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Establishing School Counselors as Leaders in Bullying Curriculum Delivery: Evaluation of a Brief, School-Wide Bystander Intervention

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Abstract

The authors evaluated a brief, school-wide bystander bullying intervention (STAC) designed to establish school counselors as leaders in curriculum delivery. Elementary school students trained in the program reported an increase in perceived knowledge and confidence to act as “defenders,” utilizing the STAC strategies when they observed bullying, and a decrease in bullying victimization and perpetration at a 4-month follow-up. We discuss implications for school counselors.

Keywords: STAC, bullying, bystander program, elementary school, defenders

Bullying represents a significant problem in the United States, with national survey data indicating 20.8% of students report being a victim of bullying (US Department of Education, 2017). Bullying is defined as often repeated, unwanted, intentional aggressive behavior that takes place within the context of a relationship with a perceived power imbalance (Brank, Hoetger, & Hazen, 2012; Olweus, 1993). Although the prevalence of bullying peaks in middle school, with 31% of sixth grade students reporting bully victimization (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), national data indicate that bullying behaviors starts as early as elementary school. Specifically, as many as 22% of students in grades 3-5 report being bullied and 50% report being afraid of being bullied at school (Luxenberg, Limber, & Olweus, 2015).

Bullying in elementary school is associated with multiple problems for both students who are victims of bullying and those who perpetrate bullying. Victims of bullying report psychological problems, such as being withdrawn, depressed, anxious, and avoidant (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010), and victimization is related to increased suicide attempts and completions in adulthood (Klomek et al., 2009). Further, bullying victimization is associated with stomachaches and headaches, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, cognition problems, conduct problems (Kim et al., 2015), and poor academic achievement (Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005). Students who perpetrate bullying also report negative consequences including both externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Cook et al., 2010). Additionally, students who are involved in bullying as either a victim or perpetrator are at higher risk for psychotic episodes in adolescence (Wolke, Lereya, Fisher, Lewis, & Zammit, 2014). Findings also indicate students who are bullied in elementary school continue to experience victimization into middle school and are at greater risk for school disengagement (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006). For these reasons, it is imperative to identify efficacious anti-bullying programs for elementary school students to disrupt patterns of bullying and the associated negative consequences both during elementary school and into adolescence.

School-Based Interventions

Numerous studies support the efficacy of comprehensive, school-wide programs in reducing bullying among elementary school students (Tofti & Farrington, 2011). Comprehensive programs often include training all students, teachers, staff, administration, and parents (Menard, & Grotzpetter, 2014). Although generally effective, these programs

require significant resources including training all key school stakeholders (Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, & Short-Camilli, 2004), up to 15 hours of classroom instruction (Menard, & Grotzinger, 2014), and having access to a licensed educational expert (KiVa Antibullying, 2014) who may not always be available. Because comprehensive programs place a high demand on schools, not all schools are able to adopt and implement these types of programs. Thus, it is important to identify brief, anti-bullying programs that can be more easily implemented in the school setting.

Results from a meta-analysis examining effective bullying prevention programs indicate that training student bystanders (e.g., those that witness bullying behavior) to intervene in bullying incidents is an important component of school-based bullying reduction programs (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). Researchers estimate that between 60-85% of students in elementary school witness bullying as bystanders (Aboud & Miller, 2007). When bystanders respond to bullying instances by intervening or defending victims, bullying behaviors decrease (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). In contrast, when bystanders encourage bullying either directly or indirectly, bullying behaviors increase (Karna, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010). Unfortunately, the majority of bystanders respond to bullying by reinforcing the bully; this may occur because students do not know how to intervene on behalf of victims (Forsberg, Thornberg, & Samuelsson, 2014; Hutchinson, 2012, & Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Thus, training student bystanders to intervene on behalf of victims, rather than acting passively or reinforcing the bullying, represents a promising strategy to bullying prevention.

Additionally, school-based interventions typically rely on teacher-delivered bullying education curriculum, posing another barrier to implementation due to multiple demands placed on teachers (Biggs, Vernberg, Twemlow, Fonagy, & Dill, 2008). According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2012a) model, school counselors are systemic change agents within schools, promoting student achievement through school-wide initiatives, including programs that foster a safe learning environment. School counselors help students develop emotional and social skills fostering positive and supportive relationships, empathy, and engaging students as advocates (ASCA, 2014) promoting leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change (ASCA, 2012b). Thus, taking a leadership role in anti-bullying curriculum delivery may be well suited for school counselors.

The STAC Program

The STAC program, which stands for the four bystander interventions strategies “stealing the show,” “turning it over,” “accompanying others,” and “coaching compassion,” was developed by the authors as a brief, stand-alone, bullying bystander intervention program (Midgett, Dumas, Sears, Lundquist, & Hausheer, 2015). A central focus of the program is to teach students strategies they can use to intervene in bullying situations as “defenders” on behalf of victims. Further, a unique feature of the STAC program is that it establishes school counselors as leaders by shifting program implementation from teachers to school counselors. Furthermore, the STAC program aligns with the ASCA Mindset Standards because it was designed to help students develop self-confidence to succeed in intervening against bullying and to increase their sense of belonging in the school environment (ASCA, 2014). It also promotes Behavior Standards promoting social skills including developing positive relationships with peers and demonstrating empathy, social responsibility, advocacy, and behaviors appropriate to the situation and environment (ASCA, 2014).

In previous studies, we found support for the STAC program at the elementary school level. In the initial feasibility study, in which the school counselor selected students identified as leaders to be trained in the program, the researchers found that the STAC program could be successfully implemented as a 90-minute training by graduate students in a Masters in Counseling program (Midgett & Dumas, 2016). Results of this study also indicated that students trained in the STAC program reported an increase in knowledge of bullying, knowledge of the STAC strategies, and confidence to intervene in bullying situations. More recently, results of a randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluating the efficacy of the STAC program indicated that student leaders trained in the STAC program reported an increase in knowledge and confidence to intervene as “defenders” (Midgett, Dumas, & Trull, 2017). Further, upper elementary school students (sixth graders) in this RCT reported an increase in self-esteem compared to students in a wait-list control group at a 30-day follow-up. We have also found positive effects of the STAC program on bullying behavior.

In a RCT with students identified by the school counselor as occasionally bullying, students in the intervention group reported a decrease in bullying perpetration compared to those in a wait-list control group at a 30-day follow-up (Midgett, Dumas, Trull, & Johnson, 2017).

To date, the authors have demonstrated the fidelity and short-term efficacy of the STAC program among elementary school students specifically selected for the training (e.g., student leaders or students who bully occasionally). Although these findings suggest the STAC program is a promising approach for bullying prevention among elementary school students, the methodology for all of these studies consisted of selecting a small group of students based on personal characteristics to be trained in the STAC program (Midgett & Dumas, 2016; Midgett, Dumas, Trull, & Johnson, 2017; Midgett, Dumas, & Trull, 2017). However, we have not evaluated the STAC program delivered as a school-wide intervention. Because bullying is embedded within the culture of the school (Waasdorp, Pas, O'Brennan, & Bradshaw, 2011) and school-wide programs are considered the standard for practice in bullying intervention (Tofsi & Farrington, 2011), it is important to assess the efficacy of STAC when implemented as a school-wide intervention.

The Current Study

The purpose of this study is to extend the literature by evaluating the STAC program as a brief, school-wide counselor-delivered intervention at the elementary school level. To achieve this aim, we used a single-group repeated-measures design. The school counselor at one elementary school delivered the STAC program to all students during school-wide core curriculum classroom lessons. Students were given assessments at baseline, post-intervention, and at a 4-month follow-up. We were interested in the following research questions: 1) Did students report an increase in perceived knowledge and confidence to intervene from baseline to post-training and were these changes sustained at the 4-month follow-up? 2) Did students report utilizing the STAC strategies at a 4-month follow-up? and 3) Did students report a decrease in bullying victimization and a decrease in bullying perpetration from baseline to at the 4-month follow-up?

Methods

Research Design

We used a single-group repeated-measures design within one elementary school as we were interested in the delivery of the STAC program as a school-wide intervention. All students were invited to participate in the STAC intervention. All participants completed baseline, post-training, and 4-month follow-up assessment surveys.

Participants

The authors recruited elementary school students from an urban, public Northwestern school with a total enrollment of 323 students in grades K-6 for participation in this study. Students in grades 3-6 were invited to participate in the study ($n = 144$). Of these 144 eligible students, 113 (78%) received parental consent to participate in the study. Of these 113 students, 100% were present for the baseline assessment and the STAC training and assented to participate. Our final response rate of 78% is higher than the range of response rates (30% - 60%) typical of other school-based intervention studies using active parental consent (Smith, Boel-Studt, & Cleeland, 2009). The sample of 113 students (60.2% female; 39.8% male) included students in third ($n = 30$), fourth ($n = 28$), fifth ($n = 27$), and sixth ($n = 28$) grades. Participants ranged in age from 8-12 years old ($M = 9.74$ and $SD = 1.26$), with reported racial backgrounds of 64.2% White, 10.1% African-American, 9.2% Hispanic, 7.3% Asian, 0.9% Pacific Islander, and 8.3% other.

Of the 113 students who completed baseline assessment and the STAC training, 85% ($n = 96$) completed the post-training assessment and 82% ($n = 93$) completed the 4-month follow-up. There were no demographic differences or differences on outcome variables between students who completed follow-up measures and those who did not complete follow-up measures either at the post-training assessment or the 4-month follow-up.

Procedure

Members of the research team worked closely with the school counselor to conduct the study procedures. In the fall semester, during regularly scheduled core curriculum classroom lessons, the school counselor explained that all students at school would be trained in a bystander anti-bullying program to learn strategies they can use to help reduce bullying. The school counselor also indicated researchers would be evaluating the training, introduced the study procedures to students, and invited them to participate. The school counselor informed students there would be no negative consequences if they declined participation. All students in grades 3-6 were given an informed consent form

to take home to their parents/guardians to provide written consent for their student's participation in the study. The school counselor also followed up with a phone call or email to a parent/guardian when necessary. Once students returned the signed informed consent to the school counselor, she provided them with an assent form and read the form to students in lower grades.

All eligible students were given the research questionnaires which included the Student-Advocates Pre- and Post-Scale (SAPPS; Midgett et al., 2015), Use of STAC Strategies (Midgett, Doumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017), Bullying Behavior Survey (Revised Olweus Questionnaire; Olweus, 1996), and demographic questions. Students completed SAPPS, the Bullying Behavior Survey, and the demographic questions at baseline (October). Upon completion of four, 30-minute STAC classroom lessons (December), students completed the SAPPS. Four months after baseline (February), students completed follow-up questionnaires which included SAPPS, Use of STAC Strategies, and the Bullying Behavior Survey. Members of the research team read each item from every questionnaire to students. The University's Institutional Review Board and the school district approved all study procedures. Additionally, we followed the American Counseling Association (ACA; 2014) ethical standards for the study.

Measures

Knowledge and Confidence to Intervene. The Student-Advocates Pre- and Post-Scale (SAPPS; Midgett et al., 2015) was used to measure knowledge of bullying, knowledge of the STAC strategies, and confidence to intervene. The questionnaire is comprised of 11 items that measure student knowledge of bullying behaviors, knowledge of the STAC strategies, and confidence intervening in bullying situations. Examples of items include: "I know what verbal bullying looks like," "I know how to use humor to get attention away from the student being bullied," and "I feel confident in my ability to do something helpful to decrease bullying at my school." Items are rated on a 4-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (I totally disagree) to 4 (I totally agree). Items are summed to create a total scale score. The questionnaire has established content validity and adequate internal consistency for the total scale with Chronbach's alpha ranging from .77 - .81 (Midgett et al., 2015; Midgett & Doumas, 2016). For this sample, Chronbach's alpha was $\alpha = .80$.

Use of STAC Strategies. The use of STAC strategies was measured by the Use of STAC Strategies questionnaire (Midgett, Doumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017). Each STAC strategy was measured using a single item. Students were asked "How often would you say that you used these strategies to stop bullying in the past month? a) Stealing the Show – using humor to get the attention away from the bullying situation, b) Turning it Over – telling an adult about what you saw, c) Accompanying Others – reaching out to the student who was the target of bullying, and d) Coaching Compassion – helping the student who bullied develop empathy for the target. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (*Never/Almost Never*) to 5 (*Always/Almost Always*).

Bullying Victimization and Perpetration. Bullying victimization and perpetration were measured using the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996). The Olweus Bullying Questionnaire is comprised of 39 self-report items that measure bullying victimization, perpetration, and student perception of adult support. Bullying victimization and bullying perpetration items including verbal, relational, physical, and cyberbullying. The 9-item bullying victimization scale includes items such as: "I was called mean names, was made fun of, or teased in a hurtful way," "Other students left me out of things on purpose, excluded me from their group of friends, or completely ignored me," "I was hit, kicked, pushed, shoved around, or locked indoors," and "I was bullied with mean or hurtful messages, calls or pictures, or in other ways on my mobile phone or over the internet (computer)." The 9-item bullying perpetration scale includes items such as: "I called another student(s) mean names, was made fun of, or teased in a hurtful way," "I kept him or her out of things on purpose, excluded me from their group of friends, or completely ignored me," "I hit, kicked, pushed, shoved him or her around, or locked him or her indoors," and "I bullied him or her with mean or hurtful messages, calls or pictures, or in other ways on my mobile phone or over the internet (computer)." Items are rated on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 0 (*It hasn't happened in the past couple of months*) to 4 (*Several times a week*). The questionnaire has moderate to high internal reliability ranging from $\alpha = .74 - .98$ and satisfactory construct validity (Kyriakides, Kaloyirou, & Lindsay, 2006). For this sample, Chronbach's alpha was $\alpha = .83$ for the Bullying Victimization scale and $\alpha = .84$ for the Bullying Perpetration scale.

The STAC Intervention

The STAC intervention is designed to train students to act as “defenders” on behalf of victims of bullying (Midgett et al., 2015). In previous studies, counselor education graduate students delivered the STAC program at the elementary school level in a 75-minute training format (Midgett & Doumas, 2016; Midgett, Doumas, & Trull, 2017) that included a didactic component, experiential activities, and role-plays to teach students the four STAC strategies followed by two bi-weekly, 15-minute small group meetings (for details, see Midgett et al., 2015). For this study, the STAC program was modified to shift program curriculum delivery from counselor education students to the school counselor. The school counselor delivered the training during four, 30-minute core curriculum classroom lessons and conducted two, 5-minute follow-up meetings at the end of subsequent guidance lessons following the training.

The counselor-delivered STAC training includes four, 30-minute lessons.

Lesson 1. During the first lesson, the school counselor utilized an audiovisual presentation to teach students the definition of bullying and explain the different types of bystander roles.

Lesson 2. During the second lesson, the school counselor reviewed didactic material from Lesson 1 and facilitated a discussion about the different types of bullying students can observe at school (i.e., physical, verbal, relationship, and cyberbullying). Next, students participated in a small group activity where they created a poster writing or drawing about different types of bullying they learned.

Lesson 3. The third lesson also began with a review of the material previously covered followed by a “basketball” activity where students wrote about a bullying incident they have experienced or witnessed on a piece of paper, crumpled the paper up into a ball, and tossed it into a basket. The school counselor read a few of the examples students provided and facilitated a brief discussion to help unite the class and motivate students to act as “defenders.” Next, the school counselor used an audiovisual presentation to introduce students to the following four STAC strategies (Midgett et al., 2015):

“Stealing the Show.” This strategy involves teaching “defenders” to use their sense of humor when they observe bullying to distract the peer audience’s attention away from the target. The school counselor provides examples such as the “defender” could tell a funny joke or pretend to trip by acting silly.

“Turning it Over.” This strategy consists of encouraging “defenders” to identify and tell a safe adult at school when they witness bullying. Elementary school students learn to always use this strategy when they observe physical bullying and when they are unsure as to how to intervene.

“Accompanying Others.” For this strategy, the school counselor teaches “defenders” to reach out to the student who was targeted after a bullying incident to offer support. Students learn they can use accompanying others either by letting victims know they witnessed the incident and communicating that what happened is not acceptable, or “defenders” can support victims indirectly by spending time with them and nonverbally communicating they are not alone at school.

“Coaching Compassion.” This strategy involves gently confronting the student who bullies after the bullying incident to communicate that his or her behavior is unacceptable. The school counselor instructs “defenders” to use “coaching compassion” when they have an established friendship with the student who bullied or if the student who bullied is in a younger grade and “defenders” believes he or she will respect them.

Lesson 4. The school counselor started the fourth STAC lesson with a review of the four STAC strategies. Then, she separated students into small groups and provided each group with a pre-written role-play for students to practice using the STAC strategies and then perform a skit where they act as “defenders” to the class. After concluding the role-plays, the school counselor encouraged students to implement the strategies when they witness bullying at school and to ask her for help if they had any questions or concerns.

Follow Up Meetings. The school counselor conducted two, 5-minute follow up meetings at the end of two subsequent bi-weekly guidance lessons following the training. The school counselor asked students what types of bullying incidents they observed and helped them brainstorm effective ways to use the STAC strategies on behalf of victims. The school counselor also encouraged students to share honest feedback about their experience acting as “defenders” and reminded them she was available to meet individually with students if they had any concerns.

Intervention Fidelity. The researchers created a STAC training video to help prepare the school counselor to conduct the program. Additionally, research team members observed the school counselor delivering each of the four STAC lessons one time to ensure she was delivering the curriculum with fidelity. Team members rated the training delivery on a dichotomous scale, *Yes* or *No*, to evaluate whether the school counselor accurately taught the definition and types of bullying, the STAC strategies, and whether she deviated from training materials. Furthermore, the researchers evaluated if the school counselor conducted all role-plays included in the training and students had an opportunity to practice all four STAC strategies.

Power Analysis

We conducted an a priori power analysis using the G*Power 3.1.3 program (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) for a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with one factor (time) at three time points and a paired sample *t*-test. Results of the power analysis indicated a sample size of 36 is needed for power of ≥ 0.90 to detect a medium effect size for the main effect of Time with 3 measurements with an alpha level of .05. For a paired sample *t*-test, a sample size of 35 is needed for power of ≥ 0.90 to detect a medium effect size with an alpha level of .05.

Statistical Methods

Prior to analysis, all variables were examined for outliers at baseline and follow-up assessments and were adjusted to 3.3 SD above the mean before conducting analyses (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007). To assess perceived knowledge confidence gained in the intervention group, we conducted a GLM repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with one independent variable, Time (baseline; post-intervention; follow-up) and follow-up paired *t*-tests to examine post hoc differences between time points. To assess skill usage in the intervention group, we computed descriptive statistics to examine frequency of use of STAC strategies at the follow-up assessment. We conducted two paired *t*-tests to examine differences from baseline to follow-up assessments for bullying victimization and bullying perpetration. For these analyses, we were interested in determining changes in bullying victimization among students who reported at least one incident of bullying at baseline and changes in bullying perpetration among students who reported at least one incident of bullying perpetration at baseline. We used an alpha level of $p < .05$ to determine statistical significance and used partial eta squared (η^2_p) as the measure of effect size for the GLM ANOVA and Cohen's *d* for paired *t*-test with magnitude of effects interpreted as follows: small ($\eta^2_p \geq .01$; $d = .20$), medium ($\eta^2_p \geq .06$; $d = .50$), large ($\eta^2_p \geq .14$; $d = .80$) (Cohen, 1969; Richardson, 2011). All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 24.0.

Results

Increase in Perceived Knowledge and Confidence

We examined changes in perceived knowledge and confidence to intervene to determine if students learned the information presented in the STAC training across three time points (baseline; post-intervention; 4-month follow-up). Results indicated a significant main effect for Time, Wilks' Lambda = .79, $F(2, 81) = 11.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .21$. Follow-up paired *t*-tests indicated a significant difference in perceived knowledge and confidence between baseline ($M = 33.72$, $SD = 6.21$) and post-intervention ($M = 36.41$, $SD = 5.21$), $t(82) = -4.81$, $p < .001$, Cohen's *d* = -.46, between baseline ($M = 33.72$, $SD = 6.21$) and 4-month follow-up ($M = 36.47$, $SD = 5.06$), $t(82) = -4.25$, $p < .001$, Cohen's *d* = -.49, but not between post-intervention ($M = 36.41$, $SD = 5.21$) and 4-month follow-up ($M = 36.47$, $SD = 5.06$), $t(82) = -0.13$, $p = .90$, Cohen's *d* = -.01. As hypothesized, students reported an increase in perceived knowledge and confidence from baseline to post-intervention, and this increase was sustained at the 4-month follow-up.

Use the STAC Strategies

Next, we examined rates of use of STAC strategies among students in the intervention group at the 4-month follow-up to determine if students use the STAC strategies taught in the STAC training. Among students who indicated they witnessed bullying (60.2%, $n = 93$), 90% reported using at least one STAC strategy in the past month. For specific STAC strategies, 50.9% reported using “stealing the show,” 78.2% reported using “turning it over,” 76.4% reported using “accompany others,” and 44.4% reported using “coaching compassion.”

Bullying Victimization and Perpetration

Among students who report bullying victimization at baseline ($n = 70$, 63.1%), results indicated a significant difference in bullying victimization between the baseline ($M = 8.40$, $SD = 6.43$) and the 4-month follow-up assessment ($M = 6.05$, $SD = 5.89$), $t(57) = 3.24$, $p < .01$, Cohen’s $d = .43$. As hypothesized, students reported a decrease in bullying victimization between baseline and the 4-month follow-up assessment. Similarly, among students who reported bullying perpetration at baseline ($n = 27$, 24.8%), results indicated a significant difference in bullying perpetration between the baseline ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 2.76$) and the 4-month follow-up assessment ($M = 1.13$, $SD = 1.49$), $t(22) = 2.15$, $p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = .47$. As hypothesized, students reported a decrease in bullying perpetration between baseline and the 4-month follow-up assessment.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to extend the literature by evaluating the counselor-delivered STAC program implemented as a brief, school-wide intervention at the elementary school level. Because approximately 1 in 4 of students in upper elementary school report being bullied at school (US Department of Education, 2017; Luxenberg et al., 2015), it is important to identify effective school-wide interventions that can be used in the elementary school setting. Overall, results indicated the STAC program can effectively be delivered as a school-wide program conducted by the school counselor during core curriculum classroom lessons for elementary school students. Further, results suggest that the STAC program is a promising approach for reducing bullying victimization and perpetration when implemented as a counselor-led, school-wide training.

As hypothesized, students reported an increase in perceived knowledge of bullying, knowledge of the STAC strategies, and confidence to intervene from baseline to post-training. Further, we found that these changes were sustained at a 4-month follow-up. In previous studies conducted at the elementary (Midgett & Dumas, 2016; Midgett, Dumas, & Trull, 2017) and middle (Midgett et al., 2015; Midgett, Dumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017) school levels, we found similar results immediately post-training (Midgett et al., 2015; Midgett & Dumas, 2016) and at a 30-day follow up (Midgett, Dumas, & Trull, 2017; Midgett, Dumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017). This is the first study to demonstrate that students report retaining their perception of increased knowledge and confidence to act as “defenders” across the school year.

Findings also supported our second hypothesis that students would use the STAC strategies. Results indicated among students who witnessed bullying, 90% used at least one STAC strategy to “defend” a student being bullied at the 4-month follow-up. This finding is similar to previous research conducted at the middle school level, with 95% of middle school students reporting using at least one STAC strategy at a 30-day follow up (Midgett, Dumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017). Among the STAC strategies, more students utilized “turning it over” (78%) and “accompanying others” (76%), compared to “stealing the show” (51%) and “coaching compassion” (44%).

It is interesting to note, that although patterns reported by middle school students are similar, with 91% “turning it over,” 95% “accompanying others,” 76% “stealing the show,” and 57% “coaching compassion,” (Midgett, Dumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017), a smaller percentage of elementary school students reported using each strategy. One possible explanation for this finding is the different length of follow-up assessments. In the middle school study, students reported use of STAC strategies 30-days post training, whereas in the elementary school study, students reported use of STAC strategies 4 months post-training. An alternative explanation is that the different rates of use may be due to the age of the students. It is possible that due to developmental differences, older students may be more likely to apply the skills they learned during the STAC training, whereas younger students may need additional support. For example, younger students may need to participate in more role-plays during the training than older students or may need additional or longer follow-up sessions.

Findings also suggest that elementary students reported using “coaching compassion” less often than the other three STAC strategies. This finding is also consistent with prior research examining use of strategies among middle school students (Midgett, Dumas, Trull, & Johnston, 2017). It may be possible that “defenders” are reluctant to use “coaching compassion” because they fear becoming a target of bullying (Midgett, Moody, Reilley, & Lyter, 2017). “Coaching compassion” requires “defenders” to directly engage with students who bully rather than to address the problem through engaging with a peer audience (“stealing the show”), supporting the victim (“accompanying others”), or asking for adult help (“turning it over”). Additionally, it is important to consider that “defenders” may be appropriately avoiding directly engaging with students who bully to avoid situations that may pose a greater risk for them to become a target of bullying.

Finally, as hypothesized, students who reported bullying victimization at baseline reported a decrease in bullying victimization and students who reported bullying others at baseline reported a decrease in bullying perpetration at the 4-month follow up. These results are consistent with previous research indicating that elementary students who occasionally bully and are trained in the STAC program report a decrease in bullying perpetration at a 30-day follow-up compared to students in a control group (Midgett, Dumas, Trull, & Johnson, 2017). Researchers have demonstrated that comprehensive, school-wide bystander programs can be effective at reducing school bullying (Polanin et al., 2012; Salmivalli et al., 2011; Karna et al., 2010); however, these types of programs can be difficult to implement due to time and financial demands they place on schools (KiVa Antibullying, 2014; Menard, & Grotper, 2014; Garrity et al., 2004). Our findings suggest that a brief, school-wide bystander intervention that establishes school counselors as leaders in anti-bullying program delivery can be an effective approach to reducing bullying. This is an important finding in considering the wide range of negative consequences associated with bullying in elementary school (Kim et al., 2015; Wolke et al., 2014; Cook et al., 2010; Klomek et al., 2009; Buhs et al., 2006; Glew et al., 2005).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study contributes to our understanding of how to train students to act as “defenders” to reduced bullying at the elementary school level, certain limitations should be considered. The primary limitation of this study is the lack of a control or comparison school. Thus, it is not clear if study outcomes were related to selection variables, the STAC intervention, or other unmeasured variables. Additionally, results are limited to one school. Future research using a randomized controlled design with several schools in each condition (intervention and control) would improve the validity of the study. Next, the sample is predominantly female, limiting the generalizability of the results. Thus, there is a need for additional studies evaluating the STAC program as a school-wide intervention with samples that are more evenly distributed across males and females. Additionally, information was obtained through self-report questionnaires, potentially leading to biased or distorted reporting, especially at the elementary school level. However, children are able to provide useful information about their experience when asked Likert-type questions in a manner that is meaningful to them (Christensen & James, 2008). Therefore, the researchers read the surveys to students in an effort to increase the quality of the data. Future studies, however, could include objective measures in addition to self-report including observational data of students acting as “defenders,” as well as of bullying incidents reported to school personnel to strengthen findings. Furthermore, we did not track if there was a relationship between types of bullying students observed and strategies they utilized. Therefore, future research could investigate if there is a relationship between types of bullying observed and strategies selected.

Implications for School Counselors

This study has practical implications for elementary school counselors. Extant literature indicates that elementary school bullying is prevalent with many negative associated consequences (Kim et al., 2015; Wolke et al., 2014; Cook et al., 2010; Klomek et al., 2009; Buhs et al., 2006; Glew et al., 2005). For this reason, it is imperative that elementary school students are equipped with tools they can use to act as “defenders” to reduce bullying victimization and perpetration. Programs such as STAC can be delivered as a brief, school-wide intervention through core curriculum classroom lessons as part of a school counseling curriculum. Because the program places a low demand on schools in terms of time and financial resources, a broader range of schools can have access to bullying reduction program implementation. Further, this approach to implementing the STAC program aligns with the ASCA model (2014; 2012) establishing school counselors as leaders in implementation of a program that fosters a safe learning environment for students.

Our findings also provide important implications for school counselors to train elementary students how to intervene as “defenders” to reduce bullying at school. Although our findings indicate a sustained increase in perceived knowledge and confidence to intervene in bullying post-intervention, we also found that fewer students reported using “stealing the show” and “coaching compassion” relative to “turning it over” and “accompanying others.” Thus, it could be helpful for school counselors to provide students with additional practice to implement “stealing the show” and “coaching compassion.” For example, elementary students might struggle to come up with an appropriate joke when they witness bullying. Therefore, school counselors could teach students to use distraction instead of humor to intervene. Instead of telling a funny joke, a “defender” could interrupt a bullying situation by attempting to initiate a game such as “foursquare,” inviting the students who are observing the bullying situation and the student who was targeted to join the game. In addition, school counselors could teach “defenders” to use “coaching compassion” indirectly to decrease students’ potential fear of becoming a target. For example, a “defender” could interrupt a fifth grade boy who is teasing a younger student by asking the fifth grader if he saw his favorite sports team’s most recent game on television. After the “defender” interrupts the bullying situation, the “defender” could gently state to the student who bullied that teasing others is not “cool” and that it can be hurtful to be teased. If the student who bullies has an established relationship with the “defender,” the student who bullies could be open to considering what the “defender” is communicating. In addition, our findings indicate that “turning it over” and “accompanying others” were used more often by elementary students than the other strategies. Therefore, elementary school counselors can rely more heavily on these strategies when beginning to teach students how to intervene as “defenders” since the strategies were a natural fit for this population.

Implications for Counselor Educators

This study also has practical implications for counselor educators. When preparing school counseling students to become advocates for a safe learning environment for elementary school students (ASCA, 2014; 2012a), counselor educators can introduce school counseling students to brief, bullying programs such as STAC. Counselor educators can share the specific STAC strategies with school counseling students to help them feel equipped to combat the issue of bullying. Further, counselor educators can focus on “turning it over” as an important strategy for elementary school students and engage counseling students in a discussion regarding how they can help foster a culture at school where adults are equipped to support elementary school students when they report bullying.

Conclusion

This study evaluated a brief, school-wide bystander bullying program for elementary school students uniquely designed to establish school counselors as leaders in curriculum delivery. This is the first study to examine the effectiveness of the STAC program implemented as a school-wide program. Results indicated students reported an increase in perceived knowledge and confidence to act as “defenders,” utilized the STAC strategies when they witnessed bullying, and reported a decrease in bullying perpetration and victimization at school at a 4-month follow-up. These findings provide evidence that positive outcomes from the STAC training can be sustained throughout the school year, extending from the fall to spring semester. Results provide support for the STAC program as a promising brief, school-wide, counselor-delivered approach that can be implemented with significantly fewer resources than many comprehensive school-wide programs that rely on teachers for implementation.

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