiveness in reducing

burnout and anxiety, and exploring participants' experiences with the intervention. Correspondingly, the hypotheses predict significant differences between experimental and control groups in the post-test evaluations of burnout and anxiety.

The chapter further elaborates on the study's significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the extension of GST applications in educational psychology by integrating theories. Practically, it provides an accessible, culturally sensitive intervention model for educators and mental health professionals. Key terminologies, including sandplay therapy, learning burnout, test anxiety, and GST module, are clearly defined to establish a conceptual foundation for the research.

In conclusion, Chapter 1 lays a comprehensive groundwork for the study, highlighting the urgency of addressing learning burnout and test anxiety among high school students through a novel and empirically validated group sandplay therapy module.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a comprehensive review of the Chinese education system and examines the effects of sandplay therapy on learning burnout and test anxiety among high school students in China. The potential of sandplay therapy as a solution to address learning burnout and test anxiety is explored, and the study's theoretical framework is introduced.

2.2 Education System in China

2.2.1 Chinese education system

The Chinese education system was first introduced in 1905 during the late Qing Dynasty when the Beijing Advanced Institute was established by the Chinese reformist Kang Youwei (Ming et al., 2019). This institute is considered the precursor to modern universities in China. The reform and opening-up policy, initiated in 1978, ushered in new opportunities for the country's education. During this period, the education system underwent various reforms, such as expanding higher education, introducing international cooperation programs, and implementing vocational education reforms (Zhu & Liu, 2020). As a result, the compulsory education stage was established for Chinese students, beginning from the first grade of primary school and continuing until the ninth grade of junior high school.

Kindergarten: Kindergarten offers early childhood education for children aged 3 to 6, with a focus on fostering their language, social skills, and fundamental cognitive abilities.

Primary School: Typically spanning six years, primary school education is completed by students aged 6 to 12. The curriculum includes language arts, mathematics, foreign languages (often English), science, physical education, music, and art. Moral education and personal development are also emphasized.

Junior High School: Junior high school accommodates students aged 12 to 15 for a three-year program. The curriculum covers subjects like language arts, mathematics, English, physics, chemistry, biology, history, geography, civics, music, art, and physical education. The main objectives are to enhance subject-specific knowledge and foster well-rounded competencies.

High School: Senior high school is designed for students aged 15 to 18 and usually spans three years. The curriculum becomes more specialized, allowing students to delve deeper into subjects of their interest. Common subjects include language arts, mathematics, English, science (physics, chemistry, biology), social studies (history, geography, politics), technology (information technology), art (music), and physical education. Senior high school prepares students for post-secondary education, career advancement, and college entrance exams or other academic assessments.

Undergraduate: Undergraduate education is offered to high school graduates, typically lasting four or five years. Students can choose to study in-depth in subjects of their interest.

Graduate School: Graduate education encompasses master's and doctoral programs. Master's programs generally span around three years, while doctoral programs are longer. The focus of the graduate stage is primarily on developing students' research abilities and academic levels.

Hence, the Chinese education system aims to deliver a comprehensive education that nurtures students' knowledge, skills, and character, contributing to their personal and social growth. Education plays a vital role in cultivating national talents, preserving culture, and promoting societal advancement. Nevertheless, high school as the transition between college and junior high school education creates immense academic pressure for Chinese high school students (Sui, 2022). They endure the heaviest burden among all education stages in China (Zhang et al., 2019). Besides mastering multiple disciplines, students face frequent examinations, leading to a significant daily workload. Consequently, many students experience profound learning burnout and test anxiety. To address this issue, it is crucial to offer psychological support to students. Sandplay therapy, through imagination and meditation, helps students relax and confront challenges while boosting their self-confidence. This study aims to employ sandplay therapy as a form of psychological counseling to aid students in alleviating learning burnout and test anxiety effectively.

2.2.2 China's National College Entrance Exam (Gaokao)

The National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) is widely recognized as the most important academic examination in China and serves as the central mechanism for university admissions (Jiang 2024). Established in its modern form in 1977 after the Cultural Revolution, the Gaokao has since become a decisive factor in shaping students' academic and professional trajectories (Liu & Helwig, 2022). Administered annually in early June, the Gaokao is taken by Grade 12 students, typically aged 17 to 18, upon completion of senior high school (Wang et al., 2022).

The exam typically spans two to three days and assesses students in compulsory subjects Chinese, mathematics, and a foreign language (usually English)

as well as an elective track in either the sciences (physics, chemistry, biology) or the humanities (history, geography, politics) (Wang et al., 2022). Students' total scores are the primary criterion for university placement, with higher-ranking institutions requiring higher scores (Zhang 2021). In 2023, over 10 million students registered for the Gaokao, underscoring its scale and national importance (Lu 2023).

The Gaokao is regarded as a high-stakes examination because performance directly determines access to prestigious universities, scholarships, and career opportunities. Success is often viewed as a pathway to upward social mobility, while poor performance may limit future educational and occupational prospects (Liu 2023). Consequently, students preparing for the Gaokao face intense academic competition, long study hours, and heavy parental and societal expectations (Xie & Liu 2025).

However, the system has been widely criticized for producing significant psychological strain on students. Empirical research shows that the high-pressure Gaokao environment contributes to learning burnout characterized by emotional exhaustion, academic alienation, and reduced motivation (Gao et al., 2025) as well as heightened test anxiety, manifested through intrusive thoughts, worry, and somatic symptoms (Fu 2024). These psychological challenges have been linked to declining academic performance, impaired well-being, and even suicidal ideation in extreme cases (Cheng et al., 2025).

Although educational reforms have sought to diversify university admission criteria and reduce reliance on the Gaokao, the exam continues to dominate Chinese secondary education and remains the primary focus of Grade 12 students (Zhang & Koshmanova). As such, the Gaokao is not only a critical educational institution but also a central contextual factor shaping the prevalence of burnout and anxiety in high